

# The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel

by Bernardo Venturi



## ABSTRACT

What does it mean in practice for the European Union that the Sahel is a priority? Which political and operational aspects and issues are prioritised and what can change in the future? To address these issues, the EU's European diplomatic habitus in the Sahel is first analysed and critically assessed. Then, the emerging narratives used by the EU's institutions and political leaders to define, describe and address policy issues in the Sahel-Saharan region are closely considered. It emerges that the EU has generally followed African regional organisations in reacting to the recent coups in the Sahel, for example through sanctions. Yet, the growing role of Russia has meant that the EU's diplomatic habitus has been jolted forwards. In addition, while the EU continues to play a central diplomatic role in the Sahel and has a sophisticated diplomatic infrastructure, there is a risk of Brussels lowering its prioritisation of this region in the near future due to regional and global factors.

*European Union | CFSP | Sahel | Mali | Russia*

**keywords**

**EUDIPL**O papers editors: **Sara Poli** (University of Pisa) and **Riccardo Alcaro** (IAI)

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The Network focuses on this central question: **What are the internal and external constraints and opportunities for the European Union to further its ambitions as an international diplomatic actor?** In dealing with this question, the Network aims to generate a stronger awareness on, and contribute to deeper insights with regard to, the European Union's diplomatic activities throughout the world, in third States as well as at multilateral fora.

Both the European External Action Service and the Union delegations – and hence the European Union's diplomatic institutional machinery – remain largely unknown to the public. Yet, the European Union not only has a worldwide network of more than 140 'embassies', but at the same time it has assumed 'state-like' functions on the basis of the adoption of diplomatic rules that were originally created for states only. Many **challenges** do remain, but the deep and wide legal and policy powers – and the sheer size and universal network – of the European Union also offer **opportunities** that remain as of yet untapped.

Academic and policy analyses have pointed to a great number of **legal and political questions** related to the developing role of the EU in international diplomacy. EUDIPL O brings experts in this area together to focus on these questions in order to make public authorities at all levels (EU institutions, governmental institutions in Member States and in third countries, international organisations, international and national civil servants and diplomats), young professionals and students, as well as the public at large, aware of the challenges and opportunities in this area.



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by Bernardo Venturi\*

### 1. The EU and the Sahel: From a priority to disengagement?

The European Union has defined the Sahel region as a priority in its external action and has devoted significant political, financial and military resources. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Sahel region was often considered “the most important for Europe”, as the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Sahel Emanuela Del Re repeated like a mantra at every public event or interview.<sup>1</sup> This is also because in political and strategic terms – but not in a budgetary sense – the Sahel is generally considered part of the EU's extended neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> This approach forms part of a broader EU strategy aimed at prioritising the African continent.<sup>3</sup>

The security situation in the Sahel remains extremely critical and it pairs with very low levels of human development. During the last decade, jihadist groups have constantly increased their power, taking advantage of the weaknesses of national institutions. Currently, two main jihadist coalitions are operating across Sahelian countries: the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate based in Mali (active in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), and the Islamic State in the

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Welsh, “EU Will Be ‘Loyal and Dedicated Partner’ to Sahel, Official Says”, in *Devex*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/102503>.

<sup>2</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx>. The Sahel and West Africa will continue to be considered as part of sub-Saharan Africa in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027), the EU long-term ceiling budget. As stated by the President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, “During the last decade, Europeans learnt the importance of a stable neighbourhood. From Ukraine to the shores of the Mediterranean, from the Western Balkans to the Sahel”. European Commission, *Keynote Speech by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum, Davos, 22 January 2020*, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_20\\_102](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_102).

<sup>3</sup> The EU's Global Strategy mentions that the EU “will invest in African peace and development as an investment in our own security and prosperity”. EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 36.

\* Bernardo Venturi is Associate Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Director of the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP).

Greater Sahara (ISGS), which mostly operates in the Liptako-Gorma region, also known as the Three-Border Region joining Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

Against this backdrop, the EU has contributed to ushering the Sahel region into what we may consider the fourth phase of its recent history. Following the eras of colonisation, post-colonialism, and development-cooperation partnerships, the Sahel now finds itself in the securitisation era.<sup>4</sup> The Sahel has thus become for the EU an area of experimentation of the so-called integrated approach to peace and security.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the EU has always claimed to project normative power in the Sahel and other regions. Such power brings with it an array of liberal normative values: democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and good governance. Since 2016 and the introduction of the EU Global Strategy, Brussels has tried to innovate in its external action, enhancing the integrated approach, including more spheres of intervention and improving field coordination and policy consistency and applying the “principled-pragmatism” approach whereby European interests and values coexist. Finally, this trend could also be accelerated by the fact that jihadi cells have increasing connections to the West African coastal area and given that the number of deadly events involving jihadi groups is rising.<sup>6</sup> This could partially redefine the borders of the political Sahelian space and its connections with a broader approach to peace and security in West Africa.

