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No Pillar of Stability: Mauritania's Trajectory and the Pitfalls of European Cooperation

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A confluence of developments is raising the Mauritanian government's financial and diplomatic room for manoeuvre, among them the heightened European focus on the Atlantic migration route; Western states' loss of other partners in the Sahel region; as well as the start of natural gas production and growth in mining activity. Given the narrow, closed structure of Mauritania's ruling elite, these increased resources could allow current powerholders to consolidate authority. However, they could also exacerbate the serious social and political tensions simmering beneath the surface. European migration and security policies risk contributing to such tensions, which could ultimately undermine the relationship that European governments are seeking to build with Mauritania.

Mauritania has long been a quintessentially marginal state from both a European and an international perspective. But over the past five years, this has begun to change due to four developments.

First, with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso at the epicentre of the crises in the Sahel, Mauritania had long been less of a focus for interventions and security cooperation by Western states. But following military takeovers in these three states, they abruptly turned against their long-time Western partners from 2022 onwards – and, to varying degrees, began relying on Russian assistance. Along with Chad, these three states have forced the withdrawal of the French and US militaries, several European Union (EU) security assistance missions, and the United Nations (UN) mission in Mali. European states, in turn, have drastically reduced not only their military footprint, but also their development assistance there.

Mauritania is the only one among the former G5 Sahel states to not only have maintained but expanded its military and security cooperation with Western governments. Admittedly, this cooperation has always been more limited and discreet than it had been in the other Sahel countries, since the authorities are sensitive to the domestic population's aversion to the presence of foreign forces. Nevertheless, Mauritania is now among the West African coastal countries to which European governments are looking in order to stay relevant in the region and contain the crisis in the Sahel. It is in this context that the country has come

to be lauded as a “beacon of stability” by European officials and the press,¹ and that NATO began supporting Mauritania's military with a range of capacity-building measures in mid-2022.² This notably includes training for special forces, which is currently carried out by a Czech contingent. The United States and France both have their own more longstanding and substantial train-and-equip programmes.³ The EU has redirected some of its resources towards military capacity-building in the Sahel to Mauritania.⁴ Growing spillover from the conflict in Mali has since underlined the relevance of such cooperation to both sides: Since 2023, around 160,000 people have been newly displaced by violence in Mali and found refuge in Mali's eastern El Hodh El Chargui region, bringing the total number of Malian refugees in Mauritania to more than 270,000.⁵ This new wave has also provoked fears among the Mauritanian authorities about jihadist infiltration and the radicalization of refugee populations, further strengthening their case when appealing for Western assistance. There were repeated cross-border incursions in the same period by the Malian army and Wagner fighters, which killed several Mauritanian citizens, fuelling bilateral tensions between both states.⁶

Second, the numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in the EU via the migratory route from the West African coast to the Canary Islands has grown rapidly since 2020 and reached unprecedented levels in 2024, when almost 47,000 people arrived in the Canary Islands on that route – more than a third of them Malians.⁷ Departures from Mauritanian shores drove the increase in 2024, but Mauritania is also a transit country for people departing from Western Sahara or Morocco. Mauritania has long cooperated with the EU – and Spain in particular – to curb migrant departures from its territory. But as departures surged in 2023 and early 2024, the Mauritanian government upped its demands for the payoff it receives for its cooperation – seeing as the EU was signing or negotiating agreements with Egypt and Tunisia worth billions of euros, primarily to prevent migrant departures from those coun-

1 European Commission, “Joint Press Statement by the President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the President of the European Commission and the Prime Minister of the Spanish Government”, 8 February 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_709; “Mauritania Is a Beacon of Stability in the Coup-prone Sahel”, *The Economist*, 27 June 2024, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/06/27/mauritania-is-a-beacon-of-stability-in-the-coup-prone-sahel> (accessed 25 April 2025); Fritz Schaap and Andy Spyra, “Keeping the Peace on Camelback – Mauritania's Secret to Stability”, *Spiegel Online*, 23 July 2024, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/keeping-the-peace-on-camelback-mauritanias-secret-to-stability-a-223fc1f0-c4fe-4483-9815-d6040d659c91> (accessed 25 April 2025); Samuel Ramani, “Why Everyone Is Courting Mauritania”, *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/21/mauritania-green-energy-china-nato-russia-gulf/> (accessed 25 April 2025).

2 NATO, “NATO and Mauritania Strengthen Cooperation”, 4 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_216763.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 25 April 2025).

