

THE EU-MAURITANIA PARTNERSHIP: WHOSE PRIORITIES?

THIS PAPER ANALYSES THE MIGRATION PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT SIGNED BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE MAURITANIAN GOVERNMENT IN MARCH 2024. IT CONSIDERS THE POLITICAL, SOCIETAL, AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN WHICH THE AGREEMENT WAS CONCLUDED, DISCUSSES THE IMPACTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP, AND CONCLUDES WITH A SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 7 March 2024, a migration partnership agreement (the Partnership) was signed between the European Commission and the Mauritanian government. This followed a press conference one month prior attended by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, and Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. In the press conference, the three jointly declared their commitment “to stepping up cooperation to dismantle people-smuggling and people-trafficking networks and to combat irregular migration while protecting and safeguarding the fundamental rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.”¹ These concerns are fleshed out in the March Joint Declaration that formalised the Partnership, which it structures around five “priority areas”:

- » Socio-economic opportunities for young people to facilitate social cohesion
- » Protection and asylum
- » Legal migration and mobility
- » Irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, trafficking in human beings, return and readmission
- » Border management, surveillance and control

The Partnership itself forms part of the EU's Global Gateway programme, and as such involves areas of cooperation distinct from migration, such as green hydrogen and digital infrastructure, and support to peacekeeping missions in the east of Mauritania. As we will see, however, the behind-the-scenes political dialogue that had been ongoing between Mauritanian authorities and European counterparts since September 2023 suggest migration politics to have been a substantial impetus to its announcement.

This paper illustrates how the dynamics of these negotiations suggest a restructuring of relations between the EU and Mauritania, one that is driven by the political concern with migration in Spain, but also by the shifting geopolitical landscape in the Sahel region. Beyond this transformation, it also details the negative consequences of the Partnership for migrants and asylum seekers in Mauritania, as well as for social cohesion more widely in the country. Ultimately, it highlights the futility of a method of response to unauthorised migration that has been tried and tested in this same context for nearly twenty years, with little success thus far in achieving its stated objectives.

The paper first offers a brief contextual overview, covering Mauritania's politics and society and its migration profile, before then discussing the history of EU-Mauritanian migration cooperation and broader relations with the EU. The second section turns to the Partnership itself, focusing on five impact areas: migrants and sea departures, loss of life at sea, the international protection landscape, social cohesion in Mauritania, and EU-Mauritania relations. The paper then concludes with recommendations that are divided between immediate-term measures relating to the Partnership which might harness its potential benefits and offset some of its harmful effects, as well as more long-term solutions that address the structural underpinnings of what is demonstrably a counter-productive approach to unauthorised migration.

2. CONTEXT

Mauritanian national territory extends over 1,030,700 km² and is host to a residing population of 4.9 million. An arable belt of land on the Senegal River Valley in the south of the country transitions into the more arid Sahara in the middle and north. Mauritania is bordered to the west by 754 km of Atlantic coastline, to the south by the Senegal River, to the north-west and north-east by Western Sahara and Algeria, and to the south-east and east by Mali. This geographic location makes Mauritania, first and foremost, a key node of regional

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,” European Commission Press Corner, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_709.

circulation of goods and people, in addition to a point through which many travelling north to Europe transit.

2.1. Politics, society and economy in Mauritania

Mauritania is ethno-linguistically composed of an Arab Moor population, who speak the *hassaniya* dialect of Arabic, and of Afro-Mauritanian speakers of Fula, Wolof, and Soninké. The Arab Moors are themselves divided between “white Moors” and a formerly enslaved class of *haratin*, or “black Moors.” While sharing a common language and culture with the “white Moor” population, many within the *haratin* community reside in urban quarters alongside Afro-Mauritanian groups and work in similar employment sectors. As a result, there is a persistent racial divide within many areas of Mauritanian social life, with segments of the “white Moor” class disproportionately represented within the upper echelons of the armed forces and business elite, while many within the Afro-Mauritanian and *haratin* communities occupy lower socio-economic rungs. This divide also structures the labour market, which is heavily segmented along ethnic lines, with “white Moor” populations being concentrated in commerce, the civil service, and informal street trading, while *haratin* and Afro-Mauritanians are more represented in manual labour, domestic work, fisheries, and transport.²

That said, deprivation and poverty are multi-racial phenomena in Mauritania. In 2023, GDP per capita stood at \$2,065.20 and the unemployment rate was 10.8%.³ Youth unemployment was higher still, standing at 23.7%.⁴ According to the multidimensional poverty index, moreover, 58.4% of the population was multidimensionally poor in 2021 (the most recent year for which figures are available).⁵ While the ruling military and business elite is drawn almost exclusively from the “white Moor” population, many others within this group also fall within these indicators of unemployment and deprivation, alongside Afro-Mauritanian and *haratin* communities.