In this framework, despite the fact that the Sahel has consolidated itself as a priority for the EU, exogenous and endogenous political developments in early 2022 point towards disengagement. Firstly, the coups in Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso have generated significant diplomatic dilemmas for EU officials. Then, as discussed below, diplomatic tensions between Mali and some European states will inevitably affect the political-diplomatic approach of Brussels. Further, the war in Ukraine deepens Brussels' plight and accelerates disengagement, while Moscow is more active.

<sup>4</sup> Bernardo Venturi, “The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security–Migration–Development Nexus”, in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 17|38 (December 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8696>.

<sup>5</sup> Elisa Lopez Lucia, “Performing EU Agency by Experimenting the ‘Comprehensive Approach’: The European Union Sahel Strategy”, in *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2017), p. 451-468. Bernardo Venturi, “The EU and the Sahel”, cit. The 2019 revision of the EU Global Strategy states that “Perhaps best exemplifying the Integrated Approach in these years has been the Sahel. [...] The Sahel is an important test case to further build on and learn from. Looking ahead, it can become the norm in the way in which we address the crises plaguing our surrounding regions, near and far.” EEAS, *The European Union's Global Strategy. Three Years On, Looking Forward*, June 2019, p. 25, <https://europa.eu/!Qf88CQ>.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa”, in *Africa Briefings*, No. 149 (20 December 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/12775>; Anna Lena Sabroso-Wasse, *North of the Countries of the Gulf of Guinea. The New Frontier for Jihadist Groups?*, Berlin, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrika/publikationen/einzeltitel/-/content/a-threat-from-the-north-of-the-gulf-of-guinea-countries-new-frontier-for-jihadist-groups-in-west-afr-1>.

Thus, the apparently unshakable centrality of the Sahel seems to be on the verge of crumbling. All the diplomatic and policy infrastructures are still in place but there are signs that the EU is likely to progressively disengage. For example, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated in an interview that “if the governments of these countries have another decision today [...], we will act according [to] their will, no doubt about it”.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, as a first step towards progressive disengagement, in mid-April 2022 the EU halted part of the training missions for the Malian armed forces and national guard (EUTM) due to the fact that “There are not enough security guarantees from the Malian authorities over the non-interference of the well-known Wagner Group” already under EU sanctions and accused of human rights abuses, as stated by Josep Borrell.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The EU's diplomatic habitus in the Sahel

The Sahel became a political space of action for the EU relatively recently. This is well represented by the approach of the EU's two-page “Strategy for security and development in the Sahel” adopted in 2011 that targeted only Mauritania, Niger and Mali. Burkina Faso and Chad were included in 2014 to cover all of the countries of the G5.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, the Council of the EU adopted the Sahel Regional Action Plan (RAP) 2015–2020, which was reviewed and updated at the beginning of June 2016, improving the EU's strategic approach.<sup>10</sup>

While coordination with other international actors has increased gradually, the EU's diplomatic engagement in the Sahel has shown some significant shortfalls, especially as regards support for sound governance and an excessive focus on security. The EU's new Integrated Strategy in the Sahel adopted by the Council in April 2021 addresses these issues with greater insistence on the political dimension, strengthening governance and also more attention to human rights and fighting impunity for their abuses.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, Brussels plays a central diplomatic role in the region and particularly in Mali. In fact, the EU has supported the peace process in Mali and the 2015

<sup>7</sup> Mwangi Maina, “‘These Accusations about Europe Are Part of a Big Disinformation Campaign’ Says Josep Borrell”, in *The Africa Report*, 1 February 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/172296>.

<sup>8</sup> “EU Ends Part of Mali Training Mission, Fearing Russian Interference, Borrell Says”, in *Reuters*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-eu-idAFKCN2M31GQ>.

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on a European Union Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, 21 March 2011, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7569-2011-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Sahel, 3477th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting*, Luxembourg, 20 June 2016, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10393-2016-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel (7723/21)*, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>. At point 8, the Council states “to step up its support by placing greater emphasis on the political dimension, with governance at the heart of its action”.

implementation of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, of which it is a guarantor. The EU also actively supports the UN Security Council targeted sanctions against those threatening the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali.

The EU's apparatus in the region has steadily increased in the last decade and is currently represented by EU delegations, the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, and the EU Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell for the Sahel (RACC).