3 Author interviews, Western diplomats, Nouakchott, February 2025; “Czech Army to Serve again in African Sahel, Training Troops in Mauritania”, *Radio Prague International*, 25 November 2024, <https://english.radio.cz/czech-army-serve-again-african-sahel-training-troops-mauritania-8835592> (accessed 25 April 2025).

4 Council of the European Union, “European Peace Facility: Council Adopts Third Assistance Measure in Support of the Armed Forces of Mauritania”, (Press release), 24 March 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/24/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-third-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armed-forces-of-mauritania/> (accessed 25 April 2025); Expertise France – The French Public Cooperation Agency, “European Union Programme to Support the G5 Sahel Joint Force Supporting the Functioning and Operationalisation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force by Providing Equipment, Services and Works”, International Security, Stability and Peace, 13 January 2025, <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/fiche-projet?id=829478> (accessed 25 April 2025).

5 UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency, “Mauritania Factsheet”, 1 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/107472> (accessed 25 April 2025); UNHCR, “Refugee Emergency Response Update”, 26 February 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114715> (accessed 25 April 2025); UNHCR, “Mauritania Operation Factsheet March 2025”, 15 March 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/115504> (accessed 25 April 2025).

6 “Mali: le ministre de la Défense mauritanien à Bamako sur fond de tensions diplomatiques”, *TV5 Monde* (online), 21 April 2024, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/mali-le-ministre-de-la-defense-mauritanien-bamako-sur-fond-de-tensions-diplomatiques> (accessed 25 April 2025).

7 Mixed Migration Centre, *Beyond Restrictions: Migration & Smuggling Across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic & the English Channel*, 20 March 2025, <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/migration-smuggling-mediterranean-atlantic-english-channel/> (accessed 25 April 2025).

tries. The reaction was swift. In a visit to Nouakchott with the Spanish prime minister in February 2024, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a EUR 210 million package that is partly linked to migration management.⁸ Of that amount, Mauritania will receive EUR 100 million in budget support.⁹ Mauritanian counter-migration policies have also led to deportations of growing numbers of Malian, Senegalese, and other West African nationals without residency permits – deportations that are straining Mauritania's relations with its West African neighbours.

Third, the growth of Mauritania's extractive industries has widened the government's fiscal room for manoeuvre and modestly raised Mauritania's profile as an investment destination. Between 2020 and 2024, government revenues increased by a half – from EUR 1.5 billion to EUR 2.3 billion – while expenditures doubled. During the same period, export revenues grew by 75 per cent – from EUR 2.1 billion to EUR 3.7 billion – driven by gold and iron ore exports and market prices.¹⁰ This trend could continue: Gas production from the giant Grand Tortue Ahmeyim (GTA) field, which Mauritania shares with Senegal, began in early 2025. In a context marked by European efforts to replace Russian gas with supplies from other sources, that project has also increased European interest in Senegal and Mauritania under energy security considerations.

It remains to be seen to what extent other major projects that are under consideration will become reality, including plans to double the country's iron ore production by 2030, proposed uranium and phosphate mining projects, as well as the giant BirAllah gas field. The growth of the extractives sector could permit major progress in electrification and possibly also some industrialization, such as steel production. However, it is also likely to spur intra-elite competition for the capture of profits as well as societal demands for accountability if it does not translate into improved public services and infrastructure.

And fourth, Mauritania has also become the focus of growing geopolitical competition between its northern neighbours, Morocco and Algeria. Both of these states are trying to draw Mauritania into their orbit, including with new infrastructural projects such as roads. This aspect is the subject of a separate publication and will not be examined here in detail.¹¹ It is nevertheless worth mentioning, as rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is generating interest in Mauritania even beyond those two states: The United Arab Emirates, for example, is said to be lobbying senior Mauritanian officials in favour of Morocco.

Taken together, these developments are bolstering Mauritanian officials' international bargaining power. They could also strengthen the government's hand internally. But they also require making policy choices that are controversial – whether on migration or on the use of public funds – and could alter domestic power relations in ways that exacerbate existing tensions. Extractive growth, security cooperation, and counter-migration are interacting with domestic political dynamics in ways that make Mauritania far more fragile than its now popular description as a bastion of stability would suggest.

8 European Commission, "Press Statement by President von der Leyen Following the Meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez and Mauritanian President Ould El-Ghazouani", 8 February 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_703 (accessed 25 April 2025).