Unlike much of the rest of the region, Mauritania’s governance trajectory has stabilised in recent years. Following a spate of military coups in the mid 2000’s, a presidential system has been consolidated since 2009, in which the military still wields disproportionate influence, and a significant degree of power is concentrated in the executive branch.⁶ The current president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, is a former general and served as chief of staff of the armed forces. His election in 2019 elections were accompanied by riots and protests within Afro-Mauritanian and *haratin* communities, many of whom supported anti-slavery campaigner Biram Deh Abeid who ran against Ould Ghazouani. The government claimed that foreign elements had stoked tensions, and deported a number of people in response. Ould Ghazouani was re-elected after a first round of elections that took place on 29 June 2024. Once again, the aftermath involved protests and riots in *haratin* and Afro-Mauritanian majority neighbourhoods and regions.

As shall be discussed, the EU’s introduction of migration policy prerogatives into this context can inflame the racial and social inequalities that underpinned this unrest. This is all the more so given the difference between the EU’s conception of migration as a problem to be managed and the historic role it has played in Mauritania.

2.2. Mauritania’s migration profile

Migration has historically been a cornerstone of economic development in Mauritania, as many sectors in the opening decades of independence relied upon migrant workers from Senegal, Mali, and Guinea.⁷ These inward movements were facilitated by Mauritania’s membership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its 1979 Free Movement Protocol. These inward migrations came to play a structural role in the Mauritanian economy during early decades of independence, when most of the Mauritanian population were either nomadic pastoralists or sedentary farmers. Mauritania withdrew from ECOWAS in

2. Ali Bensaâd, “Mauritanie : L’inhibition Des « Effets Retour » de Circulations Migratoires Diverses et Intenses,” *Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration*, 2008, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/8336>; Laurence Marfaing, “Du Savoir Faire Sénégalais En Matière de Pêche Sur Les Côtes Mauritanienes : Une Approche Historique,” *Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift Für Kritische Afrikastudien* 8, no. 8 (2005): 69–98.

3. World Bank, “Mauritania,” 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/MR>

4. World Bank, “Unemployment, Youth Total - Mauritania,” 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=MR>.

5. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), “2023 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Mauritania,” *UNDP (United Nations Development Programme)*, 2023, 1–31.

6. Boubacar N’Diaye, *Mauritania’s Colonels: Political Leadership, Civil Military Relations, and Democratization* (London: Routledge, 2018).

7. Armelle Choplin and Jerome Lombard, “Migrations et Recompositions Spatiales En Mauritanie,” *Afrique Contemporaine* 4, no. 228 (2008): 151–70.

2000 but retained bilateral agreements pertaining to free movement with Senegal, Mali and the Gambia.⁸ According to these agreements, foreign nationals of signatory states have the right to enter and reside in Mauritania visa-free for a period of three months. As a result, West African migrants are a constituent part of urban socio-economic life in Mauritania, often overlapping in urban residency and labour terms with the historically marginalised communities mentioned above.

In recent decades, this migratory picture has become more complex. Since 2006, annual net migration has fluctuated from -18,058 in 2006 to a high of 14,070 in 2012, and today stands at 3,000.⁹ The high in 2012 corresponds to an increase in the number of Malian refugees in the east of Mauritania following a *coup d'état* in Mali and subsequent political unrest in the country. In response, a refugee camp was constructed in M'bera, in Mauritania's eastern Hodh al-Chargui region. While the number of those accommodated in the camp has also fluctuated since, it has today reached unprecedented levels, standing at 100,000. Alongside them, there is a growing 'out-of-camp' refugee population which is estimated to be around 80,000.¹⁰ The negative emigration rate of -18,058 in 2006, meanwhile, corresponds to significant numbers of people leaving Mauritanian territory for the Canary Islands, where 32,000 people arrived over the course of that year.¹¹ The Spanish and EU response to these arrivals created a new policy area of migration management in Mauritania, representing a departure from the informal yet structural role migration has historically played in the country's political economy.¹²

2.3. The introduction of EU migration management to Mauritania

The Canary Islands arrivals of 2006 generated a domestic political crisis in Spain, to which the Spanish government responded by requesting the assistance of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency).¹³ This resulted in the launch of Hera Operations, a series of maritime and naval operations coordinated between Spain, Frontex and West African authorities.¹⁴ As arrivals on the Canaries diminished, the EU and the Mauritanian government in 2010 published a national migration strategy with the aim of enshrining long-term migration management responsibilities and capacities within national institutions.¹⁵ With the launch of the European Trust Fund for Africa following the Valetta Summit in 2015, Mauritanian cooperation with EU external migration management initiatives was further rejuvenated. Situated within the EUTF's Lake Chad and Sahel window, Mauritania was allocated €84 million worth of project financing over 2018 and 2019. Projects financed include migration and border management initiatives, youth employment and vocational training programmes, and support to regional security programmes, such as the G5 Sahel and rapid intervention and surveillance units.¹⁶

Throughout much of this period, the Atlantic Route to the Canaries was less of a flashpoint on the EU's external borders than the Central and East Mediterranean passages to Europe. This began to change from 2020, a year that saw 40,326 sea arrivals (8,000 more than those of 2006), a record that was surpassed the subsequent year, with 41,979 sea arrivals recorded in 2021.¹⁷ While there was a slight lull in 2022, sea arrivals reached their highest point yet in 2023, at 57,071. At the start of 2024, the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands was the most frequented passage to Europe, with 12,092 crossings recorded in January and February, compared with 9,150 on the East Mediterranean, the second most frequented in this period.¹⁸ Situated against

