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## Migration Management in West Africa: The Role of the EU and Internal Risks for Countries in the Region — the Case of Niger

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**Abstract.** Irregular mass migrations are widely recognised as posing threats to both the personal security of participants and the national security of transit/destination countries. This article examines the threats to the stability and integrity of sending countries as a result of attempts to “regulate” migration from “outside,” when such interference is guided mainly by the interests of the third party. The present study examines the European Union’s (EU) involvement in the ‘normalisation’ of the Sub-Saharan Africa migration situation and argues that these activities have contributed to the crisis within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The deterioration of the political and economic situation in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, exacerbated by ECOWAS sanctions, has led to significant changes in inter-state relations and migration flows, creating new challenges to regional stability. Using a situational analysis, the authors concentrate on migration processes in Niger, where instability exacerbates existing problems. Nevertheless, both the EU and ECOWAS have imposed sanctions on Niger, including halting development assistance programs and suspending security cooperation. This paper argues that this has worsened the situation in a country already on the brink of economic disaster. Some European countries, such as Denmark and Italy, which remains the main arrival country for irregular migrants along the Mediterranean route, have suggested that cooperation with Niger should continue, as failure to do so could further complicate the migration situation in European countries. The paper concludes by charting several possible solutions to facilitate and manage regional mobility at this stage. It also argues that African countries need to build migration management regimes tailored to their own national interests. The European Union, for its part, needs to reconsider its position on prioritizing its own agenda in the region and recognize African countries as equal partners in the migration system.

**Key words:** regional migration, crossborder mobility management, security threats, Sub-Saharan countries, Niger, ECOWAS

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## Управление миграцией в Западной Африке: роль ЕС и внутренние риски для стран региона на примере Нигера

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**Аннотация.** Нерегулируемые массовые миграции, как повсеместно признано, несут угрозы как личной безопасности участникам мобильности, так и национальной безопасности стран транзита и назначения. Исследование посвящено проблеме возникновения новых угроз стабильности и целостности стран происхождения мигрантов в результате попытки третьих акторов урегулировать миграционную ситуацию исходя исключительно из собственных интересов. Рассмотрено участие ЕС в «нормализации» миграционной ситуации в странах южнее Сахары, которое во многом способствует кризису внутри Экономического сообщества стран Западной Африки (ЭКОВАС). Ухудшение политической и экономической ситуации в Нигере, Мали и Буркина-Фасо, усугубленное санкциями ЭКОВАС, привело к значительным изменениям в межгосударственных отношениях и миграционных потоках, создавая новые вызовы для региональной стабильности. Посредством ситуационного анализа изучены миграционные процессы в Нигере, где нестабильность усугубляет существующие проблемы. В то же время Европейский союз (ЕС) осудил заявления о выходе Нигера из организации и вместе с ЭКОВАС наложил санкции на него: в частности, были остановлены выплаты по программам помощи развитию и приостановлено взаимодействие в области безопасности, что ухудшило положение в стране, находящейся на грани экономической катастрофы. В то же время некоторые европейские страны, такие как Дания и Италия, которая остается главной страной назначения для нелегальных мигрантов на средиземноморском маршруте, предлагают продолжать взаимодействие с Нигером, так как отказ от взаимодействия может еще более осложнить миграционную ситуацию в европейских странах. В последнем разделе описаны модели, по которым могут развиваться региональные мобильности в будущем. Также отмечено, что странам Африки необходимо построить собственную модель управления миграцией в интересах своего населения. В свою очередь, Европейский союз должен пересмотреть свою позицию по участию в управлении миграцией в Западной Африке и, участвуя в создании системы безопасности региона, исходить не только из своих собственных интересов, но признать африканские страны равными партнерами в системе управления миграционными потоками

**Ключевые слова:** региональная миграция, управление трансграничной мобильностью, угрозы безопасности, страны Африки южнее Сахары, ЭКОВАС

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**Вклад авторов.** Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку дизайна, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

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### Introduction

After Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), numerous questions about regional governance were raised. The most prominent of these pertain to the migration management, encompassing both intraregional and

intercontinental mobility, and the broader efforts to normalize migration patterns (Setrana & Okyerefo, 2024). The 1979 Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment formed a system of seamless mobility within the region, addressing cornerstone issues such as visa-free travel, residency rights, and the ability to conduct

business in any member state.<sup>1</sup> These measures fostered regional integration, despite bureaucratic and economic challenges. However, the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS threatens to dismantle the visa-free regime within the union. The decision by these three countries in September 2023 to form a mutual defence pact,<sup>2</sup> known as the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), may enhance their security but disrupts decades of mobility and cooperation.