9 EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships, "First Official Mission of EU Commissioner Sikela Develops Mutually Beneficial Cooperation with Mauritania", 20 December 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/first-official-mission-eu-commissioner-sikela-develops-mutually-beneficial-cooperation-mauritania-2024-12-20_en (accessed 25 April 2025).

10 International Monetary Fund, *Islamic Republic of Mauritania*, IMF Country Report No. 24/362, December 2024, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/CR/2024/English/1mrtea2024003-print-pdf.ashx>

11 Wolfram Lacher and Isabelle Werenfels, "Mauritania's Balancing Act amid Intensifying Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry", *Megatrends Spotlight* 49, 7 April 2025, <https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/en/publication/mauritania-balancing-act-amid-intensifying-algerian-moroccan-rivalry>

Economic Growth, Rent-Seeking, and Inequality

Although there has been a notable expansion of both fiscal and export revenues over the past years, close observers of the Mauritanian economy emphasize the need to remain cautious on the outlook. The long-awaited start of gas production in 2025 came after significant delays and technical difficulties that led the operator of the GTA field, BP, to renegotiate terms with its Senegalese and Mauritanian partners.¹² The IMF's most recent assessment expects gas revenues to "provide additional fiscal space of 0.8 per cent of GDP" from 2025 to 2029.¹³ But current and former officials say that they have revised their expectations for revenues from GTA sharply downward. Moreover, in 2024, BP let its licence for the giant BirAllah gas field expire, and the authorities have yet to find a new investor for the field. High hopes had also been placed on the country's green hydrogen potential, and the government has begun to create a regulatory framework for that sector. But with the political backing for major investments in green hydrogen faltering in both Europe and the United States, prospective investors lack the necessary assurances that there will be markets for large-scale hydrogen production. The outlook for that sector is therefore shrouded by uncertainty.

More to the point, the growth of GDP, exports, and government revenues may be less meaningful than other, more sobering statistics. When controlled for inflation, GDP per capita has hardly grown since 2018, but merely returned to its pre-pandemic level.¹⁴ Moreover, although Mauritania's GDP per capita is more than double that of Mali, both countries score similarly badly on indicators such as access to electricity and secondary school enrolment.¹⁵ Indeed, Mauritania's proportion of 15- to 24-year-olds who are neither in employment nor in education and training is the second highest in all of sub-Saharan Africa, after that of Niger.¹⁶

As these measures show, translating economic growth into tangible improvements in living standards is a key challenge – not only because of Mauritania's high population growth rate, which stood at 3 per cent in 2023.¹⁷ Even more important is the question of how economic gains are distributed in society. Mauritania's economy is highly oligopolistic, with profits concentrated in a small number of family-owned conglomerates that also comprise their own banks. Business conglomerates and banks, in turn, are controlled by the same rival elite factions that also dominate the country's politics. The banks' primary function is to recycle export revenues into imports, and calibrating the distribution of deposits from export earnings by state-controlled entities is a key focus of elite politics.

Most members of the ruling elite interviewed by the author in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou themselves suggested that the state's increased resources are, above all, fueling misappropriation by well-connected political and economic players.¹⁸ This is hardly surprising, given the incestuous ties between businesses, banks, and politics. A recurrent theme in such discussions is that illicit profits from embezzlement are being shared more widely within Mauritania's narrow, oligopolistic elite in the past few years, compared to the

12 The Africa Report, *The Waiting Game – Senegal & Mauritania: Why BP May Give Up on Phase 2 of the GTA Gas Field*, 19 December 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/371966/senegal-mauritania-why-bp-may-give-up-on-phase-2-of-the-gta-gas-field/> (accessed 25 April 2025).

13 International Monetary Fund, "Islamic Republic of Mauritania", p. 13, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/MRT>

14 World Bank Group, *Maximiser le rendement du capital humain en Mauritanie pour une richesse accrue et une prospérité partagée Mauritanie*, Rapport sur la Situation Économique – Septième Édition, 2024.

15 World Bank Group, "Data – Mali", <https://data.worldbank.org/country/mali> (accessed 25 April 2025); World Bank Group, "Data – Mauretania", <https://data.worldbank.org/country/mauritania> (accessed 25 April 2025).

