

## Research Project

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**Research Area:** SPS/04 Political science

**PhD in:** GLOBAL STUDIES. ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND LAW,

**Thematic area C)** Processi geo-politici e scelte politiche delle istituzioni europee, internazionali, regionali e dei principali paesi per il governo della globalizzazione e delle relazioni internazionali.

### **Reversing the trend in Europe-Africa relations. An analysis of the development cooperation of Italy and the European Union in light of recent political changes in the Sahel region**

#### **Relevance of the Project in the State of the Art**

The idea behind this Research Project is to expand a field of study, namely Italian and European international relations in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to the Sahel region. Despite being a subject of interest for the academic world, the Sahel still needs to be studied and explored in depth. Consequently, recent political developments in the Sahel region hold significant geopolitical and strategic importance from a European perspective, both for individual actors like Italy and for the entire European Union. As will be discussed in more detail later, the European Union and its Member States have invested significant resources in cooperation and development in this region over the past decade. The Sahel, as repeatedly emphasized by scholars, has been a true "practice field" for the development of the Union's external actions (Venturi, 2017). However, despite the initial optimism, the policies implemented in the Sahel region (especially in Niger and Mali) have often been strongly criticized by the academic community and public opinion. Therefore, the main objective of this Research Project is to analyze the nature of Italian and European policies in the Sahel region, seeking to highlight their main limitations and vulnerabilities in relation to different dimensions: diplomatic, political, economic, and social.

In line with the aforementioned statement, it can be inferred that a significant part of the literature on cooperation and development between Europe (Brussels and Member States) and Africa has focused, until now, on critically assessing the Union's activities implemented in the past decade. From the Italian perspective, in line with European policies, there has been talk of a greater opening, since the beginning of this century, to a new partnership with Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa (G. Carbone, 2021; Ventura, 2022; MAECI, 2022). However, despite the official rhetoric, especially in the last decade, activities have often focused on aspects related to the management and control of migration flows, parallel to the growing salience of this issue in the political debate (Moroni, Rognoni, 2021). Similarly, with regard to Brussels, the excessive focus on security and migration, coupled with a lack of interest in social and economic policies, represents one of the main criticisms raised by experts (Raineri, Strizzari, 2019; Lopez, 2019; Plank, Bergmann, 2021; Venturi, 2019). These criticisms often stem from the nature of the relations between the European Union and Africa, which are rooted in a long-standing partnership often described as asymmetric and inheriting the

legacy of colonialism (Kotsopoulos, Mattheis, 2018; Fargion, Gazibo, 2021; Haastrup, Duggan, Mah, 2021)

In light of the above, delving into Italian and European political and cooperation relations with this region becomes crucial in the context of substantial political changes that have taken place from 2020 onwards, the significance of which still seems to be underestimated in the literature on the subject. Indeed, the new political dynamics in the Sahel are likely to be a crucial geopolitical variable in the current complex international scene. The political, economic, and social dynamics of the Sahel, besides being a matter of local relevance, also have significant effects on European equilibria. Taking migration policies as an example, which are one of the most politically relevant issues in the European public debate, and especially in Italy, the Sahel represents one of the main crossroads for migration flows. Therefore, addressing the underlying imbalances of African migration to Europe should translate into diplomatic and political activism in the Sahel region in order to develop efficient projects and activities to address the deep-rooted political, economic, social, and climatic causes that drive migration from sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Research Design**

The development of bilateral relations with the African continent in recent years has become one of the essential priorities of EU foreign policy. In particular, the European Union has often expressed its desire to become a significant geopolitical player on the international stage and, in this regard, it should therefore miss the opportunity to strengthen its relations with African states, both considering the future dynamics of Africa and the geographical proximity of the two continents. In fact, political and social imbalances in sub-Saharan Africa are already showing their effects on the continent Europe, where issues related to migration and intercontinental security play a key in the political debate both in Brussels and within member states such as Italy.

Clearly, EU-Africa relations represent a vast field of study, which for obvious reasons cannot be addressed in its entirety. In this sense, the idea behind this Project is to narrow the scope of the analysis to the external actions of Italy and the European Union in the specific African area of the Sahel, which has been and will continue to be an enormous geopolitical challenge for the European continent. Since the establishment of the Sahel Strategy in 2011, European policies in the region have increased enormously. Over the past decade, the Sahel has been the scene of several crises and imbalances. The states that are part of that region present some of the lowest levels, on a global scale world, of poverty, social imbalances, and underdevelopment. In the second half of the last century, after independence was gained from colonial powers, the newly independent states undertook slow processes of democratization and economic development, still showing significant fragilities and limitations. On the one hand, the war in Libya has greatly destabilized local balances, accentuating both immigration in and out of Africa and the proliferation of weapons in the region, derived from the Libyan black market (Boserup, Martinez 2018). On the other hand, the outbreak of war in Mali has had a destabilizing effect on regional security, serving as a multiplier for terrorist activities in the Sahel. In fact, starting from that moment, although some had already been active on the ground for a few years, various terrorist groups found fertile ground to develop further their networks and further expand their ranks (GTI 2022).