In Brussels, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has established a "Sahel Task Force" to coordinate geographical and thematic departments such as the European Commission Directorates General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO), and Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and EUSR for the Sahel.

The EUSR has played an important role in reaching out to governments in the region and in leading EU action, with particular attention to the Malian peace process, where the EU is a member of the International Mediation Team supporting implementation. Ángel Losada Fernandez (EUSR 2015–2020), with his long diplomatic experience, maintained a balanced position, liaising among Brussels, European capitals and Sahelian governments. The current EUSR Emanuela Del Re's approach appears inclusive and open to listening to different non-governmental actors, and sometime more direct and less diplomatic than her predecessor's.

The EU delegations operate in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. Headed by mid-level officials, the delegations monitor the implementation of the programmes and act as liaison offices between local governments, the institutions in Brussels, the regional CSDP missions and other international actors. Usually, the delegations avoid exerting political pressure in order not to lose access to local governments.<sup>12</sup> The delegations prefer to leave public political criticism to the embassies of the member states.<sup>13</sup>

The Sahel is also a region with more CSDP missions deployed: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Mali. EUCAP Sahel Niger, launched in 2012, provides advice and training to Nigerien security institutions. In 2013, Brussels launched the first military mission in the region, the Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). In 2015, a second civilian mission, EUCAP Sahel Mali, was established. The three CSDP missions in the region have changed over the years, adapting to the EU's new priorities.<sup>14</sup> In mid-2015, for example, the Sahel Regional Action Plan

<sup>12</sup> IAI interview with EU staff, Bamako, November 2019.

<sup>13</sup> IAI interview with Malian researcher, Bamako, November 2019.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission and EEAS, *Annual Report on the Sahel Regional Action Plan* (SWD/2016/482), 23 December 2016, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5009-2017-INIT/en/pdf>.

opened a new phase for EUCAP Sahel missions by introducing the objectives of strengthening the internal security forces' capacity to fight against terrorism and organised crime and supporting the Malian and Nigerian governments in managing migration flows and border security.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali became part of the overall plan of the EU Migration Partnership Framework in 2016. The missions' staff received a clear instruction to focus on short-term activities and put aside long-term state reforms.

This occurrence exemplifies the tendency for CSDP missions to maintain a technical profile with limited space for governance, interactions with diversified civil society actors, and a broader understanding of the dynamics between security capacities and the political architecture. The training missions have focused on military and policing capacities with limited space for governance dynamics and with implications for a full-fledged integrated approach.

Furthermore, the coups of August 2020 and May 2021 in Mali have generated concerns in Brussels and in other Western capitals. Some of the soldiers behind the armed takeover were trained in European countries,<sup>16</sup> by the US military<sup>17</sup> and allegedly by EUTM<sup>18</sup> (even if Borrell has denied this allegation). The mission was suspended for a few months and then reactivated. Yet these dynamics confirm the weaknesses of the connection between technical training and accountable political institutions. Furthermore, the legitimacy of all three CSDP missions is at risk due to Mali's political attitude towards new security actors, as discussed in the following section. For instance, Germany could withdraw its support in May 2022 from EUTM (and MINUSMA, the UN Mission in Mali, as well). Both mandates expire at the end of May and must first be discussed in the Bundestag (the German federal parliament). It is reasonable to suppose that the missions will not continue in their current form.<sup>19</sup>

EU diplomatic efforts in the Sahel are also channelled through regional and international organisations. The EUGS mentions the Sahel with strong emphasis

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "EU Freezes Mali Training Missions after Military Coup", in *Deutsche Welle*, 26 August 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3hYjA>.

<sup>17</sup> Danielle Paquette, "Mali Coup Leader Was Trained by U.S. Military", in *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/mali-coup-leader-was-trained-by-us-special-operations-forces/2020/08/21/33153fbe-e31c-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/mali-coup-leader-was-trained-by-us-special-operations-forces/2020/08/21/33153fbe-e31c-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> The mission trained the large majority of the Malian military capacity. According to EUTM Mali factsheet (<https://eutmmali.eu/factsheet>), EUTM-Mali has training to more than 15,000 Malian armed forces students (the early 2022 active military personnel amounts to 18,000). Furthermore, some analyses have supported this thesis, e.g., Anna Schmauder et al. wrote about "The implication of soldiers trained and equipped by EUTM in a coup which overthrew a civilian government [...]". See Anna Schmauder, Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Delina Goxho, "Strategic Missteps: Learning from a Failed EU Sahel Strategy", in *ISPI Publications*, 5 November 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/28130>.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Klatt, "Mali Is (Again) at a Crossroads", in *International Politics and Society*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/mali-is-again-at-a-crossroads-5737>.

