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From the “laboratory” to the “arena”: the EU’s quest for maturity and the instrumentalisation of conflict in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s the EU has used African conflicts as “laboratories” to develop its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and to mature its profile as a security actor; half of all CSDP missions have been deployed on the continent. However, the ineffectiveness of these missions, accusations of neocolonialism and the increasing appeal of Russian security assistance have raised fundamental questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of the CSDP model. Using a postcolonial decentring framework, which facilitates a clearer focus on African agency, I analyse why the EU has been unable to make sense of Russia’s increasingly prominent role in African security. Through interviews with EU staff, document analysis and fieldwork in Mali, this paper explores how the EU’s instrumentalisation of Africa as a “laboratory” – which positioned the continent as a depoliticised testing ground, with limited regard for the effectiveness of these tests – has had counterproductive effects on its long-term influence. It has left the EU unable to fathom why its geopolitical rivals enjoy popularity in Africa or to respond appropriately. In its preoccupation with its own maturation process, the EU has disregarded the agency of Africans and this myopia has been deliberately exploited by Russia.

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Introduction

In April 2022, less than two months after Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU announced their suspension of EUTM Mali, one of their longest running CSDP missions. EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell argued that the EU had no choice but to freeze their assistance, after Mali had invited the Russian private military company the Wagner group to conduct counterterrorism operations with them. The Malian government did not provide “sufficient guarantees” that EU-trained Malian soldiers would not work with the “notorious Wagner group” which Borrell argued “is responsible for some very serious events which have led to tens of people being killed in Mali in recent times” (Deutsche Welle 2022). At the same time as policymakers and scholars proclaimed

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a “Zeitenwende” in European foreign policy following the invasion of Ukraine, with the EU more able to project force and act to defend its “values and interests”, the EU struggled to make sense of Russia’s increasing popularity in Africa. Three of the countries where the EU had been closely engaged in crisis management and peacebuilding – Mali, Niger and the Central African Republic (CAR) – had chosen to pursue closer ties with the EU’s greatest international adversary.

Contributing to this special issue on “maturation” in EU foreign policy, this article asks why the EU has been unable to make sense of Russia’s increasingly prominent role in African security (Maurer *et al.* 2024). Using a postcolonial decentring framework, I argue that the EU has long seen its interventions in African conflicts as “laboratories” by which it can test out ways to “mature” itself as a security actor. Absorbed with performing its actorness in Africa, the EU had limited regard for the effectiveness of its operations. When the Wagner group began to intervene on the continent, the EU increasingly viewed Africa as an “arena” of geopolitical contestation, paying special attention to Russian disinformation. This article problematises the EU’s preoccupation with its “maturation” journey and turns the focus onto those subject to the EU’s interventions and experiments. I argue that by instrumentalising Africa first as a “laboratory” and then as an “arena” of Russian or great power influence, the EU has been unable to make sense of the current political landscape. Despite its repeated rhetoric of building equal partnerships, I argue that the coloniality of the EU’s outlook has rendered it unable to recognise the agency of African countries as more than recipients of EU interventions, as they look to make their own choices about their international partnerships (EEAS 2017, European Commission 2020, Council of the EU 2024).

While contributions in this special issue have explored the ways “maturation” can better enable researchers to understand the EU’s foreign policy trajectory, maturation as a focus of EU foreign policy practice as well as a framework for analysis has limits. Not only can “maturation” imply that the development of a foreign policy must follow a prescribed course with certain stages and usually a limited conception of what a “mature” actor might constitute – typically a readiness to use “hard power” and military means – but a fixation on maturation can also sustain an insular focus on evaluating the EU’s development without equally considering the EU’s impact and the perceptions of this impact on recipient countries. The scholarship on EU “actorness” has previously been criticised for this reason (Keuleers *et al.* 2016). A postcolonial decentring agenda and a focus on African agency facilitate a clearer analysis of why some of the EU’s African partners have turned to assistance from Russia and why the EU’s preoccupation with its own maturation had counterproductive effects on its long-term influence.

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with EU staff working on CSDP in Africa as well as field observations made during a trip to Bamako, Mali in June 2023. I also use analysis of EU public documents such as reports and speeches as well as engagement with secondary literature based on research on the ground. The article will proceed in five parts, following a decentring logic whereby I interrogate the EU’s discourses about African conflicts and then provincialise them, drawing on countervailing discourses from within Africa. First, I will outline the postcolonial and decentring research agendas as my theoretical framework to make sense of the EU’s approach to crisis management in Africa. Then I will analyse the discourse of African conflicts as “laboratories” for CSDP, arguing that this discourse bears the traces of colonial histories. The final two

sections will examine the (re)emergence of Russia in Africa, problematising the EU's response and situating Russia's appeal to anti-imperial and pan-African attitudes within a historical context. The conclusion will summarise my argument and contend that the EU's relations with Africa cannot develop into anything new unless the EU properly addresses and engages with the legacy of Europe's colonial past.

Postcolonial theory and the “decentring” agenda

Postcolonial theory, broadly conceived, provides analytical frameworks for understanding the enduring influence of colonial structures on global politics, economy and society and the constraints it imposes on formerly colonised countries as well as on former imperial powers (Sebhatu 2020). Postcolonial scholars, through examining the psychological effects of colonialism (Fanon 1963), cultural representation (Said 1978) and epistemic violence (Spivak 1999), have analysed the continuing reproduction of colonial hierarchies and how to work towards postcoloniality, or transcending the global imperial past (Sebhatu 2020). Postcolonial scholars equally question Eurocentrism, or “the sensibility that Europe is historically, economically, culturally and politically distinctive in ways that significantly determine the overall character of world politics” (Sabaratnam 2013, p. 261). They interrogate the validity and universality of European knowledge systems and analytical frameworks as applied to the Global South.