16 World Bank Group, *Maximiser le rendement* (see note 14).

17 World Bank Group, "Data – Mauretania" (see note 15).

18 Author interviews with around two dozen politicians and technocrats, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, February 2025.

era of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2009–2019). The latter was reputed to have increasingly monopolized large-scale theft of public funds in the hands of his family and close associates. By contrast, since Aziz's former close ally Mohamed Ould Ghazouani assumed power in 2019, very few people have been prosecuted for corruption – with the exception of Aziz himself. Political actors in both ruling circles and the opposition concur that favouritism in the awarding of public contracts and the embezzlement of public funds enjoy impunity. Such illicit gains are also seen as central to politics: They are key sources of electoral finance in the form of vote-buying and the distribution of favours.

The stranglehold of elite networks also extends to artisanal gold mining, which has been among the fastest-growing sectors over the past decade. This activity initially proved harder to control for the state than the country's traditional mainstays of export revenues: iron ore mining and fisheries.¹⁹ The growth of artisanal gold mining has also created far more jobs than foreign-owned gold and copper mining projects have done; in 2021, official estimates put direct employment in the sector at around 52,000 people, though miners' representatives cite much higher numbers.²⁰ Yet, at least since 2022, a large part of the profits has been captured by a select group of well-connected actors. That year, Mauritania's central bank stopped buying artisanally mined gold, and a recently created regulatory authority for the sector extended oversight of the transactions.²¹ According to regulations, this authority, Maaden Mauritanie, was to license several companies to buy gold from miners. In practice, however, security forces in mining areas enforced a monopoly for one company, which was therefore in a position to impose lower prices. According to miners' representatives and numerous other well-informed sources, the company in question is associated with a close relative of Mauritania's president.²² Although formal proof of this is lacking, the enforcement of a de facto monopoly clearly requires high-level political backing. Owing to repeated complaints by miners, such enforcement ended in late 2024, though no clearly regulated new system has been introduced so far.²³ In addition, triangulation of declared exports and imports of Mauritanian gold suggests that in 2022 alone, around 11.2 tonnes of artisanally mined gold were smuggled abroad – more than four times the amount of Mauritania's declared gold exports.²⁴ Since the commercialization of artisanally mined gold was a de facto monopoly, the profits from gold smuggling are also likely to have been highly concentrated.

These patterns suggest that continued growth of the extractives sector will disproportionately benefit narrow elite networks straddling business, politics, and the senior ranks of the military. This is likely to exacerbate existing socioeconomic tensions. Statistical data appear to show that inequality has declined in Mauritania over the past 20 years and is now slightly lower than in neighbouring Senegal and Mali. But contrary to those countries, in Mauritania, a highly salient sociopolitical cleavage compounds income inequality. Mauritania's affluent ruling class is almost exclusively *Bidhan* – that is, “white” Arabic speakers – even though

19 Laurent Gagnol, Rayane El Ghastalany, and Ahmedou Mahfoudh, “De l'âge du fer à l'âge de l'or? Géographie extractiviste en Mauritanie”, *L'Ouest Saharien* 19 (2023/2): 147–180.

20 MR EITI – Initiative pour la Transparence dans les Industries Extractives en Mauritanie, Mauritanie Rapport ITIE 2020–2021, 18 December 2022, p. 48; author interviews, miners' union leaders, Chami, February 2025.

21 MR EITI – Initiative pour la Transparence dans les Industries Extractives en Mauritanie, Mauritanie Rapport ITIE 2022, 14 October 2023, p. 22.

22 Author interviews with miners' union leaders and finance professionals, Chami and Nouakchott, February 2025. See also Manassa al-Rasid Info, Facebook post, 22 January 2025,

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=590288897199984&id=100086566353119; “The Only Company Allowed to Buy Gold from Miners Belongs to Haddemin Ould al-Ghazouani”, *Eljewishir*, 22 January 2025, <https://eljewahir.com/node/31838>

23 Author interviews (see note 22).

24 SWISSAID, *On the Trail of African Gold – Quantifying Production and Trade to Combat Illicit Flows*, May 2024, p. 134.

most Bidhan are by no means well-off. By contrast, the *Haratin* population – Arabic speakers who are descendants of former slaves – forms the vast majority of the country's poor. A third societal component are the Wolof, Soninke, and Fulani communities, which straddle the borders with Senegal and Mali. Their relationship with the ruling elite is marked by the legacy of violent expulsions, dispossession, and repression that targeted their members from 1989 to 1992.²⁵

