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Decentring the EU-Mauritania Migration
'Partnership'

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Introduction

Migration concerns have recently gripped the European Union's (EU) foreign policy. One way the EU has sought to address this issue is the 'externalisation' of migration policy, in which the EU seeks collaboration with non-EU countries to curb migration flows towards Europe (Martini and Megerisi, 2023). To this end, Von Der Leyen's 'Geopolitical Commission' entered into agreements with various countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the last few years. These agreements have caused an uproar, as they often lack human rights guarantees and risk further empowering autocratic regimes (Martini and Megerisi, 2023).

Though attention has gone to these issues, less has been dedicated to the neocolonial structures embedded in the migration agreements and their surrounding discourse. Decentring EU foreign policy, which is the practice of reconsidering "European agency in a non-European world" (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013, p.283), aids in understanding these postcolonial hierarchies that are still present in the EU's policy towards its so-called 'Southern Neighbourhood'. Therefore, looking at the migration agreements that the EU has entered with third countries in the MENA region can help understand how they perpetuate existing power imbalances and further a Eurocentric agenda. One of these countries is Mauritania, where efforts to restrict migration from and through the country have been boosted through the 2024 EU-Mauritania Partnership.

Consequently, this paper seeks to answer the question: *How can a decentring lens reveal the Eurocentric nature of EU externalisation policies towards Mauritania?* First, this paper will provide an overview of Eurocentrism in migration policy and the core tenets of the decentring agenda. Then, this paper will look at EU-Mauritania relations on migration from colonial times to the present. Subsequently, this paper will zoom in on the Migration Partnership and assess its discourse and contents through a decentring framework. From there this paper concludes by evaluating the implications of such migration agreements more generally.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Eurocentrism and Migration

Eurocentrism can broadly be characterised as "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). This Eurocentric vision stems from colonialism, but it is a problem that has persisted beyond European imperialism (Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013). After the Second World War and the creation of the European Union, Europe quickly buried their memories of a colonial past and focused on the 'virgin birth' of the continent (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013). This has led to Eurocentric analyses of EU foreign policy (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018), in which the EU views itself as a normative power and seeks to export its self-proclaimed norms and values (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024).

Migration policy, particularly its external aspect, has been strongly influenced by Eurocentrism (Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2024). Countries from the MENA region play a central role for the EU as migrants come from or travel through these states to reach Europe. EU migration policy is criticised as predominantly centred around the European border, disregarding the perspectives and experiences of the Global South, often viewing these countries as 'transiters' or 'senders' of people (Bulley, 2024). Moreover, the MENA region is described as 'dangerous' and 'imperfect' in contrast to an 'ideal' EU (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024). These discourses legitimise a securitised approach to migration, frequently leading to

violent border control policies (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024; Martini and Megerisi, 2023). From a geopolitical point of view, EU border externalisation is arguably an important tool in preserving (neo)colonial systems through which the EU maintains economic and political influence over formerly colonised territories (Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2024). These relations shape how formerly colonised populations move, the distribution of aid and financial resources to these territories, and the use of EU-funded police forces and private companies - reflecting patterns of control and domination (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2024). Cobarrubias et al. (2023) have discussed the symbolic nature of these externalisation agreements. For instance, they argue that European countries support a symbolic international hierarchy through visa negotiations as a bargaining chip for 'third countries' to collaborate with them, highlighting the unequal freedom of movement between their respective citizens (Cobarrubias et al., 2023). They explain that European countries are aware of this hierarchy and seek to maintain it.

