

Master's Thesis

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Climate Leadership or Security Strategy?

The EU's Climate Engagement in the Sahel

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Executive summary

The goal of this thesis is to research the European Union's (EU) climate engagement in the Sahel and to address the gap in research, where one strand of literature investigates the EU's policy approach to the Sahel with security and migration lenses and treats climate change as a subordinate element, while climate science on the region, as the other strand of literature, often neglects to acknowledge the interplay between policy domains and concentrates more on the regional climate impacts alone. Therefore, this thesis examines the drivers of the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel and how climate, developmental, migration and security concerns are balanced in this process. To address this question, the research follows a qualitative methodological approach, in which European policy experts were consulted via guideline-based, semi-structured interviews and together with EU documents, communications, public statements, longer interviews and event recordings methodically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The findings of that analysis reveal that for the EU's approach to the Sahel climate change primarily is a subordinate or secondary concern and that it is being framed as a 'threat multiplier' that amplifies already existing security and migration pressures to promote wider security, migration management and border control policies for the region. At the same time, the research uncovered a fragmented actorness of the EU, shifting priorities that are recurrently driven by internal political trends and an approach that is perceived as largely being driven by internal interests instead of Sahelian needs and wants. Overall, the thesis argues that the EU's climate engagement is marked by securitisation dynamics that limit the recognition of climate change's causal complexity, the inclusion of local perspectives and the implementation of appropriate climate protection measures.

Executive summary in German

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Lücke in der Forschung zum Engagement der Europäischen Union (EU) in der Sahelzone zu schließen, in der ein Forschungszweig den politischen Ansatz der EU unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Sicherheit und Migration untersucht und Klimawandel weitgehend als untergeordnetes Politikfeld betrachtet, während die Klimawissenschaft die Wechselwirkungen zwischen den Politikbereichen weitgehend außer Acht lässt und sich eher auf die regionalen Klimaauswirkungen allein konzentriert. Daher untersucht diese Arbeit die Treiber des Klimaschutzengagements der Europäischen Union in der Sahelzone und wie Klima-, Entwicklungs-, Migrations- und Sicherheitsbelange in diesem Prozess gegeneinander abgewogen werden. Um diese Frage zu beantworten, verfolgt diese Arbeit einen qualitativen methodischen Ansatz: Es wurden semi-strukturierte, leitfadengestützte Expert:inneninterviews mit europäischen Policy-Expert:innen durchgeführt und zusammen mit EU-Dokumenten, Mitteilungen, öffentlichen Erklärungen, längeren Interviews und Veranstaltungsaufzeichnungen systematisch anhand einer thematischen Analyse nach Braun und Clarke (2006) ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Klimawandel vorwiegend als untergeordnetes oder sekundäres Anliegen fungiert, welches die EU als ‚Risikomultiplikator‘ darstellt, das Sicherheitsrisiken und Migrationsdruck verstärkt und zur Rechtfertigung umfassenderer Maßnahmen in den Bereichen Sicherheit, Migrationsmanagement und Grenzkontrolle in der Region herangezogen wird. Gleichzeitig deckte die Untersuchung eine fragmentierte Handlungsfähigkeit der EU, wechselnde Prioritäten, die häufig von innenpolitischen Trends bestimmt werden, und einen Ansatz, der weitgehend von internen Interessen statt von den Bedürfnissen und Wünschen der Menschen, die in der Sahelzone leben, geprägt zu sein scheint, auf. Insgesamt argumentiert die Arbeit, dass das Engagement der EU im Klimabereich von einer Sicherheitsdynamik geprägt ist, die die Anerkennung und Einbeziehung der komplexen Ursachen des Klimawandels, die Einbeziehung lokaler Perspektiven und die Umsetzung geeigneter Klimaschutzmaßnahmen einschränkt.¹

¹ In agreement with the supervisor of this thesis, the German version of the executive summary was produced by translating the English version with DeepL. The translation was reviewed to correct any mistakes and adjusted to fit the German academic writing style. DeepL is available under: <https://www.deepl.com/de/translator>, last access 15.02.2026.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, in discussions around climate change, a reference to security is not far away. So much so, that today policymakers routinely also invoke it in traditional security contexts. For instance, in 2022 at the opening of the Petersberg Climate Dialogue in Berlin, the then German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stated that:

“It [climate change] is the most serious international security issue of our time.” (Baerbock 2022)

Political discourses and strategies of political entities like the European Union (EU) have been significantly shaped by this understanding of climate change. Today, climate change is no longer simply seen as an environmental challenge but is being described as a “threat multiplier” (e.g., Borell 2023b) that exacerbates issues like terrorism, instability and migration. A result of this has been the increase in the number of policies and strategies, that emphasize the presumed impacts of climate change on European security.

This development is exemplified in the EU’s approach to the Sahel, one of the world’s climate hotspots and a geopolitical frontline for the EU. Because although the EU has been involved in the Sahel for many years, mostly in regard to security and migration concerns, climate change has only recently become more significant in this context, and then mostly in relation to those already existing foci. For example, in its latest strategy for the Sahel from 2021, which is also the first one in which climate change is mentioned in more than a subordinate clause, the EU declared: “The EU will continue to support efforts to combat climate change, conscious of its direct consequences for populations, including in terms of security” (Council of the European Union 2021, 14). However, the Sahel has been long known as one of the world’s climate hotspots, so while the uprise in attention echoes the general increase and mainstreaming of climate efforts, this recent increase in regional attention on climate change in the Sahel has raised critical questions around the securitisation, oversimplification and misuse of climate narratives by the EU (e.g., Mateos et al. 2024; Raineri 2022). In particular, the direction of this discourse is reminiscent of an already well-established scientific critique of the EU’s migration approach in the region. Here, scholars mostly agree that migration management and border control measures of the EU were not implemented because of a sudden uprise in migration flows, but to satisfy internal European political sentiments on anti-migration following the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 (e.g., Fakhry 2023; Lebovich, 2018).

So, although there is an existing body of literature critically examining the EU's engagement in the Sahel, including the increasing use of securitisation narratives in their climate engagement, most studies treat climate as one element within the broader security and migration debates. Parallel to this, there is also another well-established body of science around the climate change impacts in the Sahel and what should be done in terms of mitigation and adaptation in the region (e.g., Loeben et al. 2022; Tomalka et al. 2021; Trisos et al. 2022; Niang et al. 2014). However, what remains largely unexplored in this split between climate science and policy discussions is how EU policymakers, European scientific and policy experts and Sahelian actors themselves understand the EU's climate engagement and the underlying interests and trade-offs that drive it. To fill this research gap, this thesis will focus on the four key policy domains that are most central to the EU's Sahel strategies and also reflect the recurrent areas of critique on the EU's Sahel engagement by policy experts: development, migration, security and climate change. Consequently, the overarching research question this thesis aims to answer is:

What are the main drivers behind the EU's climate action in the Sahel and how do climate, developmental, migration and security concerns balance in this process?

To systematically answer this question, this thesis will be guided by four sub-questions that represent the duality of the research questions' focus by looking at the intentions behind the EU's Sahel discourse and also on the trade-off between policy domains happening within it. First, they aim to dissect and reveal discursive constructs in official EU documents and statements. Second, they probe at the prioritisations of the four key policy domains development, migration, security and climate change in official EU documents and statements. Third, they examine the practical manifestations of this prioritisation in projects and funding mechanisms. And fourth, they assess how local Sahelian stakeholders view the EU's climate approach. This systematic progression from rhetoric to implementations and perceptions helps to enable a multi-layered analysis of the EU's climate approach to the Sahel. Concretely, the four sub-questions are:

SQ1. How does the EU frame its climate action in the Sahel in official documents and statements?

SQ2. How are climate, developmental, migration and security concerns discussed in the EU's official documents and statements on climate change in the Sahel and which appear to dominate the debate?

SQ3. What kind of projects and funding mechanisms are prioritized in the EU's climate action in the Sahel?

SQ4. How do local stakeholders perceive the EU's climate action in the Sahel?

To address the sub-questions, this thesis will follow a qualitative approach that aims to uncover discursive and perceptual drivers. In order to do so, semi-structured, guideline-based expert interviews with European policy experts will be conducted. Together with selected EU documents, communications and public statements, this data corpus will then be systematically analysed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

The remainder of this thesis is organised to address the questions at hand as follows: first, the second chapter will build the theoretical foundation of the thesis by introducing the concept of securitisation and the climate-security nexus. Next, the third chapter will provide a background on the Sahel's history and characteristics, the impacts of climate change on the region and its political and security dynamics. Moreover, the third chapter will present the EU's approach to the region and then move on to discuss the four main themes of critique that exist concerning the EU's engagement in the Sahel. These are, first, the area of development, governance and local ownership; second, the securitisation and militarisation of the EU's approach to the Sahel; third migration and border control efforts of the EU; and fourth, climate change and the EU's nexus logic. Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, the fourth chapter will then sum up the findings from the previous chapters and draft interim assumptions. In the fifth chapter, the methodology of the thesis will be explained by introducing the corpus of the data, which consists of conducted expert interviews and selected EU documents, communications, public statements and event recordings. Furthermore, also the design and implementation of the thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) will be illustrated. After that, the sixth and seventh chapter will provide the analysis and discussion of the data. Lastly, in the eighth chapter, conclusions will be drawn and the research question will be answered.

But as this thesis focusses on European power dynamics in an African context that is marked by European colonial history, before chapter two's theoretical background, a brief positionality statement will illuminate the author's position and how it influenced the research process and interpretations.

As discussed by many, the "positionality – in terms of personality, power asymmetries, professional and personal experience, ethics, training, and motivation" (Stodulka et al. 2018, 519) – shapes the individual and their research. Thus, drafting a positionality statement aids in making the researcher's stance to their work more transparent and also supports the continuously reflection of their position while conducting their research. So, ahead of the

following research, I want to acknowledge my position as a white female researcher from Germany investigating a topic of a Western global power – the EU – engaging in an African region. It is important for me to state, that it is not my intention, nor do I aspire to speak for the people living in the Sahel or their experiences with the EU. I am aware that my research is conducted in a Western scientific context and is limited because of that. Due to this, I have intentionally chosen not to investigate the effectiveness or similar measurements of the EU's action but rather the intent behind the action. At the same time, I am still aware that my position in this research, especially in reference to the European colonial history in the Sahel, affected my research. This led me to be very conscious of and cautious about my study and especially any interview requests I made to Sahelian researchers and organisations. Furthermore, during and following my I was and still am dedicated to reflect my position and understand the privileges and the challenges of my research. More detailed and dedicated reflections on the actual impact of my position in the research can be found in the methodology and in the review on the limitations in the discussion.

2. Theory

2.1 Securitisation

The concept of securitisation is located in the broader literature on the concept of framing, which was first developed in sociology by Goffman (1974). He described framing as a schema of interpretation that structures how individuals make sense of social situations. Since then, the concept has found great popularity across many scientific disciplines and has been further developed over the years. According to Entman (1993), framing is the process of “selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Entman 1993, 53). Watson (2012) adds to this definition, that the intention of framing is “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Watson 2012, 283). Therefore, the concept of framing primarily takes into account the process in which an actor is constructing meaning through interpretative schemata, also known as ‘frames’ and how this results in stable patterns on the structure of how an issue is perceived and prioritised. In political science this question is usually adapted to ask, how policymakers decide, which issues should be on the agenda and how these topics gain such interest that they are prioritised (Wilén 2025). Entman (1993) also identifies four locations in the process of framing: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. These locations are based on one of the most cited examples of framing in literature by Kahneman and Tversky (1984), in which they conducted an experiment that gave a group of individuals differently worded choices to save

the same amount of people and then analysed what the majority chose. This experiment visually showed, how the successful framing of an issue can shape the audiences' reception to it. Based on this, Snow and Benford (1988) established three core needs to successfully frame an issue: first, one needs to identify a problem that is in need of alteration; second, one needs to propose a solution to the diagnosed problem with specific instructions on what needs to be done; third and last, one needs to issue a call to action that engages the audience to strengthen the case for corrective action. In policymaking, to comprehend this framing process is to understand how policymaking is done and what requirements there are to push for action.

Building upon the literature on framing and the evolvement of the scientific field, in the mid to late 1990s the Copenhagen School and especially Wæver (1995) first systematically formulated the concept of securitisation and defined it as the discursive process of shifting an issue from normal politics into the realm of security politics. In 1998, Wæver extended this concept with more detail together with Buzan and de Wilde and largely coined the term (Buzan et al. 1998). According to them, the concept of securitisation describes the performative speech act, in which actors frame a particular issue to make it seem like an existential threat, which results in the issue being perceived as a security issue and consequently opening it up to the use of extraordinary measures. The concept challenges the traditional view of security, which holds that something can objectively be classified as a security issue. Instead, securitisation theory is based on the constructivist notion that any issue can be constructed as an issue for security, even if the existential framing of that issue is indirect or absent. Thus, for many scholars, the concept of securitisation exists as a subfield of framing (Wilén 2025; Flohr, 2025; Watson 2012). A key component of the concept is the self-referentiality of securitisation. According to Wæver (1995), through the performative act of establishing any issue as a security threat "something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so" (Wæver 1995, 54). And since the proposed existential threat can even be absent for something to become securitised, the political practice that follows this framing does not need be grounded in facts and actuality (Buzan et al. 1998). In literature, a popular example of this is the American response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, which was the declaration of the American 'War on Terror' and the securitisation of Islam in the process (Shipoli 2018).

But with the empirical growth of the concept, a second generation of securitisation studies has evolved, that emphasizes the contextuality and intersubjectivity of securitisation (Balzacq 2011; Kirk 2020). In particular, this wave challenges the Copenhagen School's attribution of absolute power to the securitising actor, contending that threats need to be feared by the relevant

audiences to have any impact, which consequently means that the power of securitisation is dependent on the individual socio-political context (Stritzel 2014). Therefore, though the second generation agrees with the general notion of ideational forces being a motor of securitisation, researchers should be mindful of the larger broader contextual scopes (Kirk 2020; Markiewicz 2024).

2.2 The climate-security nexus

Generally, the climate-security nexus emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a broader theme in policymaking through early policy reports such as the 2003 U.S. Pentagon's climate impact analysis report (cf. Schwartz 2003) or the EU's 2008 report on climate change and international security (cf. Council of the European Union and European Commission 2008). It originates in the discussions on cascading crises of a globalized world, where climate change was framed as a "threat multiplier" (Goodman and Baudu 2023) or "vicious circle" (Buhaug and Uexkull 2021), referring to assumed feedback loops of climate change intensifying other issues such as on-going conflicts or instability. However, in recent years references to the connection between climate change and security have been brought up more frequently (e.g., Wong and Saeedi 2020; Barnhoorn 2023; European Union External Action Service 2025; NATO 2024). For instance, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the energy crises following the Russian invasion of Ukraine have been connected to this understanding of climate change (e.g., Borell 2023a; Brown, 2023; Ford et al. 2022). This has led to the rise of more general concerns about the potential effects of climate change on human, national, environmental and economic security, such as displacement, the collapse of the ecosystem or resource scarcity, both in the political and in the scientific sphere (Schultheiß et al. 2025; United Nations n.d.). However, in many cases a causal connection between conflict and climate change is hard to verify. This has led to intensive academic critique of the securitisation of climate change and to an emphasis on the general need to distinguish more precisely between independent and dependent variables. The epitome of this debate is shown in the Working Group II's contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) by Pörtner et al. (2022, 4–54), in which they confirm that climate change can impact conflicts but the relationship should always be considered as a complex, context-specific, non-linear and differently scaled impact dynamic that can also act through other social, political and economic vulnerabilities. According to Rothe et al. (2025), a result of these scientific debates has been the development of three main research strands on the nexus that will be discussed in the following sections.

The first and the largest research strand is the so-called neo-Malthusian model, which is rooted in the notion of ‘environmental scarcity’ that was developed by the Toronto School and the Bern-Zürich Group in the 1990s (Homer-Dixon 1994). The neo-Malthusian model explains the relationship between climate and security through scarcity or abundance mechanisms that develop because of climate change. The main idea is that any climate change event like a flood or a drought could for example lead to the loss of habitat and livelihood, which in turn could lead to displacement, competition over scarce resources, and possibly violent conflicts (Rothe et al. 2025). Or, as described by Daoudy (2021, 5): “The link is intuitive: fewer resources means more fighting over resources.” Since then, scholars within the community have expanded upon this idea. Uexkull and Buhaug (2021), for instance, emphasize the significance of the indirect ways in which climate change can influence conflicts, such as through the reinforcement of already existing inequalities. Due to this, the idea that climate change is a “threat multiplier” (e.g., Rothe et al. 2025) is typically attributed to the neo-Malthusian model. Scientists like Selby and Hoffmann (2014), however, strongly contest this research strand by arguing that other drivers play a far more significant role in the emergence of conflicts. They criticize that the neo-Malthusian perspective is clouded by the perceived dominance of climate change impacts in all escalations of conflicts. Additionally, they argue that the general discourse on climate and security is also largely led not by scientists but instead by policymakers, military and NGO actors, who have pushed a neo-Malthusian narrative of climate change as this century’s security crisis, without providing enough evidence to validate this claim. For them, an example of this is the growing amount of fearmongering about a “flood of refugees” (Selby and Hoffmann 2014, 749) coming to the US or Europe because of climate change, even though the evidence for this is lacking.

In line with this critique, the second research strand on the climate-security nexus understands climate change as a new addition to a set of competing discourses within traditional debates on security issues such as national, human or collective security, in which climate is being constructed and framed as a security threat. This research strand, thus, largely stems from and draws on the ideas of securitisation by the Copenhagen School. Because of that connection, authors engaged in this research strand have criticised the misuse of climate change to justify disproportionate political and military measures (Warner and Boas 2019). In contrast, critics of this research strand argue that despite the fact that the “political discourse on climate change has increasingly adopted a “grammar of security” (Rothe et al. 2025, 3), any exceptional measures that are taken are usually not in the area of climate change but rather against specific climate change impacts such as migration, that are already high on security agendas (Baldwin

et al. 2014). Furthermore, other scholars raised the question of whether the discourse is actually about the securitisation of climate change or instead about the ‘climatization’ of security policies and therefore the inclusion of climate change impacts into the development of military strategies and base protection (Maertens 2021).

The last research strand does not entail a general conception of the climate-security nexus. Instead, it investigates how different actors engage with various climate security threats, which organisational and practical implications the responses to these threats have and on which level they are taken. For example, to contribute to this strand of research, Bremberg et al. (2022) compare the responses of different international organisations along their discursive framing of climate security, the institutional design, in which the organisations work on the issue and the policy actions that follow. The goal of this research strand is therefore to assess the extent of global responses to climate security challenges and the identification of policy gaps or response recommendations (Rothe et al. 2025).

3. Background and literature review

3.1 The Sahel: Geography, demographics and livelihoods

The Sahel is located in the north-western part of Africa and is considered a transition zone between the Saharan Desert with its arid climate in the north and the humid savannas in the south (Day and Caus 2019; Tomalka et al. 2021). The countries of the Sahel are considered a joint regional zone because of their deep-rooted historical, cultural and political ties, as well as the efforts to work together on similar and linked issues. All in all, the greater region of the Sahel stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, spanning approximately 5900 kilometres and inhabiting about 300 million people (Tomalka et al. 2021).

