Mapping Democracy and its Trajectories in EU-MENA Relations

30 Years since the Barcelona Declaration: Policies, Perspectives, and Regional Dynamics

Special Issue

European Student ThinkTank

Alicia Kerekes Ispas
Hannah Colpitts-Elliott
Luca Saviolo
Martina Canesi

EST President's Foreword

Relations between the European Union and the Middle East and North Africa Region have long stood at the crossroads of values, interests, and shifting regional dynamics. For young researchers and practitioners, this relationship offers a lens through which to question the promises and limits of democracy promotion, and to rethink how interregional cooperation can adapt to changing realities.

It is in this spirit that the European Student Think Tank is proud to present the second Special Issue of the EU-MENA Observatory, titled "EU Support to Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa - 30 Years since the Barcelona Declaration: Policies, Perspectives, and Regional Dynamics".

This volume brings together timely contributions that explore different facets of the EU's engagement: from state-building and leverage in Palestine, to questions of legitimacy in EU-Tunisia agreements; from the challenges of transnational repression in the Gulf and digital repression in Iraq, to democratic backsliding in Türkiye; from democracy and geopolitical re-ordering in the Sahel amid Russian and Chinese influence, to the crucial role of youth in bridging sectors, connecting regions, and building democracy.

Taken together, these articles embody the Observatory's mission to combine academic rigor with fresh, youth-driven perspectives. This Special Issue is not an endpoint, but an invitation to renew the debate on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation thirty years after Barcelona.

Elizaveta Barbanova

Editors' Foreword

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Israel's instensifying siege of Gaza with growing instability in the wider Mediterranean, and deeper tensions with the Trump Administration dominates the 2024-2029 external agenda of the European Union (EU), heavily challenging the global upholding of democratic and European values which stand at the core of the EU's normative identity.

30 years since the Barcelona Declaration (1995) - which had marked the beginning of a new interregional dialogue based on peace, prosperity and democracy - the Observatory—together with the editorial team of the European Student ThinkTank (EST)—presents its second Special Issue on Mapping Democracy and its Trajectories in EU-MENA Relations. This Issue seeks to shed light on the state of democracy in the Wider Mediterranean - here understood as a policy and societal space rather than a geographical area - and understand how democracy and its various components have evolved and developed in the relations between the EU and countries of the region.

By combining inside-out with outside-in approaches, this work refuses and counters the depiction of democracy as a one-way, power-based process. In so doing, this Issue addresses questions of democracy, human rights, and good governance and aims to capture their complexities across the two shores of the Mediterranean in a time of democratic fatigue and disillusion at a national, regional, and global level.

Alicia Kerekes Ispas, Hannah Colpitts-Elliott, Luca Saviolo & Martina Canesi

Table of Contents

Introduction to the Special Issue

Between Values and Interests: Unpacking EU Democracy Promotion in the Euro-Mediterranean

Fotini Zarogianni[1]   &   May Badran[2]

Anna Lindh Foundation   University of Catania

Abstract

This paper examines the European Union's shifting approach to democracy promotion in the Euro-Mediterranean, tracing its evolution from normative ambitions to realist, interest-driven engagement. Marking 30 years since the launch of the Barcelona Process, it reflects on how democracy support—once central to EU-MENA relations—has been gradually sidelined by the dominance of the security-stability nexus, transactional partnerships, and economic pragmatism. Through a historical and conceptual analysis of EU policy instruments from the European Neighbourhood Policy to the upcoming Pact for the Mediterranean, the paper explores the disjuncture between the EU's rhetorical commitment to "deep democracy" and its policy practice, particularly post-2011. It argues that conditionality and civil society support have become inconsistent and procedural, undermining EU credibility as a normative actor in the MENA and beyond. The study also situates these trends within broader geopolitical shifts—such as increased multipolarity, energy dependencies, and the rise of populism in Europe—highlighting the recalibration of EU external action. Concluding, the paper stresses the urgency for a values-based recommitment to democracy in EU-MENA relations, advocating for people-centred cooperation, greater support for civil society, and the operationalisation of democracy beyond rhetoric in a contested geopolitical landscape.

Keywords

EU, Foreign Policy, Middle East, North Africa, Democracy

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been involved in democracy promotion and support vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for about three decades to different extents and, certainly, to varying results. The latter oscillate based on the priorities set forward by the EU as the basis for its democracy promotion, with a democratic values-based normative approach now having been fully replaced by an economic and security profit-based realistic approach (security-stability

---

[1] Fotini Zarogianni is a researcher on international security and foreign policy focusing on the MENA/EU-MENA. She currently is a Research Officer at the Anna Lindh Foundation and a PhD Candidate (proxy warfare).

[2] May Badran is an expert in international and cultural relations, networking and cooperation in the Euro-Med region. She is currently pursuing a master in Global Politics and Euro-Med Relations.

nexus)(Léonard & Kaunert, 2017; Colombo & Soler i Lecha 2019). The signs of the times, namely global and regional geopolitical shifts, as well as EU and EU member states' internal politics have determined this shift, resulting in a questionable alliance between "democracy at home" – which is itself being questioned in the face of the far right parties' rise – and "transactionalism abroad" that only produces frustration and disappointment to those who hoped and fought for a change in the region and to those who really internalise and practice democracy at all times.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Process (1995), which inaugurated the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), bringing to the fore a strong commitment for regional cooperation across cultural, economic, political, and environmental domains, and striving for a push for peace in the Middle East (UfM, 2025). From the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (2004) and its empty promises for domestic political reform, to the era of political conditionality (2011-2015), where democratic reforms were rewarded with financial assistance, and to the rise of transactionalism (2015), where security trampled the fight for democracy, to the New Agenda for the Mediterranean (2021) as part of EU foreign policy in the region, the EU's approach evolved. This progression culminated to today's reality, with democracy promotion now relegated to small print, under the shadow of the security-stability nexus, the depoliticization of relations with backsliding regimes, and the inability to deliver the originally promised area of stability, security, and prosperity in the Euro-Mediterranean. The 30th EMP anniversary coincides with a geopolitical global shift towards multipolarity – in light of the retracting power of the United States – and regional security developments in a conflict-ridden MENA region, leading to a reflection moment on Europe's place and 'ought to' agenda in the world and, in fact, in its own front yard, the wider Mediterranean region. No wonder why a new portfolio for the Mediterranean was created by the newly appointed and elected College of the European Commission, followed by a new Directorate General for the MENA and the Gulf, with a clear mandate to revamp EU-MENA relations, including through the development of an up-to-date umbrella framework for political and economic relations, the so-called Pact for the Mediterranean. However, neither the mandate of the Commissioner for the Mediterranean nor the one of the High Representative-Vice President, Kaja Kallas, mention democracy support, while EU external funding for such action has been visibly reduced since 2024 (Youngs et al., 2025). The question thus remains as to where does the promotion and support of democracy stand within this critical juncture for the region?

This paper aims to explore how the EU conceptualised and implemented democracy promotion in the MENA region and what is today's state of play. Through a brief journey into the past regarding the constitutive elements of the EU-MENA relations framework, and a short analysis of the key concepts and normative underpinnings of democracy support, this paper will then delve into the root causes of the EU's selective commitment to democracy in the MENA, ultimately stressing a realist explanation of EU core interests. This paper underlines that the shift to transactionalism without any or with limited concern over the democratic underpinnings of South Mediterranean counterparts, as well as the EU's rather sometimes selective commitment to human rights and international law – see Ukraine vs. Palestine – have significantly injured the EU's credibility as a normative actor in the region, while deeply impacting the chances of survival of those pro-democratic voices. The paper will conclude with some reflections on the need to strengthen the democratic underpinnings of EU policy, within the current momentum for Euro-Mediterranean relations, englobing a wider conceptualisation of democracy and considering global and regional geopolitical shifts.

Clarifying the Ground: Defining Concepts and Framing the Debate

It is with no surprise that normative elements fall at the heart of this paper; after all, long gone are the days when European integration and its brain child, the EU, were all about economics and trade. Taking a step back and examining how the EU conceptualises democracy itself and its support/promotion seems thus to be necessary.

Overall, democracy support in EU external relations was properly institutionalised and established as a normative concept after the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and operationalised through various EU Commission and Council documents (EPRS, 2021). Democratisation is generally understood as the process of working towards democracy and is usually gradual, as well as context-dependent. Although the EU has not adopted an official definition, key documentation points to the embracing of such a definition (EPRS, 2021; European Commission, n.d.). On the one hand, EU support to this process has largely focused on a rather procedural understanding of democracy, with a greater focus on civil and political rights and largely considering free and fair elections as the main indicator of measuring democracy. This way, local dynamics and the needs and will of the people for deeper socio-political change that constitutes the foundation for free and fair societies are sidelined. On the other hand, the normative side of democracy in EU lingo or "deep democracy" goes beyond free and fair elections and constitution-based governance to incorporate key human rights, including the freedom of expression and speech, freedom of the judiciary, freedom of association and assembly, and a strong space for civil society and a safe space for social and cultural rights (EPRS, 2021).

The Barcelona Process (1995) included the so-called "human rights clause" , stipulating that regional and/or bilateral cooperation should have at its core the respect for human rights and the rule of law. After all, the EMP's key goal was "to create a region of shared peace, stability, and prosperity through political dialogue, economic cooperation, and social and cultural exchanges", which can only be fully achieved through the respect for human rights (Courella, 2006). Similarly, further cooperation and deeper political dialogue was dependent on positive reforms in the field of human rights, while, in principle, agreements could be cut short in case of backsliding. However, the implementation of this conditionality remained weak, which further adds to the almost complete disappointment on the promised targets of the EMP (Amirah Fernández and Youngs, 2005). EU support to democracy and human rights was mainly channeled through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), but its track record also remained limited (Crang et al, 2009). Moreover, its programme devoted the greater part of its budget to elections support, hinting at a procedural understanding of democracy (EPRS, 2018).

The ENP (2004), which had shifted the focus to more bilateral, differentiated, tailored, and context-dependent, was seen as heavily concerned with neoliberal economic principles and macro-economic dynamics. However, it underlined its commitment to "shared values, the promotion of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion", by occasionally and very broadly referring to umbrella terms of democratic essence, as the rule of law or the separation of powers (EEAS, 2021). Nevertheless, financial assistance was not necessarily linked to deep societal changes that would allow for the so-wanted area of fairness and prosperity to flourish. Thus, little was achieved, while a lot was promised, which only put oil to the fire of the will of the Southern neighbourhood's populations.

The review of the ENP in 2011, following the Arab Spring, put a greater focus on "deep democracy" in the MENA.

The "New Response in a Changing Neighbourhood" established the European Endowment for Democracy and the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), prioritising for the first time a more bottom-up approach through support to grassroots organisations and civil society (Toukan, 2025). However, both organisations' mandates were not properly defined, making it seem more like a move to save face amidst a crisis, rather than a decisive step forward nor a full recognition of what drives democracy in the context of the MENA countries (Ayadi, Gadi, 2011). The "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity" (European Commission, 2011) put to the fore the concept of "positive conditionality", following the EU's recognition of its weak democracy promotion policy in the region that contributed to the events of 2011, while several Election Observation Missions (EOM) were deployed or planned (Gruarin, 2024). The so-called "positive conditionality" or "more for more", meant that democratic reforms are being rewarded with economic and political benefits, including market access and mobility (Ayadi, Gadi, 2011). The other side of the coin of this approach was the infamous "less for less" approach – mostly developed in the halls of the European Parliament – where democratic backsliding equals less economic assistance, or even sanctions, termination of agreements, etc. However, the latter has rarely been implemented, as the cases of Tunisia or Egypt clearly indicate, even more day by day.

Eventually, "deep democracy" promotion was progressively sidelined by a relapse to the former stricto sensu procedural conception, with the prevalence of the security-stability nexus, as showcased via the 2015 ENP review and onwards. This has led many to frame democracy promotion in EU policy as a mere "communication tool" , detached from actual policy objectives and/or even interests (Kurki, 2015). Others have questioned whether the 2011 policy framework reflected an actual normative change in democracy conception, or was merely concealing the procedural neoliberal democracy all along (Teti et al., 2013). The renewed ENP was, overall, more concerned about " stability" and " stabilisation" , in the face of growing security concerns directly affecting Europe, achieved through economic development and security measures targeting irregular migration, terrorism, conflicts – in other words, "transactionalism" entered the EU lingo. Democracy and human rights unfortunately started taking second fiddle, as the 'increased differentiation' and references to upholding "universal values" did not bring a strong message home regarding democracy (Blockmans & Van Vooren, 2015).

Another key element in the EU's democracy promotion was the adoption in 2012 of the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, whose third version (2020-2024) was recently extended until 2027 (EEAS, 2024). This document guides EU democracy and human rights-related action in its external relations, basically setting out overall goals and objectives, as well as the tools - albeit generic – of achieving them, including political dialogues, humanitarian and financial aid, support to civil society, etc. The 2023 review of the Action Plan was not as in depth as expected in monitoring impact and/or inconsistencies, such as the lack of "success stories" in EU democracy promotion, or sometimes providing a murky understanding of democracy support (Youngs & Ventura, 2024). Moving on, Euro-Med-wise, 2021 marked the announcement of the "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A new agenda for the Mediterranean", where "the rule of law, human and fundamental rights, equality, democracy and good governance" are mentioned as key action points (European Commission, 2021). The incentive-based approach (more for more) was continued. A new term, though, "human development" started being used more frequently, sometimes overshadowing references to democracy itself – words, however, have a certain power.

Following the 2024 European elections, a renewed commitment to the Mediterranean was launched by the new Commission, with the structural changes made above and the commencement of the work for the new umbrella document for Euro-Med relations, the new Pact for the Mediterra –

nean. Interestingly, in her numerous speeches on the consultation process and on the key priority areas for the new Pact, the Commissioner for the Mediterranean has made minimal references to democracy support, or to conditionality of cooperation and/or assistance. Indeed, the role of youth empowerment, civil society support, and economic stability are always referenced as keys to peace and prosperity, but the conceptual analysis of "deep democracy" above clearly indicates that the bar should be higher – especially in light of developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria. Taking all the above into consideration, a question is formed: what explains the changes in the normative understanding of democracy and its footprint on EU policies in the Euro-Mediterranean region and how can we project this to the near future of such policies.

Redefining Influence: The EU's Strategic Pivot to the MENA Region

From Normative Power to Geopolitical Actor

Constructivism has long underpinned the EU's foreign policy, reflected in the idealistic and normative terminology characteristic of the Barcelona Process and early ENP periods. The EU's self-image as a "normative power" (Manners, 2013) emphasised soft power tools, such as political dialogue, civil society support, and promotion of democracy, human rights and rule of law, especially in the post Arab uprisings period. Yet today the growing instability at the EU's southern borders, coupled with a more hostile global environment socially and economically, has exposed the limitations of this approach, leading the EU to recalibrate its engagement in the MENA region. This recalibration has been increasingly evident since 2015-2016, and now is significantly manifested by the current shift towards realism through securitised foreign policy priorities, strategic economic engagements. On the security and stability vs. democracy dilemma, a conclusive stance of the EU is remaining elusive. Nevertheless, norms are inherently entangled with material interests (Diez, 2005); any clear-cut separation between the two is untenable. The notion of a purely normative sphere, devoid of interests, lacks coherence. When the EU promotes democracy, it does so not only as an isolated moral act, but as part of a broader strategy aimed at regime consolidation and securing external support for its own position (Youngs, 2004). Multiple interests explain this strategic turn in the EU's cooperation policy towards the MENA region as examined in the next section.

Security Priorities: Migration and Border Management

One of the most striking signs of the EU's foreign policy recalibration is the greater emphasis on security—particularly concerning irregular migration and border management (Farinha, Youngs, 2024). Ongoing conflicts and governance breakdowns in parts of the MENA region made it a focal point for European containment strategies. This securitised mindset is clearly reflected in the EU's 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, which frames migration as a security threat and leans heavily on externalising border control responsibilities (Bieliune et al., 2024). Partnerships with countries, such as Tunisia (2023), Egypt (2024), Lebanon (2024) and Jordan (2025) are increasingly transactional, prioritising operational cooperation over democratic principles. Financial packages—such as the €1.5 billion allocated annually for border control efforts in Tunisia and Egypt—highlight a pragmatic 'pay-to-police' model. This approach often overlooks deteriorating human rights conditions in these countries (La Rocca, 2025), raising questions about the EU's credibility as a democracy promoter. Asylum procedures and human rights considerations are being deprioritised in favor of tighter migration controls and containment, through tacitly upporting authoritarian regimes.