"The Bidhan have the military power, they have the wealth, and they have the education", a senior politician with close ties to the presidency told the author.²⁶ Although he and others stressed the need for this rigid social structure to change, neither Ghazouani nor his predecessor have made any serious attempts to initiate such change. The government has adopted a palliative approach with social programmes to support health, housing, and income for poor segments of society; inevitably, well-connected actors siphon off a substantial proportion of the funds allocated for such purposes.²⁷ Similarly, the presidency's tactic to deal with the victims of the exactions from the 1989–1992 period has focused on attempts to negotiate behind closed doors with the aim of selectively buying off particular groups with compensation payments – avoiding any public process to establish the facts, let alone attribute responsibilities.

For different reasons, then, large segments of the population have reason to harbour intense resentment about what many perceive as a profoundly unjust societal order.²⁸ Economic development that exacerbates such inequality is likely to fuel growing political tensions.

Military Cooperation: Until the Next Coup d'État?

Mauritania's army is the backbone and guarantor of the societal order outlined above. It is profoundly political and, as a result, so is foreign support for it. For now, and since the last coup d'état in 2008 – led by former president Aziz, together with the current president, Ghazouani – the army has remained in the background, but it would be likely to reassume a more overt role in the event of a political crisis.

The army's senior ranks are overwhelmingly dominated by Bidhan, and more particularly by groups from eastern and northern Mauritania who have dominated the country's ruling elite since the 1984 coup d'état by Muawiya Ould Taya, who reigned until Aziz and Ghazouani overthrew him in their first coup, in 2005. In March 2025, there were 15 officers promoted to the highest ranks; all but one were Bidhan.²⁹ Acting and retired senior officers are deeply involved in politics – including formally, beginning with Ghazouani himself; the president of the National Assembly, Mohamed Ould Meguett; and Defence Minister Hanana Ould Sidi. Informally, senior officers are key nodes in elite networks straddling business, politics, and the military, and they reportedly have vested interests in economic activities

25 Human Rights Watch/Africa, *Mauritania's Campaign of Terror: State-Sponsored Repression of Black Africans*, April 1994.

26 Interview, Nouakchott, February 2025.

27 Interview, official in social assistance programme Ta'azur, Nouakchott, February 2025.

28 Frédéric Mantelin, "En Mauritanie, la bombe à retardement de la ségrégation raciale", *Afrique XXI*, 27 March 2023, <https://afriquexxi.info/En-Mauritanie-la-bombe-a-retardement-de-la-segregation-raciale> (accessed 25 April 2025).

29 Cherif Kane, "Mauritanie : la promotion monocolore des généraux des forces armées", *C.R.I.D.E.M.* (online), 15 March 2025, https://www.cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=781889 (accessed 25 April 2025); "Noms des officiers des forces armées promus aux grades de Général de brigade et de Général de division", *C.R.I.D.E.M.* (online), 13 March 2025, https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=781860 (accessed 25 April 2025).

such as gold mining. The army's top ranks therefore have privileges to defend, but they also compete among each other for political influence and economic gain.

The military's political role heavily circumscribes the room for manoeuvre in civilian politics. Under Ghazouani, the ruling elite has maintained a façade of formally democratic institutions with only sporadic recourse to overt repression. It has heavily tilted the playing field, such as by refusing to grant official recognition to new opposition parties, manipulating voter registers and, most of all, by leveraging its control over financial flows. Ultimately, however, this system is underpinned by military force, which provides the deterrent against any serious opposition attempts to challenge the status quo – whether emanating from Haratin movements or the conservative Tawassul party.

It is therefore hardly surprising that civil society activists and opposition politicians view European support for the authorities in general, and the security forces in particular, as a major obstacle to genuine democratization.³⁰ However, few of them believe that the sovereignist, anti-French, and anti-Western discourse of putschists in the other Sahel states can gain similar traction in Mauritania: Contrary to these states, Mauritania has not hosted French or American bases. It also stopped using the Franc CFA decades ago and Arabized its education system, setting it apart from the rest of the Sahel. Nevertheless, closer security cooperation with European states could expose the authorities to more widespread charges of being Western stooges – charges that would become particularly explosive if events lead to more overt repression. Mobilization along such lines could occur along the deep sociopolitical cleavages outlined above.

