

# Introduction

By 2050, the world's population is projected to reach between 9.4 and 10 billion people, potentially exceeding 12 billion by 2100. Most of this astonishing growth will occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, which, by 2060, will become the most populous of the eight geographic regions identified by the UN. These remarkable figures illustrate how Africa, in the coming decades, will play an increasingly critical role in the international arena and in global political dynamics. African states, characterized by developing economies and weak social systems, will face massive population growth, generating significant political and social pressures on the entire international community. Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to having fertility rates that will lead to a doubling of its population, is also one of the poorest and most unstable regions in the world. Given its fragile political systems, rudimentary healthcare infrastructure, vast social disparities, and scarcity of essential resources, most African countries rank among the lowest in all economic and social indices.

One of the greatest challenges is likely to be climate change, which will threaten the survival of a large number of communities. Sub-Saharan Africa is already one of the regions most affected by climate change, but the most devastating impacts are yet to come. Desertification, the drying up of waterways, and extreme weather events will become increasingly frequent, particularly in the Sahelian region, testing the adaptive capacities of local populations. As a result, social imbalances are likely to deepen, leading to greater migratory flows, security threats, humanitarian crises, and political instability.

Against this backdrop, the development of bilateral relations with the African continent has become one of the European Union's key foreign policy priorities.

Notably, the EU aspires to establish itself as a crucial geopolitical actor on the international stage and, therefore, must not miss the opportunity to strengthen its relations with African states, both in light of Africa's evolving dynamics and due to the geographical proximity of the two continents. Political and social imbalances in Sub-Saharan Africa are already having repercussions on Europe, where issues related to migration and intercontinental security play a central role in political debates, both in Brussels and within the domestic politics of Member States. For these reasons, among many others, the European Union must develop a comprehensive and effective foreign policy toward Africa, fostering increasingly structured cooperation.

Building on these considerations, this study aims to examine EU-Africa relations by focusing on the case study of Mali, one of the primary theaters of European external action over the past decade. While some historical background is provided at the outset, the study primarily analyzes the period from 2012 to early 2023, with political reflections extending to the end of 2024. The time-frame under review begins with the outbreak of the Malian northern crisis in 2012, a pivotal moment in EU activities in the region, and extends to early 2023, by which time many of the current political and constitutional transformations had already taken place.

The availability of extensive data from international organizations, think tanks, associations, and research institutes has been invaluable in drafting this work, alongside traditional academic sources. Primary sources, such as treaties, official documents, and legislative acts, have been essential in outlining the political and legal framework of the subject. Likewise, academic literature has played a crucial role in capturing the current state of research on the topic. Additionally, the author has drawn upon personal materials, including interviews, conferences and documents collected over several months of work in projects related to the area under investigation.

As previously mentioned, since the outbreak of war in 2012, various international actors, including the European Union, have intervened extensively in Mali, both through military and civilian missions and by developing cooperation policies. As a result, Mali has become one of the focal points of international politics in recent years. By examining European policies in Bamako, this study aims to investigate the limitations and fragilities of the EU's external action in a crisis context such as the Malian one, while also providing a broader perspective on the nature of the crisis and the balance of power between the EU and other international actors. Given the political centrality of the Malian crisis in the Union's recent foreign policy, the body of literature on the subject has expanded significantly since 2014. However, despite some exceptions, much of the scholarship has focused on specific aspects of the European approach in the region. The EU's security-oriented approach and the post-Valletta migration policies have frequently been criticized by scholars for their lack of a long-term vision and the inadequacy of Brussels' foreign policy in the Sahel.

Regarding the specific case of Mali, much of the literature has concentrated on the crisis following the 2012 war, with a primary focus on French stabilization

efforts and UN peacekeeping activities. Therefore, building on existing scholarship, this analysis seeks to broaden the scope of research by shedding light on the complex dynamics that have shaped both the Malian security crisis and the geopolitical role of Brussels in that context. Accordingly, while this study aligns with much of the literature on the subject, it aims to provide a more detailed examination of the root causes of the Malian security crisis and to investigate the nature and impact of European cooperation policies in addressing it. Moreover, this analysis is set within a moment of transition that will be crucial to the future of the region's political dynamics, further underscoring the need for an in-depth examination of recent developments. Following the two *coups d'état* in Mali in 2020 and 2021, the emergence of the new military junta fundamentally altered the diplomatic landscape, prompting international actors such as the European Union and France to reassess and modify their political approaches. For these reasons, analyzing current developments remains an urgent necessity, particularly given the extreme volatility of the region.

This study is structured into four chapters, primarily analyzing the issue from a European perspective while also considering the role and influence of other international actors active in the region. The first chapter provides a historical overview of EU-Africa relations from the Treaty of Rome onward, highlighting the key features of these relations across different periods. EU-Africa relations are critically examined, with particular attention to the underlying asymmetries and inequalities that have shaped their development. The chapter then explores the limitations and weaknesses of the EU's external action, emphasizing their impact on the Union's role in the international arena. Narrowing the scope of analysis, the chapter proceeds with an examination of European strategies and actions in the Sahel, a region that has been central to EU foreign policy over the past decade, particularly in relation to migration and security issues.

The second chapter shifts the focus to the Malian case study, providing a contextual analysis that considers various dimensions. The first part of the chapter explores the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the Sahel, introducing the complexities of Mali as a state. It then offers a chronological review of major events in Mali from the outbreak of war in 2012 to the most recent *coup* in May 2021. The chapter thus serves a dual purpose: first, to outline the political, geographical, and social transformations of the past decade, and second, to identify the main actors operating in the Malian context, including regional and international stakeholders as well as various terrorist groups active in the country.

By contrast, the third chapter adopts a more analytical approach, examining in detail the fragilities and shortcomings of the European Union's policies in Mali. However, the chapter begins with a comprehensive discussion of the terrorist groups and criminal organizations operating within Mali's borders, analyzing both the scale of the threat and its impact on the country's complex social fabric. In response to these security challenges, the European Union has implemented a series of policies in cooperation with Bamako over the past several years. These policies form the core focus of the third chapter, which exam-

ines the objectives and activities of EU missions and projects on Malian soil. Brussels' strategic interest in Mali has steadily increased over time, leading to the deployment of two civilian missions and the implementation of several cooperation initiatives. The purpose of this chapter is to assess the nature and impact of EU policies, both in terms of addressing the crisis itself and advancing the Union's broader geopolitical interests in the region. However, the EU is not the only international actor engaged in Mali; consequently, it is essential to analyze the balance of power among Bamako's principal international partners. The final section of the chapter thus examines the political and military role of France in Mali and its inevitable influence on European Union policies in the region.

In conclusion, the fourth chapter examines the most recent political and diplomatic developments in the Malian context. With the military junta's rise to power in May 2021, Mali's international relations landscape has undergone a profound transformation. France, which had maintained a military presence in Mali for nearly a decade, decided to sever ties with the authoritarian government in Bamako and withdraw its troops following a serious diplomatic crisis. Simultaneously, Russia has progressively strengthened its relations both with Bamako and with the broader Sahel region, aiming to establish itself as one of the predominant actors in the area. Consequently, the final part of the chapter focuses on the current and potential future effects of these new political dynamics on the European Union's role in Mali, considering the remote possibility of re-establishing cooperative relations with Bamako.

Thus, through the analysis conducted across the four chapters, this study seeks to investigate the overall impact of the EU's foreign policy in the Malian case. By adopting a multidimensional approach to the political and social context, the objective is to highlight the defining characteristics of Brussels' policy choices, shaped by the significant political and economic attention devoted to the Sahel over the past decade.