In doing so, the EU's self-proclaimed identity as a 'normative power' becomes harder to sustain. The gap between rhetoric and practice—between being a 'player' and simply a 'payer'—is becoming more glaring.

European Populism and the 2024 Elections: Reframing the Southern Agenda

Internal dynamics within the EU reinforced further the realist trend. The rise of populist and migration-skeptic parties, which gained considerable ground during the 2024 European Parliament elections, have reshaped the discourse around migration and foreign policy, pushing for a more restrictive, security-focused approach towards the EU's southern neighbourhood.

The growing influence of parties such as Italy's Fratelli d'Italia, France's Rassemblement National, and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland has led to a reorientation in the European Commission's priorities. For instance, by positioning Italy as an energy hub between Europe and Africa, the Mattei Plan pairs infrastructure investment with migration deterrence mechanisms. This blending of economic partnership and security objectives exemplifies how populist-driven policies reshape Euro-Mediterranean cooperation toward unilateral, realpolitik solutions. Consequently, the Southern neighbourhood was recast as a zone of risk prompting an intensification of securitized cooperation. Such a reframing has constrained EU high-representatives (e.g., Josep Borrell) from championing normative agendas, forcing a policy environment where realpolitik dominates. Overall, the ascendancy of populist-inspired narratives—equating migration with terrorism and economic burden—reinforces this strategic shift.

Economic Stakes and Strategic Partnerships: Energy and Trade in Focus

On another note, the EU's evolving geopolitical posture is also driven by shifting economic imperatives, particularly in the context of energy diversification and global supply chain reconfiguration. Russia's war on Ukraine has intensified the urgency of finding alternative energy sources, placing MENA states – especially those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and certain North African countries – at the center of the EU's strategic calculus.

Gas pipelines from Algeria, renewable energy cooperation with Morocco, and hydrogen partnerships with Egypt exemplify this pivot. Simultaneously, trade and investment ties are deepening with GCC states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Notably, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU Commission have restructured its DG MENA to include the GCC as a core focus area, especially in light of energy and security developments, forging in that sense a 'Broader Middle East' Policy.

These engagements, while bolstering economic resilience, often involve transactional diplomacy that eschews normative considerations. The EU's growing willingness to partner with authoritarian regimes for strategic gains raises questions about the coherence, credibility but also the limits of its value-driven engagement in the MENA. In practice, such engagements sometimes sidestep earlier democracy-promotion imperatives, cementing a geopolitically motivated alliance.

Bridging the Say–Do Gap: Rethinking EU Soft Power and Civil Society in the MENA Region

Support to civil society and grassroots initiatives has always stood at the heart of EU democracy support in the MENA region. This has been evident from the EIDHR and EED that provided targeted grants to civil society and aimed at the protection of activists' and grassroots organisations' work, to capacity building and knowledge sharing through "people to people" connections through Erasmus+, and to financial and technical support to the work vis-a-vis youth, civil society, and intercultural dialogue of regional organisations such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF).

The impact and achievements of these initiatives should not be underestimated nor overlooked. However, the EU has largely postured itself as a donor rather than being fully involved in the implementation and follow-up to many projects, while long-term planning, coordination of action, or the sustainability of the impact of such initiatives has not always been closely pursued. This can also be connected to what was mentioned above as a procedural understanding of democracy support, compared to a more drastic societal change as the basis for democracy. Faced with cumbersome budgets and administrative hurdles, many of these initiatives remain limited in their achievements, or – more often – struggle to transmit their output – and the recommendations it includes – to the ears of the penholder of the policies that frame the space they operate in the first place. Moreover, EU support to such initiatives being approved for implementation in the same countries where democratic backsliding and shrinking civil space is becoming the norm is certainly wounding the EU's normative credibility and harming the impact of these initiatives itself. Moreover, this strategic and realist posture of the EU towards the MENA region has undoubtedly induced a recalibration that has rippled through the civil society sector and grassroots movements, which must continually navigate Brussels's shifting funding priorities, stringent conditionality requirements and its somehow limited South-North mobility policies. In response, some NGOs in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco have recalibrated their discourses to align more closely with EU calls for proposals, while others have opted for South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC). By forging partnerships with peers in the Global South—where solutions proven effective in one context can often be adapted elsewhere—these actors sidestep Northern conditionalities, foster truly reciprocal exchanges, and build capacities from the ground up. The result is a pronounced erosion of Europe's soft power and an untapped potential of people-based actions and interactions.

An important element in the same context of soft power is the perception of the people these initiatives target in the first place; Euro-Mediterranean youth. Borne witness to Europe's inconsistent application of democratic conditionalities, faced with structural constraints of participating in the very programmes built for them (i.e., visa procedures), and consistently grappling with unemployment, stagnant economies and politics, South Mediterranean youth are filled with scepticism towards EU democracy support policies in the region. Instead, they call for more South-North mobility, more exchange of knowledge and good practices, more contact with decision makers in the Euro-Mediterranean context, and a stronger political and financial commitment to a holistic approach to democracy, one that is based on an active and free to talk and act civil society and on deep socio-economic development. Moving beyond isolated people-centric initiatives and demonstrating a genuine commitment to economic empowerment as a basis for prosperity should thus be a top EU priority in the region. Multilateral efforts through existing institutions, such as the ALF and the UfM, should be complemented by robust support for youth entrepreneurship, and capacity development in the field of civil, political, and cultural rights. Moreover, the EU would do

well to embrace a more balanced role in SSTC frameworks: not merely as a mentor dispensing expertise, but as a collaborator investing in homegrown solutions that reflect local realities. By tailoring partnerships to the region's social and economic contours—prioritizing cost-effective, mutually beneficial projects—Europe can foster durable resilience in civil society and restore normative influence. Crucially, this approach must bridge the say-do gap: lofty commitments must translate into measurable progress in governance, human rights, and socio-economic equity.

Conclusion

Democracy promotion no longer seems to be a priority – in some ways, not even a goal – in EU policy in the Mediterranean, neither on the side of the EU Commission nor on the side of the EEAS. Through turning a blind eye to the record of authoritarian regimes and even closer cooperating with some in the name of hard security or economic interests, the EU is at a loss for credibility in the MENA – but also at home. At a moment when the world order is being questioned, the EU's place in the world, in its neighbourhood, and its internal stability – see, rise of far-right parties – are being challenged. However, a concrete commitment back to the EU's core values and their clearer incorporation into its policy in the MENA, in light of the current European bureaucracy's expressed re-pivot to the MENA, could undo some of the damage done – alas, not without casualties and/or much needed accountability. It is extremely important – one could say, existential – to renew the EU commitment for "deep democracy" through the new Pact for the Mediterranean, through upcoming bilateral agreements, and through increased financial and political support for those regional programmes and institutions that are working on the ground for the promotion and protection of civic, political, social, and cultural rights, with a strong focus on civil society, rule of law, and the protection of human rights for all.

References

Amirah Fernández, H., & Youngs, R. (2005, November 30). *The Barcelona Process: An assessment of a decade of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.* Elcano Royal Institute. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-barcelona-process-an-assessment-of-a-decade-of-the-euro-mediterranean-partnership/

Bieliune, S., & Wassink, R. G. (2024, July 3). *New EU migration rules neglect cities' needs and fail to uphold human rights.* Euronews. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/07/03/new-eu-migration-rules-neglect-cities-needs-and-fail-to-uphold-human-rights

Blockmans, S., & Van Vooren, B. (2015, December 1). *Strengthening the strategic choice offered to the EU's southern Mediterranean neighbours* (CEPS Commentary). Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS). https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/SB%20ENP%20Review%20CEPS%20Commentary.pdf

Colombo, S., & Soler i Lecha, E. (2019). *A half-empty glass: Limits and dilemmas of the EU's relations to the MENA countries* (MENARA Working Paper No. 32). Istituto Affari Internazionali. Retrieved July 27, 2025, from https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_32.pdf

Courela, P. (2006). *The Euro-Mediterranean community of democratic states.* In *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2006.* IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-euro-mediterranean-community-of-democratic-states/

Crang, P., Dwyer, C., & Jackson, P. (2009). *Transnationalism and the spaces of commodity culture. Journal of Consumer Culture.* https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390902747459
Diez, T. (2005). *Constructing the self and changing others: Reconsidering 'normative power Europe'. Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 33*(3), 613–636. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031701

Direkli, M., & Ashiekh, H. A. (2022). *The European Union and democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa countries: Bridging the gap between constructivism and realism.* In *Politics, Economy, Security Issues Hidden Under the Carpet of Mediterranean* (pp. 109–125). European Publisher. https://doi.org/10.15405/BI.20221101.7

European Commission. (2011). *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – state of play and future orientations* (COM(2011)200 final). https://transport.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6c8af2ef-fb2e-4892-b4a4-c6ec97252583_en?filename=euromed_com2011_200_en.pdf

European Commission. (2024). Pact on migration and asylum: Effective system of solidarity and responsibility (Publication No. NA-09-24-221-EN-N). Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2775/621077

European Commission. (n.d.). Democracy. European Union. Retrieved July 27, 2025, from https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/peace-and-governance/democracy_en

European Commission & High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. (2011). A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean (Joint Communication, COM(2011) 200 final). https://transport.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6c8af2ef-fb2e-4892-b4a4-c6ec97252583_en?filename=euromed_com2011_200_en.pdf

European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. (2021, February 9). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A new Agenda for the Mediterranean (COM/2021/0371 final). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf

European External Action Service. (2024). The EU extends its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy until 2027. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-extends-its-action-plan-human-rights-and-democracy-until-2027_en

European Parliamentary Research Service. (2018). Democracy support in EU external policy [Research briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614717/EPRS_BRI(2018)614717_EN.pdf

European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). (2021). EU import dependency: vulnerability and policy options (EPRS_BRI(2021)689344_EN) [Research Briefing]. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689344/EPRS_BRI(2021)689344_EN.pdf

Farinha, R., & Youngs, R. (2024). Securitization and European democracy policy. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/securitization-and-european-democracy-policy?lang=en&center=europe.

Gruarin, V. (2024, February). EU policy in North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean: Balancing differentiated integration for conflict resolution and democracy support (Policy Brief). EuroMeSCo.

Kurki, M. (2015). Political Economy Perspective: Fuzzy Liberalism and EU Democracy Promotion. In Wetzel and Orbie.

La Rocca, M. (2025, April 1). EU Parliament approves four billion loan for Egypt: Greens—Commission throws away democracy and human rights. EUNews. https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/04/01/eu-parliament-approves-four-billion-loan-for-egypt-greens-commission-throws-away-democracy-and-human-rights/

Léonard, S., & Kaunert, C. (2017). The European Union and the securitisation of migration: The challenges of managing the EU's response to the refugee crisis. Journal of European Security, 26(3), 277-296. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1358900

Manners, I. (2013). Assessing the decennial, reassessing the global: Understanding European Union

Normative power in global politics. Cooperation and Conflict, 48(2), 304–329. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713485389

Teti, A., Thompson, D., & Noble, C. (2013). EU democracy assistance discourse in its new response to a changing neighbourhood. Democracy and Security, 9(1–2), 61–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2013.764802

Toukan, D. M. (2025). Improving the effectiveness of EU democracy assistance in the MENA: Supporting civil society in Jordan. In Y. Can & M. Ocvirk (Eds.), The Future of Euro-MENA Relations (pp. xxx–xxx). Woodrow Wilson Center–Middle East Program/Global Europe Program.

Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). (2025). 30 years of the Barcelona Process. https://ufmsecretariat.org/30bcnprocess/

Youngs, R. (2004). Normative dynamics and strategic interests in the EU's external identity. Journal of Common Market Studies, 42(2), 415–435. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2004.00494.x

Youngs, R., & Ventura, E. (2024, September). The EU pushes back a new democracy plan: A mistake? A review of the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (SHAPEDEM-EU Publication No. 7). SHAPEDEM-EU.

Youngs, et al. (2025). European Democracy Support Annual Review 2024. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/european-democracy-support-annual-review-2024?lang=en

-

EU, State-Building and Member States' Leverage: The Case of Palestine

Andrea Aznar Macià[1]

EST, WeWorld

Abstract

This essay explores the European Union's (EU) state-building efforts in Palestine, analyzing how the internal divisions between member states weaken the effectiveness of its foreign policy. Departing from the conceptualisation of liberal peacebuilding, the paper examines the EU's historical and ongoing engagement with Palestinian territory and its authorities while studying its geopolitical constraints and normative goals. The essay gives particular attention to the multilevel nature of EU foreign policy, which often creates inconsistency between collective EU action and individual member state agendas, especially regarding sensitive issues such as the recognition of Palestinian statehood, responses to Israeli settlement expansion, and approaches to Hamas. The essay also assesses the EU's role in a future post-Gaza war reconstruction process. While the EU has contributed significantly to humanitarian and development aid, its fractured internal consensus continues to limit its strategic leverage, credibility, and transformative potential in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Introduction

Over the years, the European Union (EU) has been an engaged actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, the EU has historically been an important financial and political force in state-building efforts in Palestine. While always recognizing the right of Israel to exist, the general consensus since the start of the 21st century is that the establishment of a Palestinian state is the best solution to achieve lasting peace in the Middle East (Bouris, 2010). For this reason in 1993, the Union gave its support to the signature of the Oslo Accords, which represented the first ever direct agreement between both Palestinian and Israeli representatives. It was hoped that, with this pact, Palestinians would be able to economically, socially, and politically manage their own territories, enabling the creation of an independent Palestinian state that lived in peace with its Israeli "neighbor".

Despite European state-building efforts, this goal has never materialized. The various Member States follow a "multilevel foreign policy", which encourages them to cooperate while also pursuing their own independent policies. Therefore, the EU's real influence has constantly been weakened by its internal disagreements and the intensifying complex context on the ground.

The scope of the research corresponds to the post-Oslo Accords period with a focus on the last 10–15 years, and the essay attempts to give an answer to the following research questions: How has the EU conceptualized and implemented state-building efforts in Palestine? How do internal divisions among EU member states affect policy coherence and impact? What can we expect of the EU's Reconstruction Plan for Gaza? In order to answer these questions, the methodology used is based on qualitative analysis of EU documents, academic literature, and grey literature.

Through these research questions the essay aims to use the case of Palestine to exemplify, through an evaluation of the effectiveness of EU state-building initiatives, how the EU's influence is limited when member states prioritize national interests over common foreign policy objectives.

Literature framework: State-Building

State-building is described as the process of building or rebuilding the institutions, frameworks and overall capacities of a functioning state in fragile contexts or post-conflict environments. Its main goal is to ensure a durable and legitimate government that is able to provide basic public goods, administer justice, keep the security of the citizens and promote socio-economic development.

State-building has become a pivotal strategy for contemporary efforts towards peacekeeping, especially within the concept frame of liberal peace. Liberal peace theory states that, in order to achieve sustainable peace, it is imperative to ensure the existence of democratic governments, international cooperation, and free markets. After the Cold War, the UN began to instrumentalize this approach by shifting its peacekeeping missions towards new operations that mix civilian, military, and state-building factors. (Leininger 2006).

Nonetheless, peace and state-building are interdependent notions. Certain scholars believe that the development of the judiciary and governmental institutions must be prioritized before ensuring liberalization (Fukuyama, 2005). This theory believes that an immediate introduction of elections and political pluralism could be destabilizing since the development of the judiciary and administrative capacity could be outpaced. This additional remark highlights the fact that post-conflict territories are usually too fragile to introduce democracy and market reforms before ensuring stability.

The European Union's foreign policy approach is based on the concepts of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Therefore, it serves as an example of state-building from a liberal peace approach. Instead of relying on military power, the EU's strategy makes use of incentives, institutional support, and conditionality to encourage internal change that builds functional state institutions able to protect peace and stability. Accordingly, the EU connects political engagement, development aid, and governance reform through diverse mechanisms such as economic cooperation, technical assistance, judiciary strengthening, and security reforms with the goal of not only restoring order but also reconstructing nations affected by conflict in accordance with liberal democratic theory (Bouris, 2010).