Postcolonial approaches arrived late to the study of EU foreign policy, partly, as Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis argue, due to mythologies about the “virgin birth” of the EU – a founding myth that the EU is an international actor unblemished by the colonial histories of its member states – and the perception that debates about the legacy of European colonialism do not apply to the EU (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis 2013). Employing postcolonial theory, they proposed a three-part toolkit for decolonising the study of EU foreign policy (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis 2013, Nicolaidis *et al.* 2014). First, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe*, Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar advocate for “provincialising” the EU, or recognising the specificity rather than the universality of Europe's viewpoint (Chakrabarty 2000). Second, they advocate for “engagement” with the perspectives of the “other” in the Global South, or the “recipients” of EU external action. One of the central assumptions of the decentring agenda is that it is impossible to study the implementation of EU foreign policy without understanding the perceptions of non-European actors and their impact on EU foreign policy (Colomba-Petteng 2023). Finally, they argue for “reconstruction”, which requires researchers to “recognize historical patterns underpinning the EU's external relations” and explore a more decentred approach to EU foreign affairs based on mutuality and empowerment (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis 2013, p. 286). This argument stimulated a “decentring agenda” in the study of EU foreign policy, as a way to re-imagine European agency in the world (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018, Wolff *et al.* 2022). The decentring toolkit has been applied to EU external action in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America, with many scholars focussing on “engagement” from the “outside in”, bringing perspectives from non-European “recipients” of EU foreign policy into the conversation.¹

The postcolonial and decentring research agendas offer two important tools which have guided my analysis of EU crisis management in Africa. First, this scholarship provides a framework for *historicising*: situating EU foreign policy discourses within their

(post)colonial context which enables the scholar to *identify the continuities of colonial structures and hierarchies* – conscious or unconscious – that continue to influence EU foreign policymaking today. Interrogating the myth of the EU’s “virgin birth”, this literature argues that the EU is not a new actor unblemished by the colonial past of its member states, but a continuation of it. Postcolonial scholars argue that it is impossible to fully understand EU foreign policy, its impacts and its deficiencies, without including an analysis of the history of European colonialism. As Carbone argues: “embracing the decentring agenda means accepting that the ‘EU project’ is inextricably linked to the colonial part of European states and its consequences” (Carbone 2023, p. 543). Through archival research, Hansen and Jonsson have illuminated how the formation of the European single market was rooted in the objective of founding member states to retain their colonial possessions (Hansen and Jonsson 2014). For France, European integration explicitly served the purpose of reinforcing ties with Algeria – which was brought into the European Community – as the rest of its African empire unravelled (Brown 2022, Marker 2022). From its foundation, the EU was implicated in the colonial policies of its member states and occupied a superior position within the imperial hierarchy of the international system.

Accordingly, scholars have approached contemporary EU–Africa relations through the lens of “coloniality” or the enduring hierarchies, mindsets and “deep structures that maintain colonial legacies and their discursive power” (Sebhatu 2020, p. 42, Haastrup *et al.* 2021, Ndlovu-Gatsheni *et al.* 2022). Haastrup *et al.* have analysed the EU’s reluctance to agree to a more reciprocal trade relationship away from the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) model as rooted in their attachment to colonial hierarchies or the “coloniality of power” (Haastrup *et al.* 2021). There is a growing literature that has examined how colonial hierarchies and modes of racialised othering are constitutive of EU border, migration and counterterrorism policies, and are also apparent in EU strategic documents (Stern 2011, Kinnvall 2016, Bhambra 2017, Telford 2018, Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019, Pallister-Wilkins 2022, Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023). For instance, Kinnvall examines how EU border regimes are informed by and entrench racialised hierarchies rooted in colonial histories by essentialising a “‘pure’ mythologized nation” or European civilisation under attack by outside “others” (Kinnvall 2016, p. 159). Even though EU foreign policy is constituted by European coloniality, research historicising EU policies that centres the persistence of colonialism’s “deep structure” is relatively sparse (Dimitrovova and Kramsch 2017, Aydın-Düzgit *et al.* 2020). Hoijsink *et al.*’s recent special issue has highlighted “that the wider scholarship on EU security has hardly studied the constitutive nature of coloniality in European security and the racialised and gendered relations that EU security policy reproduces” (Hoijsink *et al.* 2023).

Second, the decentring agenda necessitates a strong focus on the *agency of the targets of EU foreign policy* as more than passive recipients whose choices are dictated to by foreign powers (Carbone 2023). The literature on African agency in international relations problematises accounts of Africa as simply a site for external actors to play out their rivalries (Brown and Harman 2013, Bischoff *et al.* 2015, Chipaike and Knowledge 2018, Fisher 2018, Haastrup *et al.* 2020, Soulé 2020, Coffie and Tiky 2021). African agency in the international context refers to the way in which African actors navigate the international system to “negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves” (Chipaike and Knowledge 2018, p. 1). It involves taking “African politics, actions, preferences, strategies and purposes seriously, to

move past the tired tropes of an Africa that is victimised, chaotic, violent and poor” (Brown and Harman 2013, pp. 1–2). By focussing on what Africans have to say about their own international affairs, decentring is better able to *identify, problematise and provincialise* Eurocentric narratives. As this article will demonstrate, the EU’s preoccupation with its actorness and “maturation” has left EU policymakers unable to understand and respond to key political developments, even where they directly impact EU policies. Drawing on the decentring toolkit, I will situate the EU’s action in African conflicts within Europe’s colonial history and politics and provincialise the EU’s foreign policy in order to better understand the failure of and resistance to its interventions.