The specific countries that are part of the Sahel are not universally agreed upon and can differ depending on contexts, institutions, countries and experts. For example, in its Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (2013), the United Nations (UN) consider the Sahel to consist of nine countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and the Sudan; while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2025) defines the Sahel to be a region of ten countries, including some countries not included in the other UN definition: Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. Simultaneously, in some contexts the use of the regional description ‘Sahel’ can also refer to the ‘G5 Sahel’, which is a regional, political group established by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger in 2014 to foster cooperation and joint action on regional

challenges. Among others, the EU heavily supported and collaborated closely with the G5 Sahel, with much of the EU's regional political attention and funding being on the five countries (European Union External Action Service 2018). Here, the diverse use of the term 'Sahel' also comes to show, as in the mandate of the EU's Special Representative for the Sahel region, the Sahel is described as consisting of the G5 Sahel countries (Council of the European Union 2024). This mandate also makes the equation of both terms even more obvious, as it was written following the coup d'états in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2022 and 2023, after which the new military governments decided to leave the G5 Sahel organisation resulting in its dissolution in 2023 (Ross, 2023). Generally, in the literature it seems as though the country assignment to the Sahel is often split between geographical descriptions that use wider Sahel definitions based on the cultural and historical ties of the region and political references that equate the Sahel more to political entities such as the G5 Sahel (Wilén 2025). This context-dependent use of the name 'Sahel' in different sources makes it difficult to use the same country-specific term coherently. But as this thesis focuses on the EU's relationship with the Sahel, hereinafter the term 'Sahel' will be used like the EU uses it – as a reference to the G5 Sahel. This choice is deliberate as usually all definitions of the Sahel at large include the G5 Sahel countries, which makes it possible to still reference larger trends in the region that are not bound by borders, including climate change. Furthermore, the analysis on the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel would likely be flawed if this thesis were to consider the Sahel in its larger definitions while collecting data that is supposed to be about the EU's Sahel approach. References to the Sahel at large will be marked as such through comments in the text or through footnotes.

The G5 Sahel countries encompass about 5 million square kilometres of mostly semi-arid grasslands and savannas as well as shrublands and woodlands in the southern regions, making it larger than the EU (World Bank 2022). Still, in 2022, the joint population of the G5 Sahel countries was only about 89 million people. But with the highest population growth rates in the world, the number is expected to rise to between 180 and 211 million people until 2050. This is particularly due to the high fertility rates, the increase of life expectancy and the reduction of infant and child mortality rates by more than 50 percent since 1960 (World Bank 2022). The region is highly dependent on agriculture, which as the largest economic sector is contributing about 40 percent of the GDP and employing about 60 percent of the population. Most of the agricultural activity is done by smallholder farmers through subsistence dryland farming as well as pastoralism, which makes up 10 to 15 percent of the regional GDP and even more in Mauretania, where about half of the population are pastoralists (World Bank 2022). The Sahel achieved significant economic growth in the last decades, with an average real gross domestic

product (GDP) climb of 4.9 percent per year in the 2010s. But, due to the large population growth as well the low average income, the growth of the GDP per capita has remained relatively low with an average growth of only 1.65 percent per year, which in 2021 led to the average GDP per capita being only 790 US dollars. Currently, a quarter of the population in the Sahel is in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, the majority of whom being women and children, and nearly 31 percent of the Sahel's population are living below the international poverty line (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2025; Loeben et al. 2022; World Bank 2022).

3.2 The Sahel: Climate change impacts

Another concern that shapes the Sahel today is climate change as the region is considered to be one of the biggest climate change 'hotspots' in the world (Alliance Sahel 2024; Crawford 2015). But while climate change is already widely debated in society, it is still necessary to briefly explain it in the context of the thesis.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (2023), climate change can be considered as "the long-term changes in the Earth's climate that are warming the atmosphere, ocean and land". There is no debate among climate scientists that human behaviour – due to the use of fossil fuels, deforestation or unsustainable practices in agriculture – is the cause of climate change. When discussing climate change, scientists usually refer to a time before the late 1800s as the starting point of their calculations. This is explained by the fact, that the late 1800s are considered the beginning of the Industrial Revolution as well as the beginning of reliable, widespread global temperature recording, (United Nations Development Programme 2023; IPCC Working Group 1). Since then, the Earth's mean temperature has risen by about 1.5°C, causing cascading effects on the Earth's system, including droughts, melting polar ice, rising sea levels, and declining biodiversity (World Meteorological Organization 2026). The international response to these risks led to the declaration of multiple international treaties, the most prominent being the 2015 Paris Agreement, in which all Parties to the United Nations Climate Change Conference agreed to limit global warming to well below 2°C and aiming for 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2025). To achieve this, the treaty includes provisions on mitigation and adaptation, which are key concepts in the climate change debate. Adaptation refers to the anticipation of climate change impacts and preparing for these impacts accordingly by, for example, building houses to better withstand rising sea levels or enabling people to migrate. Meanwhile, mitigation conceptualises measures that aim at preventing or reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions,

such as increasing the share of renewable energies or investing in public transport (European Environment Agency 2025).

To produce scenarios for different climate change forecasts, the IPCC uses four ‘Representative Concentration Pathways’ (RCP) to illustrate different atmospheric concentrations of GHG emissions and other aerosols in 2100. In the context of this thesis, the RCPs are an important tool to accurately and comprehensively describe climate change impacts for the Sahel. The scenarios of the IPCC, namely RCP 2.6, RCP4.5, RCP6.0 and RCP8.5, are used to show different levels of impact, when talking about specific issues, like the rise of the median air temperature or rainfall. They range from being considered the low emissions scenario (RCP2.6), to medium (RCP4.5), medium/high (RCP6.0) and the high emissions scenario (RCP8.5). To also include socio-economic factors in these projections, the IPCC developed the ‘Shared Socio-Economic Pathways’ (SSP). These cover factors like the country’s population, its GDP or the rate of urbanisation and are expressed in five different scenarios: SSP1-1.9, SSP1-2.6, SSP2-4.5, SSP3-7.0 and SSP5-8. The first number of each scenario represents the socio-economic assumptions that are included in the projection and the second number describes the make-up of the atmosphere by 2100. Consequently, the different SSP’s correspond projections of global warming. For example, SSP1-1.9 is used for projections that correlate with a 1.5°C global warming average and SSP1-2.6 with a 2°C average. When used in discussions, the different SSPs are usually referred to as SSP1 for SSP1-1.9, SSP2 for SSP1-2.6, SSP3 for SSP2-4.5, SSP4 for SSP3-7.0 and SSP5 for SSP5-8 (Rose et al. 2022; Böttinger and Kasang 2025; van Vuuren et al. 2011; O’Neill et al. 2017).

In the Sahel, the impacts of climate change are manifold, which makes it impossible to discuss them all within the scope of this thesis. Thus, the following abstracts will only discuss overarching, well-recorded and impactful climate change scenarios. According to the IPCC’s RCP2.6 and RCP6.0 scenarios, the meridian air temperature is projected to rise by 2.0 to 4.3°C by 2080, which is considered a very likely scenario (Tomalka et al. 2021). This rise affects the number of very hot days per year, as under RCP6.0, in 2080, regions like the north-eastern Guinea and southwestern Mali are expected to have 125 additional very hot days per year. Some central parts of Niger already experience 306 very hot days per year and, following the RCP6.0 scenario, this number could rise to 339 by 2080 (Carleton and Hsiang 2016; Christidis et al. 2019; Tomalka et al. 2021). Furthermore, the sea levels of the coastal areas of the Sahel are projected to rise between 32 centimetres (RCP2.6) and 38 centimetres (RCP6.0) at the Atlantic coast and between 34 centimetres (RCP2.6) and 40 centimetres (RCP6.0) in the Gulf of Guinea

by 2080 (Niang et al. 2014; Tomalka et al. 2021). Climate change is projected to also impact the amount of precipitation in a year, though the direction of this impact is contested as different studies project the mean annual precipitation to increase or decrease over time. In accordance with this, the projections of events of heavy precipitation differ significantly depending on the region, though overall in line with the world's trend of increasing and intensifying precipitation. For example, in countries like Mauritania, Senegal and north-eastern Mali, the number is projected to decline. In addition to these impacts, climate change in the Sahel also changes the moisture of the soil and the potential for evapotranspiration (Tomalka et al. 2021; Loeben et al. 2022).

Beyond this, the Sahel also has specific vulnerabilities such as water availability. Current projections come with high uncertainties but generally suggest a decline of 2% (RCP2.6) to 5% (RCP6.0) of the per capita water availability. These projections consider a steady population in the Sahel. Including the above-mentioned population predictions, the water availability per capita is projected to decline by 76% (RCP2.6) and 77% (RCP6.0) by 2080 under SSP2. In addition to these challenges, the Sahel's water supply is also distributed very unevenly, is difficult to access and suffers from poor infrastructure. These issues are further exacerbated by poor management of the water supply, creating a reinforcing cycle of water scarcity (Tomalka et al. 2021). For reference, according to the Global Land Outlook Report on West Africa (2019), currently less than 1% of the Sahel's abundance of renewable water sources are being extracted. The effects of reduced water availability, along with other climate change impacts such as droughts or soil degradation, also affect the Sahel's main economic sector, which is agriculture. Here, projections show an overall negative trend, though models in these areas suffer from high uncertainties, partly due to the high difficulty of drought projections (Tomalka et al. 2021; Ali et al. 2019).

The degradation of infrastructure due to extreme weather events, the overall ecosystem, human health and displacement are additional problems distinct to the Sahel. Due to higher temperatures and the projected increase in very hot days, the risk for heat-related mortality in the Sahel is likely to increase from 2.4 to 9.6 deaths per 100 000 people per year in 2080. Additionally, through the degradation of agricultural productivity, the risk of malnutrition in the Sahel is projected to significantly increase, especially for children. Another risk for human health heightened by climate change is the risk of diseases like malaria or meningitis. Lastly, the combination of all the above-mentioned climate impacts, as well as the general vulnerability through conflicts or terrorism, could lead to much of the Sahel's population turning to migration

as a form of adaptation (Loeben et al. 2022; Tomalka et al. 2021). According to Clement et al. (2021) more than 85 million people might need to migrate under a pessimistic scenario. In Burkina Faso, the impact of the region's instability is already visible as in 2018 circa 72 000 people were registered as internally displaced. In 2019, this number already grew to about 600 000 and grew again to 1.1 million in 2020. It currently stands at over 3.7 million internally displaced people in 2025 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025).

3.3 The Sahel: Political and security dynamics and the involvement of the EU

Finally, and especially crucial for this thesis, the political and security dynamics in the Sahel reveal how crises have shaped the regional context. Because while the level of poverty and food insecurity in the Sahel can partly be explained by the international political and economic climate as well as the long-lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sahel also suffers from high levels of corruption and terrorism following many regional political and security crises in its history and particularly in the last two decades.

In the last decades, the Sahel has often been considered a region associated with insecurity, violence and conflict, as its countries have consistently ranked among the first on indexes like the Fragile State Index and last on indexes like the Human Development Index (The Fund for Peace 2024; United Nations 2024). Following its long colonial history with France, the countries of the Sahel only gained independence in 1960, after which the region suffered from persistent weak state capacities, violent conflicts and civil wars that led to multiple coup d'états and the emergence of authoritarian and military regimes. Especially ethnic divisions and poverty but also the involvement of jihadi forces and multiple rebellions of the Tuareg, a large ethnic group that lives in the Sahara, as well as the general armament of the conflicting parties led to the further destabilization of the region and the Sahel becoming one of the most conflict-prone regions in Africa (Mateos et al. 2024). In the 2000s and following the terrorist attack on 9/11, the USA began to consider the larger Sahara-Sahel region as a boiling pot for terrorism and launched various organisations, strategies, committees and many international interventions in the name of its 'Global War on Terror' (Wilén 2025). Despite this engagement, many experts consider the 2021 collapse of the Libyan government and the high number of subsequent armed conflicts in the surrounding countries as the climax of the disruptions in the larger Sahel region (e.g., Koné 2020; Raleigh et al. 2021). This is especially evident in northern Mali, where the Tuareg led another rebellion against Mali's government in Bamako in 2012. This insurgency led to the declaration of independence of the unrecognized state of Azawad in the northern parts of Mali and simultaneous coup d'état by mutinous soldiers. The escalation of

these conflicts to the south of Mali as well as the rising involvement of jihadist militants like Al-Qaeda triggered the invasion of France into Mali through its Operation Serval in 2013, which aimed to stabilise the region and set off the establishment of many different regional missions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union and the UN (Raleigh et al. 2021; Mateos et al. 2024).

The EU also started its engagement during this time by adopting its first Sahel Strategy called the “European Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel” in 2011 (European Union External Action Service 2011). The targets of this first Sahel strategy were mainly security and development, due to the underlying assumption that developmental improvement would automatically also increase security. The strategy had differently timed goals, with the short-term objectives aiming at improving basic services and enabling the Sahelian states to increase their own abilities in securing the region in the next 3 years. Furthermore, the active reduction of the power of terrorist and criminal organisations and the amount of terrorist attacks and kidnappings in the region through European efforts were also a part of the short-term goals. The medium-term objectives, with a time frame of 5 to 10 years, aimed at generally increasing political stability, security, governance and social cohesion but also to further combat terrorist and criminal organisations and especially Al-Qaeda (European Union External Action Service 2011, 4). But while the EU presented the strategy to be an integrated approach to the Sahel, many experts mainly consider the first Sahel strategy as well as its implementation to be focused on hard security, with actions revolving largely around capacity-building of the military, police and law enforcement while developmental goals remained rather unspecific and broad (Mateos et al. 2024). As the critique of the EU strategies is often intertwined with the broader concerns about the EU’s Sahel engagement overall, subsequent chapters (3.4.1 – 3.4.4) examine these critiques in detail.

In the execution of the strategy, the EU invested 600 million Euros into the Sahel through the 10th European Development Fund and established three Capacity-Building-Civilian Missions (CSDP) between 2012 and 2014: the European Union Capacity-Building-Civilian Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) in 2012, the European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM Mali) in 2013 and the EUCAP Sahel Mali in 2014 (Council of the European Union 2012, 2013, 2014). All three missions aimed at training and supporting local forces in their efforts for territorial integrity and against the threat of terrorist groups. However, while the efforts of these strategies were immense, because the stability in the Sahel continued deteriorating, many experts consider the outcome to be insufficient in comparison. (Tull 2022; Mateos et al. 2024).

In Europe, the political situation also heightened during that time as the increase in migration flows to the EU led to the declaration of the so-called Mediterranean ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015. The surging focus on migration can be considered a turning point in the EU’s external action and security approach. While irregular migration had already featured in EU external action – including in the EU’s 2011 Sahel strategy (cf. European Union External Action Service 2011, 2) – 2015 marked an escalation, as the EU’s external approach was now led by considerations of the appeasement of internal security interests (Nissen 2024). In tune with this shift, the EU reformed its approach to the Sahel in 2015, by publishing the “Regional Action Plan (2015-2020)” (Council of the European Union 2015) – the newest Sahel strategy. In it, the EU established four main focal points: first, the prevention and countering of radicalisation; second, the creation of better conditions for youth development; third, the fight against illicit trafficking and transnational organised crime; and fourth, the tackling of migration, mobility issues and border management, which is the only new focus point of the strategy (Council of the European Union 2015, 3). In accordance with this reform, the EU also sought to reform both EUCAP missions in the Sahel and realign their strategic focus to emphasize their role in border control and migration management (Mateos et al. 2024). Both internally and externally, this approach and the large focus on migration has come under immense scrutiny and sparked scientific discussions. Internally, especially the gap between the normative approach in theory and the security-based approach in practice has led to much criticism. For example, EUCAP trainers have repeatedly complained about the uneven distribution between technical military training and the discussion of normative values, human rights and lawful practices in local trainings, as the missions focus on the former for 95% percent of the time and usually only briefly touch upon the latter. This is especially based on the concern that while the EU is promoting the collaboration and training of military forces on the promise of normative values and human rights training, it is not ensuring that this training will actually be used in line with EU values (Jayasundara-Smits 2018; Schmauder et al.). Externally, the main critique of scholars stems from the notion that the EU is weighing up its own security agenda in the region against the needs and wants of the local population and is thereby prioritising the appeasement of internal European political concerns above the proven negative impact of some policies. For many, a direct example of this are the efforts for migration management by the EU in the Sahel, which have proven to have increased the amount of illegal trafficking and have worsened the overall humanitarian situation of migrants in the Sahel (e.g., Fakhry 2023; Lebovich, 2017).

Furthermore, while the EU invested a total of eight billion Euros into the Sahel between 2014 and 2020 (European Union External Action Service 2021), the Sahel’s fragility and the overall

violence increased. With more jihadist insurgencies spilling from Mali into the other Sahel countries, on-going conflicts between local forces and jihadist groups evolved into cycles of violence that increasingly turned against civilians (Center for Preventive Action 2025; Raleigh et al. 2021). In 2020, this erupted into a wave of military coups in the Sahel, with the first coup taking place in Mali in August 2020, leading to a transitional government that was already ousted in May 2021 by parts of the same military that had been involved in the first coup. This political insecurity furthermore spilled into the neighbouring countries with another military coup happening in Burkina Faso in January 2022 and again in September 2022, due to the first takeover ending with increased insecurity and the loss of about 40 percent of the country's territory to armed groups. In 2023, Niger followed with high-ranking parts of the army detaining the president and taking over the government (Lawal, 2024). In total, between 2020 and 2023, nine coup attempts and six successful military takeovers have taken place in the larger Sahel region (Wilén 2025).

This wave of coups can be considered a paradigm shift for the region. Internationally, the development was met with many different reactions: The African Union and ECOWAS immediately suspended relations with all three countries and implemented sanctions. In Niger's case, ECOWAS even threatened a military intervention. In reaction to this, the three coup regimes joined forces and founded a competing alliance – the 'Coalition for the Sahel' – against ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel, whose memberships all of them had denounced after declaring their new governments (Kump 2024). The UN's involvement also greatly diminished after Mali's government demanded the end of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) after ten years of deployment in the country. Since then, the UN's presence in the region has largely shifted to general and lighter political, developmental and humanitarian engagement through the UN Regional Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and its supporting strategy (Al Jazeera, 2023; United Nations Security Council 2024). The US approach and presence in the Sahel has shifted multiple times in the last decade due to the everchanging political developments with Trumps first term as president, Biden and now Trumps second term administration. Though only hesitantly labelling the developments in the Sahel as a 'coup', the has US suspended aid and military support in the region but still has maintained a few military bases. Internally, the debates on the US's Sahel approach largely revolve around the fact that some of the military forces that staged the coup in Niger had previously gotten training from US forces. Since the US has pulled out of or stopped most aid programs under Trump 2.0, its current approach is mostly defined by hard security and

economic interests in the region, though there are no public efforts for any new initiatives (Kohnert 2025; Yabi, 2023).

Simultaneously to these developments, a new actor has emerged in the region: Russia. Since the coups in the Sahel, Russia has intensified its efforts in the region by embracing the coup regimes and presenting themselves as the alternative to Western and European actors (Nissen 2024). In practice, this has resulted in Russia becoming Mali's main arm supplier and sending the Wagner Group, a Russian private military mercenary company, to assist all three coup regimes by training their armed forces, actively fighting against local jihadist terrorists and protecting the new regimes' power. This increasing cooperation between Russia and the three coup regimes is heavily driven by the anti-French sentiment, that has developed against the former colonial power in the Sahel and has been exacerbated by extensive, widespread Russian disinformation campaigns (Tull 2022). Furthermore, Russia is portraying itself as a transactional partner, that does not come with conditions of 'Western values' like democracy and human rights, which has made them an attractive partner for the region. This self-representation has also been effective for China, which has used its status as one of the largest foreign investors in Africa to emphasise its respect for sovereignty and non-interference. But in contrast to Russia, China's engagement is primarily visible through increased diplomatic relations and economic investments, for example, into infrastructure or natural resource extraction (Tull 2022; Nissen 2024).