'Decentring turn' in EU Foreign Policy

There is thus a need to 'decentre' the Eurocentric nature of EU foreign policy to overcome its Western-focused nature (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024). Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) proposed a three-dimensional framework, that sought to re-evaluate the EU external agenda on a normative and empirical basis. Here, they discuss three analytical steps for decentring: provincialising, engaging, and reconstruction to think "outside of the Eurocentric box" (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013, p. 285). *Provincialising*, simply put, is to question Eurocentric perspectives (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018) and is the first step in the decentring framework. It challenges conventional narratives that position Europe as central to global affairs, as well as the underlying assumptions that these are built upon, and will be the focus of this paper. *Engaging* focuses on interacting with non-European perspectives and learning from them, while *reconstruction* is concerned with recognising the historical roots underlying European external relations (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013). These three concepts were further operationalised by Keukeleire and Lecocq (2018) into six categories: *spatial*, *temporal*, *normative*, *polity*, *linguistic* and *disciplinary* decentring and are applicable under provincialisation and engagement. The initial five categories relate to ontological questions, whereas the sixth category focuses on epistemological and methodological concerns (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018).

For this analysis of the Partnership, the first four categories will be employed. The latter two fall outside the scope of this research, as linguistic decentring focuses more on the nature of the linguistic frameworks rather than the content, and disciplinary decentring focuses on epistemological and methodological approaches underlying studies of European foreign policy. The first lens, *spatial* decentring, is used when questioning how European geographic and material contexts shape relations (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). *Normative* decentring questions the universality of EU norms, or EUniversalism (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). Here, the authors raise the point that norms in European and Western ideals are often entrenched in their foreign policy. Norms such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights play a central role in EU foreign policy and are perceived as universal. *Temporal* decentring requires a recognition that analyses of European foreign policy use Eurocentric interpretations of history to evaluate its interactions with other regions (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). This is connected to Eurocentrism as modern Europe is a benchmark to assess the development of other non-EU countries. Finally, *polity* decentring questions the Eurocentric views on how a society should be organised, which usually involve a 'Westphalian' state-centric or modernity bias. State-centric bias focuses on territorial sovereign states and their relations between states.

Modernity bias, on the other hand, is concerned with how the ‘modern’ state is conceived, including its institutional and functional capabilities (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018).

Barbieux and Bouris (2024) built on these foundations and combined them with Cebeci’s (2022) works on how the EU constructs the MENA region, who concluded that the MENA region is constructed as an inferior ‘other’ by the EU. Barbieux and Bouris (2024) utilise her three categories of politico-cultural, socio-economic and security dimensions to tailor the research approach towards the MENA region. These categories, combined with the decentring agenda provide the analytical framework through which the foreign policy on migration matters by the EU towards Mauritania will be analysed.

Research Design

This paper examines the EU’s discourse towards its migration policies on Mauritania and provides assessments through a decentring perspective, focusing on the provincialising dimension. The rest of this article is structured as follows: First, this paper will provide a brief background on the EU’s colonial past regarding Mauritania, connecting it to the current state of the EU’s migration policy. Then, this paper will focus on the provincialisation of the Partnership through spatial, temporal, normative and polity lenses. It will examine the agreement via politico-cultural, security and socio-economic categories, based on Barbieux and Bouris’ (2024) framework for EU foreign policy. As their analysis focused on another MENA country, namely Algeria, these general themes are adapted to structure the results of this analysis for Mauritania.

This analytical framework will be applied to two documents that help understand the current EU external migration policy towards Mauritania. The central document is the EU-Mauritania Migration Partnership (2024), which is a Joint Declaration by the two actors outlining a roadmap based on five pillars to achieve the goals set out by this agreement. It will be complemented by the official press statement made by European Commission President Von Der Leyen upon the signing of the Partnership, which provides another source of how the EU views itself in the migration agreement with Mauritania. These documents provide the opportunity to examine to what extent Eurocentric discourses dominate not only the EU’s foreign policy but also migration policy more specifically.