Therefore, during the last decade, cooperation and development policies with the countries of the Sahel have been one of the most significant priorities for the European Union's external actions. In this sense, Brussels' engagement has taken several forms. Three CSDP missions have been deployed, one in Niger and two in Mali, focusing many of the European policies on both the civil and military security aspects and on migration border management. In addition, through the use of various funding channels, such as the European Development Funds (EDF), the European Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) and the African Peace Facility (APF), Brussels has invested a large number of resources in the implementation of cooperation and development projects. However, what has emerged most from the literature on the subject in recent years is a strong criticism of the approach and EU policies, pointing out their fragilities in many respects. Several scholars have highlighted the excessive focus of European interest on security and migration policies in the Sahel, which have often monopolized much of the funds allocated to the region, going to neglecting the social and economic aspects of the crisis.

Narrowing the scope of analysis, the preceding lines can also largely explain the main limitations of the Italian approach to relations towards Africa. From a historical point of view, the partnership with the African continent has never been a priority for Rome. However, over the last 15 years, Italy has gradually intensified its relations with Africa, especially the sub-Saharan one, eventually looking with strong interest at relations with the African continent. Following the economic crisis of the past decade and the outbreak of the Arab springs, Italy has begun to develop more of its relations with North Africa and the sub-Saharan area, with the dual goals of increasing its trade relations, opening up to the growing African market, and the stability of energy supplies, especially in Libya. Nevertheless, the real growth of interest comes a few years later, following the refugee crisis of 2015/2016, which has held a central position in the political debate both domestically and in Europe. Since those years, political and economic interest Italian interest in Africa seems to have gained a prominent place in Rome's foreign policies, as shown by the high number of institutional visits, the opening of numerous embassies in the Sahel area, and the birth of the Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger.

Having laid this foundation and also considering the growing interest in the dynamics African by many European partners/competitors, Italy will almost inevitably have to consider a priority to increase its diplomatic, economic, cooperation and development activities in the Sahelian region.

Such assessments become necessary considering recent political developments in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Sudan. Political instability has remained a constant in the various national systems, and this has been evident in the rise of authoritarian regimes in the past 2 years with the two coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, the two in Burkina Faso in 2022, and the one in Chad in 2021. The seizure of political power by parts of the military and the establishment of authoritarian regimes have deteriorated relations with Western partners, developing a populist rhetoric that is strongly anti-Western and anti-French, portraying Paris as the main enemy and obstacle to its independence. Of consequence, the most significant result was the end of French military mission (Barkhane) in Mali and Burkina Faso, followed by the subsequent withdrawal of troops from Malian and Burkinabé territory, relocating forces to the northern part of Niger.

In contrast, in this sensitive context, Russia immediately presented itself as a new political, military, and economic partner, supporting the new military juntas and seeking to supplant diplomatic relations

between the Sahel and Europe. This led to an exponential growth of Russian influence in the territory, easily observed by the growing presence of mercenaries from the Wagner Group and the strong pro-Russian propaganda disseminated in local media and events. These scenarios, especially in light of post-invasion geopolitical tensions in Ukraine, make the Sahel and European relations with it an extremely topical and relevant field of study and research.

Precisely in these latter features lies the added value of the present Project of Research, which, through detailed analyses of past and present political relations, aims to emphasize the importance of developing Italian and European partnerships with Sahelian states, hoping for a reversal of the anti-Western trend witnessed in recent years. The latter can only be achieved through a new complex and structured approach in Europe-Africa relations, with the aim of stemming the political, economic, and social imbalances in the region. It will be precisely this approach that will be investigated by the Research Project, with the aim of countering the negative trend that has characterized the partnership with local actors in the most recent period.

## **Methodology and Expected Results**

### Documentation:

- Use of official documentation. From the Italian perspective through the study of documentation, reports and communications from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of International Cooperation, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and the various Italian Embassies on the African territory of interest. In the European context through the legislative acts of the Union and to the documentation provided by EEAS and individual actors on the ground (CSDP Missions or Euro-financed cooperation projects)
- Study of literature on the subject through books, scientific journals, databases and monitoring reports.
- Possible direct interviews with officials in the field or responsible for the above issues with the idea of exploiting some connections gained during my academic career but especially during my internship period in Brussels in the field of cooperation and development.

### Expected results:

The analysis will probably show major differences between the official “discourse” and the objectives designed by the Europe-Africa cooperation in comparison to the actual results and impacts of the implemented policies in the last years (affected by many structural or ideological problems). However, the current regional political changes will be the real element of unpredictability. They will show how effectively, despite years of engagement and investments, European actors have lost their position as a privileged interlocutor for the Sahelian states' cooperation policies. In this context, it will be extremely interesting to highlight the main fragilities of the Italian and European approach to the Sahel, in order to promote a change that could be profitable both for the regional development and for the European interests.

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