8. Eleonora Castagnone, "L'immigration de Main d'oeuvre En Mauritanie: Une Evaluation de La Demande et de l'offre et Des Processus de Recrutement," *IOM Mauritania* (Nouakchott, 2023), <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/country/mauritania/limmigration-de-la-main-doeuvre-en-mauritanie-une-evaluation-de-la-demande-et-de-loffre-et-des-processus-du-recrutement.pdf>.
9. World Bank data. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/MR>
10. Hassan Ould Moctar, "Hors Camp," Sidecar - New Left Review Blog, 2024, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/hors-camp>.
11. Sergio Carrera, "The EU Border Management Strategy: FRONTEX and the Challenges of Irregular Immigration in the Canary Islands," *CEPS Working Document* 261 (2007), <https://doi.org/> <http://www.ceps.eu>.
12. Ali Bensaâd, "L'«irrégularité» de l'immigration En Mauritanie : Une Appréhension Nouvelle, Conséquence d'enjeux Migratoires Externes," *Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration*, 2008, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/10509>.
13. Carrera, "The EU Border Management Strategy: FRONTEX and the Challenges of Irregular Immigration in the Canary Islands."
14. Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias, and John Pickles, "'Good Neighbours Make Good Fences': Seahorse Operations, Border Externalization and Extra-Territoriality," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 231–51.
15. The most prominent projects completed within the framework of the strategy is likely a border infrastructure project, which increased the number of official entry-exit points in the country to 49 and equipped many of them with upgraded material and digital infrastructure.
16. Coopération: Union européenne - Mauritanie, "Revue Du Partenariat Entre l'Union Européenne (UE) et La Mauritanie 2016-2017," 2018.
17. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/esp>
18. Amal El Ouassif, "Le Partenariat Union Européenne-Mauritanie : Le Contexte, Les Enjeux et Les Défis," 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9782760624030-004>.

the history of efforts to suppress arrivals on the Canary Islands that have been ongoing since 2006, this situation makes plain the failure of these efforts on their own terms. This is not to mention the consequences they have had in non-EU states such as Mauritania, even when “successful” from the point of view of Europe, as shall be later detailed.

2.4. EU-Mauritania relations

Much like EU border management externalisation policies in Africa in general¹⁹, Mauritanian cooperation with EU external migration management takes place within a broader framework of relations with the EU. These encompass interregional frameworks such as the 2000 Cotonou ACP-EU agreement, and more recently the Samoa Agreement which Mauritania signed in late 2023. Through the European Development Fund aid that is allocated within the framework of these EU-ACP agreements, Mauritania avails of macroeconomic support, sectoral support, and support to programmes and projects.²⁰ More recently, under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), Mauritania has been allocated €125 million between 2021 and 2024.²¹ While migration and border management projects fall under this allocation, it also concerns other areas such as support to the health system, the education system, and professional training and employment.²²

Aside from migration management, one of the most significant areas of EU engagement with Mauritania is in the fisheries sector, with fisheries partnership agreements being periodically renewed with Mauritania since 1987. Indeed, Mauritania today represent the most financially significant of the EU’s third country sustainable fisheries partnership agreements.²³ These EU foreign policy areas of migration and fisheries overlap in at least two ways. Firstly, the financial significance of the sector to Europe may create bargaining or leverage opportunities for the Mauritanian state in the negotiation of migration policies, as we will see below.²⁴ And secondly, the artisanal fishing sector has suffered in recent decades as a result of the presence of industrial fishing trawlers, which has been argued to create further Europe-bound migration by damaging the livelihood of artisanal fishermen who seek out alternatives either by making the journey to Europe or facilitating it for others.²⁵

3. IMPACTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

It is too early to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of the Partnership, since much will depend on implementation. But considering the recent history of such externalisation measures, in addition to developments in Mauritania and off its coasts over recent months, some preliminary observations about potential impacts can be made. In what follows, these impacts are analysed in the areas of migrant rights and sea departures, loss of life at sea, the international protection landscape, social cohesion in Mauritania, and EU-Mauritania relations. Together, these point to the substantive effect of the Partnership not only on migrants and asylum seekers in Mauritania, but also upon its broader societal and geopolitical position.

3.1. Migrant rights and sea departures

Policing and deportation campaigns against migrants suspected of residing irregularly on Mauritanian state territory have reportedly stepped up in the months since the signing of the Partnership.²⁶ The Mauritanian

19. Lorenzo Gabrielli, “Multilevel Inter-Regional Governance of Mobility between Africa and Europe: Towards a Deeper and Broader Externalisation,” *GRITIM-UPF Working Paper Series*, vol. 30 (Barcelona, 2016).

20. European Commission, “National Indicative Programme 2014-2020,” 2020.

21. European Commission, “Mauritania: Our Partnership,” Aid, Development Cooperation, Fundamental Rights, 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/mauritania_en.