For the EU, the beginning of this decade can be marked as a critical juncture for its engagement with the Sahel. In 2021, the EU had just released a new strategy for the Sahel – "The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel" – in which they admitted that the approach they had been following for the last decade has not yielded the impacts they had been hoping for. With that, the aim of the new strategy was to reshape the EU's approach to the Sahel with a more normative focus, which still included security efforts but also focussed on issues like good governance, human rights, economic development and, for the first time, also more in-depth on climate change (Council of the European Union 2021). Simultaneously, the strategy also entailed plans to add to the military efforts in the Sahel by using the European Peace Facility (EPF), which was created in 2020 as a new foreign and security instrument outside of the EU's structural budget, to deliver military equipment and strengthen military capacities of the region (General Secretariat of the Council 2024; Nissen 2024; Mateos et al. 2024). Despite these efforts, the wave of coups in the Sahel as well as the general shift in international politics stunted the EU. Following the coups, the EU quickly joined ECOWAS in their condemnation and

suspended its missions in the Sahel, just for the new military regimes to dismiss the missions entirely and force out the European presence, including France's army missions, in the region soon after (Kump 2024; Lory, 2025). Additionally, the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 led to a general refocussing of the EU's security policy, with the political attention for the Sahel slowing to a trickle. An example of this are the funds of the EPF that were quickly redirected to defence support for Ukraine, leading to the investment of 5.6 billion euros into Ukraine between 2022 and 2024, while the funds for the Sahel totalled just under 100 million euros (Nissen 2024).

All in all, since this juncture, the EU has been struggling to find its new role with the Sahel. While on the one hand, a country group including France but also Sweden has cut off all diplomatic, military and financial ties with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and is advocating for an intransigent refusal to engage in the region, on the other hand, countries like Spain, Italy, Germany and Belgium are seemingly trying to find a way to carry on their engagement with these countries and the Sahel in general. An example of this is shown by multiple trips of Italian representatives to Niger, as well as a visit of the German defence minister, in which they announced an agreement with the regime in Niger to keep open its military base (D'Amato 2024; Tull 2024; Siebold, 2024). And although there currently is a debate on the future of EU-Sahel relations at the EU-level, despite a lack of general political attention, the EU has approved a humanitarian aid package for the Sahel countries Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and Niger worth 201 million euros in 2024 (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2024). Furthermore, in November of 2024, the Council appointed João Cravinho as the new EU Special Representative to the Sahel region with the mission to consolidate European interests and to define a new approach to the Sahel (Council of the European Union 2024). Since then, the Special Representative has been touring the EU member states and developing a new strategy for the Sahel that is expected to be approved in the upcoming months (Weiß, 2025).

3.4 Critique of the EU's approach to the Sahel

Having outlined the evolution of the political and security developments in the Sahel as well as how the EU has approached the Sahel, this subchapter will elaborate further upon how this approach has been assessed and criticised in the academic and policy literature. Taking these debates into consideration is essential to identify recurrent themes, trace trends across the policy fields of development, security, migration and climate and to examine how interests in one policy domain might have overshadowed another. The following discussion will focus on the

four recurrent themes of interest in this thesis: first, the field of development aid; second the securitisation and militarisation dimension of the EU's approach to the Sahel; third, migration and border control; and lastly, climate change and environmental concerns.

3.4.1 Development, governance and local ownership

Since 2011, the EU and its member states have spent 8 billion Euros in the Sahel, with the EU's contribution consisting of 4.6 billion Euros for development cooperation and 1.16 billion Euros in humanitarian assistance (European Union External Action Service 2021). But while these investments are unparalleled to any other EU engagements, their impact and especially its sustainability is questioned by many scientific and policy analyses (e.g., Vogelaar 2018; Ejodus 2017; Mateos et al. 2024). The one key issue many authors identify in this respect is the lack of 'local ownership', which is a concept based on the idea that locals should be involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of policies and projects to ensure that the projects are acknowledged as legitimate and achieve a degree of sustainability (Ejodus 2017). For the EU, this idea has long been central to its foreign policy rhetoric's, including its Sahel strategies. For example, the 2011 Sahel strategy emphasises the need "to promote and encourage actively African responsibility and ownership" (European Union External Action Service 2011, 4) with every subsequent strategy reiterating it (Council of the European Union 2021, 2015).

With this in mind, experts such as Vogelaar (2018) have criticised that while promoting the concept of local ownership, the application of the EU's action in the Sahel is usually happening in a top-down approach in which actions are mainly not characterised by cooperation and trust, but the clash of governmental interests with local needs. In line with this, authors such as Colomba-Petteng (2024) have more generally questioned which locals are meant when discussing 'local ownership' and have come to the conclusion that it is usually the local elites that benefit from European instruments and money. Because of this, those resources are often instrumentalized for domestic purposes and other interests outside of the broader civil society. As a result, experts like Mateos et al. (2024) or Jayasundara-Smits (2018) have criticised the ambiguity of the EU's use of the concept and the areas where it is considered important in comparison to those in which it usually plays a small or no role. Specifically, they have identified European security measures and military interventions like the EUCAP missions at leading with a top-down approach, in which the EU has shown little to no receptivity to Sahelian interests, demands, wants or needs.

3.4.2 Securitisation and militarisation

As a result of these analyses, the EU's approach in the Sahel has come under pressure with policy experts and scientists doubting the EU's intentions and deeming the approach as being over-securitised and over-militarised. Here, especially the concept of securitisation as well as its effects during the 'War on Terror' have been referenced many times (e.g., Mateos et al. 2024; Wilén 2025; Abrahamsen 2005). For instance, Wilén (2025) describes that while the framing of the Sahel has been "almost synonymous to 'crises'" (Wilén 2025, 25) for decades, she also finds that before the declaration of the War on Terror in the beginning of the 2000s, the international response to these crises had usually remained within the world of humanitarian and development interventions. This only shifted to consider the Sahel – as well as many other African contexts – a 'breeding ground for terrorism' and a 'threat to international security' following the start of the 'War on Terror'. Furthermore, Wilén (2025) explains that even though the amount of killings, kidnappings and attacks by violent jihadist groups in the early 2000s did increase in comparison to the decade before, this rise does not indicate the start of a jihadist uprising but rather reflects the heightened international monitoring and data collection. Moreover, in interviews with an academic from the Free University of Brussels and with a civilian expert from the International Crisis Group, Mateos et al. (2024) discovered that not only was the framing of the 'counter-terrorism culture' used by international actors – including the EU and its member states – to legitimise their sudden engagement and intense military presence in the Sahel, it also led to an oversimplification of the conflicts in the region. According to the interviewees, as well as other experts like Bagayoko (2024), the security framing has and is hindering a comprehensive analysis of the regional challenges and intricate dynamics in this context. Consequently, a lack of comprehension of the complex nature of the Islamist violence in the region as well as the historical and socio-economic factors at play has developed in the discourse.

Additionally, many scholars criticise the prioritisation of more short-term intense military efforts in the 2000s through combat operations and military capacity-building instead of assisting the local population to deal with governance issues and socioeconomic problems in the long-term (Venturi 2022). In the context of the EU, several authors have pointed out the hypocrisy of European officials and strategies constantly repeating the need to put people at the heart of assistance, up to a point, where it is happening "ad nauseum" as Mateos et al. (2024, 40) have put it, before always concluding that security should be prioritised. But not only this prioritisation is criticised, much of the critique among scholars generally revolves around the

structure of the EU's engagement in the Sahel. In this respect, according to Bagayoko (2024), the countless different initiatives and partners have made it difficult to ensure coordinated and coherent action from the EU. Because the processes within the initiatives or with partners were typically lengthy and complex, the initiatives would often be considered ineffective and scrutinised for their legitimization. According to Lebovich (2018), the sum of failures in the approach has allowed and sometimes even contributed to the further deterioration of the Sahel, visible particularly in Mali, where the inability of the EU to support an impartial, equal and fair justice system left an open entrance for the expansion of jihadist forces and their administrative power.

All in all, Bagayoko (2024) sums up the outcomes of the EU's engagement – especially following the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – as follows: “A decade after international actors led their first operations in the Sahel, their collective failure is widely recognized.” The experts that come to this conclusion justify their failure assessment by citing the very critiques detailed earlier in this chapter. At the same time, the literature also illustrates a general uncertainty about the EU's future Sahel strategy (Tull 2024). Especially the general redirection of the EU's security focus following the Russian invasion into Ukraine in 2022 has left open questions about the future of the European security presence in the Sahel (Nissen 2024).

3.4.3 Migration and border control

An issue area experts and locals alike employ as an example in the critique about securitisation of the Sahel is migration. When the EU released its first Sahel strategy in 2011, the issue of migration was merely a reference within the domain of the fight against instability in the region by discussing the risk of “uncontrolled migratory flows” (European Union External Action Service 2011, 1) to the EU that could be a result of the further destabilization of the region. Similarly, the CSDP mission papers in their establishment between 2012 and 2014 only include few references to migration and were mainly focussed on hard security. But following several terrorist attacks in the EU and the start of the ‘migration crisis’ in 2015, the EU's priorities began to shift towards border control, migration management and fighting ‘irregular migration’ (Wilén 2025). In response, the EU adopted their approach to the Sahel to include these new priorities and to externalise its borders, leading to chief diplomat Josep Borell saying in an

interview, that “Europe’s border is not in the Mediterranean, but south to the Sahel”² (Rémy, 2020).

However, the EU’s newfound focus on migration has gained much criticism over the years, both from local communities and among scholars, Mateos et al. (2024, 42) have described the EU’s approach as “the over-dimensioning of migration-related policies” and stipulate that especially because 80% of African migration occurs internally, the sudden focus on migration seems to be much more related to the internal political climate in the EU than to a sudden increase or new migration flows in the Sahel. Furthermore, Fakhry (2023) criticizes that the multiplication of European political, military and civilian interventions regarding migration management in the region, in spite of border crossings being on a steady decline, have resulted in the “conflation of security threats and migration” (Fakhry 2023, 6) in the region. For example, in an interview Fakhry (2023) conducted with a seconded police officer from the EUCAP Niger mission, the officer answered the question of why the EUCAP Niger mission’s mandate was reformed in 2016, by saying: “At the time, in 2016, everyone was mobilised to work on migration [...] To add migration to the mandate was to show the political commitment to the question.” (Fakhry 2023, 7). In connection to this, Lebovich (2018) adds that many mandates were also expanded to include migration in a more central way, because it resulted in the mission gaining more funding. According to scholars, this is also true regarding the bilateral relationships between the EU and several Sahelian countries, with countries like Niger expanding their own efforts to fight migration in order to receive funding or other economic opportunities from the EU (Fakhry 2023).

Despite the EU’s strong interest in this area, which Tsourdi et al. (2023, 7) have described as “governing migration through funds”, most experts also agree that those efforts were relatively unsuccessful. The reasons for this are mainly the poor cooperation with local governments, insufficient monitoring from the EU and costly, unsustainable plans that failed to include local conditions and tensions (Lebovich, 2018). Another common finding is that the EU’s migration action in the Sahel often negatively affects local communities. Within this critique, for experts like Brachet (2018), the underlying issue with the EU’s engagement is that, in spite of the implementation of arbitrary borders due to colonialism, migration has a longstanding history in the Sahel with many regional economic benefits and cultural roots as well as multilateral

² Translated from French to English using DeepL. Original citation: „La frontière de l’Europe n’est pas en Méditerranée, mais au sud du Sahel“ - (Rémy, 2020). DeepL is available under: <https://www.deepl.com/de/translator>, last access 15.02.2026.

agreements safeguarding the freedom of movement of citizens. Thus, the introduction of Western ideas of managing and limiting borders crossings has led to a multitude of new and the amplification of already existing issues in the region (Lebovich, 2017). For many, a central example of this is the city of Agadez in northern Niger, which has historically always been a place of transit and only stopped being so, following the involvement of European actors, who pushed for more ‘orderly’ migration and border control, in the late 1990s. Despite their apprehension, local officials agreed to these European demands in exchange for financial aid and economic cooperation and have since applied a wide range of repressive measures to restrict migration. Particularly with the increase of political attention on migration since 2015, this European interference has led to the deterioration of humanitarian conditions in transit hubs such as Agadez and has made migration much more dangerous overall, visible in the increase of human smuggling and repressions now marking migration routes in the region (Mateos et al. 2024; Fakhry 2023; Horváth and Schwab, 2023; Lebovich, 2017; Brachet 2018). The resulting conditions have also gained local criticism, visible for example in interviews conducted by Mateos et al. (2024) with local officials, in which the majority of interviewees answered that they think the EU is side-lining local interests for European migration management goals.

For Tull (2024) this side-lining has also made the manageability of the current situation in the Sahel and possible relations with the coup regimes more difficult. He argues that because of the EU’s long history of the instrumentalization of migration issues, the EU now faces the risks of the coup regimes weaponizing the issue to gain leverage. In his view, this has become even more relevant because of the coup regimes’ rapprochement to Russia, which makes the threat of weaponization not only conceivable but likely. All in all, in the scientific literature, the issue of European migration management in the Sahel is the most often mentioned area of critique, with the need to improve the European approach being included in almost all policy recommendations.

3.4.4 Climate change and the nexus logic

The following subchapter explores the main research interest of this thesis: the climate engagement of the EU in the Sahel. The narrative that climate change will lead to the exacerbation of already existing Sahelian conflicts has been very powerful in policymaking and media (e.g., UN News 2019; Rodembourg, 2024; Mishra 2025; Eyo 2023). So much so, that the EU has increasingly engaged in the topic and issues concerning climate change have risen on the priority list of the EU’s approach to the Sahel. However, a small but growing body of work has raised concerns about how this engagement is being handled and integrated into the

wider scope of the EU's Sahel action. Therefore, building on the overview of climate change impacts in the Sahel as well the subchapter on the climate-security nexus, the following paragraphs will review the key points of criticism in the literature.

Firstly, according to academics such as Raineri (2022) one of the main points of criticism in the debate around climate change impacts in the Sahel is the supposed desertification of the region. The premise of this narrative is the idea that the Sahelian band is an inherently fragile ecosystem that is bound to suffer immensely from climate change impacts such as diminishing precipitation. In combination with the high population growth rates in the region and the resulting increase in demand for wood, the perceived risk of desertification has fuelled international fears of a rise in and the escalation of conflicts due to the heightened competition over resources, which reflects a generally neo-Malthusian approach. This, has led to one of the core developmental goals of the EU's 2021 Sahel strategy being "combatting desertification" (Council of the European Union 2021, 14). But while this claim has gained such a following that many policymakers do not question its validity, there is actually a growing consensus among scientists that the desertification of the Sahel has not only halted but is actively reversing in many areas (Behnke 2016; Mbow et al. 2015; Raineri 2020).

Furthermore, in that context, scholars such as Puig Cepero et al. (2021) or Detges and Foong (2022) criticise the EU's approach regarding climate migration in the Sahel. Because while climate change could lead to all types of mobility events in the Sahel including entrapment, which is mainly a prognosis for the most vulnerable households and especially women and children, the largest amounts of Sahelian migration happens internally (Ardittis 2017). And even though researchers do not expect this pattern to change under the pressure of climate change, EU policymakers have embraced the concern that climate change could lead to another 'refugee crisis' and have used this narrative to argue for more migration management and border control. Even further, Ribot et al. (2020) suggest that because climate refugees are currently a popular trend in research but particularly in the media, this dynamic has led to migrants in the Sahel quickly being declared as climate migrants without researching the multitude of diverse dynamics in the individuals' choice to emigrate. According to the authors, their declaration as climate migrants is intended to demonstrate the urgency of acting against climate change, but it is also used to justify further efforts to curb migration to Europe.

This policy-research dichotomy has fuelled larger scale criticism that Western foreign actors seem to use oversimplified climate narratives to deflect attention from their own roles in driving conflict and harm through military, security, and development interventions. For example,

within the debate around desertification and its effect as a contributor to resource conflicts, local experts and other researchers deem the impacts of foreign military and agricultural interventions to be more important for the region. Concretely, the launch of foreign programs to support Sahelian agriculture has led to the disruption of mobility for nomadic herders and their livestock, which in turn challenged the co-existence of local farmers and pastoralists (Puig Cepero et al. 2021; Mateos et al. 2024). Because of this, for many scholars the concluding observation is that the neo-Malthusian view that seems to dominate the policy discourse has led to the increase in “late-colonial” (Raineri 2022, 96) approaches, which have not only failed to yield the results they aimed for, for example food security, conflict prevention, climate mitigation or adaption, but also in some parts have led to the deterioration of local systems.

To further support this criticism of the neo-Malthusian approach to the Sahel, scientists also point to the lack of translation of the increasingly high-profile political discourse around climate change impacts in the Sahel to governance strategies or military missions. In the case of the EU for example, despite its continuing emphasis on the Sahel being a key region to take action regarding climate change, no climate-related policies have yet been introduced to any of the Sahel’s CSDP missions’ strategies. In tune with the general critique of securitisation of the EU’s approach to the Sahel, the missions largely focus on a military response to security risks, without incorporating climate-related issues such as energy security, which is not mentioned in any of the EU’s Sahel strategies. Instead, according to an interview conducted by Mateos et al. (2024) with an expert on the missions, the climate dimension in the missions is more about the missions’ carbon footprint.

On the whole, the conclusion scientists investigating this issue draw is that the securitisation of climate change in the Sahel has led to the “de-politisation of conflicts over natural resources in the Sahel” (Raineri 2022, 103). Particularly the way foreign actors but also the Sahelian governments have created and used the frame that links climate change to conflicts has resulted in the diversion of attention from their own faults and responsibilities. Internationally, this framing has worked well and attracted much financial aid and attention – especially from the EU, though it generally bears the risk of glossing over the real problems as well as solutions needed in the Sahel (Raineri 2022; Mateos et al. 2024).

4. Interim conclusion and assumptions

Before this thesis moves to its chapters on the collected data and its analysis, it is useful to synthesise the main insights and assumptions that can be drawn from the theory and literature review.

The last chapters have discussed what the concept of securitisation is and how the climate-security nexus ties into it. Furthermore, they have introduced the regional context of the Sahel, its challenges and the European engagement in the region. And most importantly, within the discussion of the critique on the EU's engagement, so far, the thesis shown how the theory relates to practice and what recurrent themes there are in-between. For example, the discussion around how migration has been securitised and militarised and how the issue has been used to further European security interests, has largely inspired the desire to research the intentions of the EU in their climate engagement in this thesis. Therefore, they can directly be tied back to the main research question at hand:

“What are the main drivers behind the EU's climate action in the Sahel and how do climate, developmental, migration and security concerns balance in this process?”

The outcome of these chapters are four assumptions derived from the literature that will guide the empirical analysis of this thesis in addition to the research question. The first assumption is:

A1. The EU's climate action in the Sahel is not driven by climate protection alone, but by an interplay of mainly security concerns and migration management, with security interests often taking precedence.

This first assumption is guided by the understanding of how securitisation has generally influenced the EU's approach to the Sahel and how scholars have already described the dichotomy between climate protection narratives and the realisation; for example, in the general presentation of climate change as a “threat multiplier” (e.g., Rothe et al. 2025) that aggravates security issues. Furthermore, the assumption is also based on the use of climate migration narratives to push for migration management efforts. This also ties in with the next assumption:

A2. The EU's climate narrative in the Sahel is likely to centre on issues that have already been securitised like conflicts, instability or irregular migration, rather than on structural adaptation efforts or livelihood support.