This article explores possible solutions for the management of migration within the Alliance. In order to achieve this objective, the unique characteristics of migration flows are examined using Niger as a case study. Furthermore, the role of the European Union (EU) in limiting migration is evaluated, and the impact of ECOWAS-imposed sanctions is analysed. The article concludes with the proposal of models for future regional mobility and suggestions for how the European Union should revise its involvement in managing migration in the region.

### Methodology

Based on a situational analysis, the present study examines the complexities of regional migration management in West Africa, particularly the implications of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger's decisions to withdraw from ECOWAS. Special attention is paid to the adoption and subsequent repeal of Niger's Migration Law No. 2015-36, highlighting the socio-political and economic consequences

<sup>1</sup> ECOWAS Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment // ECOWAS. 1979. URL: <https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/treaty-files/3269/download> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Charter of Liptako-Gourma Establishing the Alliance of Sahel States Between: Burkina Faso, the Republic of Mali, the Republic of Niger // Embassy of the Republic of Mali to the United States of America. 2023. URL: [https://maliembassy.us/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/LIPTAKO-GOURMA-Engl\\_\\_\\_-2.pdf](https://maliembassy.us/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/LIPTAKO-GOURMA-Engl___-2.pdf) (accessed: 14.03.2024).

of the EU intervention in regional migration management.

The research draws on a range of official documents from regional countries, including Niger's Law No. 2015-36, ECOWAS protocols, and reports from the EU-funded projects. In addition, data from international organisations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which provide quantitative insights into migration flows, was also used. The EU policies implemented in collaboration with ECOWAS are compared with local migration strategies. Public statements, media coverage, and expert commentary are analysed to assess the EU's involvement in addressing migration issues in the region. The study situates current migration challenges within historical trends, including the influence of colonial legacies and regional agreements such as the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment.

By combining these methods, we aim to understand not only the dynamics of migration policy but also the broader implications of migration-related decisions for regional sovereignty, integration, and humanitarian security (Shipilov, 2019).

### Freedom of Movement in Sahel and EU Plans to Curb Migration

Despite the ongoing academic and political focus on migration from Sub-Saharan Africa with its rapidly growing population to Europe, intra-African migration, both within and beyond the region, is numerically and economically a far more significant phenomenon (Kommegni Fongang, 2019; Yeboah et al., 2021). Regional migration encompasses diverse phenomena such as seasonal labour movements, nomadic routes (Dabiré & Soumahoro, 2024), highly skilled and educational migration (Nesterova, 2015), among others. Some countries, particularly Niger and Mali, act as transit states for migrants heading to other African countries or beyond.

This reality has attracted the attention of the European Union, which has implemented various measures to limit the influx of migrants from African countries by preventing them from crossing its borders. In recent years, the EU has developed a framework for delegating responsibility for reducing migration flows to Europe to third countries, including transit and origin states (Niemann & Zaun, 2023). For the EU, externalization policies play a key role in the management of migration, helping to reduce migration pressure on the EU borders, alleviate strain on social infrastructure, and address anti-migration sentiments stemming from the constant inflows of migrants.

An example of externalization is the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (the Rabat Process), launched in 2006. This initiative represents a series of meetings and discussions between the European Union and countries in Central, West, and North Africa. Within this framework, greater emphasis has been placed on linking migration management with developmental aid programs addressing social, political, and economic challenges (Moraru, 2024).