Finally, there is the possibility that officers currently receiving training and other support from European states could attempt another coup. This is not only plausible because of Mauritania's own history of coups. The military takeovers in the other Sahel states since 2020 have shown that the current international environment offers favourable conditions for coup leaders. The African Union has been lax in its reactions; Western states are too anxious to maintain their cooperation to insist on a principled stance; and alternative foreign partners from Russia to Turkey and the UAE are waiting in the wings. From this perspective, the heightened European interest in Mauritania only improves the prospects of potential putschists – and hence ultimately raises the risk of a putsch.

Western diplomats tend to downplay this risk, arguing that Ghazouani has been adept at coup-proofing by regularly reshuffling the army's senior ranks. But they also concede that dynamics within the officer corps are difficult to parse. The end of Ghazouani's current and, according to the constitution, final term in 2029 could be a critical juncture in this regard. Having turned on his predecessor and longtime ally, Aziz, after taking power in 2019, Ghazouani is well-aware of the stakes involved in managing his own succession.

A Hardening Stance on Counter-Migration

Mauritania has long been both a destination country for labour migrants from West African countries and a transit country for onward migration to Europe. In recent years, labour migration has increased along with the growth of the fisheries and artisanal gold mining sectors. Since 2023, larger numbers of new refugees from northern and central Mali have added to those who have been in Mauritania since 2012, even if most have stayed in the

³⁰ Author's interviews, opposition politicians and civil society activists, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, February 2025.

eastern province of El Hodh El Chargui. Finally, the Atlantic migration route to Europe – and Mauritania as a transit country – has become more important partly because other routes have become more difficult: Morocco has intensified control of migration from sub-Saharan Africa since 2022; Tunisian authorities have been fiercely cracking down on migration since early 2024; and the risks of travelling via Libya have deterred many West African nationals since 2018.³¹

Taken together, these developments have not only raised Mauritania's profile among Spanish and EU officials concerned about the rapidly increasing number of migrants arriving via the Atlantic route. In Mauritania's upper class, they have also prompted pervasive fears that migration could change the demographic composition of the society – meaning the balance between Bidhan, Haratin, and non-Arabophone groups.³² These fears are partially related to the country's still unprocessed history of exactions against particular communities, which has left a legacy of disputes over Mauritanian citizenship. Many refugees of the 1989 expulsions – and in particular children born in exile to Mauritanian families expelled in 1989 – continue to face difficulties in regaining full recognition of their citizenship.³³ Among the refugees from central Mali who have arrived since 2023 have been Fulani families expelled in 1989 who are eyed with suspicion by the Mauritanian authorities. Such unresolved issues fuel anxieties in the ruling elite that migration from neighbouring Senegal and Mali could ultimately alter the socio-political balance of power.

These fears help to account for local reactions to Mauritania's partnership with the EU, as announced in March 2024.³⁴ The announcement met with suspicion that the EU may be working to facilitate the permanent settlement of third-country nationals in Mauritania.³⁵ The poor communication of both the EU and the Mauritanian authorities likely did not help; even opposition members of parliament say it is not clear to them what exactly the partnership entails.³⁶

The ruling elite's attitude towards migrants from other West African countries is also key to understanding the increasing numbers of deportations to Senegal and Mali over the past years.³⁷ The basic impetus for this policy appears to have emanated from the authorities' own perception of growing migrant flows as a threat. EU support offered an additional incentive and resources to carry out the deportations. The consequence has been strained relations with Senegal and Mali in particular. Nationals of both countries can travel to Mauritania without a visa and only require a residency permit for stays longer than three months. Since 2022, Mauritanian police have deported growing numbers of Malians and Senegalese accused of having overstayed without residency permits – accusations that deportees frequently deny, in vain. In 2024, Senegal stopped accepting Mauritanian deportations of Guineans and Gambians via its territory. Moreover, in March 2025, an unprecedented wave of particularly heavy-handed deportations led Senegal and Mali to protest the

31 Mixed Migration Centre, *Beyond Restrictions* (see note 7).

32 Author interviews, former and current government officials, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, February 2025.

33 Author interviews, local officials and civil society activists, Rosso, February 2025.

34 “Déclaration Conjointe Établissant un Partenariat sur les Migrations entre la République Islamique de Mauritanie et l'Union Européenne”, Nouakchott, 7 March 2025.