on regional cooperation and support for regional partners, such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the aforementioned G5.<sup>20</sup>

In this framework, the EU Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell for the Sahel (RACC) is the agency that embodies the EU idea of an integrated approach and support for regionalisation. It consists of approximately fifteen experts embedded either in the CSDP missions or attached to EU delegations in the region. It reports to the EEAS civilian chain of command in Brussels and its activities mirror those of the G5 Sahel, providing strategic advice to G5 Sahel structures and countries. The RACC does not include governance or development in its remit. Migration is part of RACC work, but only concerning trafficking.<sup>21</sup>

Two key regional initiatives supported by the EU are the G5 Sahel itself and the Alliance for the Sahel. Support for the G5 Sahel extends to security and defence and is tied to the work of the RACC. Established in February 2014 and originally presented as a vehicle for strengthening the bond between economic development and security, the G5 soon became overly engaged with security concerns. Some analysts regard the G5 as mainly following a Western-led agenda – with other global players, such as China, also involved. Importantly, the G5 is made up of no Europeans but is a multinational force “owned” by Africans themselves.<sup>22</sup> The EU supports ad hoc initiatives like the G5 because AU member states commit their own resources and because this approach also generates greater local ownership. As three states (Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali) out of five are currently ruled by putschists and transitional governments, the legitimacy and political appropriateness of this ad hoc regional organisation should be reconsidered.

Launched in July 2017 by the EU, France (the main donor) and Germany, as well as the United Nations Development Programme, the African Development Bank and the World Bank, the Alliance for the Sahel, which could be considered the economic counterpart to the security-focused G5 Sahel, finances nearly five-hundred projects in five key sectors from its budget of 10.9 billion euro (2018–2022):<sup>23</sup> youth education, training and employment; food security and agriculture in rural areas; climate and energy; the provision of basic services; and decentralisation and governance. By February 2018, the Alliance had enlarged to the European Investment Bank, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden.<sup>24</sup> The Alliance for the Sahel is a valuable platform for discussion between international actors and for coordinating different initiatives.

<sup>20</sup> EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> IAI interview with RCC member, 11 January 2019.

<sup>22</sup> The military aspect is coordinated by the respective countries' Chiefs of Staff.

<sup>23</sup> Sahel Alliance website: *The Sahel Alliance*, <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/?p=193>.

<sup>24</sup> Sahel Alliance, *The Sahel Alliance Officially Announces the Implementation of Over 500 Projects for a Total Amount of EUR 6bn to be Disbursed Between 2018 and 2022*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/?p=357>. In April 2018, Saudi Arabia joined the programme with a contribution of 200 million euro, but is not a current member.



The last ad hoc organisation involving Brussels is the Coalition for the Sahel, launched at the Pau Summit on 13 January 2020 by France, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, in the presence of the United Nations secretary-general, the president of the European Council, the EU high representative, the chairperson of the African Union Commission and the secretary general of La Francophonie. A further step was taken at the EU-G5 Sahel Summit on 28 April 2020, where the members of the European Council decided to enlarge the Coalition for the Sahel to other international partners.<sup>25</sup>

Concerning humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the EU already enjoys close and significant cooperation with each of the five regional countries and has a regional approach that also includes Nigeria and Cameroon. The humanitarian situation in the region, especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is rapidly deteriorating, with unprecedented levels of forced displacement and food insecurity. An increasing number of people require assistance. In 2021, 32.4 million people in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria needed assistance and protection.<sup>26</sup> In 2021, the EU's humanitarian assistance to the Sahel stood at 237 million euro, representing assistance by one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to the Sahel.<sup>27</sup> The EU also works on implementing the humanitarian-development nexus to address the needs of vulnerable people through a more sustainable and long-term approach.

### 3. The EU's diplomatic dilemmas

Four coups de état in one and a half years, and the related political and social developments, have generated a series of new dilemmas for the EU's current diplomatic approach.

Mali's relations with some European countries have quickly deteriorated since early 2022. The relationship with France in particular is critical as the Malian interim government has adopted populist anti-French discourse to emancipate its actions from the former colonial power and, presumably, in search of popular support. On 31 January, the government went as far as to demand that the French ambassador in Mali leave the country within 72 hours. The French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian reacted by openly depicting the Malian authorities as "illegitimate". Previously, according to some sources, Bamako had been waiting more than five months for its ambassador to be accredited in Paris.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Isabelle Ioannides, "Peace and Security in 2020. Evaluating the EU Approach to Tackling the Sahel Conflicts", in *EPRS Studies*, September 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_STU\(2020\)654173](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2020)654173).