22. European Commission, “REPUBLIQUE ISLAMIQUE DE MAURITANIE: PROGRAMME INDICATIF PLURIANNUEL 2021-2027,” 2024.

23. European Commission, “Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs),” International Agreements, 2024, https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/sustainable-fisheries-partnership-agreements-sfpas_en#list-of-fisheries-agreements.

24. Migreurop, “Prisonniers Du Désert: Enquête Sur La Situation Des Migrants à La Frontière Mali-Mauritanie,” 2010.

25. Sharon LaFraniere, “Europe Takes Africa’s Fish, and Migrants Follow,” *Der Spiegel*, January 14, 2008, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/empty-seas-europe-takes-africa-s-fish-and-migrants-follow-a-528399.html>; Hannah M Cross, “Labour and Underdevelopment? Migration, Dispossession and Accumulation in West Africa and Europe,” *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no. 136 (2013): 202–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2013.794727>.

26. Informal conversation.

coast guard has increased its patrols of the coast, with the support of Spanish *Guardia Civil* aerial surveillance.²⁷ This increase in policing raises concerns for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in the country, as detention and deportation operations unfold in a manner that takes little heed of migrant rights or dignity. Migrants are frequently detained under sweep operations that take place during nightly patrols in the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. Upon detention, people are often held in crowded and unsanitary conditions²⁸, before being subject to deportation. These removals often happen on an arbitrary basis, “without warrants, check of previous detention, provision of statutory information or opportunity to meet lawyers or international organisations.”²⁹ Most people are deported either to Senegal via the southwestern border-town of Rosso or to Mali through the south-eastern border-town of Gogui. However, there have also been documented cases of people being abandoned in the Mali-Mauritania desert borderlands, as far as the eastern regions of Hodh al-Gharbi and Hodh al-Chargui.³⁰

At the same time, arrivals on the Canary Islands have continued, with 22,304 arrivals recorded as of 15 August, compared with 9,864 in the same period last year.³¹ Even if the Partnership’s stated aim of preventing departures from Mauritanian shores is to be achieved, this will likely be through a dispersal of routes elsewhere, such as the West Mediterranean route via the Mauritanian land border with the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. As of yet, however, even such a rerouting does not seem to have occurred. Indeed, further diplomatic pressure has since been exercised to quell the arrivals, as evidenced in Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s August 27th visit to the three West African coastal states of Gambia, Senegal, and Mauritania. On the Mauritanian leg of this tour, further bilateral cooperation to combat people smuggling was declared, in addition to a commitment to a circular migration scheme for Mauritanian nationals.³² This was Sánchez’s second trip to Mauritania this year, the first being with EU President Ursula von der Leyen to announce the Partnership that was aimed at preventing these arrivals.

There are some speculative reasons why the Partnership has thus far failed to achieve this objective. Firstly, departures from Nouadhibou to Spain occur through a dense and complex network of informal facilitators, commercial actors, and law enforcement officials.³³ Relations are carefully cultivated over time and are therefore unlikely to disappear overnight. Rather, prices might simply change in response to increases in policing and surveillance. Secondly, as has been documented in other contexts³⁴, the political desire to prevent unwanted migration creates perverse incentive structures, whereby authorities in “sending” and transit” contexts may have an interest in migration continuing in order to enhance leverage and bargaining power with European states. This might be seen in Mauritania being offered a circular migration scheme during Prime Minister Sánchez’s recent visit, after arrivals continued to mount in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Partnership. We return to this dynamic in section 2.3. Lastly, as has long been argued in migration studies literature, unauthorised migration is a by-product of restrictions on legal mobility.³⁵ Absent legal avenues commensurate with the scale of arrivals, unauthorised movement at some scale will continue. While the recently announced circular migration scheme in Mauritania may make some changes in this regard, the fact that it is being offered to Mauritanian nationals will do little to prevent the majority of people leaving Mauritania for Europe from doing so, as they are primarily nationals of other West African states.

27. Camille Cassarini and Luca Queirolo Palmas, “Migration, Solidarity and Routes (Un)Making in the Atlantic Sahara,” 2024, <https://www.solroutes.eu/node/migrations-solidarities-and-routes-unmaking-in-the-atlantic-sahara/>.
28. Hamadou Boulama et al., “Axe Rosso-Nouakchott: Des Mobilités En Danger. Rapport d’observation à La Frontière Sénégal – Mauritanie,” 2017, https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Loujna_Axe_Rosso_Nouakchott.pdf.
29. ASGI, “Land and Sea Border Externalization: A View from Senegal and Mauritania,” 2023, p. 26 <https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Land-and-sea-border-externalization-a-view-from-Senegal-and-Mauritania.pdf>,
30. Lighthouse Reports, “Desert Dumps,” 2024, <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/desert-dumps/>.
31. Barron’s, “Canary Islands Migrant Arrivals Soar As Spain PM Eyes West Africa Trip,” 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/canary-islands-migrant-arrivals-soar-as-spain-pm-eyes-west-africa-trip-06406865>.
32. Agence Mauritanienne d’Information, “Republic President Holds a Held Joint Press Conference with Spanish Prime Minister,” August 28, 2024, <https://ami.mr/en/archives/18975>.
33. Cassarini and Palmas, “Migration, Solidarity and Routes (Un)Making in the Atlantic Sahara”, p. 28-31.
34. Ruben Andersson and David Keen, “Partners in Crime? The Impact of Europe’s Outsourced Migration Controls on Peace, Stability and Rights,” *Saferworld*, no. July (2019); Fiona B Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, “Migration Diplomacy in World Politics,” *International Studies Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (2019): 113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015>.
35. Hein De Haas, “Don’t Blame the Smugglers: The Real Migration Industry,” World Bank Blogs, 2015, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/peoplemove/dont-blame-smugglers-real-migration-industry>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, “NORTHWEST AFRICAN (ATLANTIC) ROUTE Migrant Smuggling from the Northwest African Coast to the Canary Islands (Spain),” 2022, https://www.unodc.org/res/som/docs/Observatory_StoryMap_3_NorthWestAfrica.pdf.