Since 2015, the EU has also been funding targeted programs in the Sahel countries to reduce northbound migration flows transiting through the region. The Sahel and Lake Chad regions receive the largest allocations for these efforts. Initiatives such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, whose primary beneficiaries include Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali,<sup>3</sup> have focused significantly more on strengthening the security sectors responsible for migration control than on other aspects of economic development in the region. Overall, the development and implementation of migration strategies within ECOWAS countries

<sup>3</sup> Fakhry A. More than Borders. Effects of EU Interventions on Migration in the Sahel // Institute for Security Studies. July 2023. URL: <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WAR-43.pdf> (accessed: 12.03.2024).

have been primarily financed by the EU or international organizations (Zakharov, Agafoshin & Gorokhov, 2024). However, EU activities, particularly those led by France in recent years, have arguably exacerbated political tensions in some ECOWAS countries, even as migration flows to Europe have declined.

One of the primary transit countries is Niger (Ponomariov & Ulanova, 2023). After the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the crisis in Mali in 2011, Niger became one of the main informal transit routes to Europe. According to IOM estimates, between February and June 2016, over 300,000 migrants from ECOWAS countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, and Gambia transited through Niger, primarily *en route* to Libya and Algeria.<sup>4</sup> From Niger, they travelled to Libya via the key transit hub of Séguédine,<sup>5</sup> and, to a lesser extent, to Algeria through Arlit, before continuing to Europe along the Central Mediterranean route.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting that movements along these informal trajectories through Niger were entirely legal.<sup>7</sup> Citizens of ECOWAS member states had the right to freely travel and reside in Niger with a valid national identification card. Migrants from non-ECOWAS countries, such as Cameroon and Chad, were granted access to free movement and transit under bilateral agreements between their countries and Niger. An entire industry developed in Niger to support migrants on their journeys, including

<sup>4</sup> Niger // International Organization for Migration Regional Office for West and Central Africa. URL: <https://rodakar.iom.int/niger> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>5</sup> Séguédine and Arlit are transit points in the Agadez, the largest region of Niger.

<sup>6</sup> Population Flow Monitoring. Niger — Overview // International Organization for Migration. October 2017. URL: <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/IOM%20Niger%20-%20Migration%20Response%20-%20Flow%20Monitoring%20Report%20-%20October%202017%20-%20EN.pdf> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Niger // International Organization for Migration Regional Office for West and Central Africa. URL: <https://rodakar.iom.int/niger> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

transportation, housing, food provision, temporary employment, and more.<sup>8</sup>

In 2015, Niger enacted Law No. 2015-36 on the “illegal smuggling of migrants.”<sup>9</sup> The law, primarily drafted in close cooperation with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)<sup>10</sup>, declared most forms of northbound migration mobility and associated businesses illegal. Niger ranks among the lowest in Africa and globally in key socio-economic indicators. Its Human Development Index (2021–2022) stood at 0.4 (52nd in Africa, 189th globally).<sup>11</sup> The per capita GDP (2023) was USD 541 (47th in Africa, 15th in ECOWAS).<sup>12</sup> These figures explain why every source of income, including that derived from assisting migration, is crucial for Nigeriens and demonstrate the inhumane impact of sanctions on the country, which primarily harm ordinary citizens.

Thus, the law has had a detrimental effect on the local economy. According to *Al Jazeera*, the law was “imposed on the Nigerien government by the European Union when migration to Europe began to reach levels deemed unacceptably high by the

EU.”<sup>13</sup> Given its impact on regional mobility, the law sparked considerable debate and was challenged in the ECOWAS court by a coalition of local and international civil society organizations. They argued that the law violated the right to free movement for ECOWAS citizens.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the criminalization of both migrants and those assisting them contradicted the fact that the transportation of migrants had been legal under existing laws and contributed to Niger’s economic development and stability. Before the implementation of Law No. 2015-36 in mid-2016, migrants travelled freely by bus, legally operated by private companies, to and within Niger, reaching the Saharan transit city of Agadez. However, under the 2015 law, any assistance provided to any foreigner (whether they were an ECOWAS citizen or not) in entering or leaving Niger was deemed “illegal smuggling of migrants.” The law was actively enforced from mid-2016 to April 2018. During this period, Nigerien security forces arrested over 282 drivers, vehicle owners, “coaxers” (intermediaries), and owners of “ghettos” where migrants stayed, and confiscated over 300 vehicles in Agadez and along the route to Libya.<sup>15</sup> In the first half of 2017 alone, 101 migrants were arrested and brought to trial, 66 vehicles were confiscated, 7,681 migrants were denied entry to Niger, and