Through firstly historicising and then provincialising the EU’s discourse on conflict in Africa, the article makes the argument that the EU has been unable to make sense of the increasing appeal of Russian assistance in Africa because, preoccupied with its own maturation, it has overlooked African agency and disregarded domestic African perceptions of their programmes. Drawing on interview data and analysis of EU documents, this article proceeds to problematise and provincialise the EU’s approaches to African conflicts in three further sections. The next section will interrogate and historicise the EU’s discourse on African conflicts in the 2000s and early 2010s, which positioned Africa as a “laboratory of experimentation” for the EU to mature its security assistance model. This discourse reflects a colonial instrumentalisation of Africa as a laboratory and shows limited regard for the consequences of this experimentation. Then the article will focus on the EU’s shift to view Africa as an arena of geopolitical competition. Here I argue that the EU has similarly overlooked African agency by blaming disinformation as the cause of Russia’s increased popularity, rather than taking seriously the beliefs of many African citizens that Russia poses a genuine, anti-imperial alternative to what many see as failed Western security assistance programmes. This widening gap in perceptions is causing the EU to further lose credibility in Africa.

Africa as an “experimental laboratory” for CSDP maturation

CSDP is the EU’s signature crisis management policy for responding to foreign conflicts. It enables the EU to conduct training and capacity building to build up skills in both the military and civilian forces of foreign countries, as well as monitoring elections and conducting maritime operations. One of the EU’s first CSDP missions was launched in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2003, and since then 22 out of 41 CSDP missions have been deployed on the African continent (Meijnders and Zandee 2015). The EU’s experience in African contexts has shaped the growth and development of CSDP (Norheim-Martinsen 2012). For instance, the EU’s early deployment in the DRC was instrumental in the EU’s development of Security Sector Reform (SSR) doctrine (Piccolino 2010, Arnould and Vlassenroot 2016). Operation Artemis in 2003 was deployed largely at the initiative of France and the UK, who agreed to test the EU’s CSDP framework (then called ESDP) in response to conflict in the Ituri province, uniting EU member states behind a common foreign policy goal in the aftermath of the divisions of the Iraq war (Ulriksen *et al.* 2004). The EU began to use development funding for “political” reforms such as for programmes to reinforce the rule of law, which it began in the early 2000s,

and paved the way for the EU's first civilian mission to train an Integrated Police Unit: EUPOL Kinshasa (Gibert 2017).

Intervention in the DRC was seen as an opportunity to test out the EU's newly created peace and security architecture (Bagoyoko and Gibert 2007, Helly 2009, Vines 2010, Gibert and Nivet 2013). The EU's engagement on the civilian level with the rule of law fed into the SSR doctrine increasingly advocated by the UK, EU, OECD and UN in the early 2000s, where officials increasingly emphasised the need for reforms in the rule of law and democratic accountability within the armed forces (Fitz Gerald 2010, p. 155, Faleg 2012). The EU's early intervention in DRC was recognised at the time as an opportunity for experimentation. In 2007 the former Force Commander of EUFOR DRC Major General Christian Damay described the mission as "a 'laboratory' for the ESDP" where the EU could learn lessons about the standardisation of materials, the harmonisation of military regulations and communications (Security and Defence Agenda 2007, p. 9). In a roundtable, EU officials involved in the intervention claimed that "the Congolese crisis has functioned as a political testing ground for the EU to design new forms of intervention" (Security and Defence Agenda 2007, p. 34). Describing a crisis as a "testing ground" is reflective of the instrumentalisation of African conflicts for EU internal goals. The EU was not just intervening to resolve an escalating security and humanitarian crisis; there was a clear motive to experiment with new tools through trial and error.

Following its experience in the DRC, the EU went on to experiment in other African conflicts. This includes deploying a naval CSDP operation following an escalation in international concerns about piracy along the Somali coast. The EU launched its first-ever maritime CSDP operation – EU NAVFOR Atalanta – in 2008 to escort World Food Programme and other vessels along the Somali coastline. These efforts were soon supplemented with EU engagement on land with the military training mission EUTM Somalia which departed from previous missions, which had focused on peacekeeping, as the EU's first training and military capacity building mission (Bergmann and Müller 2021). The EU's 2011 "Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa" became a "test case" for the "comprehensive approach" it was putting into action, where CSDP missions, its maritime operation and development actions managed by the European Commission would work together on an operational basis toward shared goals (Styan 2017). The EU's maritime experience in the Horn of Africa became the basis for the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy, where it set out its strategic interests for oceans in its vicinity, and Atalanta provided the template for EU NAVFOR Operation Sophia, launched in the Mediterranean (Styan 2017).

The "experimentation" logic is most evident in the EU's intervention in the Sahel, which is frequently labelled a "laboratory of experimentation" for EU security policy by practitioners and some observers (Lopez Lucia 2017, Venturi 2017, Tagliapietra 2020, Goxho and Guichaoua 2022). The EU has intervened in the Sahel conflict since 2011, publishing its Sahel Strategy for security and development in that year and launching three CSDP missions – EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali – in 2012, 2013 and 2014, respectively. EU officials described their 2011 Sahel Strategy as an "experiment" in creating a "real" foreign policy strategy, integrating every dimension of EU action from humanitarian to development to CSDP (Lopez Lucia 2017). Since the topic of migration through the Sahara increased in political salience in 2015, development funding was increasingly diverted to "tackling the root causes of migration" through vehicles like the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) (Zardo 2022). With a vast

array of missions and programmes deployed on the ground, the Sahel was widely cited as a “laboratory” for a security-development-migration nexus, wherein CSDP missions would work with development projects on initiatives focused on preventing migration (Venturi 2017). Improved collaboration between the different arms of EU crisis response, for instance between development and humanitarian directorates on the Sahel conflict, has been described by EU officials as an “act of maturity” (Helly and Galeazzi 2015). This reflects a self-conscious focus from EU officials on the EU’s “maturation” and development, as well as an understanding within the EU that acting cohesively – more like a state – is evidence of this maturity.