<sup>26</sup> European Commission website: *Sahel Factsheet*, <https://europa.eu/!xm36PP>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "Diplomatic Dispute over Mali's Ambassador to Paris Turns into Political Row", in *Africa*

Furthermore, Denmark was officially asked by the Malian transitional government to withdraw its 95 peacekeepers from the country<sup>29</sup> despite the former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who was overthrown by the military in 2020, having consented to the deployment of these soldiers.<sup>30</sup> In this framework of anti-French and anti-Western sentiment, on 17 February 2022 French President Emmanuel Macron announced his decision to withdraw all French and European troops from Mali. Paris made this announcement along with Ghana's President Nana Afuko Addo, Senegal's President Macky Sall, and European Council President Charles Michel.<sup>31</sup> This approach showed the intention to coordinate this move, at least formally, with the EU and regional African organisations. The withdrawal applies to both the 2,400 French troops in Mali and a smaller European force of several hundred that was created in 2020. French forces would remain in the region but would be based in neighbouring Niger, from where they could help other countries suffering from jihadist activity.

Due to this hostile attitude from the Malian transitional authorities, Estonia threatened to pull its troops out of the French-led Operation Barkane, and Sweden did so in January 2022, while in March it announced that it would pull its force of about 220 soldiers out of the MINUSMA in June 2023, a year earlier than planned.<sup>32</sup>

Tensions between the Malian junta and its Western partners are likely to continue in the coming months and embrace other domains. For example, in February 2022, Malian authorities expelled a French reporter for the weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique* and in March they ordered the suspension of the broadcasting of France 24 and RFI in the country due to supposed "false allegations" of abuses committed by the army and reported by the two French broadcasters.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, these diplomatic tensions have shown the importance of connecting technical aspects (such as military training) to institutional governance and the accountability of political institutions. So far, the EU has tried to integrate into the Sahel two approaches. Firstly, it has enhanced the integrated approach; then, it

*Intelligence*, 4 February 2022, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_diplomacy/2022/02/04/diplomatic-dispute-over-mali-s-ambassador-to-paris-turns-into-political-row,109731716-art](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_diplomacy/2022/02/04/diplomatic-dispute-over-mali-s-ambassador-to-paris-turns-into-political-row,109731716-art).

<sup>29</sup> "Mali: Denmark to Withdraw Troops Amid Dispute with Junta", in *Deutsche Welle*, 27 January 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/46Bti>.

<sup>30</sup> "Denmark Says Its Troops Are in Mali on Basis of 'Clear Invitation'", in *Reuters*, 25 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/denmark-says-its-troops-mali-basis-clear-invitation-2022-01-25>.

<sup>31</sup> "Macron Announces French Troop Withdrawal from Mali", in *France 24*, 17 February 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220217-live-macron-holds-conference-on-sahel-engagement-as-france-poised-to-withdraw-troops-from-mali>.

<sup>32</sup> "Sweden Announces Early Pullout of Troops from U.N. Mali Mission", in *Reuters*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sweden-announces-early-pullout-troops-un-mali-mission-2022-03-03>.

<sup>33</sup> "Mali to Suspend French Broadcasters France 24 and RFI", in *Reuters*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/frances-rfi-radio-france-24-television-be-suspended-mali-2022-03-17>.

has applied the “principled-pragmatism” approach whereby European interests and values coexist with one another. An analysis of EU normative and functional instruments and their impacts in terms of governance in the Sahel, however, shows that the integrated approach has not gone very far and that pragmatism prevails over principles and norms.

Firstly, the integrated approach has been limited by a trend of veiled securitisation. The EU's leadership has given attention to security efforts and only limited attention to other instruments and how they complement one another. The overall effect is that the political dimension appears as a residual aspect and not as an EU priority. For example, in Mali, the EU's work in the political sphere – and its related criticism of the government – was limited in part given the conditions of the extreme instability of this country. The EU's reticence may also be explained by the fear of losing a privileged position compared to other international actors in the region such as Russia.

Besides, the centrality of the concept of stability in diplomatic actions has not prevented crises. The EU, as other international actors, has invested in stability, for instance in Chad, with limited attention to domestic trends. For thirty years, former Chadian President Idriss Deby had guaranteed military support to the G5 but left no room for the political opposition and a healthy civil society. After he died in 2021, a military group secured power, disregarding the Constitution, and deep cleavages are now present in Chadian society. As a consequence, Chad is at risk of falling into chaos and adding to the instability of the region.