<sup>8</sup> Tubiana J., Warin C., Saeneen G. M. *Multilateral Damage: The Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes* // Academia.edu. 2018. URL: [https://www.academia.edu/37369006/Multilateral\\_Damage\\_The\\_impact\\_of\\_EU\\_migration\\_policies\\_on\\_central\\_Saharan\\_routes](https://www.academia.edu/37369006/Multilateral_Damage_The_impact_of_EU_migration_policies_on_central_Saharan_routes) (accessed: 20.03.2024).

<sup>9</sup> Niger: Loi no. 2015-36 du 26 Mai 2015 relative au Trafic Illicite de Migrants // UNHCR. May 26, 2015. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2015/fr/123771> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>10</sup> Jegen L., Zanker F. *European Dominance of Migration Policy in Niger* // MEDAM Policy Brief. 2019 (September). No. 3. URL: [https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/3d9fe9b8-bf6e-49be-a516-7f705f97151c-MEDAM\\_PB\\_2019\\_3\\_European\\_dominance\\_of\\_migration\\_policyin\\_Niger.pdf](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/3d9fe9b8-bf6e-49be-a516-7f705f97151c-MEDAM_PB_2019_3_European_dominance_of_migration_policyin_Niger.pdf) (accessed: 20.03.2024).

<sup>11</sup> Human Development Index (HDI) by Country 2024 // World Population Review. URL: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hdi-by-country> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

<sup>12</sup> GDP per capita — Africa // Trading Economics. URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp-per-capita?continent=africa> (accessed: 17.11.2024).

<sup>13</sup> Adetayo O. *Niger Repeal of Anti-Migration Law Applauded as One Less ‘Colonial Fetter’* // *Al Jazeera*. November 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/28/niger-repeal-of-anti-migration-law-applauded-as-one-less-colonial-fetter> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>14</sup> Niger: Complaint Lodged Against the Law Criminalising the Transit of Migrants // ASGI: Sciabaca & Oruka Progetto. September 9, 2022. URL: <https://sciabacaoruka.asgi.it/en/press-conference-niger-complaint-lodged-against-the-law-criminalising-the-transit-of-migrants/> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

<sup>15</sup> Tubiana J., Warin C., Saeneen G. M. *Multilateral Damage: The Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes* // Academia.edu. 2018. URL: [https://www.academia.edu/37369006/Multilateral\\_Damage\\_The\\_impact\\_of\\_EU\\_migration\\_policies\\_on\\_central\\_Saharan\\_routes](https://www.academia.edu/37369006/Multilateral_Damage_The_impact_of_EU_migration_policies_on_central_Saharan_routes) (accessed: 20.03.2024).

1,762 migrants were deported from the country.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2016, there has been a sharp decline in the number of migrants traveling to Libya. According to IOM, between January and September 2016, slightly over 230,000 migrants were recorded heading to Libya. By 2017, this number had dropped to only 1,400 for the entire year. However, some estimates suggest that smugglers and migrants increasingly resorted to bypassing official routes through remote desert areas, which are not monitored by IOM.<sup>17</sup>

There is little doubt that the Nigerien government was largely motivated by additional funding and political pressure from the European Union.<sup>18</sup> Observers believe that the Nigerien authorities implemented the anti-migration measures at the EU's behest to maintain the flow of European financial aid (Moretti, 2020). Since the adoption of the 2015 law, the EU and its member states have funded numerous initiatives to facilitate its enforcement. The EU development assistance to Niger was predicated on the country's commitment to curb northbound migration flows. Between 2015 and 2022, the EU financed 19 projects in Niger for a total of 687 million euro, with most of the funds allocated to enhancing border surveillance, law enforcement<sup>19</sup> and technical and financial

support to Niger's security forces. For instance, in 2017, joint investigative teams involving Spanish and French police worked with Nigerien police to prosecute cases of migrant smuggling.<sup>20</sup> From 2017 to 2019, these operations resulted in the arrests of 200 individuals.<sup>21</sup>