The EU's State-Building Approach in Palestine

Over the years, the European Union has acted as a prominent actor in peace and state-building efforts for the Palestinian territory, with a general focus on the support for a two-state solution. However, in spite of the EU's financial and strategic investments, its effectiveness is constrained by internal fragmentation, geopolitical changes and the external dominance of other actors like the United States.

The normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states brokered by the US in 2020, known as the Abraham Accords, created further challenges to the EU. Although the accords were praised as a historic step towards peace in the region, they sidelined the Palestinian question, further complicating the EU's position. The EU welcomed the Accords with caution but reiterated that a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains essential for lasting peace in the Middle East (Özlem Tür, 2004).

Between 2014 and 2021, the EU provided, on average, a total of 297 million euros per year to the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza, adding up to a total of 2.569 billion euros during the mentioned period. These funds were channeled through PEGASE (Direct Financial Support) and contributions to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). PEGASE is an EU mechanism that provides the Palestinian Authority with financial aid for salaries and basic services, while the UNRWA is a UN agency focused on providing healthcare and education to Palestinian refugees across the Middle East. This financial power has been used to adopt a comprehensive state-building perspective focused on the following areas: governance reform, fiscal consolidation, social services, infrastructure, and economic growth in an attempt to ensure Palestinians' access to basic services like healthcare, education, clean water, and electricity (European Commission, 2024). This aid has been geographically tailored to the unique circumstances of East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and Area C (Israeli-controlled territory in the West Bank), while still maintaining a unified approach to state-building across Palestine (European Commission, 2021).

Despite regular European efforts, its aid has shown a modest impact in terms of sustainability and long-term improvements. The projects struggle to continue delivering improvements and benefits without ongoing external support. Certain sectors like health, education, and judicial reform have proven a positive impact. However, it was often thanks to isolated projects (such as the reconstruction of public schools and health centers) rather than causing a real structural transformation. These limitations are mostly blamed on the political and security context, which continues to worsen, as well as the ongoing Israeli occupation, and the weak progress in reforms such as public administration, which are considered key (European Commission, 2021).

Recently, the EU has shifted towards a more geopolitical approach to international issues, as emphasized by the 2019 European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen. A geopolitical approach prioritises a foreign policy based on strategic interests, power dynamics and security concerns instead of the promotion of democracy and human rights. It can be argued that such a phenomenon has brought new complexities into the EU's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (A.C.W.D., 2025). This shift has been notably motivated by the current EU security concerns. As the union hopes to increase its influence within the increasingly complex geopolitical world, it is adopting an approach based on interest rather than the previously used normative perspective.

The EU's state-building efforts in Palestine have clearly been significant when it comes to scale and intent. However, these programs have mostly been reactive and overshadowed by stronger

geopolitical actors. Moreover, as recently mentioned, the EU maintains a complicated and sometimes contradictory role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to the tension between its normative commitments and its limited geopolitical capacity.

Internal Divisions and Policy Incoherence

The European Union's foreign policy is a complex, multilevel governance framework that balances both the particular foreign policies of each member state and the supranational EU institutions. This structure often causes inconsistencies between the EU's collective goals and the independent agendas of the member countries. The EU tries to have and to present a unified front to the world; however, the fight for consensus among very diverse national governments tends to produce contradictory policies (Mendez, 2023). Member states often prioritize their own individual interests over EU commitments, which undermines the coherence and normative power of EU foreign policy, especially in sensitive areas such as human rights and conflict resolution.

When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are many issues that highlight the persistent internal divisions between the different EU member states. Countries like Sweden and Ireland have generally been more vocal in their support for the Palestinian cause. Instead, Germany, Austria, and the Visegrád Group have usually focused on prioritizing the security interests of Israel. This divergence in member state policies has led to inconsistent EU messaging and reduced its diplomatic leverage (Özlem Tür & Alpan, 2024). Three main dichotomies can help identify the strong inconsistencies within the union when it comes to the case of Palestine:

- **The recognition of Palestinian Statehood.** Several European countries have recently recognized the state of Palestine after the start of Israel's military war on Gaza. This is the case for Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, and Norway, which recognized Palestinian statehood on the 28th of May 2024. Nonetheless, other states are strongly reluctant to the idea: Germany and Hungary are clear examples of those nations that oppose unilateral recognition. This reality of divergent opinions keeps the EU from being able to adopt a unified position on the matter of Palestinian statehood (Grevi & Al, 2020).

- **Israeli settlement expansion.** The EU has officially condemned Israel's illegal settlement expansion on Palestinian territory since it represents an illegal violation of international law. Still, on one hand, countries like Ireland and Spain have pushed for stronger measures such as giving support to international legal action or even labeling products that come from the settlements. On the other hand, others like Germany and Hungary have resisted such measures, arguing for their strategic relationship with the Israeli nation or their own national political considerations. This has led to some EU statements being proclaimed only on behalf of certain members, with the omission of dissenting countries.

- **Approach to Hamas and the reality after October 7.** Even though the EU has a no-contact policy when it comes to Hamas, since it is considered a terrorist organization, each member state has a different interpretation and implementation of the policy. Hardliner countries like the Czech Republic and Germany demand that to maintain strict isolation from the group. Meanwhile, nations like Spain and Ireland support a certain engagement with Hamas' political wing to mostly reinforce humanitarian action. This second perspective fears that total isolation worsens the instability of the territory and the possibility of peace processes (Ruck, 2025).

The EU's limitations for consensus were put in the spotlight after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023. The European institutions called for a ceasefire and advocated access to humanitarian aid in Gaza, but the members' speeches showed deep divisions. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen displayed unequivocal support for Israel, stating "We are friends of Israel and when a friend is under attack, we have to stand together". Meanwhile, European Council President Charles Michel emphasized adherence to international law and the need to avoid double standards, stating that "Condemning one tragedy shouldn't prevent us from condemning another tragedy" (Konecny, 2024). The EU's credibility as a mediator was questioned by these institutional dissonances.

These examples of strong internal divisions highlight that the ineffectiveness of the EU's state-building efforts in Palestine and its limited credibility as a unified international actor are weakening its ability to generate a sustainable impact on the issue. The lack of a coherent approach makes the EU lose its leverage with both the Palestinian and the Israeli parties. For example, the fact that the EU solely focuses on supporting the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the only legitimate representative in the territory, while completely sidelining Hamas, has contributed to the fragmentation of Palestinian governance and it has interfered with the EU's influence in promoting genuine democratic processes and reconciliation within Palestinian society (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Al, 2023).

Moreover, the EU struggles to position itself as a credible unified actor. Policy incoherences and public disagreements damage the EU's reputation as a reliable and effective mediator. These weaknesses are then exploited by external actors, diminishing the EU's capability to influence outcomes. External actors might engage selectively with more favorable member states or disregard EU mediation efforts since they're aware of the lack of a unified stance. Furthermore, the general public perceives clear double standards when it comes to the very different EU approaches to the conflicts in Palestine versus Ukraine. The EU has a strong and unified support for Ukraine and has enforced sanctions against Russia, while the response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is nothing but cautious and fragmented. This reality damages even further the EU's credibility and the human rights that it hopes to defend (Jérome Bellion-Jourdan, 2025).

In summary, the combination of the EU's multilevel foreign policy framework with the deep and persistent internal disagreements has caused policy incoherences that strongly limit both the effectiveness of the EU's state-building initiatives in Palestine and its credibility as a unified actor in the current conflict.

The Gaza Reconstruction Plan and the Future of EU Engagement

Since October 2023, Gaza has suffered one of the most destructive wars in modern history. The territory has been left in devastation, and the death toll among Palestinians has surpassed 50,000. Moreover, more than 125,000 people have been wounded, and the majority of Gaza's 2.3 million citizens have been forcibly displaced. Most infrastructure in the territory has also been damaged or destroyed; hospitals, water plants, education facilities, as well as entire neighbourhoods, have been wiped out. Gaza now presents a severe humanitarian crisis with a threat of famine, economic collapse, close to full general unemployment, and almost nonexistent public services (IRC, 2025). The conflict has been strongly scrutinized by the international community, which sees the urgent need for a ceasefire and a sustainable solution for Gaza's recovery and peace efforts.

In the face of this situation, the postwar Gaza Reconstruction Plan was formulated by Arab states

with the goal of creating a framework to rebuild the Gaza Strip both physically and in terms of governance and humanitarian relief. This plan, mostly developed by Egypt, was adopted by the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation during a summit in Cairo in March 2025. The Arab Plan focuses on providing immediate humanitarian aid to the territory and plans for reconstruction while excluding Hamas from any future governance role and instead placing the leadership on a technocratic Palestinian committee. Moreover, the plan aims to protect Gazans from forced displacement outside the Palestinian territory.

The EU has publicly endorsed the Gaza Reconstruction Plan, considering it a strong foundation for discussions for the future of the region (EEAS, 2025). The EU's High Representative and key member states such as France, Germany, Italy, and the UK have all issued statements aligning themselves with the Arab initiative. Despite this formal consensus, each Member State is showing different levels of eagerness and strategy. For example, Germany and France are more centered on reconstruction efforts to strengthen their diplomatic influence in the Middle East. Instead, some Eastern European nations are more reserved or express less engagement due to their alignments with Israel.

The EU has not only passively endorsed the Plan, but has also approved the EU Comprehensive Programme for Palestine 2025-2027, which was an outcome of High-Level Political Dialogue between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority. With this program, the EU committed to providing substantial financial aid (1.6 billion euros for 2025-2027) in order to sustain public services and infrastructure according to the priorities of the endorsed Plan (European Commission, 2025).

The EU's Gaza Reconstruction Plan (2025-2027) is organized across three main pillars: the first aims to support public services and governance, providing up to 620 million euros in direct grants to the Palestinian Authority (PA) to target urgent public administration needs and state-building reforms. The second pillar focuses on recovery and stabilization projects with around 576 million euros for tangible projects across Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem to address sectors like water, energy, health, and critical infrastructure. This pillar would improve living conditions and commit to allocating 82 million euros annually for UNRWA to maintain vital services for refugees. The last pillar targets the reinforcement of the private sector with up to 400 million euros in loans (through the European Investment Bank) for the Palestinian private sector, supporting entrepreneurship, jobs, and rebuilding the economy.

The official statement from the European Commission on April 14, 2025, declared that "The EU's support for Palestinian recovery and resilience is unwavering, grounded in our commitment to the two-state solution. All assistance is conditioned on genuine progress toward inclusive governance, human rights, and peace." The EU's focus, therefore, is on the creation of a solid political and security framework that can be accepted by both Palestinians and Israelis to ensure lasting stability and peace. As declared, the union continues to place the two-state solution as its official goal for the region, and all aid and relief efforts are directed towards reviving credible peace processes.

Nonetheless, this commitment is put in question by the nuanced relationship of the EU with Israel. The abundant ties and partnerships with the Jewish nation limit the EU's willingness to enforce pressure on Israeli policies regarding settlement expansion and military actions. Moreover, the gravity of the recent conflict, which some observers have depicted as an ongoing act of genocide, along with the firm positions of the Israeli and US governments, makes the two-state solution seem further away from reality than ever. These developments question the viability of the two-state framework in the current geopolitical context.

Conclusion

The EU prides itself on being the biggest provider of external assistance to the Palestinians, with a bilateral allocation amounting to €1.36 billion for 2021-2024, of which over €1.043 billion has already been allocated.

In the context of recent tragic developments on the ground, the EU and the Palestinian Authority (PA) signed a Letter of Intent on 19 July 2024, which set out a strategy for addressing the critical budgetary and fiscal situation of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian economy. The letter planned for the creation of a program for Palestine and, in the meantime, created an emergency support fund of 400 million euros to the PA that was disbursed between July 2024 and February 2025. Almost a year later, the EU Comprehensive Programme for Palestine 2025-2027 was presented after discussions with the Palestinian Authority and various other partners. Nonetheless, even when committing to big allocations such as this, the EU keeps a cautious stance on the Palestinian issue. Official statements that present these aid programs specify that the designations do not imply a recognition of a State of Palestine, and they do not conflict with the individual positions of the Member States on the issue.

The current programme for Palestine does not represent a new approach to the conflict. The EU continues to bet on the two-state solution by supporting the Palestinian Authority. Yet, historically, this strategy has failed to be successful due to political divisions in the territory and external pressures, presenting several risks to the EU's plans for the region. The EU's credibility as an effective actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at stake due to the member states' disagreements. Therefore, the Union is mostly perceived as a financial donor that lacks political impact.

In conclusion, the EU's impact and influence have been limited despite its efforts at state-building in Palestine through financial aid and institutional support for a two-state solution. The inconsistencies within the Union endanger its credibility to influence the context on the ground. The Gaza Reconstruction Plan is ambitious and well-funded, but it will face the same risks and complications that have already prevented a lasting peace agreement in the region. As long as the national interest of each member continues to trump the EU's collective foreign policy agenda, the Union's influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will stay limited and constrained.

References

A.C.W.D. (2025) The shifting sands of European diplomacy: The EU's evolving alignment with Israel, Arab Center Washington DC. Available at: https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-shifting-sands-of-european-diplomacy-the-eus-evolving-alignment-with-israel/ (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

Akgül-AçıkmeŞe, S. et al. (2023) Stalled by Division: EU Internal Contestation over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, JOINT – A joined-up Union, a stronger Europe. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_1055 (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

Bellion-Jourdan, J. (2025) The EU said it believed in the two-state solution – its actions said otherwise, EUobserver. Available at: https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/arf30887e7 (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Bouris, D. (2010) 'The European Union's role in the Palestinian Territory after the Oslo Accords: Stillborn State-Building', Journal of Contemporary European Research, 6(3), pp. 376–394. doi:10.30950/jcer.v6i3.205. lis1md,+Journal+manager,+Bouris_JCER (1).pdf

EEAS (2025) Statement by the High Representative on the arab plan for Gaza, EEAS – Press release . Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/statement-high-representative-arab-plan-gaza_en (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

European Commission (2024) Evaluation of the EU's cooperation with Palestine 2014-2021, Evaluation of the European Union External Action. Available at: https://south.euneighbours.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/evaluation-of-the-eus-cooperation-with-palestine-2014-2021-EZ0125000ENN.pdf (Accessed: 02 June 2025).

European Commission (2025) Commission announces Multiannual Programme for Palestinian recovery and resilience worth up to €1.6 billion. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_1055 (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

European joint strategy in support of Palestine 2021 - 2024 (2024) EEAS. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/palestine-occupied-palestinian-territory-west-bank-and-gaza-strip/european-joint-strategy-support-palestine-2021-2024_en?s=206 (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Evaluation of the EU's cooperation with Palestine 2014-2021 (2024) European Commission. Available at: https://south.euneighbours.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/evaluation-of-the-eus-cooperation-with-palestine-2014-2021-EZ0125000ENN.pdf (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Fukuyama, F. (2005). State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century. London: Profile.

Furness, M. (2023) Europe should prepare to support long-term Palestinian state-building, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). Available at: https://www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/europe-should-prepare-to-support-long-term-palestinian-state-building/ (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Grevi, G. et al. (2020) Differentiated Cooperation in European Foreign Policy: The Challenge of Coherence. Available at: https://epc-web-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/content/PDF/2020/EU_IDEA-_challenge_of_coherence.pdf (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

IRC, 2025. Crisis in Gaza: What to know and how to help (2025) International Rescue Committee (IRC). Available at: https://www.rescue.org/crisis-in-gaza (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Kassioui, H. (2024) The EU's rhetoric-reality gap towards Israel-Palestine, Universiteit Gent. Available at:
https://www.ugent.be/ps/politiekewetenschappen/gies/en/research/publications/honours_paper/academic-year-2023-2024/the-eus-rhetoric-reality-gap-towards-israel-palestine (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Leininger, J. (2006). 'Democracy and UN Peace-Keeping: Conflict Resolution through State-Building and Democracy Promotion in Haiti', Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law, 10 (1), pp. 465-530.

Mendez, A. (2023) Unpacking Inconsistencies in the European Union's Foreign Policy . Available at: https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/3074182/no.ntnu:inspera:144932901:64736651.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

Moerenhout, T. (2012) 'Essay on EU involvement in the Israeli-palestinian conflict - consistency and cohesiveness from 1967 to the emergence of the Arab Spring', SSRN Electronic Journal [Preprint]. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2179483. Microsoft Word - Moerenhout (2012/Nov) - EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.doc

Tür, Ö. (2024). What accounts for the EU's actorness within its "geopolitical awakening"?: The Israeli Palestinian conflict and effectiveness and cohesion of the European Union, METU Studies in Development, 51 (December), 2024, 261-280.