This second assumption is based on the discussions in the literature on the climate-security nexus. These prominently describe how the EU has not only framed climate change as the

security issue of the century, but how this framing has largely resulted in the discussions on other, already prominent issues in the region, such as migration. Additionally, it considers how scholars have noted that the EU's approach to the Sahel has been historically characterised by reactive risk-management strategies that prioritise short-term objectives over long-term investments. In tune with this, the third assumption is:

A3. Climate change in the Sahel is used discursively to legitimise an expansion of EU security and migration-related interventions.

The third assumption based on the previous chapter originates from scholars such as Mateos et al. (2024), who discovered that even though climate change was introduced into military strategies, there has been little to no translation of it into the reality of the missions, specifically the lack of implementation of issues such as energy security. Lastly, the fourth assumption is:

A4. EU priorities in the Sahel are shaped and sometimes overrun by prevailing policy agendas and 'trends' in Brussels and European capitals, which influences how problems are defined and which instruments are mobilised.

This last assumption is derived from the overall analysis of the EU's but also other international actors' engagement in the region, which has shown the amount of influence current political trends such as the 'War on Terror' or the 'refugee crises' have had on the approach to the Sahel. What will be particularly interesting to investigate within this assumption, is the question of whether climate protection interests are prioritised over local needs and demands, which has been shown in the discussions around the EU's efforts regarding migration in the Sahel.

5. Methodology

This thesis follows a qualitative approach that is composed of expert interviews and relevant EU documents, communications and public statements, which will be analysed through a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). In total six interviews were conducted and eleven documents, communications and public statements as well as four longer interviews and event recordings were selected and analysed. The different steps of the methodology will be discussed in the following.

5.1 Data collection: Expert interviews

In social sciences, expert interviews are a common method to address research questions when there is limited existing literature. In this case, while there is plenty of literature on the Sahel, foreign actors in the Sahel and climate change in the region, there is little to no literature

examining the connections between these strands of literature, as the scientific disciplines are often split in their own silos. Furthermore, while future policy recommendations are often discussed in the literature, policy outcomes and the specific failure of actors in geographical areas, especially ones without much media attention, are usually discussed between policy actors, think tank experts, scientists and other relevant actors behind closed doors. This often makes them inaccessible for outsiders.

To fill this gap, in total six interviews with a length of between 30-45 minutes were conducted. One of these interviews was conducted in person and five through a videocall. According to Schütz (1972), an expert is a person with special, in-depth knowledge of specific topics or a section of a scientific field. For this thesis, the requested experts were considered to have in-depth knowledge on either one or more disciplines relevant to the research question such as security or climate change in the Sahel and to either be an academic expert, Think Tank analyst or politically involved as a member of the European Parliament or staff in EU institutions. Furthermore, as discussed in the positioning in the beginning of this thesis, as a white researcher from a university in the Global North, I had a special interest and responsibility to include Sahelian voices in the pool of experts. The experts were identified through their published works, targeted sources like specific think tanks working on or having a targeted expertise on the issue (e.g., European Council on Foreign Relations, European Union Institute for Security Studies) or EU directories.

To reach this number of interviews, in total 34 experts and three organisations were requested through a standardised e-mail partially adapted to the expert, their field of expertise and the reason(s) of interest. In cases where there were no e-mail addresses available, the experts were requested through broader e-mail addresses such as institutional or team contacts, contact forms on the institution's website or through the social media platform LinkedIn. The experts were requested in the timeframe between the 9th of September and the 1st of December. All in all, two experts declined the request for an interview, three experts declined the request but gave a reference to someone else and 25 experts didn't respond. Two experts accepted the interview request but did not respond to further planning emails, leading to a total of six interviews.

The content of the interviews and more specifically this thesis does not aim to be wholly representative of the debate about the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel. This is partially because the number of interviews, while including different scientific disciplines and views on scientific discussions such as the climate-security nexus, remains limited. Another reason is that I was not able to interview Sahelian experts and staff of relevant EU institutions, despite sending

out interview requests to the relevant contacts. However, the staff roster of EU institutions as well as specific thematic responsibility is largely not publicly available. Considering this, the selection of interviewees relied on referrals by other experts, “Whoiswho”, which is an official electronic directory of the organisational chart of the EU, LinkedIn or other websites. But while most of the requests went unanswered or declined, the requests that were answered, contained referrals to other staff, which in turn either did not answer or referred me to someone else, who then did not answer. Furthermore, during the research of Sahelian experts, it became obvious that while many international organisations are working in the region, most do not seem to be working with local partners but rather with other international organisations. The requests to those who do went unanswered or declined. This also applies to the requested Sahelian organisations and Sahelian experts that work on the relevant topics. Overall, this lack of available interviewees, who have expertise on the topic, results in a limited representativeness of this thesis. But while it is not wholly possible to close this gap, the impact of the missing perspectives should be mitigated by the additional analysis of EU documents and communications as well as the continued consideration of this issue during this research.

The interviews were conducted with a previously established guideline-based questionnaire. Due to the different backgrounds of the experts, this allowed to adjust single questions and offered the ability to spontaneously ask follow-up questions (Wassermann 2014, 58). The interviews were then transcribed using the MAXQDA Transcription-AI³ and the results were re-examined to correct any errors. Due to the fact that some interviewee’s as well as my native language is German, three of the interviews were conducted in German, transcribed and then translated using DeepL⁴. In preparation, the interview guideline was also translated using DeepL and re-examined to correct any errors and adjust the language style. Both the English and the German questionnaire as well as the interview transcriptions and, if necessary, their translations can be found in the appendix. In the analysis, any citations will be given in English with the original German transcription available as a footnote. To protect the personal data of the interviewees and the confidentiality of the interviews, which were agreed upon in the individual declarations of consent, as well as to keep up the standards of qualitative social research, the transcriptions of the interviews were anonymised. This also helped to build an open atmosphere, in which the interviewees felt comfortable to speak and make critical statements without fear of negative consequences. An anonymised overview of interviews, the

³ Available under: <https://www.maxqda.com/automatic-transcription>, last access: 15.12.2025.

⁴ Available under; <https://www.deepl.com/de/translator>, last access 29.01.2026.

declaration of consent as well as the information sheet that was provided to the experts in the interview request can be found in English and in German in the appendix. Due to the confidentiality of the interviews, the signed declarations of consent cannot be attached to this thesis, as for example the signatures on the documents would reveal the identity of the interviewees. Furthermore, despite multiple reminders, experts no. 2, 4, 5 and 6 failed to send in their declarations of consent before the interviews, so they were verbally asked for their consent in the beginning. This can be retraced in the transcripts. Expert no. 2 sent in the declaration of consent after the interview.

5.2 Data collection: EU strategies, communications, public statements & appearances

As discussed, this thesis will also analyse a corpus of selected EU strategy documents, public statements and appearances pertaining to the EU's action in the Sahel in order to complement the existing body of data. Partly, to attempt to negate the lack of European or Sahelian voices in them and to capture the tone of the European policymakers' discourse.

What is first and foremost relevant for the data corpus, are the three EU strategies – namely the 2011 Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020 and the 2021 Integrated Strategy in the Sahel (Council of the European Union 2021; European Union External Action Service 2011; Council of the European Union 2015). These strategies represent the evolution of the EU's policy approach over the years and also help to trace the increasing importance of climate change. The data corpus next also selected public communications and statements by high-level EU officials from 2023 to 2025. This timeframe was chosen to capture the EU's renewed strategic reflections following the period of stasis after the military coups in the Sahel. This focus also ensures the prioritisation of the evolving policy narratives while avoiding redundancy with prior analyses of the pre-coup engagements. Among the selected documents are Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union speeches from 2023 and 2025 and both the mission letter from Ursula von der Leyen to appoint Kaja Kallas as the new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the press release about the Council's appointment of João Cravinho as the new EU Special Representative for the Sahel region (von der Leyen 2024, 2025, 2023; Council of the European Union 2024). In addition to this, two recent interviews with João Cravinho on the EU's new strategy to the Sahel were analysed (Weiß, 2025; Du Plessis, 2025). Similarly to this type of data, the corpus also includes four longer audio interviews and event recordings, in which João Cravinho, spoke with journalists specialised on Africa and at think-tank events in 2025 (Nucifora 2025; Bruno

Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; Newuf and Okachi 2025). Just like the expert interviews, three of these recordings were transcribed using MAXQDA Transcription-AI⁵ and the results were re-examined to correct any errors. For the event organised by the Council on Foreign Relations (2025), the think tank already provided a transcription, which was used in the analysis. Lastly, a communication by the European Commission on their understanding of the climate-security nexus was also selected, to capture the general outlook of the Commission on the relationship between climate and security (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2023).

5.3 Coding of the collected data

The data collected for this thesis was analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which is a systematic yet still flexible approach for "developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset" (Braun and Clarke 2022, 40) that progresses from an initial coding of the data to increasingly abstract theme development. This choice of method was deliberate due to the different data types and especially considering the varied backgrounds of the experts and the European documents, communications and public statements that were selected in this thesis, which is not comparable in a one-to-one matter. The EU strategies and official communications are institutional documents that are strategically developed and formulated to deliver the formal policy priorities and authorised positions of the European Union. But while the public statements and appearances of EU officials are also strategically prepared, they generally represent speech acts shaped by their communicative settings, audiences and a certain degree of spontaneity. Party in line with this, the expert interviews constitute another type of data, that instead of providing strategic EU positions, rather provide informed interpretations, contextualisation and, at times, critique of EU discourse and policy practices. The analysis therefore does not treat the different types of data as equal but instead examines recurring meanings, framings and patterns – generally considered as themes in this context – across these different sources. Simultaneously, thematic analysis offers clear, practicable steps from the familiarisation and coding to reviewing, defining and naming themes. This in comparison to, for example, selecting a more standardised method such as the qualitative content analysis, which can be useful to apply a more fixed category structure to systematically classify or compare data, enables the exploration of how different actors construct meanings and what patterns can be found within them.

⁵ Available under: <https://www.maxqda.com/automatic-transcription>, last access: 15.12.2025

Following the six phases of thematic analysis, the first step of the analysis was the familiarisation with the dataset, which included reading and re-reading the data and making brief notes. The next step in the analysis was the inductive coding of the data, which was done using MAXQDA⁶, a software for comprehensive qualitative data analysis. In total, 443 text passages were coded and 209 codes were established, which were cross-examined for overlaps and duplicates. After that, initial themes were generated, then developed and reviewed, and lastly refined and named in phases three to five of the analysis. The result of these steps are 10 main themes, 17 sub-themes, and two third-level themes. The initial coding was intentionally expansive and broad and included a range of contextual and peripheral codes. After reviewing and refining the analysis, these codes were not deemed to bear meaningful contributions for the research question at hand and were consequently clustered in a context category that was not used to construct the final themes. An overview of the developed themes can be found at the end of the analysis and an in-depth codebook is attached in the appendix.

6. Analysis

The results of the thematic analysis will be presented in this chapter. To do so, each theme and sub-theme will be presented and exemplified by extracts of the data.

6.1 Focus of the EU's approach: security and migration

This first theme captures the extent to which security and migration considerations dominate the primary focus of the EU's engagement in the Sahel, with climate concerns largely being described as not primarily relevant or being a secondary focus of the EU. To gain a better overview of this theme, these two strands were separated into two sub-themes called "security and migration focus" and "climate isn't a primary focus".

EU strategies and public statements consistently frame the region through references to terrorism, instability, irregular migration or resource competition and present the Sahel as a key frontline for European internal security and border control. Within this narrative, climate change appears mainly as a factor that aggravates these existing risks, rather than as a policy field driven by its own logics, instruments and priorities. An example of this can be found in the EU's 2021 Integrated Strategy for the Sahel:

"Long-term trends such as climate change, demographic pressure in a context of insufficient economic growth, the increasing scarcity of natural resources, epidemic risks – including the

⁶ Available under: <https://www.maxqda.com/products/maxqda>, last access 15.02.2026

COVID-19 health crisis and its effects – have exacerbated existing tensions and even raised new challenges, such as the issue of access to water and sanitation, and land, the issue of access to education, healthcare and employment, and the scale of migration flows.” (Council of the European Union 2021, 3)

When asked about the focus of the EU’s engagement in the Sahel, the interviewed experts largely echoed this hierarchy of concerns by describing that either climate change was not on the general agenda, they did not perceive it as important or that climate initiatives in the Sahel were often embedded in security and migration portfolios or added to already existing programmes. Although several interviewees described that they believed climate change had become more relevant in recent years, they also stated that the topic itself was usually a subordinate or secondary focus in those initiatives or programmes. For instance, the interviewed former European parliamentarian responded that migration and security were top priorities, when asked about the main motivations for the EU in the Sahel. Regarding the role of climate change, he responded:

“I would say security and migration are from a pragmatic point of view, from a realist point of view, are the main driver of the EU's climate action in the, in the Sahel region. Of course, there are probably secondary reasons that are more, much more genuinely linked to global commitments, to fight against climate change, to help less developed countries in their, in their strategies and their investments, to, to adapt or to mitigate climate change. Probably there's also something like this in the, in the, in the reasoning why or the reasons why the EU has some climate, let's say climate activity in the, in the Sahel. But I think it's only that only comes after the concerns on, on security violence in the region and migration.” (transcript of interview no. 2, para. 17)

6.2 Securitisation of climate change

Building on this dominating focus on security and migration within the EU’s approach to the Sahel, this second theme encapsulates how climate change is frequently securitised within the EU discourse on the Sahel. Rather than being treated primarily as an environmental or developmental challenge, climate impacts are framed as multipliers of existing security issues like instability, migration or terrorism (Council of the European Union 2021, 3; interview no. 4, para. 20). This securitised framing is also reflected in the analysed outlook of the EU Commission on the climate-security nexus, where the Sahel is repeatedly highlighted as a region of priority. In this document, the Sahel appears alongside only a small number of other regions such as the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) or the Horn of Africa and is

explicitly identified as a key area in which climate change amplifies conflict risks, displacement and instability (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2023). In the coding, these two directions of assumed threat multiplication – migration and security – were split up into their own sub-themes, namely ‘securitisation of climate change for migration’ and ‘link of climate change to security’. Within the first sub-theme, a recurrent pattern was the framing of climate impacts as drivers of migration to the EU. For instance, when asked if they think other concerns play into the climate change approach of the EU, the interviewed former European parliamentarian answered with:

“I mean, I mean, I mean, so we from the European Union, we, we get involved in helping those countries fighting against the climate change, because climate change is one of the reasons why people feel forced to move. And if they move, they will probably go up north to the Mediterranean and, and cross the Mediterranean to the European Union.” (transcript of interview no. 2, para. 11).

In the parallel sub-theme on the ‘link of climate change to security’, references to the threat of conflicts dominated the discourse. Experts and official texts frequently cited competition over water or agricultural land as sparking intercommunal violence and jihadist recruitments. For example, João Cravinho noted that one of the EU’s main motives to be active against climate change in the Sahel is:

“When you have changing farmlands, changing circumstances of on the land, you also have increased conflict between farmers and herders. Conflict that is then often translated into ethnic tensions.” (transcript of Nucifora 2025, para. 7)

This securitised framing of climate change was consistently articulated across the data sources with the exception of two experts, who criticised the framing (transcript of interview no. 1, para. 16; transcript of interview no 5., para. 4). One of these experts also expressed, that they particularly “noticed an effort to reframe these issues [fighting violent extremism and migration] as issues that were affected partly or considerably by climate change” (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 20) in roughly the last six years (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 4).

6.3 Trends drive policymaking

Building on these securitisation mechanisms, the third theme reveals how broader political trends and external attention cycles shape the discourse on and approaches to the Sahel. Within this theme, three recurring patterns emerged that show how the Sahel and climate change appear in EU-related discourse. Subsequently, these were divided into three sub-themes: first ‘overall

attention impacts discourse and approach to the Sahel’, second ‘instrumentalisation of climate change’, third ‘buzzwords are important for funding’.

First, several interviews indicate that attention to the Sahel and to the climate engagement in the region is closely tied to broader political and media trends. One interviewee stated that when the overall attention is higher on issues such as migration or terrorism or when countries have military deployments in the region, it receives more political and institutional attention (interview no. 3, paras. 38 & 42). In another interview, domestic extreme weather events such as floods in Spain or droughts in Germany were described as triggers for renewed emphasis on climate engagement – including for the Sahel (interview no. 6, para. 27).

Within this broader dynamic of attention, the second sub-theme ‘instrumentalisation of climate change’ captures how climate change has been used in the discourse and policymaking around the Sahel. The interviewed former member of the European parliament, for example, expressed that because nearly every political group acknowledged the impacts of climate change in the Sahel and how that could affect the EU, the issue was used to reinforce the securitised approach of the EU (interview no. 2, para. 4). In line with this, another expert answered the question of whether they think other interests play a role in the EU’s climate engagement, by saying:

“I think that there has been a significant rehashing of previously existing initiatives that, you know, all of a sudden needed to be framed by streamlining climate change. So, preventing violent extremism, which in itself was already a rehashing of early warning systems of conflict prevention, etc., became preventing violent extremism, which subsequently became tackling climate change in order to prevent violent extremism, for instance. But I have the impression that many actual actions haven't really changed that much in essence. It's only the framing that changed. And that entails many security related actions by the European Union.” (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 22)

And though the interviewee also underlined that this was not used to justify the missions in their origin, as they had already existed, it reveals how actions were re-framed to fit better with new priorities of the EU Commission and with the changing interests of voters (interview no. 5, para. 28). Additionally, the same expert questioned if the EU might be using climate change’s relatively soft image in comparison to hard security concerns as a diplomatic ‘street’ for engagement with the difficult political contexts in the Sahel. For instance, the interviewee referenced that they do know of multiple climate projects that are currently sponsored by the

EU in the Sahel, which would not be feasible, if they centred on hard security issues (interview no. 5, paras. 40, 45-46).

However, in contrast to this understanding of the political instrumentalization of climate change, throughout the interview one expert suggested that it is in reality mostly the actors who already specifically work on climate issues that often link climate to security or strongly promote the issue in the Sahel context in order to gain leverage for the topic in an already crowded policy field (interview no. 3, e.g., 10, 20, 24). But in their view, this is not purely done out of opportunism but also because climate change appears like a harder issue to translate into concrete policies than others, which might make this framing necessary (interview no. 3, para. 24). Additionally, the expert noted, that due to the generally securitised discourse and approach in the Sahel, it can be necessary to narrate issues such as climate change with their security implications in order to gain political attention and resources (interview no. 3, para. 20). Nonetheless, one kind of instrumentalization all the interviewees could agree on is how Sahelian governments use it to their advantage. For example, one interviewee illustrated how Sahelian governments “skilfully navigated the rising sensitivity to climate change” (transcript of interview 5, para. 30) to gain political leverage with the EU or the US under the Obama and Biden administration. However, they would also use it to reframe issues in the Sahel that should mainly be linked to governance shortcomings as climate-related challenges, thereby shifting the blame to the international community (interview no. 3, para. 18; interview no. 5, para. 30).