Colonial Continuities in Mauritania

To understand how the current migration EU policies have been shaped it is necessary to look at the historical processes from the past, which are often missing from research on EU external migration policies (Cobarrubias et al., 2023; Ould Moctar, 2020). This section will be largely based on Ould Moctar’s research (2020), as it is one of the few academic resources discussing the parallels between colonial and modern-day EU migration policies in Mauritania. Colonial influence on Mauritanian migration can be summarised into three measures: territorial delimitation, controlling human mobility and racialised belonging (Ould Moctar, 2020). The first territorial demarcation by France in 1905 started the colonial conquest and territorial division that would shape the present-day borders. Before this, the borders of Mauritania were determined by fluctuations of political relations which the French sought to end. The linear territorial demarcations were not only inherently problematic but also led to a new issue for France, namely managing populations who crossed these new borders (Ould Moctar, 2020). The largely nomadic groups that frequently crossed these borders led the French colonisers to statistically document the movements of those who resided in the borders as a way to control human mobility. These, as Ould Moctar (2020) argues, preface the process of EU border

externalisation, in which “human mobility now represented a problem” (p.38). Moreover, another problem that these administrative measures created is that they entrenched deep racialised issues, by linking racial identities to geography in an entirely new unnatural territorial form (Ould Moctar, 2020).

Links with colonial migration measures and EU border externalisation policies can be easily drawn. In modern-day Mauritania, EU border externalisation started gaining traction in 2006 with a surge of irregular migrants reaching the Spanish Canary Islands. The surge was rapidly framed as a ‘migration crisis’ and linked to trafficking of all sorts by Spain and the EU (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart, 2010). This framing legitimised an exceptional situation where police involvement was introduced to halt migration from Mauritania and placed the moral responsibility on migrants whilst fostering an image of a ‘suicidal act’ to reach Europe (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart, 2010). Over the following years, the EU heavily invested in upgrading border infrastructure in Mauritania, often intertwined with development aid (Frowd, 2014). Through the creation of borders in the past, border externalisation has allowed for the fortification and securitisation of Mauritania’s borders in the present (Ould Moctar, 2020). Moreover, the responsibility to prevent irregular migration shifted gradually from the EU level to Mauritania. The latter country introduced a new system in 2010 to register foreign nationals through biometric technology, showing how Mauritania internalised systems to keep track of not only migrants but of racial groups more generally. This has been criticised as it at times led to racialised territorial exclusion, also present in Mauritania in its time as a colony (Ould Moctar, 2020). It is important to note that though the EU has largely disappeared from the region, and Mauritania is in charge of upholding these oppressive conditions, the parameters of Mauritania’s agency are arguably set by the colonial project (Ould Moctar, 2020). Thus, this brief historical background has shown that despite Eurocentric views on a ‘virgin birth’ of the EU, the measures present in modern-day Mauritania can be traced back to colonial times.

Analysis

Provincialising the EU’s discourse towards Mauritania reveals its reliance on *normative, polity, temporal, and spatial* Eurocentric frameworks. Generally, the discourse by the EU shows an asymmetrical relationship between supposed ‘partners’, in which there is a clear distinction between the superior actor (the EU) and the inferior one (Mauritania). Moreover, how the EU approaches migration shows elements of colonial continuity in its expectations of how Mauritania should manage and strengthen migration controls.

Politico-Cultural Dimension

Mauritania as a Transit State: Spatial, Polity and Temporal Eurocentricity

In this Migration Partnership, Mauritania is largely framed as a ‘transit state’, in which the Joint Declaration discusses “[Mauritania’s] laudable efforts to bring migration routes, including maritime routes, under control, to manage irregular migration” (p.3), as well as the “management of migration flows” (p.4). Firstly, the mere framing of a country, such as Mauritania, as a ‘transit state’ is a political production that implies that it is complicit in the illegalisation of migration within the realm of European externalisation policies of migration control (Frowd, 2020). Spatial decentring underscores that this Eurocentric view towards Mauritania also reduces it to a peripheral role, in which Mauritania is valued by the utility it brings to the EU rather than its own internal policies. This reductionist aspect of viewing Mauritania as a tool to manage migration flows also holds parallels with the colonial fixation

on territorial delimitation (Ould Moctar, 2020). Although this might increase Mauritania's agency through increased bargaining power (Ould Moctar, 2024), the problematic logic behind migration management is endorsed, at least implicitly, by the EU.