Finally, Sahelian national armies continue to commit violations despite the EU's support. For instance, Malian troops and EUTM participants have both failed to avoid infringements.<sup>34</sup> As assessed in Niger and Mali, “[t]hese deficiencies stem from the fact that the EUTM focused on questions of technical support and capacity building rather than real reform, governance, and strategic planning”.<sup>35</sup> In practice, if abuses happen, then there is no real consequence. For example, in Inatés, a commune of Tillabéri in Niger, 136 civilians disappeared or were killed by soldiers during military operations between March and April 2020.<sup>36</sup> Yet Niger is expected to become the main hub for foreign forces in the Sahel as France closes its military bases in neighbouring Mali.

<sup>34</sup> On Malian troops, see: Amnesty International, *Report 2017/18: The State of the World's Human Rights*, February 2018, p. 252, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/6700/2018/en>.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Lebovich, “Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, September 2018, p. 13, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/halting\\_ambition\\_eu\\_migration\\_and\\_security\\_policy\\_in\\_the\\_sahel.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Commission nationale des droits humains (CNDH) Niger and Réseau panafricain pour la paix, la démocratie et le développement (REPPAD), *Rapport de mission d'enquête, d'investigation, de vérification et d'établissement des faits relatifs aux allégations portant sur la disparition de 102 personnes dans le Département d'Ayorou, Région de Tillabéri*, 2020, [https://cndh-niger.org/images/pdf/Rapport\\_Final\\_Mission\\_Investigation\\_Inates\\_Ayorou\\_2020-CNDH-REPPAD-Last%20\(2\)\\_2.pdf](https://cndh-niger.org/images/pdf/Rapport_Final_Mission_Investigation_Inates_Ayorou_2020-CNDH-REPPAD-Last%20(2)_2.pdf).

#### 4. Brussels in the labyrinth: Mali and Russia

The sanctions against the Mali transitional authorities and the reaction to a possible engagement of the Wagner Group in Mali represent two important test cases of the challenges posed by Mali for the EU's diplomacy.

In August 2020, army officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta toppled Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. In response, ECOWAS shut Mali's borders, imposed trade restrictions, and suspended the country from its decision-making bodies. Under pressure, the military junta promised to restore civilian rule by February 2022 after holding presidential and legislative elections. This move led to a lifting of the economic sanctions, although Mali remains suspended from ECOWAS's main bodies.

Yet in May 2021 Mali's transitional authorities carried out a second coup, forcing out the interim civilian government. The move was met with widespread diplomatic condemnation, including from the EU and ECOWAS. In this case, the Western African organisation did not impose sanctions immediately, but in November opted for targeted measures against individual members over delays in the election preparations.<sup>37</sup> In early January 2022, Goïta eventually shared the plan to hold elections in December of the same year. On 9 January, ECOWAS adopted further sanctions, including the recall of ECOWAS member states' ambassadors accredited to Mali, the closure of land and air borders, the suspension of all commercial and financial transactions except for primary goods,<sup>38</sup> the freezing of Malian assets in ECOWAS central banks, and the suspension of all financial assistance and transactions.<sup>39</sup> According to Al Jazeera and other analyses, the ECOWAS sanctions resulted in the population rallying behind the transitional government, at the instigation of the same military junta.<sup>40</sup>

The EU has supported ECOWAS and its diplomatic choices in the different phases of the negotiation, showing its willingness to support this regional international organisation. In particular, on 4 February 2022, Brussels issued sanctions against five prominent members of the interim government accused of obstructing the successful conclusion of Mali's political transition.<sup>41</sup> Among other things, the five people, including Prime Minister Choguel Maïga, are no longer allowed to enter

<sup>37</sup> "West Africa Bloc ECOWAS Hits Mali with Sanctions after Poll Delay", in *Al Jazeera*, 9 January 2022, <https://aje.io/5wp9ut>.

<sup>38</sup> Food products, pharmaceutical products, medical supplies, and equipment.

<sup>39</sup> ECOWAS, *4th Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Mali. Final Communiqué*, Accra, 9 January 2022, <https://ecowas.int/?p=52898>.

<sup>40</sup> "Maliens Rally after Army Calls for Protests over ECOWAS Sanctions", in *Al Jazeera*, 14 January 2022, <https://aje.io/da3ur3>.