Democratic Legitimacy and EU Bilateral Agreements: The Case-Study of Tunisia

Alicia Kerekes Ispas[1]

EST

Abstract

The European Union (EU) seems increasingly reliant on pragmatic, informal, and supranational tools in its external action, particularly in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. While the EU traditionally presented itself as a normative actor promoting democracy and human rights, this has given way to pragmatic approaches favoring migration control, security, and energy cooperation. The 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) exemplifies this trend. Signed amidst heightened migration pressures, the agreement illustrates the Union's growing dependence on bilateral arrangements that circumvent traditional procedures and safeguards. This paper analyses the MoU to examine how informalisation shapes EU external governance, interinstitutional dynamics, and democratic legitimacy. Drawing on relevant literature and a qualitative analysis of documents and speeches, it finds out that the EU, pushed by some member state leaders, increasingly drives informal arrangements that prioritise expediency but risk undermining transparency, accountability, and human rights oversight.

Keywords

EU, Tunisia, Democracy, Legitimacy, Bilateral Agreements, Human Rights

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing trend of supranationalisation and informalisation of the European Union (EU)'s foreign, security, and migration actions, including in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The EU's relationship with its Southern Neighbourhood has been complex and variable, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011. On the one hand, the EU aimed to hold itself as a normative actor by supporting democracy, human rights, and inclusive development — something that it is slowly giving up. On the other hand, the EU increasingly consolidated its pragmatic approaches, trying to accommodate the Union's and its member states' pressing interests — including migration, security, and energy cooperation with third countries — sometimes at the expense of its normative legitimacy. This change of course can be seen through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) reviews, Ursula von der Leyen's 2019 "geopolitical" Com-

---

–mission and 2024 second term, as well as in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In this context, the EU has been increasingly relying on flexible, informal bilateral agreements with Southern Neighbourhood governments, presented as pragmatic tools to swiftly address pressing challenges, primarily migration. However, these moves have raised concerns over transparency, democratic legitimacy, adequate human rights assessment and oversight, sustainability, and overall accountability.

Signed amidst heightened concerns over irregular migration, the 2023 EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) exemplifies the Union's increasing reliance on bilateral, informal deals that diverge from formal instruments. Hence, this paper aims to explore what the EU–Tunisia MoU reveals about the increasing pragmatism, supranationalism, and informalisation of the EU's external action in the MENA, and the role of individual institutions in these processes. By analysing this agreement, it seeks to understand how the different actors exercise their negotiating capacity, how this affects EU interinstitutional relations, and what broader democratic implications arise for the EU from this mode of external governance. Ultimately, it is argued that the increasing reliance on informal methods risks undermining interinstitutional dynamics within the Union, as well as its own normative identity and democratic legitimacy. This gains importance in the wake of worrying democratic backsliding and migrant rights violations in Tunisia, making it essential to assess the EU's involvement and responses.

To address these questions, the essay examines the relevant literature on the rising pragmatism characterising the ENP, the partial supranationalisation of the EU's foreign affairs, and the Union's use of informal and flexible strategies in its external action. Furthermore, it follows a qualitative, interpretive methodology, analysing official documents, publications, and speeches coming from different EU institutions and personalities. In this way, it examines the EU–Tunisia MoU, including its context, main actors, negotiation processes, implementation, and reception. Finally, the conclusions of the assessment, along with the broader implications, of the MoU are presented. By situating this agreement within the broader EU-MENA relations, the paper aims to critically reflect on the democratic and legitimacy costs of increasingly pragmatic and informal policymaking in the region. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the externalisation of migration and the evolving nature of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Literature Review

Between Norms and Interests: The EU's Neighbourhood Policy Dilemma

Following the Arab Spring, the EU's approach to its Southern Neighbourhood seemed to have experienced a significant shift. Most of the literature agrees that the EU adopted an increased pragmatic neighbourhood policy, prioritising migration control and regional stability over its normative agenda of democracy and human rights promotion (Colombo, 2021; Zoubir & Lounnas, 2021). While initial democratisation efforts aligned with the EU's strategic interests in fostering stable partners (Dandashly, 2018), these goals were soon constrained by crisis management, migration pressures, and geopolitical shifts.

This shift is reflected in the 2015 ENP revision and the 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP), which introduced the notion of "principled pragmatism", which aimed to

reconcile its values with its strategic interests (Colombo, 2021; Mirel, 2022). Nonetheless, scholars argued that the abstractness of the notion, accompanied by its short-term planning, inconsistent action, and lack of internal coordination, left the EU's action limited in effectively promoting both long-term democratic transformation and stability in the region (Badarin and Schumacher, 2020; Stollenwerk et al., 2021). Olsen's (2000) theory of the "limits to international idealism" highlights this inherent contradiction in the EU's foreign policy: while it claims to promote democracy abroad, its approaches appear to be inadequate because of the security priorities and internal divisions among member states. Paenke (2019) describes this as a "dual strategy", in which the EU seeks to uphold its normative identity while pursuing its security and economic interests — a tension that, amid shifting geopolitical dynamics, is undermining its credibility as a normative power.

A central feature of this pragmatic turn has been the externalization of migration control; a subject extensively covered in literature. Following the surge of irregular migration towards Europe, the EU shifted responsibilities for migration management to third neighbouring states to cope with its limited internal mechanisms and coordination between member states (Tagliapietra, 2019). The EU turned to bilateral strategic partnerships based on "mutual interests" with third countries, with the 2016 EU-Turkiye "refugee deal" a foremost example (Saatçioglu, 2018). This approach consolidated with the 2020 New Pact on Migration and Asylum (Häkli, et al., 2024), the 2021 "New Mediterranean Agenda" (Lannos, 2021), financial aid and development projects (Akpomera, 2024), or cooperation with civil society in the respective countries (Dini & Giusa, 2020). As Panebianco and Cannata (2024) conclude:

> "The EU seems entrapped in a sort of (not-new) stability-democracy dilemma. Confronted with increasing pressures on the Mediterranean and Eastern borders, the EU responded through reframing its tools according to an issue-oriented crisis management logic, prioritizing border controls, returns and readmission" (p. 28).

In Tunisia, which has been largely considered the success story of the Arab Spring, the EU's support for democratization also waned over the years (Hatab, 2018; Millet, 2021). Initially, Tunisia's democratization and relative stability made it a favorable EU partner through the "conditionality" framework. On the one hand, the EU's incentives were received with credibility, and its promises were delivered, namely through socio-political programs and economic support. On the other hand, Tunisia was compliant, meeting the EU's expectations in undergoing reforms (Wurm, 2018; Johansson & Rivera, 2020). Nonetheless, cooperation on terrorism and migration control started being a foremost priority. Firstly, as Tunisia faced a terrorist insurgency and strong instability in the context of Libya and Syria's breakdown, the EU strived to enhance the country's security capabilities and economic stability. Secondly, Tunisia emerged as a critical origin and transit country for migrants aiming for Europe (Dandashly, 2018; Zoubir & Lounnas, 2021). In this context, Pinto (2024) explains that the EU has gradually withdrawn its commitment to Tunisian democracy, unable to act on the authoritarian and populist turn taken by President Kaïs Saied, elected in 2019, arguably empowered by European legitimacy and financial support.

Moving towards a Supranationalisation of the EU's External Action?

A recent body of literature points to the partial supranationalisation of EU foreign policy, traditionally under the exclusive domain of member states. It seems that the distinction between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism is blurring (Howorth, 2011). For instance, Morillas (2020) examines the EUGS to defend that the intergovernmental foundations of EU foreign affairs have

gradually motivated supranational dynamics and created a certain "autonomy in intergovernmentalism". The EUGS — a milestone in unifying EU external action - reinforced and potentiated the role of Brussels — based bodies in the EU's foreign affairs, including the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the High Representative/ Vice-President (HR/VP), who led the formulation of the strategy.

Similarly, the European Commission has been keen to advance its autonomy in EU foreign and security policy. Although the Commission long played a role in the EU's external action, its mandate is theoretically limited to economic issues, external trade, and development aid. Over the past years, the body seemed to have expanded its influence beyond these domains through strategic linkages and bureaucratic spillover. Haroche (2023) points out different reasons for this. On the one hand, this ambition is the result of external factors, including intensifying geopolitical pressures such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the consolidation of Chinese competition. On the other hand, endogenous factors play a crucial role, particularly the Commission's rivalry with the EEAS and its aim to challenge the latter's primacy in external action. The Commission's ambition in the EU's external action was particularly manifested with von der Leyen's "geopolitical Commission", which aimed for a unified European voice and cohesive action in responding to global challenges. Her efforts were quite successful in further expanding the Commission's competence in the EU's external affairs (Barcani & Kassim, 2024).

This trend also seems to apply to the ENP. Warnars (2020) points out that, while the formulation of the ENP in 2004 was an intergovernmental process, the Commission was able to strongly influence and become its main driver. Zwolski (2020) complements that as the Commission's competences expanded over the years, so too have expectations for greater efficiency and accountability. This institutional evolution has contributed to the Commission's growing politicization, which is facing mounting political pressure from member states and political groups pursuing their own interests. Hence, the Commission's traditionally technocratic, bureaucratic, and development-oriented role has shifted toward more politicized engagement in high-profile, ideologically bounded, interest-based policies.

This links to a second body of literature that stresses that EU member states continue to play a key role in shaping the Union's external action. Foreign and security policy remains a sensitive area of intergovernmental collaboration and national concern, especially amid rising Euroscepticism across the EU (Sülün, 2024). Amadio (2022) adds that informal groups of member states play a key role in EU foreign policy, especially when there are strong national disagreements and EU-level capacity is lacking. In this way, they aim to deal with certain policy issues and operate parallel to formal mechanisms. Rivera (2020) exemplifies how the growing influence of far-right parties and populist discourses are driving the EU's pragmatic approach in the Southern Neighbourhood. The writer highlights the coalition between the Italian and Hungarian governments, which has pushed for "illiberal agendas" that prioritize migration control and security over human rights commitments in the Mediterranean. The prominence of intergovernmental dynamics is exemplified in migration policy, a highly politicized area driven by national preferences and inter-state bargaining (Givens & Luedtke, 2003; Polat, 2006). While some authors acknowledge growing tensions between intergovernmental and supranational dynamics, they agree that supranational efforts are limited and member states largely favor unilateral, ad hoc measures (Dagi, 2017; Trauner, 2022). Member states' officials have long favored the security dimension of migration and pushed for a migration externalization agenda to circumvent EU internal blockades, respond to national electoral pressures, and preserve their autonomy — thereby sidelining the more comprehensive efforts of the Commission

and the European Parliament (Lavenex, 2006). As Tagliapietra (2018) complements, it is the member states' inability or unwillingness to commonly address migration flows that led the EU to search for a solution in externalization. Gürkan and Coman (2021) highlight how, during the so-called "migration crisis", supranational actors invoked normative interests while member states security and material ones. The Commission, however, ultimately aligned with the latter, culminating in the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal. Crisis responses, they conclude, are shaped by the Council, sidelining normative preferences of supranational institutions, which are forced to adapt.

Finally, EU external governance is best understood as a hybrid system, where supranational and intergovernmental actors interact — cooperate or clash — to drive policy. While intergovernmental processes remain central and leaders in the Council have become more active in legislation processes, supranational bodies like the Commission have also gained strategic ambitions and scope of action. Likewise, these institutions do not act as uniform bodies, but are characterized by differences between their subunits (Schmidt; 2016 & Moloney & Princen).

Bilateral Agreements with the Southern Neighbourhood: Differentiation, Flexibility, and Informality

While the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership aimed to promote region-building and transnational cooperation from a holistic approach, bilateral relations between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean became the backbone of ENP. In the face of a complex myriad of actors and interests, geographical differentiation and bilateralism have been prioritized for greater flexibility and effectiveness (Ovádek & Wouters, 2017). And although this approach improves adaptation to the partner's specific needs, it is also viewed as a means to maximize EU leverage and circumvent the constraints of multilateralism. Overall, it has raised concerns about limiting region-building, policy convergence, and consistency among partners.

Similarly, a vast body of research focuses on the informalisation of these bilateral relations with the Southern Neighbourhood countries. Ott (2020) explains that soft law has become an essential and increasingly used instrument in EU foreign policy. By promoting bilateral soft law tools, the EU is contributing to the informalisation of its external action — from working arrangements to joint declarations, statements and memoranda of understanding. International soft law and non-binding instruments emerge as an advantage, particularly in dealing with politically contested areas in terms of efficiency, flexibility, and even discretion. Nonetheless, they also raised questions on their legal nature and the risk of jeopardising EU principles and values. Amadio (2022) adds that informal groups of member states also emerge to deal with contested issues, especially when there is disagreement among countries and weak EU capacity. However, these groups lack accountability mechanisms and fall into short-term strategies, hence bypassing formal procedures and hampering the EU's consistency. In turn, Wessel (2020) warns that while avoiding formal procedures may offer short-term strategic benefits, it comes at some costs, including the evasion of appropriate safeguards, limited European Parliament scrutiny, reduced transparency, and weakened accountability. Nonetheless, the author emphasizes that informal agreements, despite lacking legal binding force, are still part of the EU's legal order and commit the actors involved. Likewise, they do not necessarily prevent the European Court of Justice (EUCJ) from exercising its oversight, as EU legal norms continue to apply.

It is not surprising that informal international agreements have become widespread in the EU's migration strategy, particularly used to cooperate with third countries on preventing departures, fighting smuggling, establishing return schemes, and promoting legal paths. These informal practices expanded with the "migration crisis" and the subsequent political deadlock, when the EU sought fast and pragmatic alternatives outside the traditional formal channels. Among them, the 2016 EU-Turkiye Deal stands as a landmark but controversial arrangement — criticized for its democratic and legal ambiguity and potential risks to human rights (Wessel, 2020; Kassoti & Idriz, 2022). Reflecting on the proliferation of Mobility Partnerships (MPs), Cardwell and Dickson (2023) coin this model "formal informality", i.e. deals mimicking traditional formal agreements, but lacking the necessary legal protections, transparency, and clarity, and often repackaged as crisis management tools.

Strik and Robbesom (2024) take the recent EU-Tunisia MoU as a case study to investigate the Commission's informal approach in attempting to curb migration without proper democratic procedures and human rights safeguards with potential effects on the ground.

Evaluating the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding

Since the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, EU relations with its Southern Neighbourhood have been dynamic and adaptive. In 2004, ENP was formalized as the main EU framework for promoting regional cooperation in the neighbourhood based on bilateralism, conditionality, and shared values like democracy and human rights (European Commission, n.d.-c). Following the Arab Spring, the ENP was revised in 2015 to adopt a more pragmatic strategy that acknowledged the limits of the EU's leverage and aspirations in the region. Accordingly, a "more effective partnership" is put forward focusing on key areas such as economic development for stabilization, security and tackling terrorism, and migration and mobility. Likewise, the approach strengthened its focus on flexibility and differentiation (European Commission, n.d.-b; European Commission, n.d.-c; EEAS, n.d.).

It is worth mentioning that during the same years, far-right populist discourses and parties grew across Europe, characterized by their anti-immigration, Islamophobic and Eurosceptic stances. Even if not a majority, they became more represented in the Parliament with the 2019 European elections (Walker, 2019). The elections also came with the 2019-2024 "Geopolitical Commission" led by Ursula von der Leyen, which endorsed a more globally influential Europe that promotes both "European values" and its strategic interests (European Commission, 2019). Two of the guiding priorities became "A stronger Europe in the world", aiming for a unified EU in foreign affairs, and "Promoting our European way of life", which detailed the importance of establishing a united response to the "global challenge" of migration (European Commission, n.d.-a).