As the violence in Mali worsened after 2017, the EU decided to “test” more new tools to stabilise the conflict. The EU’s Article 28 Stabilisation Action, for instance, brought political, development and military actors into a project which aimed to rebuild administrative structures in central Mali. The stabilisation action was deemed “a great tool to operationalise the integrated approach” (Lebovich 2018). “Integration” is central to the EU’s maturation discourse; the desired end state for the EU is to become a cohesive, unified, coherent foreign policy actor. Some EU officials made the case that integration of different arms of the EU’s foreign policy would make the EU more effective as a crisis manager:

The Sahel is a pilot case of the integrated approach ... The ambition was to try and make sure that the EU uses its instruments, its policies in an integrated way to maximise the impact of their engagement in the Sahel. (Interview 4 2023)

However, others argued experimentation in the Sahel did not produce an effective intervention: “If you are experimenting and you know the reality in the field, you know it is certainly not effective” (Interview 1 2023). The EU did not design its policies intentionally to fail, but staff exhibited a clear awareness that the missions are ineffective. Rather, the missions had the second function of also testing ways to boost the EU’s profile as a crisis manager. Another official working on the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) argued that impact on this conflict was “not the point”: “we are constructing the European Union [through the EUTF] ... and in doing so, we are putting the EU in a position to be recognised as a security actor, which it was not four years ago” (Interview 5 2019). The idea of coherence and integration became an end in itself as a way for the EU to mature as a foreign policy actor, and the EU’s self-actualisation became as important an objective as effectively resolving the conflict. The EU’s Article 28 Stabilisation Action in Mali was disbanded after only a year without achieving any of its operational objectives of restoring state authority. It was deployed without adequate consideration of the situation on the ground; there was too much violence in central Mali for the EU’s experts to be able to work there consistently (Lopez Lucia 2019, p. 36). When the action was terminated early in the spring of 2019, intercommunal violence and attacks from Islamist groups in central Mali reached unprecedented levels.

These “experiments” in Africa in the 2000s and 2010s reflect a broader logic of experimentation, trial, and error, in Western and multilateral peace operations across the continent. The scale of the EU as well as UN presence in Africa during this period compared to other regions of the world reflected an assumption that Africa was a broadly European sphere of influence where they could try out new peacebuilding operations. As Tardy and Wyss have argued:

From the end of the Cold War, the number of peacekeeping operations in Africa strikingly increased – more than on any other continent. As a result, Africa has developed into an experimental laboratory, in which many of today's peacekeeping norms and practices came into existence. (Tardy and Wyss 2014, p. 3)

European countries and the EU were also involved in managing conflicts in the Middle East during the “War on Terror” period, however conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan had significant “great power” involvement and conflict management in Iraq and Afghanistan was dominated by large-scale US-led interventions. In contrast, European policymakers in the 2000s and 2010s viewed Africa as a geopolitics-free space in which the EU could intervene and experiment, extracting lessons and knowledge from these experiences to develop a more coherent crisis management toolkit. Africa's proximity to the EU's borders and the longstanding interest of certain member states in their former colonies also facilitated this heavier engagement (Meijnders and Zandee 2015, Nováky 2016, Gegout 2017).

However, the African conflicts where the EU has been particularly active – the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and the central Sahel – have not stabilised. The Sahel conflict has dramatically escalated and spread southwards since 2012 (Nsaibia 2022). The conflict in the CAR continued to deteriorate despite extensive international intervention (Council on Foreign Relations 2023). The conflict in the DRC has continued to spiral, and when the EU withdrew their CSDP missions in 2016 the situation in the eastern DRC was still highly volatile (Arnould and Vlassenroot 2016). The EU's “success story” of a maritime operation in the Horn of Africa largely tackled the symptoms of violence and poverty in Somalia only insofar as they affected Western shipping interests (Vines 2010). Somalia's civil war has continued – 2022 was a particularly deadly year – and the African Union's EU-funded peacekeeping mission there, AMISOM, is preparing its withdrawal (Hochet-Bodin 2023). EU staff stress that it is beyond their remit to resolve protracted conflicts such as those of the Sahel, CAR and Somalia, and that CSDP missions are small in size and incapable of such objectives; they aim instead to build capacity in African armed forces to resolve these conflicts themselves (Interview 7 2023). A common discourse among EU staff is that recipients themselves are “responsible” for solving conflicts while the EU supports them (Ejdus 2018, Interview 5 2019, Interview 7 2023). Thus while resolving the conflict is a long-term objective of the EU, often it is not the primary objective. Where ending the violence is not the top priority, establishing a presence, experimenting with forging common European action and “maturing” as a security actor rise to the foreground as motivations.

The logic of “experimentation” implies the ability to try and to fail, however, failed tests have consequences: there are always costs which are borne by the populations subject to the experiments. In her ethnography of international statebuilding efforts in Mozambique, Sabaratnam deemed the attitude by which certain conflicts are deemed sites for experimentation “the politics of disposability” (Sabaratnam 2017). Sabaratnam argues that the recipients of intervention were seen by donors as “blank slates”:

the repeated failures and experiments within intervention are not understood by the donors to have any opportunity costs in terms of time or engagement for the counterpart or beneficiaries, so – apart from the financial cost borne by the donor – the failures of intervention are treated as relatively costless. (Sabaratnam 2017, p. 134)

This “politics of disposability” bears the legacy of a colonial hierarchy whereby Africa is seen as a less consequential space, whereby Africa is a continent shaped and designed by external forces and where Africans have little agency of their own (Sabaratnam 2017). While CSDP missions, like EU assistance programmes, can only take place with the explicit agreement of the authorities EU policymakers implicitly assumed that given their comparative lack of resources, Africans would take the assistance that they were offered. In Mali and Niger, for instance, EU staff argued that given the great demand for aid in these countries in the 2010s, the authorities agreed to whatever kind of assistance the EU was willing to give: “Niger will take money from donors because they need it: they will always take what we offer” (Interview 8 2023). Others argued: “It is the culture of Africans to say yes to everything because it’s not polite to refuse” (Interview 9 2023). As a result, the EU’s presence was not contested and it was free to experiment with new crisis management tools.