<sup>41</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/156 of 4 February 2022 Implementing Article 12(2) of Regulation (EU) 2017/1770 Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of the Situation in Mali*, [http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg\\_impl/2022/156/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2022/156/oj).

the EU, and their assets have been frozen. Previously, on 13 December 2021, the Council of the European Union set up an autonomous framework for sanctions with restrictive measures for "individuals and entities responsible for threatening the peace, security or stability of Mali, or for obstructing the implementation of its political transition".<sup>42</sup>

The EU's overall approach to sanctions in Mali has been characterised by echoing ECOWAS' condemnation of the slow transition toward new elections. It should be noted that initially Brussels did not sanction Malian transitional authorities for the coup as such, but for presenting a new plan aimed at extending the duration of the transition to a total of five and a half years, contrary to the agreement reached with ECOWAS on 15 September 2020.<sup>43</sup>

This approach has also been applied to the coup in Burkina Faso. On 24 January 2022, Burkina Faso's armed forces led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba seized power. On 3 February, as it did in Mali, ECOWAS decided not to impose additional sanctions on Burkina Faso – besides its suspension from the bloc (as the African Union also did). ECOWAS also asked the junta for a reasonable timetable for the "return to constitutional order",<sup>44</sup> and the EU followed the same path.

At the same time, Borrell stated, "The European Union intends and hopes to stay engaged in Mali and the Sahel but not at any cost."<sup>45</sup> A similar position was expressed by EUSR Del Re.<sup>46</sup> This might have left the door open to the growing interest of other third countries in Mali.

Rumours have been spreading since late 2021 that the Wagner Group – which can be considered a network of companies and groups – is in negotiations with the Malian junta about sending mercenaries.<sup>47</sup> While the Malian side speaks

<sup>42</sup> Council of the European Union, *Mali: EU Sets Up Autonomous Framework for Sanctions against Those Obstructing the Political Transition*, 13 December 2021, <https://europa.eu/!k9jtJG>.

<sup>43</sup> The decision is also in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2584 (2021): "Calls on all Malian stakeholders to facilitate the resumption and full realization of the Political Transition and the handover of power to elected civilian authorities, reaffirms in this regard the imperative need to respect the transition period of 18 months as decided during the meeting of ECOWAS Heads of States on 15 September 2020 and as set out in the Transition Charter". UN Security Council, *Resolution 2584 (2021)*, 29 June 2021, point 1, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2584\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2584(2021)).

<sup>44</sup> ECOWAS, *Extraordinary Summit Final Communiqué*, Accra, 3 February 2022, point 10, <https://ecowas.int/?p=53141>.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Fox, "Sahel Ministers Cancel Joint EU Talks Amid Growing Chaos", in *Euractiv*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1703771>.

<sup>46</sup> "We have to be coherent, and consistent as well. In fact, the position of the European Union is in line with ECOWAS [...] We agree that we need to be firm in our approach. At the same time, nevertheless, we are fully aware that Mali must not be isolated. This would be very dangerous for a number of reasons, and therefore it is important to keep an open door." Teresa Welsh, "EU Will Be 'Loyal and Dedicated Partner' to Sahel, Official Says", cit.

<sup>47</sup> Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee and Joseph S. Bermudez, "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 2 February 2022, <https://www.csis.org/node/63851>.

primarily of Russian trainers as part of bilateral cooperation, many observers point to Wagner's highly trained special forces. In a press conference in early February, President Putin stated that there were currently no relations between the Russian government and Russian private security actors,<sup>48</sup> while tangible ties between the group and the Kremlin have been seen.<sup>49</sup>

The EU's diplomatic posture changed radically with the involvement of the Wagner Group in Mali. The competition with Russia in the Sahel, coupled with the principled pragmatism approach,<sup>50</sup> ignited robust and irascible EU diplomatic action. In September 2021, HR Borrell warned that the possible involvement of the Group could "seriously affect European Union's relations" with the country.<sup>51</sup> In December 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on the Russian mercenary group, accusing it of fomenting violence and committing human rights abuses in the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine.<sup>52</sup> At the end of January 2022, Borrell underlined the EU's "deep concern following the confirmed deployment of Russian mercenaries in Mali and the great danger that this poses to civilian populations. This group's methods are incompatible with our collective efforts on security and development."<sup>53</sup> The early February sanctions imposed on Bamako followed immediately the insistent rumours on the Wagner Group's deployment in Mali. Since January 2022, Wagner mercenaries have indeed been deployed in central Mali, where they conduct joint patrols with the Malian military.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, the Russian security group is reported to have carried out severe human rights violations. According to MINUSMA's human rights division, the Malian army and Wagner mercenaries are accountable for the mass grave discovered in early March 2022 in the Niono Cercle, an administrative subdivision of Mali's Ségou region.<sup>55</sup> A few weeks later, on 1 April, a Malian defence ministry statement stated that from 23 to 31 March the army had killed 203 "terrorists" and arrested 51 more in Moura, central Mali.<sup>56</sup> Yet, a field investigation conducted by Human Rights

<sup>48</sup> Chiamaka Okafor, "Mali: Putin Says Russia Has No Ties with Wagner Group", in *Premium Times*, 9 February 2022, <https://wp.me/p2LdGt-28O0>.