In 2021, the partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood was again renewed, proposing the New Agenda for the Mediterranean, focusing on strengthening resilience, security and human development in the region (European Commission, 2021). The strategy was built on key initiatives like the 2020-drafted New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to establish a common system to manage migration based on securing external borders, making faster and more efficient procedures, establishing an effective system of solidarity, and embedding migration in international partnerships. The pact calls for the importance of "mutually beneficial partnerships with key third countries of origin and transit" (European Commission, 2024b), something that has been criticized by human

rights groups over the risks to migrant protections (PICUM, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). The re-election of von der Leyen in 2024 signals a strengthened pragmatic tone, a shift going from considering the EU a normative actor in the world that also safeguards its interests, to an EU that just considers the latter:

> "Europe cannot control dictators and demagogues across the world, but it can choose to protect its own democracy. Europe cannot determine elections across the world, but it can choose to invest in the security and defence of its own continent. Europe cannot stop change, but it can choose to embrace it by investing in a new age of prosperity and improving our quality of life" (European Commission, 2024c, para. 3).

In the face of growing geopolitical challenges, the Commission's guiding priority in external action is that of "leveraging our power and partnership", particularly in the wider neighbourhood. Some measures include the establishment of a New Commissioner for the Mediterranean, the building of a new pact for the Mediterranean, and the restructuring of DG NEAR (Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations) into two separate DGs focused on the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods respectively. While it remains to be seen how they will evolve, these measures aim to develop a "strategic" partnership based on "mutual interest and common sustainable prosperity and resilience", (European Commission, 2025), where normative values seem to be left in the background.

Contextualizing the EU-Tunisia relations, dating back to the 70s, those have traditionally revolved around trade and security. Ben Ali's dictatorial regime, for instance, was a close ally of European countries and cooperated in dismantling tariff barriers, limiting Islamism, and controlling illegal immigration. This explained the hesitant and slow response of the European actors when the protests sparked in the country in 2011 (Kéfi, 2011).

After the Tunisian Revolution, their relationship developed as Tunisia came to be considered the only success story of the Arab Spring and a potential precedent for democracy in the Arab world. The EU committed to the democratic transition of the country, portrayed by their ambitious 2012 Privileged Partnership and 2014-2017 Action Plan, which focused on political cooperation and socioeconomic integration (European Union, 2013).

Migration and mobility cooperation remained a relevant priority, exemplified by the launching of the Dialogue on Migration, Mobility and Security in 2011 and the Mobility Partnership in 2014. The EU was aiming to cooperate on migration, and particularly the enactment of a Tunisian asylum legislation (European Commission, 2014).

While Tunisia's 2014 Constitution recognizes the right to asylum, proper legislation has been postponed and resisted. Abderrahim (2021) points to two main reasons: concerns about the country becoming a target for the EU's outsourcing of asylum requests and the prioritization of more pressing laws for consolidating the country's democracy. Furthermore, in 2017, the idea of externalizing asylum procedures and making refugee camps in Tunisia was pushed again by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The then Tunisian PM Chahed rejected, referencing Tunisia's young democracy and lack of capacity (DW, 2017).

In 2018, the EU-Tunisia Association Council was established to review their partnership. Strengthening Tunisia's democracy remained a priority, even if through a more pragmatic approach: "Tunisia made a strategic choice in anchoring itself to the European area, and the development of a

prosperous and stable Tunisian democracy within the neighbourhood of the EU is of mutual strategic interest" (European Union, 2018, p.3). Other key themes included socioeconomic development and trade relations, youth participation, and mobility and migration.

Regarding the negotiation process, the Commission first expressed its interest in a stronger partnership with Tunisia on combating illegal immigration through anti-smuggling, returns, and legal mobility cooperation in April 2023. The idea that both the Commission and Tunisia were willing to detail a partnership in the following months was declared (European Commission, 2023a). By early June 2023, the Commission announced that the EU (mentioned as a whole) and Tunisia had agreed to work on a comprehensive partnership based on economic development, trade and energy relations, migration control, and people-to-people contact. On July 16th, the deal was agreed by the "Team Europe", comprising Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, on the one hand, and Kaïs Saied, on the other. The MoU was then signed in Tunis by the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi and the Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Migration, and Tunisians Abroad Mounir Ben Rjiba (European Commission, 2023b & European Commission, 2023d). But, going beyond the EU's official announcements, it is worth addressing in what context the MoU was negotiated.

The first half of 2023 saw a sharp rise in migrants arriving in Italy from Tunisia, reaching 27,690 by March, significantly higher than in previous years. This surge was partly explained by the deteriorated economic situation and the growing anti-immigration discourse and practices in Tunisia. Notably, most migrants were non-Tunisians, depicting Tunisia's role as a key transit country to Europe (UNHCR, 2023). In April 2023, the Italian government declared a state of national emergency in response to the rising number of sea arrivals to Lampedusa and the lack of European support (Al Jazeera, 2023; Vigano, 2023). Taking office in September 2022, Georgia Meloni has long prioritized curbing migration, particularly through migration cooperation with third countries. Her government concluded controversial deals with countries like Libya, Tunisia and Albania (Rubeo & Baroud, 2019; Marsi, 2023). Similarly, Meloni has been openly critical of the EU's lack of cohesive immigration policy and advocated for reshaping it. In doing so, Meloni has worked closely with the Commission and managed to advance initiatives like the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the EU-Tunisia MoU (Mabrouk, 2024; Adamo, 2025). On the Dutch side, then PM Mark Rutte, leader of the conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), also played a key part in advancing the MoU. As Rutte was known for prioritizing migration control, both domestically — where anti-migrant rhetoric had grown — and at the EU level, where he pushed for stricter policies. He found a close partner in Meloni, forming a vocal Italo-Dutch coalition committed to striking migration deals with African countries, with Tunisia at the top of their list. Notably, just a week before finalizing the Tunisian deal, Rutte resigned after his cabinet collapsed over disagreements on asylum policy (The Guardian, 2023; Van Der Linde, 2023).

Finally, Tunisia had been facing critical economic stagnation and a financial crisis, particularly with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine. In this context, the IMF proposed a bailout package of $1,9bn along with austerity-driven reform conditions. By April 2023, the initiative was completely rejected by Kaïs Saied, who declared it "foreign diktats" risking social harmony in the country. This left Tunisia in a critical economic situation and in need of a solution, a perfect timing to welcome funding from the EU (Amara, 2023; Un & Mukanganga, 2023).

Complicating matters further, the 2019 appointment of Kaïs Saied as president marked a populist and increasingly authoritarian shift in Tunisian politics. Since 2021, Saied has progressively

concentrated power and targeted freedom of speech under the pretext of fighting corruption and foreign interference—dismissing the parliament, rewriting the Constitution, and imprisoning journalists, lawyers, and political opponents (Al Jazeera, 2022b; BBC, 2023). During the same years, he also developed a strong anti-immigration rhetoric, contributing to the unprecedented wave of human rights abuses against Black immigrants. Saied had been accused of using racist discourses–including the idea that migration is a plot to change the country's demography — as a political scapegoat to deflect attention from the country's deeper economic challenges (Guesmi, 2023; Meakam 2024). During the negotiations, however, Saied stressed the importance of addressing the inhumane conditions faced by immigrants, while clarifying that Tunisians did a lot to support them and dismissing NGOs' reports as "campaigns of defamation and falsehoods against the country". He also emphasized the importance of the MoU being accompanied by a set of binding agreements, something that has not yet arrived (The Arab Weekly, 2023; Agenzia Nova, 2023).

On the Content

The agreement was published on July 16th 2023 by the Commission as a 4-page press release, highlighting its informal nature, under the title "Memorandum of Understanding on strategic and global partnership". In the introduction, it clarifies that the agreement is between Tunisia and the European Union, represented by the European Commission. The main aim is to strategically enhance EU-Tunisia relations by enhancing economic and trade relations, endorsing Tunisia's green energy transition, promoting people-to-people contact through educational exchanges, and migration cooperation. However, two priorities stand out, namely the economic stability of Tunisia and "reducing irregular migration flows and saving human lives".

Firstly, the EU commits itself to assisting Tunisia in boosting economic growth and restoring macroeconomic balance by supporting reforms through budgetary support. Similarly, the EU declares its aim to strengthen economic, trade, and investment cooperation with the country. Considering migration, both parties express their desire to combat irregular migration by dismantling migrant smuggling, cooperate in search and rescue operations, collaborate in returns and readmissions, and promote legal pathways. The EU commits itself to "provide sufficient additional financial support, in particular for the provision of equipment, training and technical support necessary to further improve the management of Tunisia's borders". The document does not reference the development of Tunisia's asylum legislation, stalled since 2014. Instead, it clarifies that "Tunisia reiterates its position that it is not a country of settlement for irregular migrants. It also reiterates its position to control its own borders only" — reflecting Kaïs Saied's firm stance on asserting national sovereignty over migration governance.

On another note, the MoU lacks clarity on the amount of funding committed by the Commission, as well as on specific targets, timeline, or enforcement provisions. Although human rights are briefly referenced — such as "this approach shall be based on respect for human rights" and "in accordance with international law, whilst respecting their dignity" — there is no concrete oversight mechanism, either ex-ante or ex-post, to suspend cooperation in case of fundamental rights violations. This raises concerns about non-compliance with the EU's legal obligations under its Treaties, the NDICI Regulation, and rulings by the EUCJ, which prohibit agreements or funding that could contribute to fundamental rights abuses (Kube, 2017; Strik & Robbesom, 2014).

Finally, democracy and the rule of law are not mentioned. This goes in contrast to the post-2011 agreements, fundings, or press statements which reaffirmed the EU's commitment to Tunisia's demo -

cratic system. Likewise, before 2023, different European actors did voice their concern over Tunisia's strong democratic backsliding, including the Parliament (European Parliament, 2021), HR/VP Josep Borrell (European Commission, 2022a) and Commissioner Didier Reynders (European Commission, 2022b).

Implementation and Evolution

By September 2023, the Commission announced the disbursement of 127 million euros under the MoU framework, among which 60 million euros were dedicated to budget support and 67 million euros formed part of an operational assistance package on migration. It was argued that actions in the field of migration were prioritized due to the "urgent situation in Lampedusa" (European Commission, 2023e). Unexpectedly, Saied criticized and returned the 60-million-euro part denouncing it as "charity" (Liboreiro, 2023b). The Tunisian government pledged dissatisfaction towards the Commission, which was accused of withholding larger amounts of funds promised in the MoU (Sorgi, 2023). In a sharp rebuke, Tunisian Foreign Minister Nabil Ammar expressed that Tunisia does not require nor particularly appreciate the EU's partnership:

> "*If you come back at us, we will also come back by revealing truths that are not in your interest (...) we do not beg anyone, and the world does not stop at one partner or another (...) we have not started wars, and we have not plunged humanity into world wars as you have done (...) (Business News, 2023).*

These tensions delayed the implementation of the agreement, which coincided with a surge in illegal departures from Tunisia's shores, something attributed to Tunisia's increasing leverage and blackmailing tactics. Tunisian Coast Guard renewed its activities in October 2023, marking a notable drop in immigrant arrivals to Italy (González & Hierra, 2023). By the end of 2024, sea arrivals from Tunisia to Italy had decreased drastically by 80% (Agenzia Nova, 2025). The unreliable disposition of Kaïs Saied intensified when Tunisian authorities denied entry to a group of European Parliamentarians aiming to investigate the country's political and social situation and independently assess the implementation of the MoU in Tunisia (Gwyn, 2023).

Despite these tensions, the MoU's implementation continued, and by December 2023 the Commission declared a package of 150 million euros for Tunisia's economic reforms and financial stability. These were disbursed by March 2024 (European Commission, 2024a). By January 2025, after mounting criticism of the MoU deal and reports on human rights abuses on the ground, the Commission was fundamentally overhauling its payments to Tunisia. While the Commission rejected the accusations, officials confirmed the setting of new arrangements and specific conditions based on human rights for future payments over the coming years (Townsend, 2024; Sánchez, 2024). Paradoxically, by April 2025, the Commission recognized Tunisia as a "safe country", which facilitates deportations of Tunisians in Europe back to their country (Genovese, 2025).

Responses and Security

While many EU figures backed the initiative as key to control migration, the MoU came with a myriad of controversies and tensions within the Union. Starting with Commissioner Schmit, he was a

main critic of the deal and their executors, particularly in the face of worrying reports of migrants being pushed into the desert by Tunisian authorities: "This is not Europe, these are not European values, this is an agreement with a very special nasty dictatorship" (Wax, 2024). HR/VP Josep Borrell, who had been advocating for Tunisia's return to democracy, has also been skeptical of the agreement since its inception. In June 2023, he stressed that any cooperation framework should first be approved by the Council and comply with human rights standards (EEAS, 2023c). After the MoU approval, he wrote a letter to Olivér Várhelyie communicating the member states' concerns over the agreement's legal validity, declaring that "the participation in the negotiation and the signing ceremony of a limited number of EU heads of government does not make up for the institutional balance between the Council and the Commission" (O'Carroll, 2023, para 8). Since then, however, his remarks became vaguer: "we needed to collectively assess the situation and second, [to discuss] how to manage our partnership with Tunisia and uphold our support to the Tunisian people and avoid some events that have been creating some concerns" (EEAS, 2024, para. 52).

Several member states equally expressed their disagreement, including Germany. The German Foreign Minister expressed "incomprehension" at the rushed MoU for the insufficient consultations with all the member-states and the lack of human rights consideration (O'Carroll, 2023; Baczyska, 2023).

The European Parliament also questioned the legality of the agreement and demanded explanations (ECRE, 2024), as underscored in the approved "Motion for a resolution on the adoption of the special measure in favor of Tunisia for 2023". First, it criticized the Commission for sidelining the Parliament, calling this a "lack of respect for parliamentary scrutiny and the comitology procedure" (European Parliament, 2024, pt. 1). Second, it questioned whether the agreement complies with the fundamental principles of EU external action, given Tunisia's deteriorating human rights record. Accordingly, the Parliament requested clarification on the legal basis of the agreement under EU law and how its success will be evaluated. It also demanded explanations regarding President Saied's refusal to accept €60 million in EU funds and the denial of entry to certain Members of Parliament in Tunisia.

Similarly, the European Ombudsman has also been vocal on the situation. In September 2023, the body launched an investigation into the deal's legality and rights safeguards. Due to the Commission's delayed response to appeals, it took nearly a year for the Ombudsman to issue a conclusion (Nielsen, 2024).

In October 2024, the European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly concluded that the Commission had committed maladministration regarding the EU-Tunisia MoU, citing serious transparency and accountability failures. Notably, while the Commission insisted that a human rights assessment was unnecessary, it had in fact conducted a risk management exercise that was never published. Likewise, the Ombudsman clarified that "The fact that a MoU might not create legally binding obligations under international or domestic law does not mean it is not necessary or advisable to carry out a prior HRIA" and "EU funds should not support actions that are at odds with the provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and international human rights law". The Ombudsman urged the Commission to elaborate concrete human rights criteria for the possible suspension of the funding, along with periodic assessments on the ground (European Ombudsman, 2024; Sánchez, 2024). As a response, the Commission maintained its "innocence" and assured the deal was transparent, well-funded, and monitored (Nielsen, 2024).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that European and Tunisian civil society have been particularly critical of the deal and accused the EU of being complicit in Tunisia's undemocratic backsliding and human rights abuses. This is exemplified by the letter over 370 civil society members signed against the EU-Tunisia MoU (Middle East Monitor, 2023). These actors have been active in documenting Tunisia's crackdown on immigrants since the partnership was signed, reporting violent police raids, arbitrary arrests, collective expulsions of thousands to the desert, cases of sexual assault, marginalization in accessing employment, health care and housing, criminalization of immigrants' assistance, among other (Amnesty International, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025; Khawaja, 2025). As the Amnesty International Advocacy Director summarized:

"This ill-judged agreement, signed despite mounting evidence of serious human rights abuses by authorities, will result in a dangerous expansion of already failed migration policies and signals EU acceptance of increasingly repressive behaviour by Tunisia's president and government" (Amnesty International, 2023, para. 2).

Conclusion

The 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) stands as a key case portraying the European Union's increasingly pragmatic, informal, and supranational external engagement in the MENA region. This paper has shown how, under mounting migration pressures and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the European Commission, led by certain member states' leaders, has pushed for informal and vague bilateral arrangements with third countries that bypass traditional institutional procedures and human rights safeguards.

The EU seems to be increasingly relying on informal tools to gain flexibility, rapidity and discretion in dealing with pressing and politically sensitive issues, but often at the cost of transparency, accountability, democratic legitimacy and human rights oversight. Considering the MoU, the lack of parliamentary scrutiny, consideration of all member states, ex-ante and ex-post human rights assessments, and enforceable conditionality clauses challenge foundational EU principles. As highlighted, even if an agreement is non-binding, it still has to be compliant of European and international law. This has not only raised questions about legal noncompliance but also triggered European inter-institutional tensions, evident in the reactions from the Parliament, the European Ombudsman, and other European personalities.