There has not yet been a full discussion of the political consequences – as well as the financial costs – of failed CSDP missions or crisis management experiments in Africa; loss of time, funds and loss of the goodwill of the recipients of these experiments as conflicts continue to claim lives. As I will demonstrate, the long-running presence of Western interventions without a clear impact on the conflict has contributed to growing accusations of failure from the recipients of these interventions. From the perspective of Mali and the CAR in particular, Europeans have failed to bring about lasting peace: citizens have seen a heavy international and European presence but, at the same time, a worsening of the conflict. Under the logic of experimentation, the EU opted to remain involved in conflicts in Africa to try out new policies, while making very limited or no progress in improving the conflict for the citizens of these countries. These long-running interventions are now reckoning with public anger at their failure to improve conflict conditions as alternative military partners become increasingly popular. The EU’s maturation as a crisis manager in Africa did not happen in a vacuum but in a complex historical and social context in which Africans are capable of evaluating the impact of external interventions on their own terms.

The EU’s logic bears the traces of a long colonial history of treating Africa as a laboratory for European advancement. Tilley’s *Africa as a Living Laboratory* demonstrates how British colonisers used the African continent for a variety of research campaigns, in natural as well as human sciences. The British established a large veterinary and agricultural centre in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) to conduct field experiments (Tilley 2011, p. 139). The African Survey, carried out in the 1930s, demonstrated the value the British put on Africa as a site for knowledge extraction and research on human development and the natural sciences. (Tilley 2011, p. 5). Colonial administrators at this time were keen to “improve” the populations they governed in Africa through welfare and development and to learn lessons in Africa that could be applied across their colonies. The survey influenced colonial policy across the British Empire – and ultimately the passage of the Colonial Development Welfare Act – and the results were shared with French and Belgian colonial administrations (Tilley 2011, p. 73).

European programmes to extract scientific or sociological knowledge from colonial Africa, while often serving a higher cause of development or improvement, were also premised on the disposability of African lives as subjects for experimentation. African colonies were instrumentalised by European administrations as laboratories in a literal

sense, with Africans as “captive subjects” for medical experimentation (Tilley 2011, p. 14). In 1906, Robert Koch set up “human laboratories” in German East Africa (now Tanzania) to trial the drug Atoxyl to treat sleeping sickness (Eckart 2002, Chiwanza 2020). Human trials were not approved in Europe and Atoxyl contained arsenic which caused blindness and severe pain in the people Koch injected, many of whom were forced to participate (Erichsen and Olusoga 2011). The failure of these trials was perceived by European administrators as less costly in Africa, whereas the successes could still be used to advance European scientific and technological progress. The risks of the experimentation necessary to achieve European progress were transferred on to the African populations who were the (usually unwilling) subjects. A more recent example of the colonial laboratory logic is France’s use of Algerian land to conduct its first *Gerboise Bleue* nuclear tests in 1960, which elicited the outrage of the authorities in Algeria, Ghana, Tunisia, Morocco and Mali due to the elevated risk of radiation exposure to their populations (Collin and Cooper 2021). Ignoring protests from African diplomats and African students in Europe, the French government saw the risk to African lives as an acceptable cost to fulfil its foreign policy ambitions and advance to the status of global nuclear power (Panchasi 2019, Mezahi 2021).

My aim is not to make a causal argument that EU policymakers are explicitly influenced by nineteenth and earlier twentieth century narratives: decisionmakers and observers who contribute to the EU discourse of “experimentation” in Africa may not be conscious of this colonial legacy. Rather, discourse is “a structure, which is reproduced independently of the motives of the speakers” (Aydın-Düzgit *et al.* 2020, p. 744). EU staff do not have the same motives as colonial administrations who administered foreign rule in the last century and many EU staff come from countries which never had overseas colonies. However, as the postcolonial thinkers of the twentieth century emphasised, colonialism is not just foreign rule but also entails the persistent hierarchies that the imperial system created (Getachew 2019). In this way, the discourse of Africa as a laboratory for European advancement, which originated in the 19th and 20th centuries, persists in a different form today and is reproduced by EU staff which contributes to maintaining a hierarchy rooted in colonialism. European policymakers may not be aware of what they are reproducing; as Roxanne Doty notes, colonial representations of the Global South can “form a sort of cultural unconscious” where the “infinity of traces that leave no inventory continue to play a significant part in contemporary constructions of reality” (Doty 1996, p. 169, Aydın-Düzgit *et al.* 2020). Parallels with European experimentation in the colonial period are important not because EU officials today necessarily view African lives as worthless, but because they can tell us about the way that African societies have been instrumentalised to play a role in “maturing” European societies. Experiments in Africa – in the twentieth century as in the twenty-first century – were not viewed by Europeans as costly, which left them a space for trial and error without obstruction or contestation.