In 2018, a modern border post was constructed 18 km from the city of Kantchari, between Burkina Faso and Niger, to prevent irregular migration. This location was considered strategically significant for the IOM and European migration management structures. The border post was equipped with biometric technologies, including fingerprinting systems, which sent information directly to the European database.<sup>22</sup> According to Donko and co-authors, the EU's migration management in West Africa "led to technologically advanced and heavily militarized border posts and border territories, jeopardizing the visa-free regime, freedom of settlement, and cross-border economies within ECOWAS" (Donko, Doevenspeck & Beisel, 2022). Unsurprisingly, in 2020, the border post was entirely destroyed during an armed attack,<sup>23</sup> as its existence was perceived by the local population as interference

<sup>16</sup> Zandoni G. The Monday That Changed Migration in Niger // Open Migration. January 15, 2018. URL: <https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/the-monday-that-changed-migration-in-niger/> (accessed: 18.03.2024).

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel S., Rijks B. Migration Trends from, to and Within Niger: 2016–2019 // International Organization for Migration Niger. 2020. URL: <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom-niger-four-year-report.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2024).

<sup>18</sup> Arhin-Sam K., Lambert L. Niger: The Gate to the Sahel // Brot für die Welt. April 2023. URL: [https://www.misereor.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload\\_misereor/publication/en/human\\_rights/country-brief-migration-partnership-niger.pdf](https://www.misereor.org/fileadmin/user_upload_misereor/publication/en/human_rights/country-brief-migration-partnership-niger.pdf) (accessed: 18.03.2024).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Press Release: Strengthening Cooperation in the Fight Against Migrant Smuggling: The European Union and Niger Launch Operational Partnership to Tackle Migrant Smuggling // European Commission. July 15, 2022. URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_4536](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_4536) (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>21</sup> Jegen L., Zanker F. European Dominance of Migration Policy in Niger // MEDAM Policy Brief. 2019 (September). No. 3. URL: [https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/3d9fe9b8-bf6e-49be-a516-7f705f97151c-MEDAM\\_PB\\_2019\\_3\\_European\\_dominance\\_of\\_migration\\_policyin\\_Niger.pdf](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/3d9fe9b8-bf6e-49be-a516-7f705f97151c-MEDAM_PB_2019_3_European_dominance_of_migration_policyin_Niger.pdf) (accessed: 20.03.2024).

<sup>22</sup> Doevenspeck M., Donko K., Beisel U. Migration Controls at the Burkina Faso — Niger Borderland Reveal European Attitudes to African Livelihoods // LSE. January 7, 2022. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/01/07/migration-controls-at-the-burkina-faso-niger-borderland-reveal-european-attitudes-to-african-livelihoods/> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

in regional politics and economies by external actors.

The EU also financed vocational retraining programs in Niger. In 2017, the EU allocated 3.5 million euro to Niger to “mitigate the economic impact of reduced irregular migration flows on the local economy in the Agadez region, focusing on job creation.”<sup>24</sup> Despite this funding, the policy did not yield the desired results, with only 300 people benefiting from the program. The program’s low effectiveness was partly attributed to the exclusion of smugglers and transporters, whose previous activities had been classified as “criminal”<sup>25</sup> by the European Union.

Following the adoption of the law, police and border-control forces from the EU member states began establishing offices in Niger, providing training to local authorities, thereby laying the groundwork for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (*Frontex*) operations in the country. In 2018, *Frontex* established a Risk Analysis Cell in Niger, aimed at “collecting and analyzing strategic data on transborder crime in various African countries and supporting relevant agencies involved in border management,” including the sharing of data with *Frontex*.<sup>26</sup>

The growing migration-related interaction between the EU and Niger unfortunately disregarded local traditions of intraregional mobility, criminalized northbound cross-border

migrations, and generally ignored the dynamics of regional mobility. This had a negative impact on the free movement of citizens within ECOWAS (Arhin-Sam et al., 2022). A vivid example of this was the deportation of over a thousand Nigeriens from Senegal in early 2022. While “deportations within ECOWAS are not new, it is notable that recent deportations occurred amid external actors’ influence, funding restrictive migration policies.”<sup>27</sup>