35 Hassan Ould Moctar, *The EU-Mauritania Partnership: Whose Priorities?*, ECRE Working Paper 21, October 2024.

36 Author interviews, opposition parliamentarians, Nouakchott, February 2025. A year after the partnership was announced, the EU delegation to Mauritania still felt the need to react to continuing social media chatter with a snappish statement, saying “it is difficult to understand the criticism levelled at [the joint] declaration”; Délégation de l'Union Européenne en Mauritanie, Communiqué de presse, “Partenariat entre l'Union européenne et la Mauritanie dans le domaine de la migration”, 28 March 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/mauritanie/communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse-partenariat-entre-lunion-europ%C3%A9enne-et-la-mauritanie-dans-le-domaine-de-la_fr?s=109

37 An interior ministry official put the number of deportees at 4,500 in 2022, 9,500 in 2023, and 16,000 in 2024. Author interview, Nouakchott, February 2025.

alleged ill-treatment of their citizens.³⁸ A senior presidency official summed up Mauritania's dilemma as follows: *"We shouldn't cause ourselves problems with our neighbours by playing the gendarme for Europe – for what? Our neighbours will always be there."*³⁹

The EU and its member states – above all Spain – are involved in every aspect of Mauritanian counter-migration efforts. The Spanish Guardia Civil conducts aerial surveillance along the coast; its officers also join Mauritanian coast guard patrols and operate in detention centres from which deportations are managed.⁴⁰ Germany is supplying a new patrol boat and financing the construction of a new operations base for the coast guard in Nouadhibou, as well as radar stations along the road. Officially, this German assistance aims at strengthening the coast guard's capacities to monitor fishing – a sector in which German development cooperation has long been active. In the current context, however, increased German support to the coast guard is likely driven by the European objective of preventing departures and increasing interceptions of migrant boats.⁴¹ Moreover, the EU has recently financed the construction and equipment or refurbishment of detention centres to process intercepted migrants ahead of deportation.⁴² The vehicles in which deportees are driven to the Senegalese and Malian borders have also been supplied by the EU or its member states.⁴³

Prior to the campaign of deportations from March 2025 onwards, there had been occasional reports of maltreatment in such operations. Overall, however, the behaviour of Mauritania's security forces had been far more benign than the often lethal actions of the Tunisian authorities. Nor is European support for Mauritania's coast guard similarly problematic as that for its Libyan counterpart, which is an integral component of a system of abuse and exploitation. Even observers with critical views of European border externalization strategies conceded that the Mauritanian coast guard and police forces generally treated migrants with respect and in a non-violent manner.⁴⁴

However, this changed drastically with the deportation campaign that began in March 2025. This campaign reportedly targeted migrants regardless of whether they were in Mauritania legally or not, and the abuses this campaign allegedly involved indicate a sudden hardening of practices by the security forces.⁴⁵ It remains unclear as to what role European pressure may have played in this sudden change, or whether the anxieties of Mauritians

38 "Le Sénégal 'indigné' par le traitement de ses ressortissants migrants en Mauritanie", *TV5 Monde* (online), 16 March 2025, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/le-senegal-indigne-par-le-traitement-de-ses-ressortissants-migrants-en-mauritanie-2766531>

39 Author interview, Nouakchott, February 2025.

40 Nissim Gasteli, Andrei Popoviciu, Tomas Statius, Thomas Eydoux, Liselotte Mas, Cellule Enquête vidéo and Maud Julien, "Comment l'argent de l'UE permet aux pays du Maghreb d'expulser des migrants en plein désert", *Le Monde*, 21 May 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/05/21/comment-l-argent-de-l-union-europeenne-permet-aux-pays-du-maghreb-de-refouler-des-migrants-dans-le-desert_6234489_3212.html; Hassan Ould Moctar, "Autonomy within Entanglements: Illegalised Migrants, the EU Border Regime, and the Political Economy of Nouadhibou, Mauritania", *Environment and Planning D* 4, no. 1 (2022): 56–73 (Original work published 2023).