3.2. Loss of life at sea

Deaths at sea have also reached unprecedented levels in 2024, with an average of 1,000 deaths per month recorded over the first five months of the year.³⁶ According to the Right to Life Monitoring Report of Caminando Fronteras, Mauritania was the primary departure point for many of those who lost their lives during this period, with numerous reports of boats that had left Mauritania disappearing at sea with all of the people still on board. While correlation is not causation, the fact that this loss of life has followed the signing of the Partnership is consistent with research that has highlighted how restrictions in migration policies tend to render journeys more lethal.³⁷ In this light, it is concerning that the joint declaration establishing the Partnership makes only one reference to loss of life “in the desert or at sea”, while migrant smuggling is mentioned on six separate occasions in the declaration document.³⁸

In addition to boats departing from Mauritania being lost at sea, the Mauritanian coastline is frequent witness to the sinking and disappearance of boats that have left from farther south on the Atlantic Route. One such incident in July 2024 saw 89 people drown and 72 others go missing off the coast of southern Mauritania, after they had left from the Senegal-Gambia border region.³⁹ The Mauritanian coast guard reportedly rescued 9 people. The fifth priority area of the declaration, concerning “border management, surveillance and control”, envisions the strengthening of search and rescue capacities. Given the increasing frequency of such incidents, this should be a high priority.

3.3. The international protection landscape

All of this holds implications for international protection prospects in Mauritania. The second priority area of the Partnership’s joint declaration envisions the strengthening of the protection and the asylum system, through bolstering identification and reception capacities as well as improving refugees’ and asylum-seekers’ access to social services. In principle, any move to strengthen international protection capacities is to be welcomed. However, the context in which these aims have been declared— namely a desire to quell an unprecedented number of arrivals on the Canary Islands – suggest an outsourcing of international protection responsibilities to be at play in this aspect of the joint declaration. This is of particular concern given the increasing number of Malian nationals fleeing conflict in their home country who figure among the arrivals in Spain.

Given the ongoing absence of asylum legislation in Mauritania, moreover, there are limits to how much capacity can be built in this arena. At present, the UNHCR is responsible for refugee status determination in the country, while the government issues those granted status with documentation, thereby integrating them into its biometric civil registry. This division of labour plays out relatively smoothly in the M’bera refugee camp in the eastern Hodh al-Chargui region, where the majority of refugees in Mauritania reside. But in urban settings, the difficulty in identifying protection needs mount considerably, as does the risk that asylum seekers with a credible international protection claim to make will be detained and deported as “irregular migrants”, given the lack of due process involved in detention and deportation operations.

The government effectively acknowledged such risks in a refugee governance and protection policy paper which details the rationale behind a regularisation campaign that took place between July and November 2022.⁴⁰ Over the course of this three-month period, the residence permit registration fee was waived, and undocumented migrants were invited to enrol at a purpose-built civil registry centre in a stadium in Nouakchott. In the words of the government report, this exercise aided in identifying asylum applicants who would otherwise have been at risk of detention and deportation.⁴¹ With the regularisation’s grace period now long passed and an increased level of policing of migrants suspected of being “irregular” in Mauritania following the Partnership, there is a growing risk that the universal right to asylum and the non-refoulement principle are being

36. Caminando Fronteras, “Right to Life Monitoring – First Five Months 2024,” 2024.

37. Border Forensics, “Mission Accomplished? The Deadly Effects of Border Control in Niger,” 2023, <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/niger-investigation/>.

38. European Commission, “Joint Declaration Establishing a Migration Partnership Between Mauritania and the European Union,” 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/eu-mauritania-joint-declaration_en.

39. Al-Jazeera, “At Least 89 People Dead as Boat Capsizes off Mauritania,” 2024, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/5/at-least-89-migrants-dead-as-boat-capsizes-off-mauritania>.

40. Ministère de l’Economie et du Développement - République Islamique de la Mauritanie, “LETTRE DE POLITIQUE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT SUR LES RÉFUGIÉS ET COMMUNAUTÉS D’ACCUEIL,” 2023, 1–26.