In July 2023, a military coup occurred in Niger, during which several factions of the armed forces seized power, suspended the constitution, and placed President Mohamed Bazoum under house arrest. According to observers from the *Journal of Political Inquiry*, the coup was a direct result of public dissatisfaction with President Bazoum’s cooperation with the EU on migration, particularly the externalization of EU borders.<sup>28</sup>

While the coup initially received public support in Niger, the European Union condemned it and, together with ECOWAS, imposed sanctions. These included reduced electricity supplies from Nigeria,<sup>29</sup> halted development aid payments,<sup>30</sup> suspended

<sup>24</sup> CTR — Projet d’Appui à la Stabilité Socioéconomique dans la Région d’Agadez/PASSERAZ // Akvo RSR. 2018. URL: <https://eutf.akvoapp.org/dir/project/5922> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>25</sup> Chahuneau L. Niger’s Repeal of Migrant Smuggling Law Prompts EU Fears over Curbing Immigration // France 24. December 4, 2023. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20231204-niger-s-repeal-of-migrant-smuggling-law-sets-back-eu-efforts-to-curb-immigration-flows> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>26</sup> EU: Commission Halts Migration Cooperation with Niger, But for How Long? // Statewatch. September 7, 2023. URL: <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2023/september/eu-commission-halts-migration-cooperation-with-niger-but-for-how-long/> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>27</sup> Bisong A., Jegen A., Mounkaila H. What Does the Regime Change in Niger Mean for Migration Cooperation with the EU? // European Centre for Development Policy Management. September 11, 2023. URL: <https://ecdpm.org/work/what-does-regime-change-niger-mean-migration-cooperation-eu> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>28</sup> Roberts C. The Blurred Lines of Border Management: *Frontex* in Africa // Journal of Political Inquiry. February 27, 2024. URL: <https://jpinyu.com/2024/02/27/the-blurred-lines-of-border-management-frontex-in-africa/> (accessed: 27.03.2024).

<sup>29</sup> Nnodim O., Angbulu S. Niger: Nigeria Cuts Power Supply, ECOWAS Vows to Confront Junta // Punchng. August 3, 2023. URL: <https://punchng.com/niger-nigeria-cuts-power-supply-ecowas-vows-to-confront-junta/> (accessed: 27.03.2024).

<sup>30</sup> West African Central Bank Cancels Niger \$51m Bond Issuance Due to Sanctions // Al Jazeera. July 31, 2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/31/nigers-planned-51-mln-bond-issuance-cancelled-due-to-sanctions> (accessed: 28.03.2024).

security cooperation, and the closure of land and air borders.<sup>31</sup>

The closure of borders negatively impacted migration in the subregion. For example, on the day following the decision to close the borders, migrants from Benin and Niger “were stopped at the border and forced to reach another country by crossing the Niger River under extremely risky conditions. The crossing takes about thirty minutes, and its cost increased tenfold from 500 to 5,000 CFA francs (less than one euro to 8 euros).”<sup>32</sup>

Benin eased restrictions and reopened its border with Niger after sharp criticism from civil society and the announcement of the lifting of ECOWAS economic sanctions at the end of February 2024. However, Niger kept its border with Benin closed.<sup>33</sup>

It is worth noting that the EU countries hold differing positions on providing humanitarian aid to Niger. While Germany and France have suspended development aid, Denmark has continued to provide it, warning that isolating Niger could lead to even greater population displacement and increased migration to Europe.<sup>34</sup> Italy has also expressed its intention to maintain cooperation with Niger on migration issues. As an EU border country, the Italian government fears that worsening

instability in Niger could negatively affect migration flows to Italy.<sup>35</sup>

In response to the sanctions, Niger repealed Law No. 2015-36, which was aimed at preventing migration flows to Europe. According to a government statement, the law “did not take into account the interests of Niger and its citizens.”<sup>36</sup> The people of Niger welcomed the new government’s decision, as the majority of residents in the northern regions and the city of Agadez<sup>37</sup> earned their living by transporting migrants.<sup>38</sup> The repeal of the law effectively ended an eight-year security partnership between the European Union and Niger.<sup>39</sup>

### Migration Management Models and National Interests

Migration management today refers to a complex system of national measures aimed at developing labour markets and providing opportunities for resettlement and border crossing. Migration management also includes a state’s participation in bilateral and multinational agreements related to migration. This intricate system must balance economic

<sup>31</sup> Final Communiqué of the Fifty First Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Niger // ECOWAS. July 30, 2023. URL: [https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Final-Communiqué\\_ENG-2\\_230730\\_161029.pdf](https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Final-Communiqué_ENG-2_230730_161029.pdf) (accessed: 15.12.2024).