Lastly, the third sub-theme captures how certain labels and “buzzwords” (e.g., transcript of interview 6, para. 67; transcript of interview 3, para. 24) influence the access to funding and programme approval. Across the majority of interviews, the experts voiced that the way proposals are labelled and framed can significantly affect their chances of being financed. Thus, at a time, when climate change became more relevant in the discourse, the use of climate-related language resulted in the project having better chances of receiving funding and other resources, even if the underlying activities were similar to previous initiatives. For instance, one expert expressed:

“Well, from what I’ve noticed about climate change... I know that when I was in Niger between 2009 and 2012, I know that a scientist who was dealing with conflicts in the region said for a new project proposal: Okay, she’s interested in local conflicts, but now suddenly the topic of climate change has come up and she has to write about it in her project proposal because it’s

the new buzzword, so to speak, that gets you funding.”⁷ (translation of interview transcript no. 4, para. 12)

But in relation to this, the expert as well as other interviewees also added that in the world of project financing, the use of buzzwords is a common mechanism and that it does not necessarily mean, that the issue will not still be an actual consideration in the project (interview no. 3, paras. 26 & 38; interview no. 4, paras. 14 & 16). One of the experts also added that currently the trend is shifting towards hard economic issues such as jobs. Therefore, to continue to work on other topics they now have to embedded “a bit in this cloak of prosperity, economic resilience, blah, blah, blah”⁸ (translation of interview transcript no. 6, para. 67).

6.4 The EU is in it for the EU

The fourth theme connects multiple codes from interviews and EU documents, communications and public statements indicating that EU engagement in the Sahel often primarily serves European interests rather than being driven by the region’s independent needs or priorities. Across sources, the Sahel repeatedly emerged not as an end goal in itself, but as a strategic space where the EU pursues self-defined objectives related to its own security, geopolitical development and crises aversion. For example, João Cravinho justified the EU’s engagement in the Sahel for the foreseeable future by saying:

“I don't know what the situation will be in 10 years, but I can tell you that the European Union will be engaged because [sic!] we have to be engaged for our own interests.” (Du Plessis, 2025, 7)

Expert no. 3 considers these interests to have a self-interested rationale, which go beyond security and are connected to broader institutional and international dimension within them. Specifically, they explained the EU’s engagement with EU ambitions on the global stage, such as gaining support for a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Due to this, they consider the interests or goals of the EU to be removed from the crisis but implicitly justified through

⁷ Original German transcript of interview no. 4, para. 12: „Also was ich vom Thema Klimawandel mitbekommen habe... Ich weiß, dass als ich zwischen 2009 und 2012 in Niger war, weiß ich, dass eine Wissenschaftlerin zum Beispiel, die sich mit Konflikten befasst hat in der Region (..) für einen neuen Projektantrag gesagt hat: Okay, sie interessiert sich für lokale Konflikte, aber jetzt plötzlich kommt das Thema Klimawandel auf und sie muss das jetzt in ihren Projektantrag schreiben, weil das das neue Buzzword sozusagen ist, über das man Finanzierungen bekommt, und ja.“

⁸ Original German transcript of interview no. 6, para. 67: “Dass man das ein bisschen in diesen Deckmantel der Prosperity, Economic Resilience, blablabla einbettet.“

issues like terrorism or migration (interview no. 3, para. 6). For many of the interviewees, thus, the result of their analysis is that the main concern of the EU is the EU.

What came up prominently in this theme, was the repeated reference to the threats of spillover as a motivation for the EU's engagement, which is why it was sorted into a separate sub-theme: 'The EU acts because of spillover fears'. During the coding, particularly European documents, communications and public statements but also some of the interviewees regularly described the threat of migration flows, the expansion of terrorist networks, weapon trafficking and radicalisation as a core trigger for involvement. The prioritisation of this is, for instance, visible in João Cravinho's explanation of why the EU will now renew its approach for the Sahel:

"But the reality is that the dynamics of the Sahel are just too close to us for us to afford the possibility of disengagement, and that is now a consensus. The idea that we cannot afford — because we have certain interests of our own as EU, we cannot afford to turn our backs upon what is happening in that region. If we do so, then we will have no control over what comes to us from that region." (transcript of Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, 5)

One expert specified the intricacies of the spillover logic by stating:

*"If there is no stability, extremist groups can, of course, establish themselves, maintain their position, multiply and network with each other, which is also the case in the Sahel region. That means stability and this spillover effect, perhaps even to us. Whether that... It doesn't have to be... (..) be direct migrants, but it can also be people who have been living here for generations, but who are affected by racism, who have a lot of resentment, some of it quite justified, and who are then inspired. We have seen this in France, where there have been several cases, actually the second or third generation."*⁹ (translation of interview transcript no. 6, para. 21)

Contrastingly, expert no. 5 actually considers the main motivation of the EU to engage in the Sahel to be that they consider it as an "excellent laboratory to devise security tools for the European Union, and therefore to provide the European Union with a more proactive security orientation and physiognomy." (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 12). They explain this notion

⁹ Original German transcript of interview no. 4, para. 12: „Wenn, wenn Stabilität nicht gegeben ist, können natürlich extremistische Gruppen, da sich auch ja halten, erhalten und vervielfachen und sich auch untereinander vernetzen, was ja auch in der Sahelzone der Fall ist. Das heißt, die Stabilität und dieses Überschwappen dann vielleicht auch zu uns. Ob das... Es muss gar nicht über direkte Migrant:innen sein, sondern das kann ja auch über Leute, die schon seit Generationen bei uns leben, die aber von Rassismus betroffen sind, die ganz viele ganz viel Unmut auch haben, auch teilweise ja wirklich zurecht, die sich dann inspirieren lassen. Also das haben wir ja in Frankreich... gab es da ja auch einige Fälle, ne 2., 3. Generation eigentlich ist.“

by stating that neither the potential idea of an instability spill-over nor the containment of migration is productive in the region, which EU policymakers realise, so the unprecedented amount of money and resources does not measure up. Therefore, according to the expert, for them and also in the opinion of other scholars, the engagement in the Sahel builds the opportunity for EU member states to practice working together in the security domain (interview no. 5, para. 12).

6.5 The discourse and approach lack causal complexity

The fifth theme connects the multiple critiques from interviewees concerning the oversimplified causal narratives surrounding climate change discourses and policymaking in the Sahel. Here, interviewees repeatedly highlighted how both EU and Sahelian actors frame complex regional dynamics through climate-security linkages, often disregarding scientific nuance or alternative explanations.

The first sub-theme ‘over-simplification of climate change’ emerged from repeated criticism by interviewees of the tendency to position climate change as the primary driver of diverse issues despite contrasting evidence. An example of this lack of nuance that came up in multiple interviews is the discourse on conflicts around Lake Chad. In this context, the experts criticised that even though it has been refuted by scientists many times, the conflicts around Lake Chad were often framed as having resulted from climate change (interview no. 3, para. 10; interview no. 5, para. 30). According to these interviewees, this oversimplification has also affected the larger policy debate, to such an extent, that the simplified reasonings are now “stuck”¹⁰ (transcript of interview no. 3, para. 10) on the larger context of the Sahel and have “resulted in a confusing picture regarding the explanation of the drivers” (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 36). The reasoning for these simplifications was also explained in the interviews. The resulting codes were clustered together in the sub-theme ‘climate causalities serve political needs’. Multiple experts described how framing climate change as a primary concern for the region provided political utility for both EU and Sahelian actors. On the benefit for the EU, one interviewee explained:

“Well, I think it was a very convenient political process for European policymakers to kill two birds with one stone. Arguably the two main priorities of the international community blending together both the fight against terrorism or migration and the fight against climate change by saying that all of these are connected, was more of a political manoeuvring and political

¹⁰ Original German transcript of interview no. 3, para. 10: „draufgeklebt“

rhetoric. [...] It was a way to overcome political divides in Europe. Some European countries were less prone to endorse climate change as the main priority of the European Union. And so the Union tried to build an argument whereby if you want to fight irregular migration, then you need to fight climate change first.” (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 32)

Therefore, this dual appeal was seen as particularly effective because on the one hand, climate change carries moral narratives with domestic political discourses and on the other hand, it also activates more engagement on the Sahel as a whole. Simultaneously and partly already described in the explanation of the third theme, this instrumentalization of climate change also worked for the Sahelian governments. In this instance, one expert particularly referenced how the Sahelian governments but also the involved international actors – among them the EU – used narratives of land conflicts and resource competition as the reason for conflicts in central Mali to defer from the much more relevant cause: the expansion of industrial agriculture, which disrupts pastoralist mobility and leads to farmer-herder clashes (interview no. 3, para. 18).

The same expert also further highlighted the risks of this dynamic by recounting their experience of being mischaracterised as a climate denier simply for questioning these causal claims:

“And we had that once before, when I invited a colleague who then took a somewhat critical look at it [the idea that climate change causes Lake Chad to shrink], so to speak. And then a colleague from the BMZ¹¹ was very irritated because she immediately understood it as climate change denial, and that didn't fit in very well. But that wasn't it at all. It wasn't climate change, but rather a question, so to speak.”¹² (translation of interview transcript no. 3, para. 10)

During the interview, the impact of these mischaracterisations emerged in a rather obvious way, as the expert repeatedly felt the need to justify that climate change obviously exists and also has its impacts even though none of the interview questions or other responses by the interviewer scrutinised any of their remarks (e.g., interview no. 3, paras. 18 & 24).

¹¹ BMZ stands for ‘Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung’, which is the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

¹² Original German transcript of interview no. 3, para. 10: „Und da hatten wir auch schon eben mal, dann hatte ich mal einen Kollegen eingeladen, der dann auch mal sozusagen das ein bisschen kritisch beleuchtet hat. Und dann war dann auch eine Kollegin vom BMZ [see footnote no. 9] doch stark irritiert, weil die das gleich sozusagen als Klimawandel-Denial verstanden hat und das passte dann halt irgendwie nicht so gut. Aber das war es gar nicht.”

6.6 Fragmented actorness of the EU

The sixth theme synthesizes the interviewees' critiques regarding the EU's capacity to function as a coherent, effective actor in the Sahel. Two interconnected sub-themes reveal structural and identity-based limitations that undermine the EU's engagement. The first sub-theme 'structural incoherence of the EU's approach' captures the consistent responses of interviewees on the fragmentation among the EU's different institutions and programmes (interview no. 1, paras. 18 & 26; interview no. 3, para. 28). For example, one interviewee explained:

"It's true that when you speak to different, like agencies, within the European Commission, one of the things that you understand is that the European Union is not a monolithic body, so that there are like different approaches, different views, and even different priorities." (transcript of interview no. 1, para. 14)

This impression is also reflected in a statement of João Cravinho, who identified institutional and governmental alignment as a priority for future strategies:

"So, listening to the 27 [member states of the EU], secondly, listening also to the institutions of the European Union working out how we can get these institutions that have their own dynamics, their own energy, their own ideas, how we can get them to operate according to common political logic, big institutions, if they do not have a clear political guidance, they keep on moving. They do their own things; they operate according to internal dynamics and logics. And this was, I think, to an important degree, what was happening. And the result, of course, is that our European instruments were operating in very divergent manners, in manners that did not produce any meaningful impact and did not obey any political logic." (transcript of Bruno Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog 2025, para. 5)

To add to this critique, another interviewee noted how these many different approaches – including those by other non-European actors – often lead to a top-down implementation style by external actors, as uncoordinated actors fail to map the local contexts and initiatives accordingly, have a narrow view on their surroundings and thus construct duplicate structures. In their experience, this lack of consideration for the local population's wishes always leads to the rise of new conflicts and a competition for legitimacy (interview no. 4, para. 36). Besides this, one interviewee also linked these structural issues to how projects are funded, implemented and evaluated. They stressed that many initiatives are only funded for two to four years, which leaves little room for long-term learning or sustained engagement. Meaningful reviews of these projects would be necessary but are often difficult to implement, as assessments, if they are

even done, are carried out by the same individuals who managed the projects. Moreover, fixed-term contracts further reinforce this dynamic as the staff relies on presenting successes and positive references to secure subsequent positions or funding. Instead, these obstacles as well as the limited error tolerance give little incentive to speak openly about shortcomings or structural limitations of their projects (interview no. 6, paras. 57-59). Additionally, the same interviewee also noted that the implementation and direction of engagement on the ground is dependent on the individuals in those initiatives, so the intention and impact is sometimes hard to predict (interview no. 6, paras. 21 & 25). In addition, for expert no. 3, a result of these structural flaws is that key principles such as local ownership, which are publicly claimed as leading priorities, are rendered irrelevant and that organisational interests or exposure goals overtake them (interview no. 3, para. 38). Furthermore, the abundance of initiatives also results in a perceptual confusion of experts and locals alike between the many overlapping projects and missions that is exacerbated by a lack of transparency (interview no. 3, paras. 34). For instance, regarding the EU's presence in Mali, the expert said:

“No one in Mali or anywhere else can understand (...) that this EU delegation has nothing to do with the EU training mission or anything like that, right?”¹³ (translation of interview transcript no. 3, para. 34)

The second sub-theme ‘Who is acting?’ shows the scepticism among multiple interviewees about whether the EU functions as a unified actor in the Sahel or if the overall approach effectively is the product of some member states’ particular policy interests. To begin on the larger scale, multiple interviewees struggled to conceptualise the EU as a singular entity in the Sahel, arguing that regional approaches predominantly reflect the divergent EU member states’ priorities rather than a collective European strategy (interview no. 3, paras. 8 & 36; interview no. 4, paras. 28-30; interview no. 5, para. 12). For example, Mediterranean EU countries were frequently cited as prioritising migration management and advocating for this policy issue on the European level (interview no. 3, para. 8; interview no. 4, para. 30; interview no. 5, para. 12). According to one interviewee, this divergence became even more obvious after the coups in the Sahel when the EU did not have a joined approach. Multiple European countries suspended their missions but countries like Italy were quick to re-engage (interview no. 4, para. 30). However, expert no. 3 referenced the larger context of an intergovernmental organisation

¹³ Original German transcript of interview no. 3, para. 34: “. Es lässt sich ja niemandem vermitteln in Mali oder sonst wo, (...) dass diese, das jetzt diese EU-Delegation nichts zu tun hat mit der mit der EU-Trainingsmission oder, oder so was, ja?”

such as the EU by noting that there will always be a few countries who have a particular interest in an issue and the rest often just goes along with it (para. 34). Besides this, two of the interviewees also established a parallel line of critique by questioning, if actually France is dominating the European approach and is leveraging it to pursue its own objectives. They underlined this perspective by noting:

“[...] The French have of course also tried to sit in important and also important positions within the EU in order to push everything in this direction, as we saw in Paris. Yes, if you look at, I don't know, which people are sitting where in the EU delegation in Bamako or in the missions, you will find that, surprisingly often you will always meet some French people who are placed there. [...] Or that there may be people from other countries who perhaps share the French view very strongly, to the extent that some member states or their diplomats say that the EU delegation is an appendage of France and complain bitterly about it.”¹⁴ (translation of interview transcript no. 3, para. 8)

This dominance has also not only led to complaints by other Member States but also weakened the trust and credibility of the EU for locals (interview no. 4, paras. 28). The perception of the EU acting, effectively, as a French proxy in this regard reached its starkest expression in one interview, in which the expert completely dismissed the EU strategies themselves and admitted that they have “never seen these EU papers and strategies and so on” as “it’s just a lot of paper¹⁵” (interview no. 3, para. 36).

6.7 Vagueness around concrete work

The seventh theme highlights a pattern of uncertainty and limited specificity about tangible climate projects or measures implemented by the EU in the Sahel that was identified in the interviews. Despite frequent references to the increase of the relevance of climate change in discourses, concrete examples proved to be elusive for most respondents when directly prompted. Detailed examples of EU-funded climate adaptation, mitigation or resilience projects

¹⁴ Original German transcript of interview no. 3, para. 8: „[...] und die Franzosen haben natürlich auch versucht, innerhalb der EU an wichtigen und auch an wichtigen Schaltstellen zu sitzen, um eben auch alles in diese Richtung, wie man das in Paris gesehen hat, zu zu schieben. Ja, wenn sie sich angucken, was weiß ich, welche Leute wo sitzen bei der EU-Delegation in Bamako oder bei den Missionen, dann werden Sie feststellen, dass ganz überraschend oft sie dann immer auf irgendwelche Franzosen treffen, die dort platziert sind. Ja, das brachte mal einen. Oder dass da vielleicht Leute anderer Leute sitzen, die halt vielleicht die französische Auffassung sehr stark teilen, bis hin dazu, dass dann vielleicht manche Mitgliedstaaten oder deren Diplomaten sagen, die EU-Delegation ist ein Wurmfortsatz Frankreichs und sich darüber bitterlich beschweren.“

¹⁵ Original German transcript of interview no. 3, para. 8: „[...] ich habe nie diese, wenn sie sich diese EU Papiere Strategien da angucken und so weiter, ja das ist halt auch viel Papier“

were notably scarce, with most responses remaining at a general awareness level rather than operational knowledge (e.g., interview no. 3, para. 18; interview no. 4, para. 24.; interview no. 5, para. 20; interview no. 6, para. 37). But this vagueness could potentially just be a coincidence, lack of knowledge or the thematic work focus of interviews rather than a deeper meaning.

Only two exceptions emerged through mentions of the Great Green Wall, which is a revegetation project in Africa. One of the experts only vaguely referenced the project and was not sure about the name, while the other interviewee mentioned it to exemplify how some EU-sponsored climate projects lack a conflict sensitive approach (interview no. 3, paras. 16-18; interview no. 5, para. 22). In connection to this, another expert expressed an assumption regarding the potential efforts of the military to include climate change in their missions by arguing that because national-level priorities include climate change, this is translated to EU missions and activities. But again, this remained vague as they could not finally confirm these assumptions:

*“But the German military in particular is very open to the background, how climate change can fuel existing conflicts. So, there is definitely training, and I assume that when our specialists go on training missions to the Sahel region, they pass this on, because otherwise there would be no reason for it. But as I said, I'm not there with them to see what they're actually training. But I would assume so, because otherwise it wouldn't make sense for them to place so much emphasis on it here in Germany. If they didn't pass this on, especially in the regions where it's really noticeable on the ground.”*¹⁶ (translation of interview transcript no. 6, para. 37)

Besides this, expert no. 5 noted some EU climate projects that are still on-going, but again could not elaborate on specificities (interview no. 5, para. 43). Furthermore, they had emphasised previously in the interview that the EU is making significant climate efforts in the region by facilitating data collection, raising awareness on the impacts of climate change in West Africa and supporting international programmes on climate change. However, they questioned what

¹⁶ Original German transcript of interview no. 6, para. 37: „Aber gerade auch das deutsche Militär ist sehr offen für die, ja, für den Hintergrund wie Klimawandel Konflikte bestehende anheizen kann. Also da gibt es auf jeden Fall Schulungen und ich gehe davon aus, dass wenn unsere Fachkräfte dann ähm, in die Sahelzone in Ertüchtigungsmission gehen, dass sie das auch weitergeben, weil sonst wäre ja der Grund nicht da. Aber wie gesagt, ich bin nicht vor Ort mit und, und schaue, was die da wirklich trainieren. Aber ich würde davon ausgehen, weil sonst würde es ja keinen Sinn machen, dass sie hier in Deutschland so viel, ähm, doch finde ich einen großen Fokus auch mit drauf legen. Ähm, wenn sie das nicht weitergeben würden in gerade in den Regionen, wo es wo es wirklich, ähm, ja on the ground, wo man es wirklich merkt. Ja, deshalb gehe ich davon aus, dass das auch weitergegeben wird.“

type of impact it has, as raising awareness and providing data does not equal climate mitigation (interview no. 5, para. 24).

6.8 Visions for a new approach

The eighth theme groups the diverse recommendations, expectations and hopes for the future of EU-Sahel relations that were articulated across three perspectives, which also make up the sub-themes: locals, interviewees and EU policymakers. These reveal both convergence around partnership principles and persistent tensions over roles, priorities and power dynamics.