41. Ibid.

undermined.⁴²

3.4. Social cohesion in Mauritania

The Partnership has implications that go beyond the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees currently residing on state territory. It has also potentially destabilising effects in Mauritania itself, particularly as the policing of migrants in Mauritania often dovetails with a broader social marginalisation of disenfranchised groups.⁴³ As mentioned above, migrants typically reside in Afro-Mauritanian and *haratin* neighbourhoods. For this reason, the policing and surveillance operations in which “irregular” migrants are detained and deported can involve harassment, detention and threats of deportation made against these communities as well. The 2024 presidential elections were illustrative of the tensions that can be exacerbated by such operations, as the aftermath of the elections involved protests and riots amongst residents of deprived neighbourhoods in the capital and in southern regions of Kaédi and Selibaby, where three protesters were killed in police custody. This followed a pattern set in 2023, which also saw protests and riots following deaths in police custody of members of the Afro-Mauritanian and *haratin* communities.

In addition to these broader social tensions, the Partnership itself elicited widespread societal opposition following its announcement in February. This opposition came from formal opposition parties, social movements, the general public, and even the Mauritanian diaspora in Washington DC.⁴⁴ Driving these mobilisations was the perception that Mauritanian territory was being used to resettle migrants unwanted in Europe, and a concern about the destabilising effects this would have in Mauritania. Such was the volume of discontent that both the ruling party and the Ministry of Interior issued separate statements denying that the Partnership would involve any resettlement of foreign nationals in the country.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, a protest was organised on the day of its signing, which was repressed by police. There is, then, an ironic contradiction between the Partnership’s stated commitment to social cohesion, as set out in its first priority area, and its reception in the Mauritanian public.

This also highlights the reputational damage the EU has incurred as a result of the Partnership. EU-Mauritania relations do not typically figure prominently within public discourse and political debate in Mauritania, and this is likely the first time an EU project has encountered significant popular opposition in the country. It is difficult to say whether this was the result of broader regional anti-Western sentiment manifesting in Mauritania, or part of an ongoing reputational fallout from the EU’s stance vis a vis Israel’s war on Gaza, about which there have also been regular protests in Mauritania, or simply an expression of domestic xenophobia vis a vis migrants in the country. In any case, it would be in the EU’s own self-interest to mitigate this reputational damage through, for instance, pursuing forms of cooperation which do not evoke as much hypocrisy in the eyes of the Mauritanian public.

3.5. Restructuring EU-Mauritania relations

It has long been observed that the outsourcing of migration policies to countries outside the EU can not only bolster governments of questionable legitimacy, but also weaken the EU’s own bargaining power with such governments.⁴⁶ The reason for this is that states beyond the EU external border can leverage their strategic position and the fear of migration in Europe in exchange for more favourable aid and trade deals. There have

42. Hassan Ould Moctar, “From Externalised Asylum to Refugee Containment? Assessing the Impact of EU-Mauritania Migration Cooperation on International Protection Prospects,” *Externalizing Asylum A compendium of scientific knowledge*, 2024, <https://externalizingasylum.info/from-externalised-asylum-to-refugee-containment/>.

43. Following unrest in the wake of the 2019 presidential elections, for example, a wave of arrests of “foreign nationals” occurred: Le Monde, “Mauritanie : Une Centaine d’« étrangers » Arrêtés, Internet Coupé,” June 26, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/06/26/mauritanie-une-centaine-d-etrangers-arretes-internet-coupe_5481440_3212.html.

44. CRIDEM, “Etats-Unis: Manifestation Des Mauritaniens à Washington DC Sur l’accord Migratoire,” 2024, https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=773057; CRIDEM, “Mauritanie : L’opposition Appelle à Une Mobilisation Générale Contre l’accord Avec l’UE Sur l’immigration,” 2024, https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=772682.

45. CRIDEM, “INSAF Commente l’accord Sur l’immigration et l’affaire « Biram »,” 2024, https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=772722; Middle East Monitor, “Mauritania Denies Plans to Settle Irregular Migrants,” 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240221-mauritania-denies-plans-to-settle-irregular-migrants/>.

46. Matthew Porges, “Morocco, the Western Sahara and the EU,” *London Review of Books*, 2018, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2018/march/morocco-western-sahara-and-the-eu>; Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo and Lorenzo Gabrielli, “The Ceuta Border Peripeteia: Tasting the Externalities of EU Border Externalization,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37, no. 3 (2022): 645–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2048680>; Andersson and Keen, “Partners in Crime? The Impact of Europe’s Outsourced Migration Controls on Peace, Stability and Rights”; Jean-pierre Cassarino, “Beyond the Criminalisation of Migration : A Non-Western Perspective,” *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 4, no. 4 (2018): 397–411.

long been hints of such a dynamic between the EU and Mauritania in the area of migration management. Speaking of the arrivals on the Canary Islands in 2006, for instance, then Prime Minister Ould Laghdaf said to MEP's on an interparliamentary mission to Mauritania: "we have become the Maginot Line of the EU, which must help deal with this situation."⁴⁷ At that time, however, the sums of money committed by the EU to migration management projects was relatively negligible, with €12.9 million worth of project financing envisioned within the 2010 national migration strategy.⁴⁸ The Partnership, by contrast, will see €210 million disbursed to Mauritania in a single year.