Externally, the EU-Tunisia MoU risked challenging the EU's credibility. By engaging with Tunisia's increasingly authoritarian government without addressing its democratic backsliding or human rights abuses, the EU appears silent and unable to counter or react to the country's authoritarian turn. As seen, the increasing leverage of Kaïs Saied has made him an unpredictable and unreliable partner for the EU, enabling him to act without constraints. This quiet acceptance of Saied's regime—despite credible reports of racist discourse, fundamental human rights violations, and erosion of fundamental freedoms— eventually damages the Union's credibility and legitimacy. This has also set dangerous precedents for future agreements in the region, where short-term gains, including but not limited to migration deterrence, may outweigh long-term goals and compliance with European and international law.

References

Abderrahim, T. (2021). Walking a Tightrope in Tunisia: The Aspirations and Limitations of Migration Policy Reform. German Council on Foreign Relations, 12. https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Report-Tunisia_EN_2021_korr_1.pdf

Adamo, G. (2025, February 17). Italy's evolving approach to illegal immigration under Giorgia Meloni. Institute of New Europe. https://ine.org.pl/en/italys-evolving-approach-to-illegal-immigration-under-giorgia-meloni/

Agenzia Nova (2023, July 13). Tunisia and the EU Commission sign the memorandum of understanding in the presence of Meloni and Rutte. Agenzia Nova. https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/tunisia-and-the-eu-commission-sign-the-memorandum-of-understanding-in-the-presence-of-melons-and-burps/

Agenzia Nova (2025, January 1). Migrants: Sea arrivals in Italy down almost 60 percent in 2024. Agenzia Nova. https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/migrants-sea-arrivals-in-italy-decreased-by-almost-60-percent-in-2024/

Akpomera, E. (2024). Europe and Arab States' Migration-related Instruments with Africa: Dilemma of Soft Power and Conflictual Interests. Migration and development, 1-12. DOI: 10.1177/21632324241251529

Al Jazeera (2023, July 23). Italy declares state of emergency over "migration congestion". Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/12/italy-declares-state-of-emergency-over-migration-congestion

Amara, T. (2023, April 6). Tunisia president rejects IMF 'diktats', casting doubt on bailout. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-rejects-imf-dictats-says-public-peace-not-game-2023-04-06/

Amnesty International (2023, September 21). In Tunisia, the EU is repeating an old and dangerous mistake. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/in-tunisia-the-eu-is-repeating-an-old-and-dangerous-mistake/

Amnesty International (2024, May 16). Tunisia: Repressive crackdown on civil society organizations following months of escalating violence against migrants and refugees. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/tunisia-repressive-crackdown-on-civil-society-organizations-following-months-of-escalating-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees/

Amnesty International (2025). Externalization of Migration and the Impact on the Human Rights of Migrants: Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/EUR0194852025ENGLISH.pdf

Amadio, M. G. V. (2022). Informal groupings as types of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy: the cases of Kosovo, Libya, and Syria. Contemporary Security Policy. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2022.2144372

Badarin, E. & Schumacher, T. (2020). The EU, Resilience and the Southern Neighbourhood After the Arab Uprisings. In Cusumano, E. and Hofmaier, S. (eds.), Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean, 63–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23641-0_4

Baczynska, G. (2023, September 22). Germany's Baerbock joins chorus criticizing EU migration deal with Tunisia. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-baerbock-joins-chorus-criticizing-eu-migration-deal-with-tunisia-2023-09-22/

Baracani, E. & Kassim, H. (2024). The "Geopolitical Commission": An End of Term Review. Journal of Common Market Studies. Annual Review, 00, 1–11. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13673

Business News (2023, October 11). Nabil Ammar affirme que les soixante millions d'euros ont été rendus à l'UE. Business News. https://www.businessnews.com.tn/nabil-ammar-affirme-que-les-soixante-millions-deuros-ont-ete-rendus-a-lue,520,132653,3

Cardwell, P.J. & Dickson, R. (2023). 'Formal informality' in EU external migration governance: the case of mobility partnerships. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49 (12), 3121–3139. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193743

Colombo, S. (2021). "Principled Pragmatism" Reset: For a Recalibration of the EU's Diplomatic Engagement with the MENA Region. *IAI papers*, *21* (39). ISBN 978-88-9368-218-3

Dagi, D. (2017). Refugee Crisis in Europe (2015-2016). The Clash of Intergovernmental and Supranational Perspectives. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, *6* (1). DOI: 10.20472/SS.2017.6.1.001

Dandashly, A. (2018). EU democracy promotion and the dominance of the security-stability nexus. *The Journal of North African Studies*, *28* (6), 1444–1472

Dini, S. & Giusa, C. (2020). Externalising Migration Governance Through Civil Society. Tunisia as a Case Study. Palgrave Macmillan.

DW (2017, February 14). Tunisia PM: We bear no responsibility for Berlin attack. *DW*. https://www.dw.com/en/tunisia-prime-minister-we-bear-no-responsibility-for-berlin-attack/a-37539969

ECRE [European Council on Refugees and Exiles] (2024, March 8). *EU External Partners*. https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-eu-continues-its-co-operation-with-repressive-regimes-to-reduce-irregular-migration-%E2%80%95-commission-refuses-to-release-information-on-its-do-no-ha/

European Commission (2014, April 1). *New EU support for Tunisia's democratic transition*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_208

European Commission. (2019). *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408

European Commission (2021, February 9). *Joint Communication on a Renewed Partnership with the*

Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/459c4319-f163-4b4b-8c6b-0f278e80f497_en?
filename=joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood_en.pdf

European Commission (2022a, October 19). *Tunisia: Speech on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP debate on the political situation.* Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/tunisia-speech-behalf-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate-political-situation-2022-10-19_en

European Commission (2022b, November 14). *Déclaration du Commissaire européen à la Justice, Didier Reynders, après sa rencontre avec le Président Kaïs Saïed.* Retrieved from https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/declaration-du-commissaire-europeen-la-justice-didier-reynders-apres-sa-rencontre-avec-le-president-2022-11-14_en

European Commission (2023a, April 27). *The European Commission and Tunisia have expressed the willingness to establish a stronger partnership on migration, anti- smuggling and the promotion of legal migration.* Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-and-tunisia-have-expressed-willingness-establish-stronger-partnership-migration-2023-04-27_en

European Commission (2023b, June 11). *The European Union and Tunisia agreed to work together on a comprehensive partnership package.* Retrieved from https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-tunisia-agreed-work-together-comprehensive-partnership-package-2023-06-11_en

European Commission (2023c, July 16). *Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia.* Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887

European Commission (2023d, July 16). *The European Union and Tunisia: political agreement on a comprehensive partnership package.* Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-tunisia-political-agreement-comprehensive-partnership-package-2023-07-16_en

European Commission (2023e, September 22). *Commission announces almost €127 million in support of the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia and in line with the 10-point plan for Lampedusa.* Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-announces-almost-eu127-million-support-implementation-memorandum-understanding-tunisia-2023-09-22_en

European Commission (2024a, March 4*). L'Union européenne poursuit la mise en oeuvre du Mémorandum d'entente avec la Tunisie en déboursant 150 millions d'euros de soutien financier.* Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/lunion-europeenne-poursuit-la-mise-en-oeuvre-du-memorandum-dentente-avec-la-tunisie-en-deboursant-2024-03-04_en

European Commission (2024b, April 21). *Pact on Migration and Asylum.* Migration and Home Affairs.

Retrieved from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

European Commission. (2024c, July 18). *Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/STATEMENT_24_3871

European Commission (2025). Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/about/departments-and-executive-agencies/middle-east-north-africa-and-gulf_en

European Commission. (n.d.-a). *Priorities 2019-2024*. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024_en

European Commission (n.d.-b). *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)*. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en
European Commission (n.d.-c). *Southern Neighbourhood*. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/southern-neighbourhood_en

EEAS (2023, June 26). *Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the press conference*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-press-conference-1_en

European External Action Service (2024, June 24). *Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the meeting*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-meeting-15_en

European External Action Service (n.d.) *European Neighbourhood Policy*. Regional Policy. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en

European Parliament (2021). *MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the situation in Tunisia*. B9-0525/2021. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2021-0525_EN.html

European Parliament (2024). *MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the adoption of the special measure in favour of Tunisia for 2023*. B9-0173/2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2024-0173_EN.html

European Union (2013). *Relations Tunisie- Union Européenne: un partenariat privilégies. Plan d'action 2013-2017*.

European Union (2018). DECISION No 1/2018 of the EU-Tunisia Association Council of 9 November 2018 adopting the EU-Tunisia strategic priorities for the period 2018-2020 [2018/1792]. Acts adopted by bodies created by international agreements. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22018D1792&from=Fr

Genovese, V. (2025, April 16). Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco in EU list of safe countries of origin. Euro News. *https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/16/egypt-tunisia-and-morocco-in-eu-list-of-safe-countries-of-origin*

Givens, T. & Luedtke, A. (2003). EU Immigration Policy: From Intergovernmentalism to Reclutant Harmonization. In Börzel, T. A. & Cichowski, R. A. (Ed.). The State of the European Union, 6: Law, Politics and Society (291–310). Oxford University Press.

González, R. & Hierra, L. (2023, December 16). Tunisia reactivates its collaboration with the EU in the fight against irregular immigration. El País. https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-12-16/tunisia-reactivates-its-collaboration-with-the-eu-in-the-fight-against-irregular-immigration.html

Guesmi, H. (2023, March 17). It was not Saied who introduced anti-Black racism to Tunisia. Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/17/it-was-not-saied-who-introduced-anti-black-racism-to-tunisia

Gürkan, S. & Coman, R. (2021). The EU-Turkey deal in the 2015 'refugee crisis': when intergovernmentalism cast a shadow on the EU's normative power. Acta Politica, 56(2), 276–305. doi:10.1057/s41269-020-00184-2

Gwyn, M. J. (2023). Tunisia denies entry to European Parliament's foreign affairs mission. Euronews. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/14/tunisia-denies-entry-to-european-parliaments-foreign-affairs-mission

Häkli, J., Kudzmaite, G. & Pauliina, K. K. (2024). Devaluing personhood: The framing of migrants in the EU's new pact on migration and asylum. TIBG, 00, 1-15. DOI: 10.1111/tran.12676

Hatab, S. (2018). Deepening democracy or stabilization? European neighborhood policy (ENP) and the "Arab spring". Review of Economics and Political Science, 4 (1), DOI 10.1108/REPS-10-2018-009

Haroche, P. (2023). A 'Geopolitical Commission': Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition. Journal of Common Market Studies, 61 (4), 970- 987.

Howorth, 2011. (2011). Decision-Making in Security and Defence Policy: Towards Supranational Intergovernmentalism? KFG Working Paper, 25.

Khawaja, B. (2025, May 12). The EU Has Simply Abandoned Human Rights in Tunisia. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/12/eu-has-simply-abandoned-human-rights-tunisia

Johansson, E. N. & Rivera, A. E. (2020). Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model, Democratization, 27 (8), 1376-1393, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1792886

Kassoti, E. & Idriz, N. (2022). Global Europe: Legal and Policy Issues of the EU's External Action. Springer.

Kéfi, R. (2011). Tunisia Sparks Arab Revolutions. Afkar/ Idées. IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/tunisia-sparks-arab-revolutions/?lang=es

Kube, V. (2017). The Polisario case: Do EU fundamental rights matter for EU trade policies? Blog of the European Journal of International Law. https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-polisario-case-do-eu-fundamental-rights-matter-for-eu-trade-polices/

annos, E. (2021). The Externalization of EU Policies in the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: The Potential Impact of the New Mediterranean Agenda. IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2021.

Lavenex, S. (2006). Shifting up and out: The foreign policy of European immigration control. West European Politics, 29 (2), 329 – 350. DOI: 10.1080/01402380500512684

Liboreiro, J. (2023b, October 12). Túnez desprecia a Bruselas y devuelve 60 millones de euros de ayuda de la Unión Europea. *Euronews*. https://es.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/12/tunez-desprecia-a-bruselas-y-devuelve-60-millones-de-euros-de-ayuda-de-la-union-europea

Mabrouk, M. (2024, April 22). *Combating immigration in exchange for financial aid*. Middle East Monitor. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240422-combating-immigration-in-exchange-for-financial-aid/

Marsi, F. (2023, February 2). Italy 'complicit' in crimes for renewing pact with Libya: NGOs. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/2/italy-complicit-in-crimes-for-renewing-pact-with-libya-ngos

Meakem, A. (2024, January 2). Tunisia's Backsliding Democracy Turns on Migrants. *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/02/tunisia-elections-saied-ghannouchi-eu-migration-deal/

Middle East Monitor. (2023, August 15). *380 researchers, civil society members stand against Tunisia-EU migration deal*. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230815-380-researchers-civil-society-members-stand-against-tunisia-eu-migration-deal/

Millet, M. C. (2021). *An Oasis of Democracy: Tunisian Democratization and its Western Influences*. Master's Thesis. Harvard University.

Mirel, P. (2022). The declining influence of the European Union in its Southern Neighbourhood. *European issues*, *642*.

Moloney, D. & Princen, S. (2024). Assessing the role of the European Council and the European Commission during the migration and COVID-19 crises. *West European Politics*, *47* (7), pp. 1556-1587. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2023.2225403

Morillas, P. (2020). Autonomy in intergovernmentalism: the role of *de novo* bodies in external action during the making of the EU Global Strategy, Journal of European Integration, 42:2, 231-246, DOI: 10.1080/07036337.2019.1666116

Nielsen, N. (2024, November 29). EU Commission maintains innocence despite losing Tunisia transparency case. *EUObserver*. https://euobserver.com/migration/arc34aa91b

O'Carroll, L. (2023, September 18). EU states expressed 'incomprehension' at Tunisia migration pact, says Borrell. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/eu-states-expressed-incomprehension-at-tunisia-migration-pact-says-borrell

Olsen, G. R. (2000). Promotion of democracy as a foreign policy instrument of 'Europe': Limits to international idealism, *Democratization*, *7* (2), 142-167, DOI: 10.1080/13510340008403663

European Ombudsman (2024). Decision on how the European Commission intends to guarantee respect for human rights in the context of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (OI/2/2024/MHZ). https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/fr/decision/en/193851

Ott, A. (2020). Informalization of EU Bilateral Instruments: Categorization, Contestation, and Challenges. *Yearbook of European Law*, *39*, (1), pp. 569-601. doi:10.1093/yel/yeaa004

Ovádek, M. & Wouters, J. (2017). Differentiation in Disguise? EU Instrument of Bilateral Cooperation in the Southern Neighbourhood. *Institute for International Law.*

Paenke, J. (2019). Liberal empire, geopolitics and EU strategy. *Geopolitics*, *24* (1), 100-123. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1528545

Panebianco, S. & Cannata, G. (2024). The Mobility-Democracy Nexus Betrayed: When the European Commission's Talks Fall Apart in the Mediterranean. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *29* (1), 7-34.

PICUM (2024, March 11). *The EU Migration Pact: a dangerous regime of migrant surveillance*. https://picum.org/blog/the-eu-migration-pact-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance/

Polat, C. (2006). The Immigration Policy and Process of European Integration: Supranationalism Versus Intergovernmentalism? *Ankara Review of European Studies*, *6* (1), 69-80.

Un, C. & Mukanganga, R. (2023, September 11). What next after Tunisia rejects IMF and austerity burdens? *African Business*. https://african.business/2023/09/resources/what-next-after-tunisia-rejects-imf-and-austerity-burdens

Rivera, A. E. (2020). Populist challenges to EU foreign policy in the Southern Neighbourhood: an informal and illiberal Europeanisation? *Journal of European Public Policy*, *27* (8), 1195- 1214.