<sup>32</sup> Imorou A.-B. At the Expense of the Population // Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. December 18, 2024. URL: <https://www.fes.de/en/stiftung/international-work/articles-international-work/closure-of-the-border-between-benin-and-niger> (accessed: 20.12.2024).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Denmark Resumes Its Development Aid to Niger // Africanews. September 19, 2023. URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/09/19/denmark-resumes-its-development-aid-to-niger/> (accessed: 28.03.2024).

<sup>35</sup> Cafiero G. Italy’s Cautious Approach Towards Niger’s Political Crisis // The New Arab. August 31, 2023. URL: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/italys-cautious-approach-towards-nigers-political-crisis?amp> (accessed: 28.03.2024).

<sup>36</sup> Niger Junta Revokes Law Aimed at Curbing Migration to Europe // Infomigrants. November 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/53518/niger-junta-revokes-law-aimed-at-curbing-migration-to-europe> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>37</sup> Agadez has long been a transit town for migrants from West and Central Africa heading towards the Mediterranean.

<sup>38</sup> EU — Niger Migration Cooperation at Risk // Pub Affairs Bruxelles. January 4, 2024. URL: <https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-in-the-media/eu-niger-migration-cooperation-at-risk/> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

<sup>39</sup> Adetayo O. Niger Repeal of Anti-Migration Law Applauded as One Less ‘Colonial Fetter’ // Al Jazeera. November 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/28/niger-repeal-of-anti-migration-law-applauded-as-one-less-colonial-fetter> (accessed: 14.03.2024).



interests, humanitarian considerations, and security concerns.

Migration management systems are influenced by various factors. For instance, Bangladesh and Australia have developed models of migration management with strong state control, combining regulation with facilitation of movement to ensure orderly migration. Conversely, business-oriented models with minimal state involvement, driven by labour demand in destination countries, are characteristic of nations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Other examples include bilateral migration systems that enable preferential migration between two countries, among other models.

ECOWAS, like the EU, is based on a regional model, with its core principle being collective mobility management by the member states. In implementing this principle, the member-states develop common standards for protecting migrants' rights and managing borders. Consequently, migration management is a complex mechanism in any national context, making its reconstruction challenging — a process currently unfolding in the Alliance countries.

Unlike, for example, the UK's withdrawal from the EU, which took more than five years, the Alliance states — in response to joint EU — ECOWAS sanctions — declared their withdrawal from ECOWAS as “immediate,” violating ECOWAS provisions that require a one-year notice of withdrawal. This undoubtedly created significant issues for the traditionally mobile population conducting business and living outside their countries of origin in the region. Therefore, the Alliance countries will probably need to quickly select one of the existing migration models for further national development.

One possible model for regional mobility management in the future could involve a return to bilateral agreements with individual countries. This reliable solution requires the goodwill of neighbouring states, professional

diplomacy, and the creation of state structures to support these agreements. Another possible scenario for managing external migration flows from Niger to the EU countries might involve bilateral agreements between Niger and interested the EU member states.

An alternative migration regulation model could involve the complete abolition of visas, as seen in Rwanda and Kenya. However, such a radical decision might not be appropriate for countries with unstable security conditions.

An important regional instrument for cross-border mobility could be the African Union Protocol on Free Movement, signed by 32 countries, including ASS countries.<sup>40</sup> However, only four countries, including Mali and Niger, have ratified it, with a minimum of 15 required for it to come into force. The ratification of this protocol could therefore be a first step towards the creation of a new migration management model, allowing cooperation on free movement to continue regardless of the situation within ECOWAS (Hirsch, 2021). However, this appears unlikely in the near future.