The notion of a 'transit state' also connects to the discussion of stability. In their Joint Statement, the EU and Von Der Leyen present the Sahel region as one characterised by "growing instability and insecurity" (Commission, 2024, p. 2). This underscores the asymmetries in the relationship, as the EU views itself as a stable 'ideal' region (Bouris and Barbieux, 2024). This relates to a need for provincialising a polity bias, where EU universal assumptions expect that if Mauritania follows the EU's proposed guidelines it will solve the underlying issues present in Mauritania. Temporal provincialising helps us understand that these assumptions go deeper, in which a Eurocentric framing of history reflects a point of reference when entering foreign policy (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). As seen with other African countries (Staeger, 2016), the EU's neocolonial stance is paternalistic as it seeks to apply its own success story to a spatial Other. In addition, when provincialising these elements, it is important to note the lack of acknowledgement that large parts of the differences are caused by past European colonialism, often forgotten through the Normative Power Europe discourse (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis, 2013).

Normative Eurocentricity

"Recalling that the promotion, protection and respect of human rights, the rule of law and good governance are the foundations of Mauritanian and EU migration policy, and welcoming Mauritania's establishment in July 2022 of a national authority to counter human trafficking and migrant smuggling" (Commission, 2024, p.4).

In the EU-Mauritania Partnership Joint Declaration, this normative element of human rights is repeated on five separate occasions. Setting aside whether these norms should be pursued or not, it nevertheless highlights that the EU seeks to reinforce its stance as a 'normative power'. By provincialising these norms, it is important to note that these Eurocentric values show a hierarchical preoccupation, which is prioritised over Mauritania's socio-political frameworks. Connections can be drawn here to Cobarrubias et al. (2023) discussion on the symbolic value of these externalisation agreements, as an international hierarchy is presupposed in these agreements. Moreover, these 'first generation' political rights often precede other 'second generation' economic, social and cultural rights as well as 'third generation' solidarity rights (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). Emphasising these norms in this order emphasises an asymmetry between the two actors, as these Western values pressure Mauritania to organise their society following the same logic. Moreover, the Joint Declaration also emphasises the use of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, reinforcing the perception that Mauritania must align with externally defined norms. This is especially problematic as international organisations often bow to the externalisation logics of the EU (Lavenex, 2016).

Security Dimension

The securitisation of migration is a central discourse within the Migration Partnership. In the Partnership, a distinction occurs between the first pillar, which relates to job creation, the third pillar, which promotes legal migration, and the three other pillars (2,4 and 5), which focus on upgrading asylum capacities, preventing irregular migration through cooperation and

improving border management. This is to emphasise that the EU's approach towards migration in this agreement is largely focused on the control of migration.

(Lack of) Normative Eurocentricity

This migration Partnership is often discussed in terms of the dangers that follow migration efforts, with multiple mentions of the dangers that human trafficking poses to refugees, such as on page 3, where they emphasise “the importance of working together to prevent and combat criminal network of migrant smugglers”. The framing of this agreement implies that the securitisation of migration is for the sake of the refugees, as seen in past EU-Mauritania agreements (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart, 2010). By doing this, it shows elements of normative Eurocentricity, as migration is framed as an issue that only with the EU's help is solved, despite that the problems of irregular migration were also created by the EU. This once again ties into the EU's skewed perception of itself towards the securitised ‘Other’ (Cebeci, 2022). By doing this, the agreement furthers the colonial perceptions of racialised belonging (Ould Moctar, 2020)

However, on the other side, the constant emphasis on security and stability, with these two words mentioned in articles 2, 3, 4, and 9 of the Joint Declaration, also points to the emphasis by the EU on lack of securitisation of Mauritania and the region. By putting a clear focus on these two elements, it shows a selectivity of EU norms and when they are chosen to be emphasised (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018). Here, the goals of the EU are to keep Mauritania and the surrounding countries stable so as to prevent further migratory flows into Europe. Overall, the Partnership presents a larger focus on the negative side of migration and not the benefits it could bring, as most measures can be considered restrictive towards migrants.