Out of the “laboratory” and into the “arena”

While previously the EU had used Africa as a depoliticised space to test its crisis management policies and develop the profile of its missions, this section demonstrates that the arrival of Russian trainers in Africa raised questions about the validity of EU security

assistance. The first reports of the Wagner Group's African presence emerged in 2017 when mercenaries were sent to Libya, Sudan and Mozambique (Marten 2019). However, Wagner's presence became most established in the CAR. Violence in the CAR continued to intensify despite the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission since 2014, a French-led military operation and two CSDP missions (Carayannis and Lombard 2015, Carayannis and Fowlis 2017). When President Faustin Archange Touadera was elected in 2016, non-governmental militias controlled around four-fifths of the country's territory (Pokalova 2023). Touadera pleaded with the UN to send more equipment and personnel after the departure of French troops, however this assistance did not arrive (Reuters 2017). In 2018 the CAR signed an agreement with the Russian government for military support (Kelly 2018). In 2020, the Wagner Group were instrumental in driving back a coalition of rebel militias from enclosing the capital city of Bangui, which nearly ousted Touadera. Wagner personnel thenceforward became responsible for guarding the president and a former Russian official served as the national security adviser (Ramani 2021). Russia also undertook a public image campaign, funding local radio stations, Russian language and cultural centres and Russian military statues in CAR (ACLEDE 2023). In late 2021, the Malian government contracted Wagner. After a decade of EU and French security and development projects, civilian deaths reached an all-time high in 2020, and anti-French, pro-Russian protests became commonplace. A string of coups followed the military turmoil: first of pro-Western President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020 and then of the military junta that replaced him in May 2021. Mali's current leader Colonel Assimi Goïta stoked popular distrust of the French intervention, expelling the French ambassador and inviting Wagner to conduct counterterrorism operations with the Malian army.

Russian trainers now have a consolidated presence in several sites where the EU were once heavily engaged, also coinciding with an escalation of Russia-EU tensions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While consensus has emerged in the EU that Africa is now an arena for great power competition, there are divisions within EU member states over how to respond to this contestation. While some are more open to trying to maintain a relationship with the authorities in these countries, others favour a harder line and are entirely opposed to training African troops who go on to work with Wagner mercenaries. The EU's incoherent decision-making reflects this lack of consensus. In November 2021 the EU suspended operational training to CAR's armed forces, citing Wagner's presence (Deutsche Welle 2021). In April 2022 the EU announced they would also suspend some aspects of their missions in Mali, citing human rights violations by Malian armed forces and "foreign-fighters" (Council of the EU 2022). EU member states and institutions repeatedly denounced Wagner's human rights violations; in December 2021 the EU imposed sanctions on Wagner over their involvement in human rights abuses in CAR, Sudan, Mozambique, Ukraine, Libya and Syria (European Union 2021). However, disagreement within the Council of the EU led to paralysis, and the mission in Mali remained open until its mandate expired in May 2024, despite having frozen most of its training programmes two years earlier (EEAS 2024). The civilian mission in Mali remains open with reduced activities, as do the CSDP missions in the CAR.

These decisions have not deterred African countries from working with Russian trainers. CAR and Mali both refused to meet the EU's demands that EU-trained soldiers could not work with Wagner (Van der Lijn *et al.* 2022). The authorities in Niger announced

the end of the EU's two CSDP missions in the country in December 2023 (which were in any case suspended after Niger's coup d'état in August) at the same time as the Russian deputy Minister of Defence visited (Wilén 2024). In April 2024, Russian instructors and an air defence system arrived in Niger (France 24 2024). The EU's requirement that no EU-trained personnel could work with Wagner is reflective of a "vacuum" logic whereby rival powers contest each other for influence in different foreign arenas (Jacobsen and Larsen 2023). The EU has exported its approach to relations with Russia following the invasion of Ukraine – sanctions, divestment and public denouncements – to the African context where governing elites have very different perceptions of Russian assistance based on their own history and politics. The EU's logic is not compatible with the way that many African elites view their international partnerships, and overlooks the internal dynamics of each African country which informs their choices.

Scrambling in Africa: striving for maturity, struggling to respond

The governments of Mali and CAR both invited the Wagner group because they believed that they would be able to offer more effective assistance (Jacobsen and Larsen 2023). Wagner's arrival confronted the EU with difficult questions about the appeal of its security assistance model and CSDP. When the EU viewed themselves as the only viable partner for Africa, they were less concerned with how effective their interventions were and more focused on testing projects that enabled their own "maturation" as a security actor. With the arrival of Wagner, the EU was forced to reckon with the possibility that the benefits of hosting a CSDP mission may not be self-evident to African countries. As Josep Borrell remarked in 2023:

We need to improve the effectiveness of our civilian and military missions and operations in supporting our partners. We have learned lessons from the challenges we faced in the Central African Republic and in Mali. In both countries, our missions have not been sufficiently supported by the effort to equip our partners, and the Wagner Group has used this to its advantage. (Agenzia Nova 2023)

The provision of equipment became key to the sensemaking of EU policymakers as a response to the popularity of Wagner: "The Russians came in with guns and then advisers and entered into the vacuum created by the EU because we did not want to provide equipment" (Interview 3 2023). Others argued that accompanying African troops onto the battlefield was key, which Wagner do not hesitate to do (Interview 2 2023). There is now acknowledgement among policymakers that Africa is no longer the EU's experimental space:

When we launched in 2013 it was "the peace dividend", the mindset that we can do what we want in Africa; we are so powerful, without any contestation. And now we have to think a little bit more on how we use our own means. I think we will really succeed if we are able to provide also military equipment. (Interview 1 2023)

The new European Peace Facility (EPF) allows the EU to purchase lethal equipment for the first time, and arms shipments have been deployed to Mauritania, Somalia, DRC and Mozambique as well as Ukraine. Its development roughly coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and became part of the EU "Zeitenwende", whereby Borrell claimed the EU had made "more progress in a week toward the objective of being a global security player

than it had in the previous decade” (Wintour 2023). The EPF was praised by the Chairman of the EU Military Committee as a sign of the EU’s “maturity”: “this is really a cultural and historical shift for the EU, a mature approach in the use of the full toolbox of the Integrated Approach” (Brieger 2022). The equation of “maturity” with the ability to supply lethal weapons speaks to a discourse that the EU should shed its, pacifistic identity and learn to speak the “language of power”, including hard power (Borrell 2020, Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023).