Rubeo, R. & Baroud, R. (2019, November 7). Italy's dubious policies in Libya. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/11/7/italys-dubious-policies-in-libya

Sánchez, E. N. (2024). Commission to enforce human rights criteria under EU-Tunisia deal. *EUObserver*. https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/ar7033c7cc

Saatçioğlu, B. (2019). The European Union's refugee crisis and rising functionalism in EU-Turkey relations. *Turkish Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2019.1586542

Schmidt, V. A. (2016). The New EU Governance: New Intergovernmentalism, New Supranationalism, and New Parliamentarism. IAI Working Papers, 16. ISSN 2280-4331 ISBN 978-88-98650-91-0

Sorgi, G. (2023, October 11). Tunisia hands back €60M of EU funding as migrant deal tensions soar. Politico. https://www.politico.eu/article/tunisia-hands-back-60-m-eu-funding-migration-deal/

Stollenwerk, E. Börzel, T. A. & Risse, T. (2021). Theorizing resilience-building in the EU's neighbourhood: introduction to the special issue. Democratization, 28 (7), 1219-1238, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1957839

Strik, T. & Robbesom, R. (2024). Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the

Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control. Netherlands International Law Review, 71, 199-225. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40802-024-00251-x

Sülün, D. (2024). The End of the Supranational Dream of the European Union: Toward a More Nationalist and Intergovernmental Union. Alternatif Politika, 16 (3), 540-569. https://doi.org/10.53376/ap.2024.19

Tagliapietra, A. (2019). The European Migration Crisis: A Pendulum between the Internal and External Dimensions. IAI Papers, 19 (12), ISBN 978-88-9368-104-9

The Arab Weekly (2023, July 17). EU, Tunisia sign MOU for 'strategic and comprehensive partnership" with migration in mind. The Arab Weekly. https://thearabweekly.com/eu-tunisia-sign-mou-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-migration-mind

The Guardian (2023, July 8). Dutch government falls as coalition partners clash over immigration. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/07/dutch-pm-set-to-resign-after-failing-to-reach-immigration-agreement

Townsend, M. (2024, September 19). The brutal truth behind Italy's migrant reduction: beatings and rape by EU-funded forces in Tunisia. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/sep/19/italy-migrant-reduction-investigation-rape-killing-tunisia-eu-money-keir-starmer-security-forces-smugglers

UNHCR (2023). Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea in 2023. IOM & UNHCR. Retrieved from https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/109256

Van Der Linde, I. (2023). EU-Tunisia: Why the Dutch were compelled to strike a deal with an autocrat. Nawaat. https://nawaat.org/2023/10/23/eu-tunisia-migration-why-the-dutch-were-compelled-to-strike-a-deal-with-an-autocrat/

Vigano, M. S. (2023). Italy declares a state of emergency over migration. DW. https://www.dw.com/en/italy-declares-a-state-of-emergency-over-migration-what-does-it-mean/a-65306799

Walker, S. (2019, May 27). European elections: far-right 'surge' ends in a ripple. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/27/european-elections-far-right-surge-ends-in-a-ripple

Warnars, E. (2020). The European Neighbourhood Policy: An Intergovernmental or Supranational Creation? [Master's Thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam].

Wax, E. (2024, May 23). EU commissioner Schmit lambasts bloc's migration deal with Tunisia. POLITICO. https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-commissioner-nicolas-schmit-lambasts-migration-deal-tunisia/

Wessel, R. A. (2020). Normative transformations in EU external relations: the phenomenon of 'soft' international agreements. West European Politics, 44 (1), 72-92. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2020.1738094

Wurm, L. (2018). Democratisation after the Arab Spring: How can the EU effectively support Tunisia and Egypt? ÖGfE Policy Brief, 19.

Zoubir, Y. H. & Lounnas, D. (2021). European-North African Security: The Complexity of Cooperation. In Mason, R. (eds), Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54444-7_9.

Zwolski, K. (2020) Diversified in Unity: The Agenda for the Geopolitical European Commission. Global Affairs, 6 (4-5), pp. 519-535.

Transnational Repression and the Precarious Nature of Democracy: the European Union and the Gulf Monarchies

Hannah Colpitts-Elliott [1]

EST, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacional

Abstract

Human rights defenders, activists, journalists, opposition politicians, and ordinary citizens of authoritarian states often leave their home country behind in order to find greater safety and freedom outside the grasp of repressive and violent authorities. However, this is increasingly met with coercion, surveillance, and intimidation that transcends borders. This paper draws on the concept of transnational repression to explore the way in which the Gulf Monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) target critics abroad and interrogate the role of the European Union (EU) in enabling, tolerating, or responding to such practices. This paper argues that the EU's lack of policy action to combat transnational repression within its borders, and the apparent prioritisation of economic and strategic partnerships with authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has created an environment in which supposedly democratic countries become complicit in authoritarian abuses. Importantly, this silence and inaction in the face of transnational repression undermines the democratic norms of the EU, eroding protections for freedom of expression and political dissent within the EU. This paper, therefore, forefronts the importance of human rights accountability in Europe and a more human-centred approach to the issue of transnational repression moving forward.

Introduction

Living in the diaspora can offer those exiting authoritarian regimes greater freedoms and opportunities. Through finding "voice after exit" (Glasius, 2018), individuals in the diaspora can more freely express criticism of their home country. Activists, journalists, and human rights defenders often use this position to draw national and international attention to abuses at home, circumvent regime censorship, pressure host governments to act, and support domestic opposition movements (Moss et al., 2022). From this unique vantage point, diaspora actors benefit from a dual position as insiders

---

[1] Hannah Colpitts-Elliott is Research Fellow of the Levant Desk at the EST's Observatory on EU-MENA Relations and she is a graduate from the Research Masters in International Studies at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals. Her research focuses on gender, peace, and security in the Middle East.

with linguistic, cultural, and social ties to their homeland, and as outsiders with access to global platforms and networks capable of exerting international pressure (Moss et al., 2022).

Democratic states, including those in the EU, are often assumed to provide safe environments where such activism can flourish. However, the reality is more complex. Despite the greater freedoms available in exile, diaspora activism is increasingly met with repression. Authoritarian regimes, acutely aware of the threat posed by politically active exiles to their domestic legitimacy and control, and international reputations, seek to suppress dissent abroad through what has been termed *transnational repression*: "attempts by regimes to punish, deter, undermine, and silence activism in the diaspora" (Moss, 2022, 71). This practice is not marginal. Freedom House (2024) has documented a consistent rise in transnational repression over the past several years, marking it as a growing threat to democratic norms and the safety of exiled dissidents across the world.

Among the most prolific practitioners of transnational repression are the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Possibly the most notorious and well-known case of transnational repression, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul led to global shockwaves. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. A range of other targeted acts have been documented against women's rights defenders, activists, religious minorities, and political opponents from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although the number of exiles from Saudi Arabia and the UAE is relatively limited, the repression they face is both systematic and intense (Abushammalah, 2023). Given that the EU is home to many individuals of Saudi and Emirati origin, including dissidents, it is essential to understand the threat these individuals face and how the EU is (or is not) ensuring the safety and freedoms of its residents.

This paper explores how Saudi Arabia and the UAE engage in transnational repression against individuals residing within the EU, and critically examines the EU's role in combating, enabling or failing to prevent this repression. It seeks to unpack the broader implications for the EU's democratic character, raising two central research questions: First, how are Gulf monarchies repressing dissidents within the EU, and what is the impact on the rights and protections typically afforded in democratic societies? Second, in what ways do EU policies and political-economic relationships with these regimes facilitate or reinforce this repression? Ultimately, this paper argues that the conventional binary between authoritarian and democratic states should be reconsidered. It contends that transnational repression is co-produced, not only by authoritarian states that initiate it, but also by democratic host countries that contribute to its persistence.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it reviews the existing literature on transnational repression and democratic erosion. Second, through examining the academic literature, EU policies and NGO reports, it turns to an elaboration of the toolkit of transnational repression used by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the impacts this has on the rights and freedoms of those living in exile. Next, it examines the response of the EU, through silence, political (in)action, and the economic and political ties between the regions. Finally, the conclusion assesses the broader implications of this dynamic on the quality of democracy within the EU and provides recommendations for a more human-centred response to transnational repression.

Literature Review

Transnational Repression

While transnational repression is not a new tactic, over the past years it has been gaining salience as a tool weaponised against individuals abroad who pose a threat to authoritarian regimes (Dukalskis et al., 2023). As a means of silencing critics of their home country, the transnational repression toolkit includes many methods that are often deployed in tandem. In this sense, it is difficult for those targeted to predict the way in which they will be threatened. Tsourapas (2021) identified several strategies of transnational repression, including but not limited to, the use of surveillance to spy on and those abroad; threats both online and offline of violence; coerced return to the homeland through renditions or forcibly returning individuals to the country of origin; enforced disappearances of dissidents; coercion-by-proxy through targeting loved ones and family members back home; and lethal retribution.

With advancements in digital technology, activists, human rights defenders and journalists are now able to more easily communicate across borders and establish channels of information sharing—both among themselves and with wider audiences. However, these same means of communication are exploited by authoritarian regimes to surveil and repress these individuals (Glasius, 2018). For example, regimes are able to harass, intimidate and threaten activists through online messaging and social media, to hack into activist social media accounts, to pose as supporters to gain information, and to use spyware to surveil the activities of activists online (Glasius, 2018). Ultimately, these efforts seek to compromise lines of communication of individuals abroad by seeking to identify entire circles of critics. This has serious implications for the safety of activists, both in the diaspora and those remaining in the home country (Schenkkan et al., 2020). Importantly, this is a low-cost yet highly effective manner of identifying and surveilling critics, as it does not risk sending regime agents to operate in other countries (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021).

Furthermore, when targeting women who are politically active, tactics of transnational repression often take on gendered forms, with attacks relying upon sexualised and misogynistic language and stereotypes in order to shame, discipline and delegitimise women (Anstis & LaFlèche, 2024). This can include smear campaigns, doxxing, posting and sharing of real or fabricated intimate images or videos, gendered insults, threats and blackmail (Anstis & LaFlèche, 2024). As female activists, human rights defenders and journalists rely on their reputation for the credibility of their work, these efforts seek to discredit and shame them based on gender norms. These tactics aim to prevent and punish women's political participation, having damaging consequences on their ability to continue their work, be trusted, and reach wider audiences (Anstis & LaFlèche, 2024).

Importantly, many instances of transnational repression are aided by the cooperation, known or unknown, of host governments (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021). Michaelsen and Ruijgrok (2024) note that there often exists authoritarian cooperation on transnational repression. As a result of shared disregard for human rights and a weak rule of law, authorities often facilitate cross-border persecution of dissidents, including by complying with extradition requests or forced repatriations. Democracies, on the other hand, are often unknowingly complicit in transnational repression, for example by complying with detention and deportation requests identified through Interpol (Lemon, 2019).

Transnational repression seeks to instill fear into not only those targeted, but the wider diaspora community, in order to deter and silence criticism. Concerned for their safety and the safety of their

46

loved ones back home, many dissidents engage in self-censorship or silence to avoid experiencing this repression (Schenkkan et al., 2020). This represents a grave threat to human rights, freedom and democracy across the world, in which we are losing the voices that are challenging and raising awareness of human rights abuses. Furthermore, for those who do make the difficult decision to continue their activism and work, the consequences can be severe, particularly in terms of mental health, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Anstis & LaFlèche, 2024). Overall, transnational repression has devastating impacts on the individuals targeted, and it is, therefore, essential to mitigate and prevent these effects.

Democratic Erosion

Freedom House has identified "14 consecutive years of global authoritarian resurgence and democratic erosion", identifying how "transnational repression not only reinforces authoritarian rule in the origin countries, but also breaks down basic democratic protections in the victims' host countries" (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021, 5). For this reason, it is essential to understand how transnational repression is impacting the quality of democracy in the EU. Democratic erosion, or democratic backsliding, refers to the gradual decline of the quality of democracy and can be marked by the weakening of democratic norms, erosion of institutional checks and balances, and restrictions on civil liberties (Bermeo, 2016; Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018). This differs from democratic breakdown or collapse, which is marked by an abrupt end of democracy through coups or authoritarian seizures of power; rather, this erosion is incremental and frequently occurs under democratically elected governments (Bermeo, 2016).

Research on the EU has noted the way in which internal dynamics can contribute to wider democratic erosion, such as the rise of illiberal populism, rule of law crises, and restrictions on media and judicial independence. Special focus has tended to be given to countries like Hungary and Poland; however, Smolka (2021) showed that 21 EU member countries have displayed a loss in the quality of democracy. Importantly, it is not only internal factors that can contribute to democratic erosion, but also external ones—including foreign influences, disinformation, and transnational repression— that can intersect and exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021).

Especially critical for this paper is how democratic erosion impacts civil society and freedoms of expression. All EU Member states are committed to upholding and complying with the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993, including "the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights" (European Union, 2007). Despite this commitment, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the role of democratic erosion in undermining the freedoms and rights of civil society actors within the EU (Christopoulou, 2022; Sadurski, 2019). Various EU governments have narrowed the civic space available, placing greater restrictions on civil society (Negri, 2020).

Through formal democratic mechanisms such as legislation, court rulings, and media regulation, governments have restricted dissent while maintaining a veneer of legality (Grzymala-Busse, 2019). This has manifested in laws targeting foreign-funded NGOs, the marginalisation of critical watchdog groups from policy consultation, and smear campaigns that frame civil society as agents of foreign interference or as enemies of national values. These trends not only diminish civil society's ability to function as a check on state power but also signal a broader erosion of liberal democratic norms across parts of the EU (Christopoulou, 2022).

The safety and operational space of civil society actors has also been compromised by increasingly hostile political environments. Reports from Freedom House and the CIVICUS Monitor highlight a growing pattern of intimidation, surveillance, and legal harassment against activists, particularly those involved in LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, and anti-corruption work (Firmin, 2025; Tucker, 2017). Therefore, activists exiled from authoritarian regimes are not only facing the long arm of repression from their home countries, but are also operating in an environment restricted by the EU governments, having severe impacts on their freedoms and rights. In this context, this paper will focus on how the erosion of civil liberties and human rights threatens democracy.

The Use of Transnational Repression by Gulf Monarchies in the EU

Abushammalah (2023) identified that the use of transnational repression by the Gulf monarchies is "alarmingly expanding", with the region becoming one of the world's leading perpetrators. Those targeted include individuals perceived to be going against the interests of the Saudi and Emirati governments, including journalists, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, students, prominent figures, and royals who have gone "rogue". It is important to note that the transnational repression perpetrated by Saudi Arabia and the UAE is not limited to the EU, as they have also targeted dissidents in the USA, Canada, the UK, and in neighbouring countries. Activists are especially vulnerable in surrounding states that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as there exists what Schenkkan and Linzer (2021, 33) refer to as "institutionalized channels of transnational repression".

Several Saudi princes have chosen to reside in Europe, from where they have begun to voice criticism of Saudi Arabia and the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. However, royalty status does not provide protection from the repressive reach of the Crown Prince, as evidenced by princes being forcibly rendered to Saudi Arabia from within the EU. For instance, Prince Saud Saif al-Nasr disappeared after voicing support for a coup on social media. Believing he was flying from Milan to Rome to discuss a business deal, he was in fact flying in a private plane that landed in Riyadh. Nothing has been known about his whereabouts since (El Mawy, 2017). Similarly, in 2003, Prince Sultan bin Turki bin Abdulaziz was drugged and abducted from Geneva, and forcibly rendered to Saudi Arabia after giving several interviews critical of the Saudi government. In 2010, he was allowed to seek medical treatment in the USA because of his deteriorating health, an opportunity he used to file a criminal complaint in the Swiss courts regarding his kidnapping. Yet once again, he was forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia while believing he was heading for Cairo, and he has not been heard from since (Schenkkan &Linzer, 2021). Prince Khaled bin Farhan al Saud, based in Dusseldorf since 2013, has spoken about his constant fear of being abducted and the precautions he must take to venture outside after calling for human rights reforms. Knowing the fate of other Princes, he highlights how the Saudi government has previously tried to lure him to the embassy through financial incentives (Mohyeldin, 2019).