Firstly, due to the lack of interviews with individuals from the Sahel, the direct perspectives that will be considered in the sub-theme ‘local views on the EU-Sahel relationship’ remain limited. However, in the analysed podcast interview by Newuf and Okachi (2025) with João Cravinho insights emerged through featured street interviews with residents from Mali and comments from the interviewers, who have deep regional knowledge. These accounts conveyed the local scepticism about European engagement in the Sahel, with journalist Mimi Newuh saying that there is a shared feeling among people living in Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger that the engagement brings few tangible benefits to their lives (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 4). But she later also conveyed how there is a notable shift in Sahel countries like Mali, where the people who they previously saw protesting against further EU engagement now do not rule it out anymore but want the EU to genuinely listen to their perspectives and lived realities (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 41). The conducted street interviews underline this perception, for example with one woman saying:

“You can help us, but if only it can try to involve local communities. If those countries try to, to be together, it's something really good. It's something to be helped. Okay. Because you cannot talk about development without peace.” (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 38)

Furthermore, another man expressed:

“If you want to help somebody, you need to know first the problem the person is living, and then you need to discover the realities of those ideals, what they're suffering from, and then you can't just come and impose things on them and they will accept, you know, you.” (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 39)

Interviewer George Okachi further summarised this sentiment by stating how moving forward, the relationship should be considered as the ‘Sahel-EU relation’ instead of ‘EU-Sahel relations’ (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 13).

The second sub-theme “visions by EU policymakers” captures the statements made in EU documents, communications and public appearances on the future of the EU’s approach to the Sahel. Overall, the statements made by João Cravinho convey that the EU will approach the Sahel with the “availability to listen” (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 51) and hear what the needs and wants of the population are without compromising European morals and interests (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, 6). Additionally, the new strategy of the EU is supposed to have a different approach altogether: one that is focussed on human security (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 29). He describes human security as entailing health, education, socioeconomic resilience but also working on migration and with civilian security forces. This focus is also represented in the official press release of the Meeting of the European Council’s Foreign Affairs Council in November 2025, where the EU member states foreign ministers agreed on a new approach to the Sahel:

“The focus of the approach on political and diplomatic engagement, human security and economic opportunities, and its aim is to prevent further conflict, tackle root causes of migration and counter-organised crime” (Foreign Affairs Council 2025, 6)

João Cravinho, furthermore, underscored that the new approach of the EU needs to be translated and also translatable into concrete, on-the-ground realities of individuals (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 62). With this understanding, he also emphasized the need to approach the Sahel pragmatically by aiming for collaboration but also having the ability to “agree to disagree” (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 8). For him, a focus on development aid is the way to achieve this (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, para 9; transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 47 & 49).

The third sub-theme synthesises recommendations from the interviewed experts. These visions were further clustered into a ‘general strategic reorientations’-theme and ‘climate-specific proposals’-theme. In reference to the first sub-theme, the experts advocated for a broader, multifaceted and more problem-oriented approach. In particular, the experts expressed that issues like development needs and human rights should not be linked as much to security and that human needs should be the focus the EU (e.g., interview no. 1, para. 52; interview no. 4, para 34). Furthermore, the interviewees emphasized that the EU needs to improve its credibility and legitimacy as an actor in the Sahel. To achieve this, the interviewees remarked that the EU probably needs to be more pragmatic and needs to work with local partners and maybe even with the military juntas. But, according to the experts, the EU also needs to be upfront with its

interests and refrain from hiding underlying personal or domestic agendas (e.g., interview no. 1, para. 38, interview 6, para. 63). In fact, one expert remarked:

“Maybe it's a little bit naive to think about this. Maybe. But what it's quite clear if we assess the last 15 years of this interaction is that, the main problem of the European Union has been the erosion of credibility and the fact that the European Union has not had the capacity to be a reliable partner for the local partners, and has not been a trustable partner in terms of achieving their goals; even security stability, in which it invested a lot of resources has been it has been quite clear that it has not been, capable of achieving this. So, at the very end, what we see is that any type of strategy should revolve around this idea of ‘How do you want to be credible, how do you want to be trustable in the region? Doing what?’” (transcript of interview no. 1, para. 38)

Simultaneously though, another expert highlighted the limitations of the EU as a solitary agent in the region. Instead, the interviewee stated that the EU needs to advocate for increased international attention and engagement on the region (interview no. 2, para. 49).

Regarding the ‘climate-specific visions’, the interviewees repeatedly expressed that climate change should be more relevant but the approach on the issue should also be more centred on social issues (e.g., interview no. 1, paras. 42 & 50; interview no. 2, paras. 35, 43, 49). Specifically, climate change should be less tied to security, though also not fully exclude it and have a more developmental core that focuses on resilience and the livelihoods of the population (interview no. 1, para. 42; interview no. 2, para. 44). To do so, climate change should be mainstreamed across all policy areas while maintaining dedicated environmental programming to ensure climate considerations permeate the complete approach (interview no. 6, para. 64). Simultaneously, one interviewee also pointed out that climate change is a global governance problem. Because of this, the reaction to it should be addressed internationally and the EU should engage itself in this endeavour. Nevertheless, it should also lead to the development of joint and negotiated strategies in participation with diverse local actors in the Sahel region to improve their participation (interview no. 1, paras. 42 & 50). Finally, one specific priority that emerged in an interview is the need to focus more on land management and pastoralists, as this group is often neglected because of the difficulty to address them due to their movement. Furthermore, they are also generally marginalised by their governments and often exist on the fringe of society. Given the additional pressures of climate change, the expert emphasized that more attention should be paid to the link between these issues (interview no. 6, para. 63).

6.9. Moral superiority vs. local pragmatism

The ninth overall theme captures the contrast between a European self-perception as a normatively superior actor – especially in comparison to other international actors – and the pragmatic realities of Sahelian agents. Within the first sub-theme ‘The EU’s approach is better (intended) than others’ the codes show, how EU officials but also some of the interviewed experts positioned the EU as morally distinct from other international actors such as Russia or China citing the EU’s emphasis on values-based approaches, human rights, climate change and long-term sustainability that benefit the local population over transactional deals or pure military involvement. Despite remarking that it might be a very Western-centric idea, one expert for instance voiced:

“But perhaps, if we give money, um, (...) my hope would be... So I'll put it very, (...) very optimistically. (...) That there is also a certain idea of 'Okay, the funds should help the local people and we're not sending our own workers there to secure the job', but in the hope that we might create jobs locally or also provide training for people in new technologies such as solar power, for example, so that it can be maintained. That would be my hope. And as I said, of course, examples such as the workers who are involved in Chinese projects, which are implemented largely by Chinese forces. And then the question is: Okay, you build your infrastructure. You then also benefit from this infrastructure through contracts and you build it with your own workers and get paid for it. Accordingly, my hope would be that there is a bit more thought behind: 'Okay, we are also working on our soft power with these projects'. Which, of course, is also um, um, yes, a self-interest. So, working on soft power is not necessarily philanthropic. But for me, it's still a better motivation.”¹⁷ (English translation of the transcript of interview no. 6, para. 61)

¹⁷ Original German interview transcript of interview no. 6, para. 61: „Aber es ist vielleicht, wenn wir Gelder geben, ähm, (...) wäre meine Hoffnung... Also formuliere ich jetzt mal ganz, (...) ganz optimistisch. (...) Dass das schon ein gewisser Gedanke auch der ‚Okay, die Gelder sollen den Leuten vor Ort helfen und wir schicken da nicht unsere eigenen Arbeitskräfte hin, um den Job zu sichern‘, sondern in der Hoffnung, dass wir Arbeitsjobs vor Ort vielleicht kreieren oder auch Leuten Trainings geben für zum Beispiel neue Technologien wie Solarpower, dass das Instand gehalten werden kann. Das wäre meine Hoffnung. Und wie gesagt, natürlich Beispiele wie die Arbeitskräfte, die wo halt chinesische Projekte, die werden umgesetzt halt viel von chinesischen Kräften. Und dann ist halt die Frage: ‚Okay, du baust deine Infrastruktur. Du hast dann da auch mit Verträgen Nutzen von dieser Infrastruktur und du baust es mit deinen eigenen Kräften, lässt es bezahlen.‘ Dementsprechend wäre meine Hoffnung, dass da auch ein bisschen mehr Gedanke ist: ‚Okay, wir arbeiten mit diesen Projekten auch an unserer Soft Power‘. Was natürlich auch wieder ein, ähm, ähm, ja ein Eigennutzen ist. Also auch, an Softpower zu arbeiten, ist ja nicht, ähm, philanthropisch, unbedingt. Ähm, aber für mich trotzdem noch eine bessere Motivation.”

João Cravinho reinforced this distinction and the focus on the diversity of the EU's approach by saying:

“Well, I certainly hope it is very different from the offer of Russia. [...] We believe that the range of instruments that we have at our disposal is incomparable to that of any other country or group of countries.” (transcript of Newuf and Okachi 2025)

However, as captured in the second sub-theme ‘local governments compare offers and should do so’ this normative understanding is often not translated into local realities. As described by multiple interviewees and also underlined by João Cravinho, Sahelian governments and peoples have evaluated international offers through a more pragmatic lens. Importantly though, according to João Cravinho, the EU does not have an expectation of exclusivity for their partnerships:

“What I would say is that they [the Sahelian governments] have their approach and we respect sovereign choices of, of countries, of the region. However, I think that what we have to offer is much, much wider, much more interesting for the populations in the longer term. But this is not necessarily a question of either or. There is nothing impeding countries of the region working with China and working with us as well.” (transcript of Nucifora 2025, para. 10)

6.10. Expert positioning and reflexivity

Building directly on this EU-local discrepancy and potentially Western-centric viewpoints, the final theme of the coding process shows how the interviewees themselves reflected on their own positionalities, biases and deeper assumptions structuring analysis of EU-Sahel relations. Many of the experts – and particularly the interviewed women – frequently qualified their perspectives by acknowledging how institutional roles, disciplinary lenses or unexamined premises might distort their understanding of EU approaches. In their interview, expert no. 5 additionally expressed how their personal connection to the Sahel influenced their view on how the EU should move forward regarding the Sahel:

“I also wanted to stress that, you know, it's hard for me to say that the Sahel might be becoming less of a priority for the European Union. Not only because I built my own career out of the EU's interests for the Sahel, but also because I've got many friends in the Sahel who are suffering also due to the disengagement of foreign partners, including the European Union. Not that they can do much or we can do much, or even the European Union can do much as long as local governments reject proposals by the European Union to, to intervene more proactively. But, you know, accepting the idea that the European Union that we should simply abandon

them... it's hard for me because I got personal feelings linked to linking me to the Sahel.”
(transcript of interview no. 5, para. 48)

In the interview, this was especially poignant as the same expert had earlier raised the counterquestion “To do what?” (transcript of interview no. 5, para. 38) when asked what they think would be a more coherent or effective approach for the EU. These layered reflections also exposed a potential bias in the construction of the interview guide as I had not anticipated that experts might reject the premise of a continued EU involvement altogether. Concurrently, there are no comparable reflections in the second type of analysed data, the European documents, communications and particularly public appearances. This absence of self-criticism, however, may also reflect the difference between anonymous interviews in comparison to the public nature of these sources, where the overall discursive culture does not empower such reflections.

After having traced the expert positionings and reflexivity in the data and to synthesise the thematic structure revealed across the analysis, Table 1 will now provide an overview of the ten main themes and sub-themes as a visual anchor before the discussion:

Table 1: Overview of themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Third-level theme
1. Focus of the EU's approach: security and climate	Security and migration focus	
	Climate isn't a primary focus	
2. Securitisation of climate change	<i>Additional codes: climate change as a 'threat multiplier'; trend of climate securitisation; efforts to reframe security/migration issues with climate change; nexus-logic: climate-security</i>	
	Link of climate change to security	
	Securitisation of climate for migration	
3. Trends drive policymaking	Overall attention on climate impacts the discourse and approach	
	Instrumentalisation of climate change	
	Buzzwords are important for funding	

4. The EU is in it for the EU	<i>Additional codes: main concern of the EU is the EU; EU used the Sahel as a laboratory to develop security tools; EU engaging in the Sahel for own interests; EU involvement actually because of other international motivations</i>	
	The EU acts because of spillover fears	
5. The discourse and approach lack causal complexity	Oversimplification of climate change	
	Climate causalities serve political needs	
	<i>Additional codes: critiques of climate reasonings are not well received</i>	
6. Fragmented actorness of the EU	Structural incoherence of the EU's approach	
	Who is acting?	
7. Vagueness around concrete work	<i>No sub-themes; includes codes on: doesn't know about actual climate action in the Sahel; can't think of an example; German military is making climate efforts; doesn't know, how it's handled in action; references to Great Green Wall; example of a still active climate project; significant overall efforts of EU for climate protection; impacts of climate efforts not per se mitigation or adaptation but still</i>	
8. Visions for a new approach	Local views on EU-Sahel relationship	
	Visions by EU-policymakers	
	Visions by interviewees	General strategic reorientations
		Climate-specific proposals
9. Moral superiority vs. Local pragmatism	The EU's approach is better (intended) than others'	
	Local governments compare offers and should do so	

10. Expert positioning and reflexivity	<i>No sub-themes; includes codes on: researcher reflexivity; self-reflection: should the EU be active in the Sahel?</i>	
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7. Discussion

The goal of this thesis is to explore the main drivers behind the EU's climate action in the Sahel and how climate, developmental, migration and security concerns are balanced in it. To do so, interviews with experts on the topic were conducted. Together with selected EU documents, communications and public appearances, the selected data was analysed by conducting a thematic analysis according to the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006). The following discussion will interpret those findings against the research question and its four sub-questions, while also evaluating the four interim assumptions that were developed in chapter four. To recall these questions and assumptions before the discussion, in the following they will shortly be stated again. First, the sub-questions are:

- SQ1. How does the EU frame its climate action in the Sahel in official documents and statements?
- SQ2. How are climate, developmental, migration and security concerns discussed in the EU's official documents and statements and which appear to dominate the debate?
- SQ3. What kind of projects and funding mechanisms are prioritized in EU climate action in the Sahel?
- SQ4. How do local stakeholders perceive the EU's climate action in the Sahel?

Second, the assumptions developed in chapter four:

- A1. The EU's climate action in the Sahel is not driven by climate protection alone, but by an interplay of mainly security concerns and migration management, with security interests often taking precedence.
- A2. The EU's climate narrative in the Sahel is likely to centre on issues that have already been securitised like conflicts, instability, irregular migration, rather than on structural adaptation efforts or livelihood support.
- A3. Climate change in the Sahel is used discursively to legitimise an expansion of EU security and migration-related interventions.
- A4. EU priorities in the Sahel are shaped and sometimes overrun by prevailing policy agendas and 'trends' in Brussels and European capitals, which influences how problems are defined and which instruments are mobilised.

After having outlined the analysis' findings, the data portrays the EU's climate engagement as a broader security strategy, where climate is subordinate to pre-existing priorities on instability and migration, instead of as genuine climate leadership. These results directly address the four guiding sub-questions while largely upholding the interim assumptions. For instance, phrasings within the context of the climate-security nexus or references to climate change as a "threat multiplier" (e.g., Borell 2023b; Goodman and Baudu 2023; Rothe et al. 2025) appeared repeatedly, subordinating environmental goals to stabilisation or anti-migration objectives, which partially aligns with assumption three and also adds to the answer of sub-questions one and two (see themes 1, 2 & 5). References to concrete projects and funding also appeared rather vague and trend-driven rather than rooted in long-term plans for climate protection, which relates to sub-question three (see themes 3 & 7). Simultaneously and thereby partially answering sub-question four, experts and locals alike perceive the European approach through a lens of pragmatic critique and call for more dialogue with the Sahelian population and less focus on domestic interests from the EU (see themes 8-10). The following text will connect these insights back to the theoretical framework and the literature, before discussing the limitations, and possible future research endeavours.

By connecting the empirical findings back to the theoretical framework, namely the securitisation theory and the climate-security nexus, that was established in chapter two, this section will illustrate how the EU's climate approach in the Sahel aligns or diverges from these frameworks. Firstly, what the data at its core has affirmed is how in the context of the Sahel, a non-traditionally security-related issue like climate change has been elevated by elites into being an existential security threat that requires measures outside of its normal policy realm. Thus, considering the suppositions articulated in the securitisation theory of how an issue becomes securitised, these framing directions can directly be related back to the theory and the considerations of Wæver (1995). For instance, the recurrent framing and emphasis on climate change being the multiplier of risks and threats like instability, terrorism or migration pressures was found in both EU documents, statements and public appearances, but also in the interviews. This framing exemplifies the performative logic described by the securitisation theory. It also shows the interplay of security concern and migration management, with security interests often taking precedence, thereby confirming assumption one. However, this also partially provides evidence for assumption two by showing that the EU's climate narrative in the Sahel is centred on issues that have already been securitised, such as migration, rather than on adaptation efforts or livelihood support. Furthermore, the framing also strongly resonates with sub-questions one and two as the distinct themes about the focus on security and migration (theme 1), the

securitisation of climate change (theme 2) and the lack of causal complexity in the discourse (theme 5) all demonstrate how climate narratives are selectively highlighted to reinforce the region's securitised discourse. Specifically, the notion of securitisation not needing to be scientifically sound as described by Buzan et al. (1998) is demonstrated as interviewees repeatedly noted how, for example, the conflicts around Lake Chad are falsely connected to climate change to cover up governance shortcomings.

These findings, however, also need to be nuanced in light of the second generation's development of securitisation theory, which has stressed the contextuality and intersubjectivity of securitisation. In practice this means that a discourse already must be receptive to securitised framings to accept and adopt them. In the context of the European discourse on the Sahel, the data has shown how primary securitising actors like EU policymakers and officials alongside policy experts and think tanks deploy securitised framings of climate change and successfully layer these onto receptive audiences, many of whom overlap as both actors and audience, creating a self-reinforcing discursive circle. This succeeds, because the audience is already primed by the Sahel's longstanding securitised discourse around security and migration. Here, especially the remark of one expert comes to mind, who noted that when an entire regional discourse and approach is already generally securitised, it can be necessary to frame issues accordingly to gain political attention and resources. Furthermore, while political elites might have the power to push certain political issues, this does not occur in a vacuum. As shown in theme five, these issues also have to fit into a wider socio-economic context that already exists, so the relevant public accepts it. Thus, EU officials could not just push a securitised framing of climate change, if it would not fit with already ongoing political trends and discourses in the EU. This also adds to the confirmation of assumption four on how 'trends' and prevailing policy agendas shape the EU's priorities as well as to the answer of sub-question two, as topics can become more relevant during 'trendy' phases (see theme 3).

Turning to the climate-security nexus, the findings actually reveal a more complex discursive language than a simple alignment with one theoretical research strand. In fact, both the neo-Malthusian first research strand and the second research strand, that largely draws on the concept of securitisation, can be found in the data. On the one hand, in line with the neo-Malthusian model, the analysed EU documents, communications and public appearances but also some of the interviewees regularly frame climate change within the notion of 'environmental scarcity' or resource conflicts. However, on the other hand, this very adoption is criticised by other interviewees, who voice their disapproval in line with the second research

strand's criticism regarding the oversimplification and misuse of climate narratives to justify security or migration management measures. In addition to the general tensions in the discourse on the climate-security nexus, it also shows how some experts, who accept the causal pathways of the neo-Malthusian model, reinforce the 'threat multiplier'-framings without questioning their scientific soundness. Simultaneously though, the scientists who do challenge the securitised framing of climate change, frequently suffer repercussions by being considered a climate change denier (see themes 2 & 5). This displayed dichotomy helps answer the first sub-question of this thesis, as it illustrates how European climate action in the Sahel is being framed in official EU documents. Additionally, it also connects to sub-question two by illustrating how the EU's climate rhetoric utilises the link between climate, development, migration and security built by resource scarcity arguments to justify conflict explanation. However, beyond the questions of this thesis, it also points to how rigid and defensive the EU's discourse on climate and security has become, as the space for nuanced critique is narrowed to a binary of securitised threat narratives on the one hand and alleged denial on the other. A consequence of this is that there seems to be little room left to question oversimplified claims of climate-security causality without being pushed to the margins of the debate.