After Mali welcomed Russian security assistance there was widespread hope that the EU could avoid a similar outcome in neighbouring Niger if the EU supplied the material assistance – including weaponry – that the Nigeriens demanded. If the EU acted like a hard power, according to this assumption, it would be more effective and win back the trust of African partners. However the announcement of a €40 million assistance measure to provide lethal equipment to Niger did not prevent a large-scale mutiny in the Nigerien army, widespread anti-French protests and the overthrow of the EU’s close ally President Mohammed Bazoum in a military coup in July 2023 (Council of the EU 2023). In its efforts to “mature” itself as a global security player through military aid, the EU failed to grasp that the declining appeal of Europe’s liberal security assistance model is rooted in deeper political forces than grievances about arms supply. It indicates the EU’s obliviousness to historical and political realities in Africa that cause many African elites and publics to mistrust Europe.

Despite the coup in Niger, the EU has demonstrated a limited ability to reflect on the structural causes of the increasing rejection of the EU’s security assistance model. Instead, EU policymakers began to make the argument that Russian disinformation and manipulation were responsible for a rise in pro-Russian sentiment in Africa. Borrell went as far as to suggest that in reality, anti-French sentiment is not widespread, and made an unsubstantiated claim that pro-Russian protestors in Africa were planted by the Kremlin:

Now is there some anti-French sentiment in Africa? Yes indeed. But is that widespread? No. We don’t see anti-French or anti-European sentiment in that widespread way ... Let’s not over amplify these kinds of messages. Sometimes you see protestors being paid by Russia to say anti-French slogans. (Borrell 2023)

In the Sahel, conspiracy theories on social media are widespread and have proliferated rapidly, and some of these have been traced back to Russian-linked accounts (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2024). These conspiracy theories typically argue that France is an agent of chaos that seeks to work with Tuareg and jihadist groups to divide and weaken Mali and surrounding countries (Sandor 2020, Tull 2021). In the CAR, disinformation campaigns have encouraged violence against the UN peacekeeping mission, and the EU has raised concerns about the safety of its staff in Bangui, who have allegedly been the target of foreign disinformation campaigns (Brzozowski 2023). The European External Action Service has noted that Russian disinformation has targeted CSDP missions in the Sahel and CAR, and has established a liaison team on the issue as part of an effort to step up public communications efforts to counter pro-Russian messaging (EEAS 2022). A dedicated strategic communications Africa Task Force is being set up by the EEAS Strat-Com division (Interview 6 2023).

While there is empirical evidence of a considerably increased circulation of anti-French and anti-European conspiracy theories on social media, the EU’s focus on Russian

disinformation as the cause of its popularity – and claims that pro-Russian protestors are paid puppets – has meant that the EU has not examined the structural conditions within certain African countries that might lead to support for Russia. The EU has also not been able to grasp the extent to which many African publics feel genuinely that the security assistance models offered by the EU’s “systemic rivals” such as Russia are preferable to European and Western multilateral intervention. Africans are not gullible or passive recipients of Russian disinformation – rather, as research on the ground demonstrates and as Africans themselves argue, rumours and anti-Western conspiracy theories are believed because of longstanding grievances and anxieties about European intervention in the region, often rooted in colonial histories.

In the Sahel, research on the ground has shown that anti-Western sentiment is not primarily the result of disinformation, even if it has been fomented by it. Rather, it is “rooted in persistent postcolonial suspicion of France” (Tull 2021, p. 14). Interviews with Nigerien villagers in areas worst affected by conflict have shown that popular anger against French soldiers would appear only after violence had taken place, reflecting grievances that French forces had not protected civilians from attacks by jihadists as local people expected (McCullough 2022). There is a widespread sense of popular disbelief at how a country as powerful and well-equipped as France could not protect civilians from jihadist violence, which facilitated explanations that France must be collaborating with jihadists. In the words of one Malian protestor: “How do you expect us to understand that [France] the fifth world power, with all the technical and technological means at its disposal, cannot stop bandits on motorcycles?” (Maliweb 2020). Conspiracy theories also circulated in Mali that the French army was collaborating with Tuareg insurgents in the north to divide and weaken Mali or exploit resources (Tull 2021). The French colonial administration had a long history of favourable treatment towards Tuareg groups, and when French forces pushed back jihadists in 2013, they did not allow Malian armed forces into Kidal, which led to an increasingly widespread belief that the French were allowing Tuareg insurgents to set up their own state (Tull 2021, Carayol 2023). In CAR, there had been longstanding public anxiety about the ineffectiveness of the French, UN and EU missions which fuelled anti-French sentiment (Lechner and Lamarche 2020). These forces were neither seen to adequately address the CAR’s security issues nor were they perceived by many to be capable of defeating non-governmental armed groups. Moreover, French peacekeepers had also been accused of sexual assault in 2016, which became a domestic grievance (Holmes and White 2023, Ramani 2023). EU narratives that Africans are victims of Russian manipulation deprive Africans of agency and overlook longstanding and legitimate concerns about the effectiveness of Western and European intervention that lie behind the circulation of conspiracy theories. As a former Malian minister and essayist Aminata Dramane Traoré has argued, “fixating on an anti-French sentiment as created and maintained by Russian propaganda is yet another way of telling us that we are incapable of thinking for ourselves and revolting” (Barthet 2022).