The political dialogue that preceded the Partnership also indicates a degree of leverage on the part of Mauritanian state actors. In September 2023, a note was issued from the European Council Presidency (at the time held by Spain) to the Working Party on External Aspects of Migration and Asylum making an argument for increased cooperation between the EU and Mauritania. The note voiced the concerns of the Mauritanian authorities that their role in the management of Europe-bound migration was underappreciated, with – in its words – "comparatively greater support provided to countries in other migratory routes (i.e. Tunisia), despite Mauritania being one of its most long-lasting and reliable migratory partners."⁴⁹ Similar sentiments were present in a January 2024 note from the European Commission to the Council making the case for the Partnership that was announced shortly afterward, with the note observing that Mauritanian authorities had themselves proposed a framework of cooperation along the lines of ones that had already been negotiated with other "transit countries."⁵⁰ This was proposed as an alternative to a Frontex status agreement that had been in negotiation with Mauritanian authorities for at least two years, before being deemed too "politically sensitive by Mauritanian authorities."

In other words, the requests and concerns of the Mauritanian government have been accommodated by the EU, after being argued for on separate occasions by both the Council and the Commission. In addition to migratory pressures on the Canary Islands, this leverage on the part of the Mauritanian government can be explained by the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Sahel region. In a context that has seen the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the G5 Sahel, the winding down of the EU Takuba Taskforce in Mali, and the requisitioning of EUCAP Sahel equipment in Niger, Mauritania's strategic significance to the EU has mounted considerably in recent years.⁵¹ This is also demonstrated by the European Commission's depiction of "Mauritania as a vector of stability in a subregion facing significant security challenges", and in its recognition of "Mauritania's strategic role and numerous efforts to contribute to regional stability."⁵² All of this means there may be greater room for Mauritanian government demands and concerns to be accommodated within policymaking circles.

If there is a greater degree of leverage being exercised by the Mauritanian authorities over their European counterparts in the area of migration control, this does not alleviate the EU of responsibility for the outcomes. Indeed, all of this still occurs within conditions of asymmetry, with terms ultimately being set by the EU. This is evidenced in the fact that the demands made by the Mauritanian authorities have largely been around a greater level of financial and technical support in the EU's arch concern with tackling unwanted migration. While the Partnership creates opportunities for financial and political leverage by Mauritania, the ability to alter this dynamic remains with the EU, since the impetus to outsource migration concerns to countries such as Mauritania ultimately originates in the European domestic arena.

47. Pier Antonio Panzeri, "Sixth Interparliamentary Meeting between the Delegation for Relations with the Maghreb Countries and the Delegation from the Mauritanian Parliament," *European Parliament*, 2010, <https://www.mendeley.com/catalogue/ff3e73ba-a74b-33b9-82e0-1d65a289c573/>.

48. Islamic Republic of Mauritania, "Stratégie Nationale de Gestion de La Migration," 2010.

49. Migration-control.info, "Migratory Situation in Mauritania," 2023, <https://migration-control.info/en/blog/migratory-situation-in-mauretania/>.

50. Hassan Ould Moctar, "Analysis: The Politics behind the EU-Mauritania Migration Partnership," *Statewatch*, 2024, <https://www.statewatch.org/outsourcing-borders-monitoring-eu-externalisation-policy/bulletin-1/analysis-the-politics-behind-the-eu-mauritania-migration-partnership/>.

51. Mamadou Ousmane, "Niamey: Weapons, Ammunition, and Military Equipment Seized at Eucap Sahel Headquarters," *Powers of Africa*, 2024, <https://powersofafrica.com/article/346/niamey-weapons-ammunition-and-military-equipment-seized-at-eucap-sahel-headquarters>; Euractiv, "EU's Takuba Anti-Terror Force Quits Junta-Controlled Mali," 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eus-takuba-anti-terror-force-quits-junta-controlled-mali/>.

52. 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"; European Commission, "Joint Declaration Establishing a Migration Partnership Between Mauritania and the European Union."

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Partnership is an expression of a deeply rooted and demonstrably counterproductive approach to inward migration in Europe, which ultimately needs to be addressed at its foundations. There are, however, immediate measures that can be taken to minimise the potential harms associated with the Partnership, which are detailed below. I then detail some of these more deep-seated structural issues and offer recommendations for addressing them as well.

4.1. Short-term

- » Strengthen search and rescue capacities

The second section of priority area 5 of the Partnership (Border management, surveillance and control) concerns the strengthening of search and rescue operations. Given the volume of losses of life at sea sustained off the Mauritanian coast in recent years, this should be an absolute priority. At present, Mauritanian coast guard search and rescue capacities are limited, and heavily reliant upon external funding.⁵³ Coupled with an iron-clad respect for the duty to save lives at sea, a gradual move toward operational and financial autonomy for the coast guard could mitigate the scale of loss of life currently unfolding. There is also inconsistent oversight by international officials responsible for assessing international protection claims during landings⁵⁴, which heightens the risks to the right to asylum and the non-refoulement principle discussed in section 2.2. Ensuring that there is the capacity to assess applications for international protection during landing and post-landing processing should be imperative.