However, while one of the central ideas of the second research strand is that the securitisation of climate change is done to justify disproportionate political and military measures, which heavily influenced the conceptualisation of assumption three, this can only partially be confirmed here. Although the data has shown how climate references are used to reframe and legitimise broader Sahel engagements by the EU that are not primarily oriented toward climate protection, including military missions, the interviewees consistently emphasised that such securitisation at best played a secondary role in the actual interventions. Most commonly, the interviewees responded that climate change might have played a role in the broader justification of a mission's ongoing activity but it did not really influence the missions themselves. In this context, one expert also explicitly noted that no missions were initiated in consideration of climate change impacts, since they were already launched before climate change became a more significant topic in the political discourse (see theme 1). Subsequently, these observations limit assumption three's expectation of climate change being used as a tool to legitimise an expansion of EU security and migration-related interventions. Instead, the assumption must be considered with more nuance and by taking into account that while climate change does play a role in post-hoc legitimisations of security and migration measures is not their primary driver.

Having situated the empirical findings against the securitisation theory and the climate-security nexus, next, these findings will be positioned within the existing literary background established in chapter three. Overall, it is worth noting that the analysis resonates with many of the broader issues and consideration raised in the criticisms on the EU's approach to the Sahel in chapter 3.4. In particular, considering the discussions of development, governance and local ownership in chapter 3.4.1 as well as the securitisation and militarisation critique in chapter 3.4.2, the discussed patterns of the top-down implementation, the lack of local involvement – not to mention ownership – and the externalisation of European priorities can all be found within the analysed data. The frequent references of interviewees to these issues while contextualising the EU's climate engagement show how deeply engrained the topic of climate change is in the EU's broader Sahel discourse and approach. Thus, the following paragraphs will focus on the analysis's relevance to the expanding body of literature criticizing the EU's climate approach in the Sahel.

Generally, the analysis strongly relates to the existing body of literature and particular to the criticism of oversimplified climate narratives, which is a key area of critique for many scientists. In particular, the observed themes on the securitisation of climate change (theme 2) and the lack of causal complexity (theme 5) affirm this scholarly perspective on how the EU and the larger discourse routinely invoke narratives of climate change being a threat multiplier or relating to conflicts over resources. This noticeably also relates back to the earlier discussed relationship of the data to the theoretical background. Furthermore, the analysis validates the finding of the literature that foreign actors utilise the oversimplification of climate change to conceal the consequences of flaws in their governance approaches. Here, especially the focus on pastoralists by European policymakers like João Cravinho but also some of the interviewees are particularly notable. The analysis showed how this framing was used to call for more action on climate change, despite the literature and one interviewee noting that this connection is more closely related to the expansion of industrial agriculture and its effect on pastoralist mobility, which can cause farmer-herder conflicts. Additionally, the analysis has also shown that this misuse of simplified climate narratives is not only done by foreign actors but also by Sahelian governments, who similarly used climate change to divert attention from their responsibility for the issues in their countries (see themes 3 & 5). Thereby, this thesis further confirms the critique ushered by Mateos et al. (2024) and Raineri (2022) in the literature in chapter 3.3.4 and provides the answer to sub-question one by showing how the EU frames its climate action in the Sahel.

Moving on, a particularly illuminating comparison emerges between the securitisation of climate change (theme 2) revealed in the analysis and the well-established precedent of the securitisation of migration discussed in chapter 3.4.3, which suggests a similarity between the discursive structures in both topics. Because much like Fakhry (2023) and Lebovich (2018) as well as other scholars in the literature have suggested about the misuse of migration to further European interests, the data shows a similar path regarding climate narratives. Concretely, the data has shown how within the region, climate change is securitised and embedded within pre-existing security and migration frameworks rather than in standalone climate protection or development initiatives (see themes 1 & 3). Because of these structural directions, this observation confirms assumption two. Adding to this, the data also echoes the claim of Ribot et al. (2020) who suggest that because the climate migration narrative has become so popular in media and research, it has led to the oversimplification of the causes for migration, especially in light of the themes found in the interviews on how trends drive policymaking (theme 3) and the lack of causal complexity in the discourse on the links between climate change and migration (theme 5). Here, the analysis shows how socio-economic and political factors that motivate migration are labelled as climate-induced even without the scientific evidence to back them up. Furthermore, the analysis has shown how this was done to support border control and anti-migration efforts, which adds weight to the claims of Puig Cepero et al. (2021), Detges and Foong (2022) and Ribot et al. (2020). Subsequently, these overarching observations affirm assumption three and also provide an answer to sub-question three on the prioritisations of projects in EU climate action. As those climate narratives were used because of their current popularity, assumption four can also be confirmed.

Expanding on this link between climate and migration securitisation, the analysis further illuminates a recurring gap between the climate-security rhetoric and its practical application to military and security missions by the EU. This resonates with the critique articulated by Mateos et al. (2024), who pointed out the disconnect between the increasingly popular use of climate narratives for security concerns and its translation into the actual governance strategies and especially into military missions. The analysis has shown how interviewees have repeatedly echoed this assessment by describing climate change as being a topic in the discourse on the Sahel and having some impact but only in an, at most, secondary way (see theme 1). Moreover, the interviewees struggled to identify specific examples of projects implementing measures related to climate change or climate change impacts (see theme 7). Simultaneously though, this could also just reflect a limit in the interviewees' knowledge, which constrains the analysis' ability to affirm or deny the literature's claim. This dilemma also again shows the limitations in

answering sub-question three and validating assumption three as the concrete impact on any expansion of concrete EU security and migration-related interventions cannot be proven. However, the data has shown that it is used to frame other more dominating issues like security and migration, so the analysis also cannot refute the assumption completely.

Complementing these observations on practical implementation gaps, the analysis of stakeholder perceptions and their visions for new approaches (theme 8) as well as on moral superiority versus local pragmatism (theme 9) offer practical extensions to the critiques in chapter three. The calls by experts for more credibility by the EU, pragmatic partnerships or the de-securitisation of policy fields like migration and climate change echo these scholarly concerns, while also nuancing them through more specific calls for a larger focus on pastoralists and human security, genuine local ownership or the call for climate protection to be generally more relevant (see theme 8). Thus, through the focus on civil society actors and demonstration of the challenging moralising tendencies in the European discourse a core contribution of the thesis emerges here. Nonetheless, particularly considering sub-question four regarding local stakeholders' perspectives, the inclusion of local voices remains severely limited by access constraints, leading to a limited scope of this contribution. Furthermore, it also means that sub-question four can only partially be answered.

In tune with this limitation, throughout the process of this thesis, several other limitations have emerged that inform the robustness of this thesis and its findings. To begin, what first arises is the overall scope of the empirical base of the thesis. Because while 34 experts were requested, only six interviewees could ultimately be conducted. This clearly limits the scope and claim to representativeness of the research. Moreover, the small number of interviewees also introduces a potential self-selection bias, as those who agreed to participate might have systematically differed from those who declined or did not respond. For instance, some of the requested experts who declined an interview might have an extremely critical stance regarding climate politics in the Sahel or the climate-security nexus. However, low response rates are a common challenge in student research and the six interviews that did materialise reflect a deliberate sampling strategy, in which purposefully selected experts whose work is closely related to the research interest were contacted. Within this group of 34 requests made, those who agreed to an interview are among those who are most deeply engaged with the questions around the Sahel, climate change in the region and the EU's approach. Here, it was also a priority that different areas of expertise, such as individuals with a broader political knowledge on the EU's approach to the Sahel or climate impact research in the Sahel but also people who have already connected

the two strands were included in the final sample. Furthermore, the interviews were comparatively long and rich, which allowed an approach that relies more on the in-depth thematic analysis of high-quality interviews than on their quantity. Also, to some extent, the choice to interview experts further mitigates the potential for a self-selection bias, as experts are more expected to situate their own knowledge and experience within a wider debate (Helfferich 2014; Bogner et al. 2009). But while the analysis did show Eurocentric views and the adoption of framings within these views from some interviewees, at large especially theme ten demonstrated how the interviewees repeatedly classified their answers by referring to possible biases and their own positioning.

Next, a second limitation of the research that immediately emerged during the thesis is the composition of the sample. Due to the political developments in the Sahel as well as the institutional structure within the EU, it was not possible to secure interviews with Sahelian experts or staff from EU institutions like the Commission. As explained in the methodology, a main reason for this were the access barriers to the experts like non-accessible e-mail addresses but also many unanswered requests. Resultingly, the group of interviewed actors consisted of European experts including one former European parliamentarian, which lead to the risk of a Eurocentric bias and a lack in information from the missing groups. To partly mitigate this absence, the overall number of documents was expanded and additionally, four longer interviews and talks with João Cravinho were included. But while one of the analysed interviews contained some local perspectives, Sahelian voices mostly remain missing. For this thesis, the concrete result of this is that local views could at best be accessed indirectly and the analysis cannot claim to fully reflect the discursive landscape on the issue.

Connected to this, the third limitation also concerns the composition of the sample – however in terms of the different data's comparability. As described in the methods section of this thesis, the heterogenous character of the dataset and its combination of formal EU strategies and communications, public statements and event recordings as well as expert interviews lead to differences in institutional status, communicative purpose, audience and degree of spontaneity. Consequently, while the deliberate choice of conducting a thematic analysis instead of, for example, a qualitative content analysis, minimises the effect of this limitation, the different data cannot be treated directly equivalent to each other. In particular, any data by the EU will likely reflect strategic political positionings while the expert interviews offer more interpretative – however still scientific – observations. Even so, because the aim of the research was not to

establish source-to-source comparisons but to instead trace broader, themes, patterns and framings, the effect of this limitation is minimal.

A fourth limitation of the research is related to the temporal scope and case focus of the selected documents. Apart from the three Sahel strategies from 2011, 2015 and 2021, the selected EU documents, communications and public appearances are mostly from 2023 to 2025. And while this choice, as explained in the methodology was deliberate to focus on the phase of the EU's renewed attention on the Sahel, including the development of a new strategy, after the coups in the region, it could also limit the traceability of pre-coup dynamics. Yet this temporal narrowing also reflects the practical grounds of research in student contexts. Nevertheless, this limitation was lessened by providing a deep reflection of the discourse and critique on the EU's Sahel approach and by firmly grounding the analysis in the literary body.

In tune with this, a fifth limitation concerns the rapidly evolving geopolitical context in the Sahel and the EU's still undetermined response to it. Since 2020, the Sahel has experienced a wave of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the withdrawal or downsizing of international missions and the growing presence of new actors such as Russia and China. At the same time, while the EU member state's foreign ministers have already agreed on a new strategy for the Sahel, it is not yet released. Thus, the empirical material analysed here captures a particular moment in a fluid political landscape, which means that both discourses and policy priorities may shift in ways that require updating once the new strategy is released or if the Sahel experiences more sudden political shifts. However, because this thesis deliberately focused on overarching themes and discursive patterns that are structurally embedded in EU policy debates, the results of this thesis are less dependent on single events or short-term shifts.

Lastly, as already addressed in the introduction, a final limitation of this thesis concerns my own positionality as a white German researcher working within a European academic context and how this may have shaped both the access to interview partners and the analysis. Due to the currently difficult reputation of Western actors in the region, my position might have contributed to the reluctance of Sahelian experts to agree to an interview. This is also furthered by my limited knowledge of French, which constrained the potential interview partners, as due to its colonial heritage many Sahelians are more fluent in French than in English or German. And while language constraints can easily be mitigated through translation programmes during the identification and contacting of the experts, in interviews these barriers are much more difficult to overcome.

Beyond these constraints, my positionality within the research may have also influenced the interpretation and coding of the data. This is particularly relevant, as the method of thematic analysis is inherently subjective and shaped by the researcher's prior readings, experiences and socialisation in the field (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022, 2023). Therefore, among else, my position in this research carries the risk of conducting the analysis through a Eurocentric lens. The positionality statement in the beginning of this thesis attempts to make this potential influence transparent even if problems such as these can never be fully mitigated. Furthermore, as described in the methodology, potential Sahelian interview partners were selected cautiously and with the explicit awareness of the existing constraints, which is an approach that generally guided the entire research.

Against the backdrop of these limitations, several avenues for further research emerge that could deepen and broaden the insights of this thesis. A first and perhaps most obvious direction would be to close the research gap regarding the local perspectives on the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel, which this research could only address indirectly. To do so, for instance, a dedicated on-the-ground case study centred on the views of Sahelian actors of the EU's climate approach could be conducted through interviews or focus groups. Here, especially a focus on local civil society organisations, pastoralists or local governmental bodies could be interesting. Considering the design of the study, it would also be wise to include local researchers in the study, conduct the Sahel not from afar but the in the Sahel itself and systematically explore together, how the EU acts on the ground, interacts with local actors and, building on the results of this study, whether the securitised framings and priorities in the EU's discourse can be retraced.

Furthermore, building on the findings of this research that broader political trends and internal European debates appear to largely drive the EU's climate approach to the Sahel, another research project could also consist of a more systematic analysis of the EU's policymaking process in this domain. Because as this thesis focused more on the discursive layers of EU's approach and connected them to the concepts of securitisation and the climate-security nexus, future studies could draw on policy process theories and agenda-setting approaches to trace the evolution of the EU's Sahel policies more heavily. In practice, for instance, this could include the identification of the key EU institutions and how their approaches relate to each other but also research regarding the moments in which climate concerns are inserted, reframed or sidelined during the policymaking process.

Another interesting direction future research could tackle, which was also mentioned by two of the interviewees, is to more closely look at the concrete action on the ground and connect this to the question also asked by sub-question three of this thesis on the funding mechanisms and projects that are prioritised on the ground. For example, this research could be undertaken through case studies on specific climate-related programmes or CSDP missions in the Sahel that analyse how climate, security, migration and development concerns are balanced within them. Here, especially the analysis at the project-level would be useful to assess whether the discovered focus on security and migration of the EU's climate approach is reflected in practice.

Next, another research focus could take a closer look at the climate-migration narratives and their utilisation by the EU and their members states. Building on the critique by Ribot et al. (2020) as well as the results of this thesis, future studies could examine when and why actors invoke climate change as a driver of mobility, how this influences policy instruments and what implications this has on the people who migrate. In practice, such a study could have a similar methodological approach to this thesis by consisting of interviews in combination with a document analysis. Interviewees that would be particularly interesting for such a study would especially be policymakers and people working on the ground.

Finally, it would also be interesting to compare the EU's climate approach the Sahel to the approaches of other actors in the region such as the UN. Such a study could, for instance, show how the patterns that have been discovered in this thesis reproduce or contrast with other agents and if broader trends can be identified. At the same time, such a comparison could help to identify, which practices are perceived as more legitimate and useful by Sahelian actors, which could inform more context- and conflict-sensitive approaches overall.

8. Conclusion

Considering the rise in references to climate change as a security threat and “threat multiplier” (e.g., Rothe et al. 2025) in European and international debate, this thesis set out to investigate the main drivers of the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel and how climate, developmental and security concerns balance in this process. To structure the analysis, the thesis was guided by four sub-questions. The first question inquired how the EU frames its climate action in the Sahel in official documents and statements, while the second question explored how climate, developmental, migration and security concerns are discussed in the EU's official documents and statements and which appear to dominate the debate. The third question asked what kinds of projects and funding mechanisms are prioritised in the EU's climate action in the Sahel and

the fourth, how local stakeholders perceive this engagement. To answer these questions, six interviews were conducted with experts working on the Sahel, climate change and the EU. Together with a selected corpus of EU documents, communications and public statements these interviews and documents were subsequently analysed through a thematic analysis and assessed informed by the theories and literature review. This combination of interview material and document analysis made it possible to trace both how the EU frames climate change in the Sahel and how experts view the EU's climate approach.

In line with the first sub-question, the analysis has shown that the EU predominantly frames climate change in the Sahel as a 'threat multiplier' that exacerbates existing issues like instability, migration and security threats rather than as its own policy domain focussed on environmental protection or adaptation. Across the three Sahel strategies and the other analysed documents, climate impacts were consistently presented through their effects on resource conflicts, farmer-herder conflicts and terrorism, with climate action being used to justify broader efforts to stabilise the region and protect European interests. This framing was furthermore reinforced by the policy experts' interviews. This utilisation reflects a clearly securitised framing that heavily draws on neo-Malthusian scarcity narratives and the integration of climate change into an established securitised approach.

In response to the second sub-question, the findings also revealed that security and migration concerns clearly dominate the EU's discourse on climate change in the Sahel, with climate change being either marginalised or folded into these existing priorities as subordinate or secondary drivers. Interestingly, during the interviews, while some experts adopted and thereby reinforced these securitised framings of conflicts being driven by climate-induced resource scarcity despite them not being scientifically sound, others who questioned these narratives reported being quickly associated with climate change denial. Still, these experts also emphasised that in an already heavily securitised context, it can strategically be necessary to frame issues in terms of security to gain attention and resources. The result of these observations is an image of a rigid and opportunistic discourse, that is driven by the rhetoric elevation of climate change to strengthen the legitimacy of pre-existing security and migration agendas.

Considering the third sub-question, the thesis can only offer a cautious answer because while the analysis clearly reflected the inclusion of climate change as a topic in the EU's approach to the Sahel, the interviewees frequently struggled to name specific initiatives focussed on climate change and described climate change as a secondary driver that has been added onto existing projects. However, while this vagueness could also just reflect a lack of knowledge, together

with the reviewed literature it might also indicate how climate change remains a largely rhetorical policy issue that is heavily affected by its ‘trendiness’.

Finally, due to the lack in responses to interview requests, Sahelian voices were largely missing in the collected data. Therefore, the fourth sub-question regarding the perception of local stakeholders on the EU’s climate approach, can at most be answered in a limited and indirect way on the account of a few local insights from analysed interviews that included local perceptions and some insights by interviewed experts. Here, the analysis can highlight the broader frustration with vague promises and top-down approaches that do not sufficiently involve those affected. Instead, a general demand for a more pragmatic and context-sensitive approach emerged that prioritises the inclusion of locals and tangible support over normative rhetoric.

Taken together, these findings largely support the interim assumptions developed in chapter four. Namely, the analysis confirms assumption one that the EU’s climate action in the Sahel is not driven by climate protection alone but by an interplay of mainly security concerns and migration management, with security interests often taking precedence. In relation to this, through providing findings in support of assumption two, the analysis also confirms that the EU’s climate narrative in the Sahel is likely to centre on issues that have already been securitised, instead of structural adaptation efforts or livelihood support. However, while climate rhetoric was used to legitimise the EU’s Sahel approach and expand its discursive scope, its usage to expand EU security and migration-related interventions appears to be limited. Therefore, assumption three can only be partially upheld. Finally, the prominence of how climate change as a ‘trendy’, popular policy issue has shaped the EU’s approach to the Sahel, validates assumption four on how EU priorities in the Sahel are shaped and sometimes overrun by prevailing policy agendas and ‘trends’ in Brussels and European capitals and how this influences how problems are defined and which instruments are mobilised.