The receptiveness of many African populations to Russian assistance articulates to an alternative strategic vision for Africa’s future international partnerships. For elites in Mali and CAR, the Russian model of intervention that privileges protecting the ruling regime, state sovereignty and gives military equipment without any governance or human rights conditionality, is attractive compared with the EU’s highly conditional security assistance offer. Russia’s assistance, for instance, has enabled the survival of Touadera’s regime,

which has become increasingly authoritarian and sought to remove the presidential term limit (Lechner and Ingasso 2023). Many African elites see geopolitical competition on their continent as an advantage, not a danger, and an opportunity to exert agency and choice over their own affairs without being dictated to by a dominant power. The first president of independent Mali, Modibo Keita, advocated for non-alignment during the Cold War and maintained strong relations with the Soviet Union and elites, including the former Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré, who received military training in the USSR as well as in France (Touron 2017). The CAR's Cold War-era Emperor Bokassa made efforts to partner with the USSR as well as China and Libya to avoid being seen as overly dependent on French support (Dukhan 2020). While pro-Russian anti-Western messaging and disinformation draw on and exploit African resentment of European colonial power, Russia did not create these resentments. Concurrently, Russia is able to draw on the USSR's long history of supporting anti-imperialist movements in Mozambique, Namibia, Angola and Zimbabwe as well as anti-apartheid African National Congress activists from South Africa (Matusevich 2021). Despite the Putin regime's reactionary conservative and oligarchic capitalist political ideology, Russia has successfully managed to "re-attach itself to the Soviet Union's legacy of supporting liberation struggles" (Duursma and Mashur 2022, p. 410). Many of the former recipients of the EU's interventions therefore believe strongly in Russia's value as a partner with strong anti-imperial and pro-pan-African credentials.

Meanwhile, the EU and its member states struggle with their colonial legacies. France has been accused of propping up a series of corrupt dictators through military intervention during the Cold War, intervening over 50 times in Africa between 1960 and 2015, more than double the number of their engagements in any other region (Assemblée Nationale 2015). They have also been accused of maintaining an unpopular colonial-era currency in West Africa and many believe them to have played a role in the assassination of revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso during the 1980s (Verschave 1998, Bat 2012, BBC 2016, Borrel *et al.* 2021, Pigeaud and Sylla 2021). The assassination of the DRC's first post-colonial pan-Africanist president, Patrice Lumumba, was overseen by Belgian officers, one of whom helped dissolve Lumumba's body and kept a tooth as a "souvenir", which was returned to the DRC in 2022 (Burke 2022). These murders are live political issues in both countries. Borrell's October 2022 speech in which he argued that Europe is a "garden" of freedom and prosperity when the rest of the world is a "jungle" which could "invade the garden" provoked outrage in the Global South (Eijking 2022). Russia, even following its invasion of Ukraine, is able to exploit its long history of supporting anti-colonial struggles and is now seen by significant portions of African populations as a less racist, less imperial power (Matusevich 2021). This perception is rooted in history and is not merely the product of disinformation (Bagoyoko and Gibert 2007).

Conclusion

As a "sui generis" actor on the international stage, the EU has long been concerned with its development into a credible, recognised – and often more militarised – security actor. Debates on "actorness" in EU foreign policy, as well as this special issue on maturation, reflect these concerns and seek to understand the EU's trajectory – how is it "maturing" and what is it "maturing" into? This article has demonstrated, through concentrating on African agency, that the EU's fixation with maturing itself as a global security actor has

been counterproductive to building sustainable relationships with African countries and resolving armed conflict on the continent. By overlooking the agency of Africans and their opposition to unsuccessful Western interventions, and by viewing Africa either as a neutral testing ground or an “arena” for geopolitical competition, the EU has been unable to understand the context in which they intervene and why their presence is increasingly contested in Africa. The EU’s colonial and unreflexive fixation with its own maturation into a hard security actor has come at a cost to its influence.

The purpose of this article has not been to argue that “testing” new policies is always problematic, particularly for regional organisations developing competencies in different policy areas, as the EU is. However, in the context of intervention in African conflicts, the stakes are high and failure is costly – in terms of human lives, in financial terms, and, as this article has explored, in political and reputational terms as the recipients of experiments protest failed interventions and opt for new partners. A more “mature” EU ought to reflect carefully on the consequences of failure before launching new missions which they claim will manage crises when the track record of these missions at resolving conflict has been poor. As the EU’s withdrawal from the Sahel demonstrates, as well as the withdrawal of other multilateral missions from Mali, the DRC and Somalia, international interveners can no longer evade the consequences of failure, particularly when geopolitical shifts mean alternative security partners are more readily available. This article has demonstrated the value of historicising EU discourses and provincialising EU foreign and security policies through the study of African agency in order to understand the EU’s current predicament regarding crisis management in Africa. As a rejection of French neo-colonialism has become an increasingly prominent part of political discourse in Africa, thinking with postcolonial theory is an opportunity to uncover the deep structures that underpin EU foreign policy and their consequences.

Europe’s relations with Africa concerning security assistance have reached an impasse. While it is far from clear whether Russia’s assistance will be more effective than the EU’s, to move to more productive relations with African states and to play a more meaningful role in responding to conflict, the EU must learn to see African countries and their populations as political forces in their own right, not as “laboratories” or “arenas” through which the EU can project or mature its presence. Developing these relationships means no longer avoiding the topic of Europe’s colonial past or claiming it is unrelated to the EU, but engaging in genuine reflection on coloniality within the EU’s policies and taking African points of view seriously to understand why they might be receptive to partnership with Russia. Maturity, if it comes from anywhere, may come from humility.

Note

1. See (He 2016, Hoang 2016, Dandashly 2021, Della Valle 2021, Keukeleire, *et al.*, 2021, Serban and Harutyunyan 2021, Kutz and Wolff 2022, Carbone 2023, Colomba-Petteng 2023)

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