Polity and Spatial Eurocentricity

On a polity level, the Joint Declaration shows a Eurocentric focus, discussing “the capabilities of the authorities responsible for border management, surveillance and control, including through enhanced cooperation between Mauritania and Frontex in accordance with the needs identified by Mauritania in this area” (p.8). This and other statements underline the EU's inclusion of Mauritania in its own institutions and its logic of externalisation. Though it mentions that it is following Mauritania's sovereignty, it nevertheless shows a ‘teacher-student’ logic (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024), in which there is a hierarchical discourse which would push Mauritania towards compliance with EU standards. Moreover, connections can be drawn to Moctar Ould's (2020) analysis of colonial efforts by European countries to control, track and prevent migration by controlling human mobility. On a spatial level, the Joint Declaration also portrays Mauritania as a ‘buffer zone’ between Europe and Africa. The roadmap's emphasis on border management and control underlines this dynamic, looking for example at the “capacity-building of security services” (p. 7). This framing reduces Mauritania's security concerns secondary to Europe's priorities and highlights the need for spatial decentring of the asymmetrical relationship between the two actors on security matters.

Socio-Economic Dimension

Normative and Polity Eurocentricity

Though the agreement largely focuses on migration measures, the EU's discourse in the socio-economic dimension also needs to be briefly examined. Together with the measures on

migration, the agreement also serves a socio-economic function. On the social side, the Joint Statement highlights the importance of addressing the ‘root causes’ of migration through development, which shows polity and normative Eurocentrism. The EU emphasises job creation through “educational and vocational training”, promotion of “labour-market relevant skills [...] in particular for young women”, and increased access to “finance and micro-loans, training and business incubation”. This is a common strategy employed by the EU (Barbieux and Bouris, 2024), in which it transfers its ‘best practices’ to Mauritania to ensure an increased adherence to European institutions and norms.

On the economic side, Von Der Leyen discusses in her press statement the importance of the energy transition, particularly on green hydrogen. She explains that through their Global Gateway investment strategy, the EU’s goal is to “grow our partners” (Commission, 2024) in this sector. This can be criticised on two points. First, the issue can be raised on polity Eurocentricity, in which Mauritania is the sole actor who needs to improve its economic institutions to achieve a European standard of success, once more emphasising their asymmetrical relationship. Secondly, from a neocolonial standpoint, questions have been raised about how much green hydrogen plans will effectively benefit the North African region (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2024). Large amounts of renewable energy are planned to be exported to the EU, leaving little for North African countries (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2024). This shows that behind the EU rhetoric there is a one-way trade, from the periphery to the core.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the EU’s discourse in the agreement with Mauritania has consistently shown Eurocentric tropes, underlined through the three dimensions of politico-cultural, security and socio-economic analysis. Decentring the relations, specifically on the topic of migration, underscores the various assumptions that undermine an equal partnership between the two actors. EU externalisation policies frame Mauritania as a ‘transit state’ and buffer zone for European migration concerns. This, combined with the emphasis on normative Eurocentric values reflect the EU’s self-perception as a normative power, in which its own standards are used as benchmarks of progress. The securitisation of migration in this Partnership further emphasises the EU’s focus on restricting mobility instead of addressing structural issues and follows the increased trend of securitisation of migration by the EU (Bouris and Barbieux, 2024). And while the Partnership does include certain measures to deal with the ‘root causes’ of migration, these are created with largely the interests of the EU in mind.

In conclusion, this analysis stresses the necessity of decentring EU migration policy. This research has highlighted the persistence of colonial legacies present in EU-Mauritania relations and suggests rethinking these asymmetries towards a genuine mutually beneficial relationship which acknowledges how colonial histories have shaped the present. Future research would benefit from a more local perspective on such migration agreements as to bridge the gap between EU discourse and local realities.

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