- » Implement and expand the Partnership's legal migration and mobility provisions

Priority area 3 of the Partnership is devoted to legal migration and mobility. Given that unauthorised migration is largely a product of restrictions on legal movement⁵⁵, implementing and expanding this element of the Partnership represents a far more durable method of preventing irregular migration than through combating people smuggling or awareness-raising campaigns. A commission devoted to implementing the Partnership has reportedly met to discuss loosening Schengen visa application procedures for Mauritanian nationals and increasing the number of visas available.⁵⁶ The circular migration scheme announced by Prime Minister Sánchez represents a similar step in this regard. As mentioned above, however, many of those arriving in Spain from Mauritania are not Mauritanian nationals, which gives these measures the air of awarding the Mauritanian state for cracking down on non-nationals in its territory. For this reason, it ought to be accompanied by similar such undertakings across the region and guarantees to the protection of human rights of non-nationals in Mauritania.

- » Ensuring that human rights abuses are not encouraged through the Partnership

At present, the incentive structures created by the Partnership appear to reward human rights abuses and the threats to the right to asylum and the non-refoulement principle detailed above. There has been little expression of concern by EU actors about documented cases of abandonment in the desert, or of due process not being followed during detention and deportation procedures, nor about the killing of protesters and demonstrators in Mauritania. Rather than implicitly encouraging these practices, the EU should – in its press statements and joint declarations pertaining to migration management – remind its Mauritanian partners of the bilateral free movement accords which it has signed with numerous West African states, and the obligations they impose upon Mauritanian security actors responsible for migration policy in Mauritania.

4.2. Mid to long-term

- » Decouple domestic migration concerns from international development assistance

The joint declaration establishing the Partnership asserts that “the management of migration flows cannot be

53. ASGI, “Land and Sea Border Externalization: A View from Senegal and Mauritania,” p. 17.

54. Ibid.

55. De Haas, “Don't Blame the Smugglers: The Real Migration Industry”; Border Forensics, “Mission Accomplished? The Deadly Effects of Border Control in Niger”; Julien Brachet, “Manufacturing Smugglers: From Irregular to Clandestine Mobility in the Sahara,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 676, no. 1 (2018): 16–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217744529>.

56. CRIDEM, “Mauritanie - UE: Vers Un Assouplissement Des Procédures d'obtention Du Visa Schengen,” April 28, 2024, https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=774373.

achieved solely by means of monitoring measures but also requires concerted action to tackle the root causes of irregular migration, particularly by implementing development projects in the countries of origin.” Of course, the implementation of development projects in countries of “origin” and “transit” is not in itself objectionable, as such projects are often transformative at a local level. There is, however, a risk to the integrity of EU development assistance and to its alignment with OECD Overseas Development Assistance criteria when it is linked to migration concerns in this fashion.⁵⁷ Moreover, this linking of migration to development assistance is self-defeating on its own terms, as the belief that economic development reduces out-migration has long been disputed by migration scholars and economists.⁵⁸ For these reasons, the implementation of development projects should occur independently of migration concerns.

- » Interrogating the political and corporate forces that have thus far rendered more just and evidence-based approaches to migration governance unthinkable

The fact that we are now approaching twenty years of an approach to migration governance that has failed on its own terms should be cause for a thorough re-evaluation. That this has not yet happened suggests that there are forces at play preventing a more reasonable and evidence-based approach to Europe-bound migration.⁵⁹ One such force is the European security industry, which creates substantial incentives for an ongoing militarisation of migration policy.⁶⁰ The propagation of security-based solutions to unauthorised migration, of the kind put forward in priority areas 4 and 5 of the Partnership, expands the European market for military equipment and surveillance technologies. But it comes at a significant cost to migrants’ right to life and dignity, international protection standards, and broader social cohesion in non-EU countries such as Mauritania. It would benefit non-EU countries and EU member states alike to decouple the interests of the security sector from those of the EU.

- » Assert the universal right to free movement as a foundational pillar of engagement with West and North African partners such as Mauritania

At a press conference announcing further bilateral migration cooperation on 28 August, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez drew parallels between the historic emigration of Spanish nationals and the contemporary departures from West Africa. This is a welcome rhetorical framing which humanises migrants by reminding us that migration is a universal phenomenon. At the same time, it fails to acknowledge the key distinction between earlier histories of European emigration and contemporary departures from West Africa, namely the unprecedented degree of restrictions on free movement that are in place today, of which the Partnership is an expression. For Prime Minister Sánchez’s rhetorical framing to bear substance requires an EU approach to external relations that acknowledges the role that the removal of barriers to free movement has played internally in Europe and strives to accommodate the same level of free movement in other contexts. This would not only offer a positive vision of hope and equality that is qualitatively distinct from the far-right forces in Europe that thrive on the demonisation of migration; it would also undo the significant reputational damage incurred by the EU through policies such as the Partnership.

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