In conclusion and in relation to the overarching research question, this research has discovered that the main driver behind the EU’s climate action in the Sahel are not climate protection or developmental concerns but the long-standing EU priorities of migration and security into which climate change has been increasingly incorporated. The EU has framed climate change as a ‘threat multiplier’ that exacerbates issues, which are already on the agenda, and used these framings to reinforce and legitimise an already established security- and migration-focussed approach to the region. Meanwhile climate and development concerns do play some role but remain secondary and subordinate, with climate change rarely appearing as an autonomous

driver that is not only considered because of its effects on European security interests and internal political dynamics. In doing so, the EU largely reproduces a neo-Malthusian climate-security nexus logic that oversimplifies issue-causalities in the Sahel.

Subsequently, to place this thesis in the broader existing research landscape, three main approaches emerge. First, overall, this thesis ties in with the existing literature on the securitisation and militarisation of the EU's Sahel approach by showing how climate change is discursively constructed as a security issue and layered onto pre-existing migration and security framings in detail, but also extends these discussions through its exclusive focus on the climate dimension rather than the entire EU approach. Second, by combining document analysis with expert interviews and tracing how these securitised narratives of climate change are taken up, reproduced and sometimes contested by those who work in the policy domain, the thesis expands the predominantly policy- and document-focussed debates in literature. Through this methodological approach, the thesis connected different scientific domains and policy expert areas, resulting in one of the first inter-disciplinary discourse analyses on this topic. Third, by highlighting the role of trends and internal European agendas in shaping the EU's climate rhetoric was utilised to advance European security agendas and internal political trends, this thesis has demonstrated clear parallels to the well-documented instrumentalisation of migration in the Sahelian context. This nuances the existing critiques of the EU's Sahel engagement by revealing climate change as a continuation of instrumentalisation patterns rather than a disruption or genuine reorientation of the EU's Sahel approach.

However, despite these contributions, this thesis is also subject to certain limitations. First and foremost, presentiveness of the thesis is limited and at risk for a potential self-selection bias because the thesis could not capture the full spectrum of actors in data corpus and the overall sample size was relatively small and included a temporal focus from 2023 onwards. Second, the lack of Sahelian experts increases the risk of Eurocentric views in the research and onto the potential biases considering my positioning within this research. Finally, in view of the rapidly evolving geopolitical context in the Sahel in the last decades, the findings of this thesis also may require updates as new approaches and strategies emerge.

The findings of this thesis, nonetheless, carry several important implications for both theoretical and policy understanding. Theoretically, the analysis exposes how peculiar the European discourse on climate change in the Sahel truly is. Most actors, whether official governmental institutions or policy and scientific experts, adopt securitised framings of climate change that are often not scientifically sound. But even though these discourses and their underlying

dynamics are challenged by some, these framings prevail. Connected to this, on the policy side, through its discursive analysis this thesis has demonstrated how the EU's securitisation of climate change in the Sahel risks sidelining core goals of climate protection and the limiting of climate change impacts, as mitigation and adaptation fade behind security and migration interests and priorities. Given that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time, this inadequate approach puts people at even greater risk from the consequences of an issue they did not cause.

Acknowledging the results, limitations and implications of this thesis, the analysis opens up several avenues for future research to refine the insights from this work. A primary direction could and should be the dedicated study of local Sahelian perspectives on the EU's climate approach through interviews or focus groups. Simultaneously, to trace how climate concerns are inserted, reframed or sidelined, further research could also entail systematic tracings of the EU's policymaking process by using policy process and agenda-setting theories. In line with this, to investigate how climate, security, migration and development concerns are balanced in funding and implementation another avenue for future research could also be the examination of concrete on-the-ground activity like the CSDP-missions. Finally, the exploration of climate-migration narratives, their invocation, policy impacts and effects on migrants could also warrant further research.

In sum, while the EU's Sahel strategy has begun to integrate climate concerns, its implementation is heavily driven by and anchored in established security paradigms. With this thesis' goal to illuminate this discourse and its drivers for both scholarly understanding and informed policy debate, it now remains to be seen whether the new Sahel strategy, that is expected in 2026, will actually bring the transformation that the EU's Sahel engagement so desperately needs.

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1. Overview of the conducted interviews

Interviewee	Organisation & job position	Professional focus	Date & place of interview	Language & length of interview
Expert Nr. 1	Professor at a university	Global governance, conflicts, peace and security with a focus on the African continent	23.10.2025 Online	English ca. 33 min.
Expert Nr. 2	Former parliamentarian of the European Parliament	European foreign politics	28.10.2025 Online	English ca. 39 min.
Expert Nr. 3	Scientist at a Think Tank	Security and military conflicts in the Sahel	30.10.2025 In Person	German ca. 44 min.
Expert Nr. 4	Scientist at a Think Tank	Conflicts and human security in the Sahel	26.11.2025 Online	German ca. 27 min.
Expert Nr. 5	Assistant Professor at a university	Critical security and conflict studies considering Africa and European external action	05.12.2025 Online	English ca. 43 min.
Expert Nr. 6	Doctoral researcher at a climate research institute	Climate-Conflict-Migration Nexus in the Sahel	23.12.2025 Online	German ca. 42 min.

2. Overview of selected documents

Title	Author/Organisation	Date	Length	Source
Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel	European External Action Service	21.09. 2011	9 pages	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategy-security-and-development-sahel-1_en (last access: 21.02.2026)
Council conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020	Council of the European Union	20.04. 2015	65 pages	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21522/st07823-en15.pdf (last access: 21.02.2026)
The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel - Council Conclusions (16 April 2021)	Council of the European Union	16.04. 2021	18 pages	https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf (last access: 21.02.2026)
2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen	European Commission	13.09. 2023	Website (Print version: 16 pages)	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426 (last access: 21.02.2026)
2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen	European Commission	10.09. 2025	Website (Print version: 11 pages)	https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_25_2053 (last access: 21.02.2026)
Mission Letter from Ursula von der Leyen to Kaja Kallas	European Commission	17.09. 2024	7 pages	https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/1fd85a66-b89a-492b-8855-89499106c1d4_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20KALLAS.pdf (last access: 21.02.2026)
Sahel: EU appoints João Cravinho as new Special Representative for the Sahel region	Council of the European Union	18.11. 2024	Print version: 5 pages	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/18/sahel-eu-appoints-joao-cravinho-as-

				new-special-representative-for-the-sahel-region/ (last access: 21.02.2026)
Foreign Affairs Council, 20 November 2025 – Main results	EU Foreign Affairs Council	20.11. 2025	Print version: 14 pages	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2025/11/20/ (last access: 21.02.2026)
EU-Sonderbeauftragter João Cravinho: Neue EU-Sahel-Strategie bis Jahresende	Lucia Weiß, Table.Briefings	16.10. 2025	Print version: 5 pages	https://table.media/africa/interview/eu-sonderbeauftragter-joao-cravinho-neue-eu-sahel-strategie-bis-jahresende (last access: 21.02.2026)
‘Turning the page’: EU envoy speaks out about fresh strategy for Sahel states	Carien du Plessis, the africa report	26.11. 2025	Print version: 12 pages	https://www.theafricareport.com/400129/turning-the-page-eu-envoy-speaks-out-about-fresh-strategy-for-sahel-states/ (last access: 21.02.2026)
Climate crisis causing ethnic tension in Sahel	Melina Nucifora, Al Arabiya english	13.11. 2025	11 min. 24 sec.	https://english.alarabiya.net/webtv/programs/counterpoints/2025/11/13/climate-crisis-causing-ethnic-tension-in-sahel (last access: 21.02.2026)
Can the EU's new Sahel strategy win back trust?	Mimi Mefo Newuh & George Okachi, Deutsche Welle	19.12. 2025	29 min. 58 sec.	https://www.dw.com/en/can-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy-win-back-trust/audio-75194581 (last access: 21.02.2026)
João Cravinho: AFTER THE VIOLENT DIVORCE: WHAT APPROACH TO EU-SAHEL RELATIONS?	Bruno Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog	03.06. 2025	59 min. 58 sec.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uodQLKyRLbA (last access: 21.06.2026)
A Conversation With João Cravinho, EU Special Representative for the Sahel Region	Council on Foreign Relations	15.12. 2025	1 h. 8 min. 50 sec.	https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-joao-cravinho-eu-special-representative-sahel

			Print version: 28 pages	region (last access: 21.06.2026)
JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL – A new outlook on the climate and security nexus: Addressing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on peace, security and defence	European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy	28.06. 2023	25 pages	https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/JOIN_2023_19_1_EN_ACT_part1_v7.pdf (last access: 21.06.2026)

3. Coding table of the thematic analysis

Theme 1	Sub-theme
Focus of the EU's approach: security and climate: <u>Code definition:</u> Extent to which security and migration dominate the EU Sahel engagement, with climate change as secondary or irrelevant	Security and migration focus <u>Code definition:</u> Consistent framings of the EU's focus in the Sahel on security risks (e.g., terrorism, instability) and migration concerns (e.g., irregular migration, border control) <u>Examples:</u> - Transcript of interview no. 2, para. 17 - Transcript of interview no. 3, para. 6
	Climate isn't a primary focus <u>Code definition:</u> Climate being described as a secondary or background focus in the EU's Sahel approach, not as a standalone policy focus. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 2, para. 25 - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 10

Theme 2	Sub-theme
Securitisation of climate change <u>Code definition:</u> Climate change being frames as a 'threat multiplier'.	Additional codes: climate change as a 'threat multiplier'; trend of climate securitisation; efforts to reframe security/migration issues with climate change; nexus-logic: climate-security <u>Examples:</u> - Transcript of interview no. 1, para. 4 - Transcript of interview no. 5, para. 20
	Link of climate change to security <u>Code definition:</u> Climate change impacts being framed as drivers for conflicts, terrorism, jihadism or ethnic tensions; especially in terms of resource scarcity. <u>Examples:</u> - Bruno Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog 2025, para. 5 - Transcript of interview no. 1, para. 16
	Securitisation of climate for migration <u>Code definition:</u>

	Climate change impacts being framed as drivers for migration (to the EU) and used to justify border and migration management measures. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 2, para. 11 - transcript of interview no. 5, para. 32
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Theme 3	Sub-theme
Trends drive policymaking <u>Code definition:</u> The extent to which broader political and media trends shape the EU's Sahel discourse and approach as well as how policymakers instrumentalise these climate change for their benefit.	Overall attention on climate impacts the discourse and approach <u>Code definition:</u> Political attention to issues is tied to crises (e.g., 'Mediterranean refugee crisis', extreme weather events, terrorist attacks), which impacts the focus of policy action. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 5, para. 20 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 27
	Instrumentalisation of climate change <u>Code definition:</u> Climate change is being added onto already existing security and migration initiatives to further their legitimacy, without the issue being addressed for itself. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 20 - transcript of interview no. 5, para. 30
	Buzzwords are important for funding <u>Code definition:</u> During times, where issues have a heightened level of political attention, the use of that issue as a 'label'/buzzword is important to gain funding for projects. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 24 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 67

Theme 4	Sub-theme
The EU is in it for the EU <u>Code definition:</u>	Additional codes: main concern of the EU is the EU; EU used the Sahel as a laboratory to develop security tools; EU engaging in the

The EU's Sahel engagement prioritises European interests over local needs or wants.	Sahel for own interests; EU involvement actually because of other international motivations <u>Examples:</u> - Bruno Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog 2025, para. 5 - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 6
	The EU acts because of spillover fears <u>Code definition:</u> The EU is mainly active in the Sahel, because of fears that crises in the region will spill-over into others and eventually also to Europe. <u>Examples:</u> - Nucifora 2025, para. 4 - von der Leyen 2023, p. 14

Theme 5	Sub-theme
The discourse and approach lack causal complexity <u>Code definition:</u> The overall discourse and approach of the EU's climate engagement in the Sahel lacks the consideration of the multitude of socio-political and governance factors that lead to crises and instead solely focusses on climate factors.	Oversimplification of climate change <u>Code definition:</u> Climate change is being framed as a primary driver of certain issues in spite of scientific refutations and alternate explanations. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 18 - transcript of interview no. 5, para. 32
	Climate causalities serve political needs <u>Code definition:</u> European and Sahelian actors alike use oversimplified climate causality narratives to legitimise their action, shift blame for governance problems or for funding. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 2, para. 17 - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 6
	Additional codes: critiques of climate reasonings are not well received <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 10 - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 24

Theme 6	Sub-theme
Fragmented actorness of the EU <u>Code definition:</u> The ‘actor’ EU is unclear and fragmented – both for policy experts and locals.	Structural incoherence of the EU’s approach <u>Code definition:</u> There is a disconnect between the different EU institutions and programmes, with shifting focusses, framings and initiatives, which can lead to overlapping and duplicate projects. <u>Examples:</u> - Bruno Kreisky Forum für internationalen Dialog 2025, para. 5 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 21
	Who is acting? <u>Code definition:</u> The actor EU cannot be clearly labelled because of unclear priorities and underlying special interests of member states. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 34 - transcript of interview no. 4, para. 30

Theme 7	Sub-theme
Vagueness around concrete work <u>Code definition:</u> There is a lack of knowledge around concrete climate action of the EU.	No sub-themes; includes codes on: doesn’t know about actual climate action in the Sahel; can’t think of an example; German military is making climate efforts; doesn’t know, how it’s handled in action; references to Great Green Wall; example of a still active climate project; significant overall efforts of EU for climate protection; impacts of climate efforts not per se mitigation or adaptation but still <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 1, para. 28 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 37

Theme 8	Sub-theme	Third-level theme
Visions for a new approach <u>Code definition:</u> Proposals by different actors on the future of	Local views on EU-Sahel relationship <u>Code definition:</u> Sahelian perspectives on the current and possible future relationship with	

the EU's (climate) approach to the Sahel.	the EU; including calls for genuine partnerships, local ownership and the interest to listen to locals. <u>Examples:</u> - Newuf and Okachi 2025, paras. 2, 41, 38-39, 52, 86	
	Visions by EU-policy makers <u>Code definition:</u> EU official's ideas and visions for the new strategy for the Sahel, like a larger focus on resilience, development and issues other than security. <u>Examples:</u> - Newuf and Okachi 2025, para. 47 - Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, p. 6	
	Visions by interviewees <u>Code definition:</u> Calls by interviewed experts for the new EU's Sahel approach.	General strategic reorientations <u>Code definition:</u> Interviewees calls for the overall revision of the EU's Sahel approach; incl. a larger focus on human security and pastoralists. <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 1, paras. 52, 38 - transcript of interview no. 4, para. 34 Climate-specific proposals <u>Code definition:</u> Calls by the interviewed experts for targeted climate action by the EU like the focus on adaptation and measures other than security.

		<u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 2, para. 35, 43, 49 - transcript of interview no. 2, para. 42
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Theme 9	Sub-theme
Moral superiority vs. Local pragmatism <u>Code definition:</u> Normative superiority rhetoric being used by experts versus the focus of Sahelian governments on their practical needs and wants in their international relations.	The EU's approach is better (intended) than others' <u>Code definition:</u> The EU discourse portrays the EU's Sahel engagement as superior or more value-driven than other actors like China or Russia. <u>Examples:</u> - Nucifora 2025, para. 12 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 21
	Local governments compare offers and should do so <u>Code definition:</u> Sahelian governments pragmatically compare tangible cooperation efforts by different actors. <u>Examples:</u> - Nucifora 2025, para. 10 - transcript of interview no. 6, para. 61

Theme 10	Sub-theme
Expert positioning and reflexivity <u>Code definition:</u> Interviewees' self-reflection on biases and their position in the discourse.	No sub-themes; includes codes on: researcher reflexivity; self-reflection: should the EU be active in the Sahel? <u>Examples:</u> - transcript of interview no. 3, para. 14 - transcript of interview no. 5, para. 37-42

4. Access to the digital appendix

Access to the English and German versions of the standardised e-mail, interview guide, interview information sheet, declaration of consent, all interview transcripts and, if necessary, their translations as well as the transcripts of the audio data available via this link.

<https://1drv.ms/f/c/c7e0ba324591781d/IgBfeTuuc0GEQ53L1RHRgUE9AfMrxfNXrB-LPzpQ5qc40Ug?e=wADxo3>

or via this QR-Code:



5. Declaration of academic integrity

I hereby declare that I have written this master's thesis with the topic:

“Climate Leadership or Security Strategy? – The EU's Climate Engagement in the Sahel”

independently and have not used any resources other than those specified. I am aware of the rules of good scientific practice¹⁸ and have observed them (in particular part A, paragraph 1, part B, paragraph 6, section 4). I have therefore identified passages taken from other works in terms of wording or meaning by citing the source in each individual case, including the secondary literature or AI tools used. Where text passages have been taken directly, I have indicated the page numbers of the source, if available. I have indicated AI-generated content as a citation in the text.

I am aware that when using content from the Internet, I have marked it and indicated the link and the date of access.

If AI tools were not used to generate content, but e.g. for linguistic review and improvement of texts, translation, systematic research, creation of outlines or for literature searches, I have given the product name and the type of use in a separate section following the bibliography. I am fully responsible for the selection, adoption and all results of the AI-generated output used by me and, in the case of the adoption of scientific content, I have checked it for correctness in the original sources, as the adoption of factually incorrect AI-generated content is considered an attempt to deceive, which can lead to failing the examination.

I am aware that texts are assessed as unsatisfactory if they consist to a considerable extent of the compilation of AI-generated text passages. Examiners may request a reflection paper on the use of AI. If the assessors have doubts about the correctness of the information provided on the use of AI tools or the appropriateness of this use, they may conduct an additional oral examination on the topic of the written work.

I confirm that the paper has not been submitted to any other examination authority or has already been submitted.

Berlin, 21.02.2026

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' followed by a large, sweeping loop and a final upward stroke.

¹⁸ https://www.europa-uni.de/de/forschung/_dokumente/richtlinie-gute-wissenschaftliche-praxis-2021.pdf

6. Documentation of the use of AI-Tools

During the process of this thesis, three kinds of AI tools were used: The AI-based translation service DeepL¹⁹, the AI-powered automatic transcription service within MAXQDA²⁰ and the AI-powered answer engine Perplexity²¹.

DeepL was used to translate the executive summary, a French interview excerpt by João Cravinho, the declaration of consent, the information sheet and relevant interview transcripts from English/French into German. This was done with the prior consultation of my thesis advisor and marked in the text through footnotes (e.g., German Executive Summary) or in the text (see chapter 5.1 Data collection: Expert interviews).

The AI-powered automatic transcription service within MAXQDA was used to produce the transcripts of the interviews and some of the transcripts of the analysed public appearances by João Cravinho that were only available in audio or video formats. This use was openly discussed in the relating chapters on the data collection (5.1 and 5.2) and the tool was linked in separate footnotes.

Perplexity was used as an auxiliary tool for targeted revisions or advice, similar to consultations with a peer or a scientific advisor. Specifically, it was used to provide suggestions for the structure of the thesis, discuss issues like comprehensibility of certain paragraphs or what to do with the codes that were not relevant to the thesis's research question. I entered my own drafts with detailed prompts discussing my problems and the solutions I could think of and then critically selected and adapted the outputs. The suggestions were never incorporated verbatim but merely used to guide the structure or provide options of how to precede. Unlike other AI-models like ChatGPT that are trained on conversational models, Perplexity is an AI-powered search engine that can be considered as the evolution of Google and focusses on accuracy, is designed for research and provides the sources for each answer. Thus, it connects the conversationalist side of large language models with high-quality search results. However, every suggestion was still always checked for its correctness against the original source.

¹⁹ Available under; <https://www.deepl.com/de/translator>, last access 21.02.2026.

²⁰ Available under: <https://www.maxqda.com/automatic-transcription>, last access: 21.02.2025.

²¹ Available under; <https://www.perplexity.ai/>, last access 21.02.2026.