It is also worth noting that the Alliance countries remain part of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU),<sup>41</sup> which is based on a common currency — the CFA franc (Zhambikov, 2020). The regional monetary union also includes provisions for the free movement of people and goods between member states. However, the countries that exited ECOWAS have adopted

<sup>40</sup> Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment // African Union. August 8, 2023. URL: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36403-sl-PROTOCOL\\_TO\\_THE\\_TREATY\\_ESTABLISHING\\_THE\\_AFRICAN\\_ECONOMIC\\_COMMUNITY\\_RELATING\\_TO\\_FREE\\_MOVEMENT\\_OF\\_PERSONS-1.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36403-sl-PROTOCOL_TO_THE_TREATY_ESTABLISHING_THE_AFRICAN_ECONOMIC_COMMUNITY_RELATING_TO_FREE_MOVEMENT_OF_PERSONS-1.pdf) (accessed: 07.10.2024).

<sup>41</sup> Le Traité Modifié de l'Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA) // Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine. URL: <https://www.uemoa.int/traite-modifie> (accessed: 07.10.2024).

anti-imperialist rhetoric, viewing the monetary union as another instrument tool of external influence.

This observation brings us to the crucial question: Do West African countries have a clear understanding of their national interests in forming a new migration management system? (Thomas & Mara, 2024). Many experts agree that recent migration policies and laws primarily serve the interests of European countries striving to reduce irregular migration to Europe (Bisong, 2019). The ultimate goal of the policies of *Frontex* and other organizations in West Africa is to externalize migration management to the African continent, creating obstacles for migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, this “containment” policy brings little benefit to African countries (Hahonou & Olsen, 2021), as it directly contradicts regional integration goals and creates additional opportunities for human rights violations. A deeper exploration of the causes and drivers of migration at the local level (Moyo, Laine & Nshimbi, 2021) would be more beneficial than constructing various barriers at borders.

### Conclusion

The issue of irregular mass migrations is one of the most critical challenges of our time, and it cannot be resolved without considering the interests of the populations of both the sending and receiving countries. This article has examined how the dominance of receiving countries’ interests can generate new risks to the stability and integrity of sending and transit countries, as well as pose threats to the lives of migrants themselves.

International cooperation on migration management within ECOWAS over the past decade has remained unequal, subordinated to the EU’s demands to reduce migration activity through and into its member states in exchange for funding. This imbalance has contributed significantly to political instability in the region.

By focusing on the European Union’s role in the “normalization” of migration in Sub-Saharan Africa, we analysed how these efforts have exacerbated the crisis within ECOWAS. The worsening political and economic situation in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, compounded by ECOWAS sanctions, has led to significant changes in interstate relations and migration flows, creating new challenges for regional stability.

The article paid particular attention to the migration dynamics in Niger, where pre-existing problems were intensified by the implementation of a law adopted under EU pressure. Following the announcement of the Alliance’s formation, the EU responded with countermeasures, including sanctions and the suspension of development aid and security cooperation, further destabilizing Niger and pushing the country toward economic collapse. The article also notes that the EU’s decisions were not unanimous. Some European countries, such as Denmark and Italy — Italy being a primary destination for irregular migrants along the Mediterranean route — advocated for continued cooperation with Niger, arguing that disengagement could worsen migration pressure in Europe.

It is clear that informal migrations from the Sahel region pose numerous security threats in both transit and destination countries, while also endangering the lives of migrants. However, ineffective policies — stemming from a lack of understanding of the importance of regional migration for African countries, the criminalization of cross-border businesses, and investments solely in border fortifications — cannot solve migration problems. Instead, such policies create new threats to the cohesion of regional unions and the stability of African governments.

The article also explores possible models of regional mobility and emphasizes the importance of African countries developing their own migration management strategies,

prioritizing the needs of their populations. The European Union and its agencies, in turn, must reconsider their role in managing regional migration in Sahel. As we have tried to demonstrate, *Frontex* does not regard Niger or any of its West African partners as sovereign states, but rather as transit points for migrants. Therefore, the EU should aim to contribute to building a regional security system not solely guided by its own interests, but based on partnership, treating African countries as equal participants in managing migration flows.

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