41 The coast guard officially reports to the ministry of fishing, and until 2016 it was manned by civilian personnel. Since then, however, civilians have been replaced by recruits from the naval academy who carry weapons and report to military officers. This change took place against the background of cooperation with Spain's Guardia Civil, and a shift in focus towards the policing of migrant departures. Nevertheless, the German government portrays its support to the coast guard as assistance for sustainable fishing. Author interviews, coast guard personnel, Nouadhibou, February 2025; Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), *Achieving Food Security, Protecting Soils and Fish Stocks*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/mauritania/core-area-conserving-nature-and-natural-resources-120998>

42 Author interview, European diplomats, Nouakchott, February 2025.

43 Ibid.; Gasteli et al., "Comment l'argent (see note 40).

44 Author interviews, sources with close knowledge of Mauritanian migration policies, February 2025.

45 Soulé Dia, "Migrants Deported from Mauritania Recount Police Beatings", *Barron's*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.barrons.com/news/migrants-deported-from-mauritania-recount-police-beatings-06599bb2> (accessed 25 April 2025); Abbas Asamaan, "La Mauritanie, désormais l'un des principaux points de départ vers l'Europe, expulse des centaines de migrants sous la pression de l'UE", *Le Monde* (online), 26 March 2025 (accessed 7 May 2025).

were the key driver behind it – but the greater amounts of resources provided by the EU in addition to the increased political attention paid to counter-migration clearly facilitated this evolution.

Moreover, as elsewhere, tightening controls will inevitably increase the profits to be made through evasion and collusion, which will likely promote the development of more sophisticated criminal networks and practices to facilitate migrant smuggling. It has long been common for members of the security forces to release migrants intercepted at checkpoints or in detention centres against payments, and there has been some evidence that senior officers are also involved in such practices.⁴⁶ Some political actors in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou argue that the prevalent perception of impunity for high-level corruption encourages mid- and lower-ranking officers to profit from facilitating migrant movements whenever opportunities arise.⁴⁷ Heavier counter-migration efforts are likely to increase the premium for such collusion, and therefore the financial incentives for corruptible officials. In sum, the increased European focus on counter-migration in Mauritania may well produce unintended consequences.

Conclusion

European governments often laud their foreign partners to the south as anchors of stability when explaining the support they provide in pursuit of interests such as counter-migration. Such descriptions are more than just rhetoric; they tend to seep into assessments of a country's politics at all levels of diplomatic bureaucracies and serve to rationalize ongoing cooperation projects. This also appears to be the case with regard to Mauritania as Europeans dedicate more attention and resources to the country. The present analysis has sought to show that the epithet of “pillar of stability” is misguided for Mauritania and conceals serious fragilities. Moreover, growing European interest and support does not necessarily help to tackle these fragilities, but could actually exacerbate them.

Although this is a call for a more realistic assessment of Mauritania's trajectory and the potential impact of European policies, it is less clear how these policies might be adapted to mitigate the risks outlined in this Policy Brief. The lesson many European policy-makers have drawn from their foreign policy debacle in the Sahel is that Europe should be more accommodating in giving African partners the security assistance they ask for, lest they turn to Russia or other rivals of the West for support. In this international environment, arguments that Europe should not strengthen the forces of a coup-prone army upholding a highly exclusionary political order are likely to fall on deaf ears.

Much of the same goes for cooperation on counter-migration. Officially, the EU and its member states seek to ensure that their support in this domain does not promote increasingly abusive behaviour and disregard for due process. In practice, however, the priority is to make migration controls more efficient, and conditionality for European support is applied mainly in pursuit of that goal. Moreover, the EU is hardly in a position to credibly demand greater respect for human rights in counter-migration, given its tolerance for systemic violations by its Tunisian and Libyan partners in migration control. And for the same

46 Author interviews, journalists and political actors, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, February 2025. See also Andrei Popoviciu and José Bautista, “En Mauritanie, un cas de corruption policière met à mal la coopération antimigratoire avec l'Union européenne”, *Le Monde*, 5 November 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/11/05/en-mauritanie-un-cas-de-corruption-policiere-met-a-mal-la-cooperation-antimigratoire-avec-l-union-europeenne_6377204_3212.html (accessed 25 April 2025).

47 Author interviews, political actors, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, February 2025.

reason, the EU is unlikely to reduce its assistance if a hardening Mauritanian stance on migration leads to growing human rights abuses or the entrenchment of criminal networks in the security sector.

If current trends continue, Mauritania's incumbent elite will further accumulate power and wealth. This process is set to exacerbate existing patterns of inequality and exclusion and could play out to the elite's advantage, but it could fuel growing tensions and instability. It is difficult to assess the weight of European support in driving this evolution and pushing the country towards either scenario. Europe's role may be more limited than Mauritanian regime critics make it out to be. At a minimum, however, Europe's focus on counter-migration, as well as on security cooperation as a means of competing with international rivals, will leave Europeans bereft of leverage to steer Mauritania's trajectory in a more positive direction.

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