<sup>49</sup> Economist, "What Is the Wagner Group, Russia's Mercenary Organisation?", in *The Economist*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/07/what-is-the-wagner-group-russias-mercenary-organisation>.

<sup>50</sup> EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit.

<sup>51</sup> EEAS, *Informal EU Foreign Ministers Meeting: Remarks by the High Representative Josep Borrell at the Press Conference*, 20 September 2021, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/104404>.

<sup>52</sup> "EU Sanctions Russia's Wagner Group over Human Rights Abuse Claims", in *Euronews*, 14 December 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/14/eu-sanctions-russia-s-wagner-group-over-human-rights-abuse-claims>.

<sup>53</sup> Lorne Cook, "EU Warns Mali, Sahel States over Use of Russian Mercenaries", in *AP News*, 26 January 2022, <https://apnews.com/64a6e0e36a6a7753325446aa209dea90>.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Mass Grave in Niono: MINUSMA Accuses Malian Army and Wagner Group", in *The African Report*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/184193>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Malian Armed Forces, *Communiqué N°026 de l'Etat-Major Général des Armées*, 1 April 2022, <https://m.facebook.com/AUFAITMALI/photos/pcb.469122018328373/469121931661715>.

Watch reported dozens of executions and described the military intervention as “the worst single atrocity reported in Mali’s decade-long armed conflict”.<sup>57</sup> As the Malian army has denied any responsibility, human rights violations are likely to represent a central issue in the coming months as it has been for the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic.<sup>58</sup> In line with EU values, the HR has condemned the perpetrators of the massacre:

La lutte contre le terrorisme ne peut en aucun cas justifier des violations massives des droits de l’homme. Le comportement exemplaire de l’Etat et de ses forces de sécurité dont le mandat premier est de protéger les populations civiles ne peut souffrir d’aucune exception. L’impunité doit être combattue avec sévérité et la plus grande urgence.<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion

While the EU continues to play a central diplomatic role in the Sahel and has a sophisticated diplomatic infrastructure, there is a risk for this region to be given lower priority by Brussels in the near future. The EU and its member states will not disappear suddenly, but they are likely to downgrade diplomatic efforts in the region. This disengagement trend should be carefully considered from Brussels. Perhaps, more than disengagement, the EU and its member states need to reflect on some critical issues related to their approach to security.

For instance, although the EU applies an integrated approach in the region, it is in a securitarian tunnel due to its overriding focus on security. Borrell’s leadership has accentuated this posture with a narrative dominated by the necessity to use military force. Military assistance to regional governments has become the main area of action while other peacebuilding and mediation activities remain more as “activités de garnement”. The EU finances peacebuilding projects<sup>60</sup> but they are not prioritised, the resources are limited compared, for instance, to military training, and they remain disconnected from other activities despite the integrated

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.

<sup>58</sup> The UN has documented several instances in which Wagner mercenaries participated were implicated in human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Central African Republic, see: MINUSCA and UNHCR, *Public Report on Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in the Central African Republic during the Electoral Period July 2020-June 2021*, 4 August 2021, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/CF/report\\_abuses\\_violations\\_HR\\_InternationalHumanitarianLaw\\_Elections\\_CAR\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/CF/report_abuses_violations_HR_InternationalHumanitarianLaw_Elections_CAR_EN.pdf). See also Human Rights Watch, *Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces>.

<sup>59</sup> EEAS, *Mali: Déclaration du Haut représentant Josep Borrell sur les violences à Moura*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/411463>.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, *Médiation agropastorale au Sahel*, September 2021, <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mediation-agropastorale-au-Sahel.pdf>.

approach. Alternative strategies aimed at leveraging the resilience capacities of local communities in the region remain understudied and undervalued. At the same, the combination of a protracted military junta and the involvement of Russian mercenaries can increase human rights violations. In this regard, Brussels needs to pay more consistent and constant attention to human rights violations and to focus more diplomatic efforts on the protection of civilians.

Overall, a more ambitious and integrated approach is feasible under a different vision directed towards integrating a long-term perspective and attempting to have a more nuanced understanding not only of the regional dimension but also of the domestic and local levels. The EU could also take advantage of engaging diplomatically with other international actors on peace and security, especially in multilateral settings.

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T +39 06 6976831

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