It is not only Saudi princes who face the threat of transnational repression, but also activists, journalists and human right defenders from Saudi Arabia and UAE. Human rights activists based in the UK have highlighted how they receive daily death threats, both online and offline, a phenomenon that can also be seen across Europe (Parent & Levitt, 2024). One of the most infamous instances of transnational repression is the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Having become critical of the Saudi monarchy, Khashoggi had left the country in 2017 for the USA out of fear of retribution. From the US, Khashoggi continued his critiques of the policies of the Crown Prince. In 2018 Khashoggi visited the

Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain a document stating he was divorced in order to marry his partner. He believed that on Turkish soil, he would not be in danger, however, while in the consulate, he was murdered, dismembered, and disposed of. These actions are widely understood to have been the direct order of the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (Dukalskis et al., 2023). Furthermore, Iyad el-Baghdadi, a Palestinian pro-democracy activist residing in Norway after being expelled by the UAE, was informed by Norwegian police that his life was in danger in 2019, after he had made the decision to continue the work of Jamal Khashoggi (Meyer, 2019).

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has been found to threaten and target students and scholars abroad (Insipreurope, 2024). This can affect the academic community on a variety of levels, including their ability to generate new ideas and research, and set possible research agendas. Researchers may feel they need to avoid certain topics, publications, and public events (Inspireurope 2024). Moreover, the impact goes beyond the individuals targeted, as it instills self-censorship on entire research communities abroad by fostering fear and mistrust (Inspireurope, 2024).

Moreover, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have purchased the powerful Israeli-made spyware Pegasus, which provides these governments with the ability to record phone calls and access text messages, even on encrypted apps (Tsourapas, 2021). Consequently, these two countries have been implicated in using the software to spy on activists, journalists, lawyers, and politicians all around the world (Edel, 2023). Furthermore, the Gulf monarchies have increasingly been funding Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization, raising fears about their attempt to politically influence this body. Interpol has frequently been used by authoritarian regimes for nefarious ends, using the system to facilitate the deportation and the restriction of freedoms of politically undesirable individuals living abroad (Lemon, 2019). Currently, Interpol is under the Presidency of the Emirati General Ahmed Naser al Raisi, who has faced accusations of overseeing torture and political repression in the UAE (ADHRB, 2025). This occurs simultaneously as activists from the UAE have highlighted that there has been a forceful and strong crackdown within the country, creating a climate of fear that prevents individuals from speaking out (A Farooq, 2024).

Furthermore, women fleeing gender-based repression within Saudi Arabia and the UAE are often exposed to gender-based transnational repression from abroad (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021). After just two years of the Crown Prince bin Salman taking power in Saudi Arabia, the number of Saudi asylum seekers doubled. Nonetheless, they did not escape the repressive reach of the Saudi authorities. Specifically, many women who fled repressive family environments became targets of state-led repression abroad. This includes bank accounts being frozen, harassment on social media sites by accounts linked to the government, family and friends back home being harassed and interrogated, facing harassment in Saudi embassies, having national ID cards revoked, and having run-ins with operatives who work for the crown (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021). In this way, gender-based repression that exists within the context of the Gulf gets extended out into the transnational sphere.

Several women have identified that they were targeted with Pegasus spyware by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in which personal and private pictures on their phones were leaked on social media. Ghada Oueiss, a journalist at Al-Jazeera who regularly reported critically on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had private photos only available on her phone of her wearing a bikini in a jacuzzi circulated on social media, followed by thousands of tweets from accounts supportive of the Crown Prince describing her as a prostitute, attacking her credibility, and insulting her appearance. This sharing of private photos is intended to publicly shame these women and smear their professional and serious reputations, seeking to silence them (Solon, 2021). Similarly, Alya Alhwaiti, an activist from Saudi Ar-

abia, was also targeted with leaked private photos, received threats and intimidating messages online, and was accused of being a slut, promiscuous, and drunk. Again, these messages were linked to accounts that were pro-government and disparaged her appearance (Solon, 2021). In this way, these threats and harassment take on distinctly gendered forms, targeting women for sexual promiscuity, their appearance, and seeking to shame, discredit and silence their professional work.

Furthermore, in May 2018, a well-known women's rights activist, Loujain al-Hathlou, was arrested in the UAE and deported to Saudi Arabia, where she remained imprisoned until her conditional release in February 2025 and had reportedly faced torture (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021). While living in the Emirates, her phone was hacked by DarkMatter, an Abu Dhabi-based cybersecurity company that closely cooperates with the UAE authorities and holds lucrative government contracts. This likely allowed the UAE authorities to monitor her movements, her interactions with other human rights activists and organisations across the world (Aljizawi et al., 2023). This is not an isolated case; these two Gulf monarchies regularly cooperate on persecution of respective dissidents, and in crackdowns against women's rights defenders (Aljizawi et al., 2023).

The Role of the EU in Enabling or Failing to Prevent Transnational Repression

Inaction and Silence

Given the fact that many individuals within the borders of the EU, not only those of Saudi or Emirati origin, are being targeted with transnational repression, it is important to understand how the EU is responding to this threat. Many EU countries lack both the capacity to identify every instance of transnational repression, and the resources to effectively counteract it (Michaelsen & Furstenberg, 2021). Victims have frequently reported to the authorities of their country of residence the threat they face; however, they have struggled to get effective results (Michaelsen & Furstenberg, 2021). Likewise, at an individual level, many law enforcement officers have not been adequately trained on the existence of transnational repression and how to respond to it, leaving many activists feeling unprotected and unsafe within the EU (Michaelsen &Furstenberg, 2021).

Not only does the EU lack the capacity to respond effectively to instances of transnational repression, it also lacks the will. There is a wide sense of silence on the way in which European officials (do not) respond to transnational repression, including the actions of the Saudi and Emirati governments, effectively sending a message of impunity to the respective leaders (Schenkkan &Linzer, 2021). Specifically, Saudi Arabian activists have highlighted their perception of differential treatment of perpetrators of transnational repression. They suggest that the actions of Saudi Arabia are not treated as seriously as those by countries such as Iran, because of their status as a Western ally. This dynamic, they argue, discourages European governments from speaking out on Saudi human rights violations (Parent & Levitt, 2024).

Moreover, while the EU has brought in certain measures to prevent spyware from being used to violate human rights—such as the 2021 Dual-use regulations that restricted the export of and technical support for cyber surveillance technology—there still lacks robust implementation of these laws and regulations (Gorokhovskaia & Linzer, 2022). For example, the subsidiary company of BAE Systems in Denmark sold the spyware product Evident to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the approval of the Danish government. This technology was developed by ETI, which is a Danish company specialised in high-tech surveillance, and can collect, catalogue and analyse electronic

communications of millions of people (ADHRB, 2020). Similarly, the Italian company HackingTeam, which sells hacking and surveillance technologies, sold a 20% stake to a Saudi Arabian investor, despite EU regulations that prohibit the sale of spyware to authoritarian regimes (ADHRB, 2020). These technologies are likely used by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to surveil and spy on their citizens nationally and abroad, risking violating basic human rights.

Economic Agreements or the Deprioritisation of Human Rights?

EU interactions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have historically been channelled through the GCC, with which the EU has a Cooperation Agreement from 1998. However, due to the EU's standard human rights clause in all its trade agreements which requires both parties to respect human rights and democratic principles, negotiations with the GCC have often been stunted (Oppenheim, 2019). Still, the EU and the UAE have been recently pursuing bilateral trade talks (European Commission 2025). Equally, the EU and Saudi Arabia have been deepening their relationship over the last few years, with European governments frequently referring to the relationship between the EU and Saudi Arabia as a "strategic partnership" (Oppenheim, 2019).

For example, in 2024, the EU supported the establishment of the European Chamber of Commerce in Saudi Arabia, in order to strengthen trade and investment relations. Saudi Arabia is the EU's largest trading partner among GCC countries, with bilateral trade in goods valued at approximately €75 billion annually. Likewise, EU investments in the country have grown by 50% since 2020 (Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, 2024). Furthermore, the EU aims to import 10 million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030 as part of its Green Deal, identifying the UAE as a key supplier of green energy. In this context, Saudi Arabia is also working to position itself as a significant player in the renewable energy sector (Delegation of the European Union to the United Arab Emirates, 2025).

While the EU has conducted human rights dialogues with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including concerns of labour rights and freedom of expression, these have led to no substantive change (EEAS Press Team, 2024; EEAS, 2024). Unfortunately, the EU and its Member States have often turned a blind eye to the human rights violations of the Gulf monarchies, prioritising instead their economic and geopolitical interests to avoid conflict with their strategic partners (Furstenberg, 2025). Human Rights Watch (2024) explored how the EU prioritises closer political and economic ties over addressing these human rights violations committed by the Gulf monarchies. The NGO critiques the EU for not linking its economic agreements to concrete improvements in the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including the release of detained activists.

Recognition of the Risks of Transnational Repression or Only Rhetoric?

The EU and its Member States have begun to recognise the importance of transnational repression as a threat to the rule of law, democracy and human rights in the region. For example, it has been referenced multiple times in the European Parliament and its specialised committees. This includes the Special Committee on Foreign Interference, which is tasked with combating interference in the democratic processes of EU Member States by third countries (Furstenberg, 2025). The 2022 final report of this committee highlighted the multitude of external threats like foreign disinformation and the interference with democratic procedures, in order to weaken democratic governance (European

Parliament, 2022).

Recommendations to combat these menaces include coordinating a strategy on foreign interference and developing targeted sanctions for individuals and family members who have been implicated in foreign interference attempts, such as diplomatic sanctions, travel bans, asset freezes and the stripping of EU residence permits (European Parliament, 2022). Moreover, in 2024 MEPs tabled a question on transnational repression for the first time (European Parliament, 2024). The European Parliament presents itself as a defender and protector of human rights both within and beyond the EU, and given its elected nature, it is important that this body represents the citizens of the EU. In this sense, this body should be at the forefront of ensuring safety and protection of activists, human rights defenders, and journalists working within its borders, whose work is threatened by transnational repression.

The European Parliament report on the EU guidelines on human rights defenders called on the Commission to take action on the growing transnational threats that human rights defenders within the EU face (European Parliament, 2023). Specifically, the Commission has been asked to investigate instances of unlawful foreign interference. While the Commission has acknowledged the issue of transnational repression, little action has been taken. In general, responses to transnational repression have been addressed in the domain of external threats. When speaking to those working for the European External Action Service (EEAS), Furstenberg (2025) found that transnational repression is embedded in their workflow, but it is not fully defined as a policy area to be addressed. Furthermore, these employees noted that transnational repression is not addressed with considerable energy or coordination, and often falls under the umbrella category of 'hybrid threats' (Giannopoulos et al., 2020). In this sense, the author identified that there is a growing awareness in the EU of its 'vulnerability' to threats from authoritarian actors, which can endanger the order of the EU and the safety of its citizens (Furstenberg, 2025). However, this has not yet translated into effective policy measures. With the Commission holding greater influence over EU policy, its inaction on transnational repression translates into wider EU inaction.

Across member states, responses to transnational repression have varied. Sweden has begun to integrate individual human security into their national security framework. For example, they adopted a law which criminalises the collection of information about a person within Sweden in order to aid foreign powers, recognising the risks diaspora communities face (Gorokhovskaia & Linzer, 2022). However, this is an unusual response; many EU member states remain underprepared for the threat of transnational repression. In particular, law enforcement agencies remain underinformed on what transnational repression is and the risk it presents. This is of particular importance given that for those targeted, law enforcement is usually their first point of contact (Gorokhovskaia & Linzer, 2022). For example, diaspora activists in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have highlighted the inadequate response they have received from law enforcement, which ultimately leaves their lives at risk (Michaelsen & Furstenberg, 2021).

Conclusion

Transnational repression carried out by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates represents a serious and growing threat to the safety and freedoms of their nationals living abroad. Importantly, these regimes do not act in isolation, but are part of a wider trend of authoritarian entrenchment through the extension of repressive systems beyond national borders and into transnational spaces. Hence, the argument put forward in this paper is not only applicable to Saudi Arabia and the UAE,

but forms part of a global ecosystem of repression that targets vulnerable individuals far beyond national borders (Abushammalah, 2023).

Diaspora activists are on the front lines of this struggle. Their work is essential in sustaining movements for freedom, accountability, and democratic transformation in their countries of origin. Yet the cost of activism from exile is rising. Those who choose to speak out face persistent surveillance, harassment, threats to family members, and even the risk of assassination. Many are forced into silence through self-censorship or abandon activism entirely. This not only weakens opposition movements abroad but also signals a broader failure of democratic states to provide refuge and uphold the rights they claim to defend.

The European Union, in particular, faces a critical test. It can no longer afford to treat transnational repression as a peripheral issue or an inevitable consequence of foreign entanglements. EU countries have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that individuals residing within their borders are protected from the extraterritorial reach of authoritarian regimes. This demonstrates moving beyond rhetorical support for human rights and taking tangible steps to identify, monitor, and confront repression occurring within EU territory.

Rather than enabling repression through silence or prioritising economic and strategic ties with repressive states, the EU must adopt a human-centred approach that places the security and freedoms of individuals at its core. This includes the development of dedicated legal frameworks to recognise and prosecute acts of transnational repression, training law enforcement to understand the nature of these threats, and establishing independent institutions tasked with monitoring repression and supporting affected individuals and communities (Furstenberg, 2025). The EU should also consider targeted sanctions and diplomatic consequences for states found to be systematically violating the rights of residents within its borders.

Ultimately, the persistence of transnational repression within EU countries reveals a deeper erosion of democratic accountability and a troubling convergence between democratic and authoritarian practices. By tolerating or enabling these abuses, the EU risks legitimising the very forms of repression it claims to oppose. To preserve the integrity of its democratic values, the EU must confront this threat not just as a foreign policy challenge, but as a domestic one, one that strikes at the heart of its commitments to freedom, justice, and human rights.

References

Abushammalah, N.J. (2023). The Long Arm of the State: Transnational Repression against Exiled Activists from the Arab Gulf States. Social Sciences, 12(12), 669. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12120669

ADHRB. (2025, May 2). Saudi Arabia's new INTERPOL Office: A Dangerous Expansion of Transnational Repression. Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. https://www.adhrb.org/2025/05/saudi-arabias-new-interpol-office-a-dangerous-expansion-of-transnational-repression/

ADHRB. (2020, June 5). Building Secret State Surveillance Systems: how the Export of European Spyware Facilitates Human Rights Violations in Gulf States. Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain. https://www.adhrb.org/2020/06/gulf-states/

A Farooq, U. (2024, June 11). As Transnational Repression Gets Attention in US, Activists Call for Focus on UAE. Middle East Eye. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/transnational-repression-get-attention-us-activists-call-focus-uae

Anstis, S. & LaFlèche, É. (2024). Gender-Based Digital Transnational Repression as a Global Authoritarian Practice. Globalizations, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2401706

Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 5-19.

Christopoulou, A.E. (2022). Civil Society and Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU. European Public Law, 28(2), 245-268. https://doi.org/10.54648/euro2022013

Delegation of the European Union to the United Arab Emirates. (2025). Pioneering the Green Transition: EU and GCC Experts Conclude Green Hydrogen Workshop in Abu Dhabi. Delegation of the European Union to the United Arab Emirates. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-arab-emirates/EU-GCC-Green-Hydrogen-Workshop_en?s=210

Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security. (2024, May 8). EU Welcomes First European Chamber of Commerce in the Gulf, based in Saudi Arabia. Trade and Economic Security. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-welcomes-first-european-chamber-commerce-gulf-based-saudi-arabia-2024-05-08_en#:~:text=Saudi%20Arabia%20is%20currently%20the,%E2%82%AC30%20billion%20in%20202 2

Dukalskis, A. et al. (2023). The Long Arm and the Iron Fist: Authoritarian Crackdowns and Transnational Repression. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 68(6), 1051-1079. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231188896

Edel, M. (2023). The Legal Webs of Transnational Repression. MERIP, Summer/Fall 2023. https://merip.org/2023/09/transnational-repression/

EEAS Press Team. (2024a, January 1). UAE: 12th Human Rights Dialogue Held in Brussels. European Union External Action. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/uae-12th-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en

EEAS Press Team. (2024b, December 20). Saudi Arabia: 4th EU-KSA Human Rights Dialogue Held in Riyadh. European Union External Action. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/saudi-arabia-4th-eu-ksa-human-rights-dialogue-held-riyadh_en

El Mawy, R. (2017, August 15). Saudi Arabia's Missing Princes. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-40926963

European Commission. (2025, May 28). EU and UAE Launch Free Trade talks. *European Commission*. https://europa.eu/newsroom/ecpc-failover/pdf/ip-25-1252_en.pdf

European Parliament. (2022). INGE 1 Report: Resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (2020/2268[INI]). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.pdf

European Parliament. (2023) The EU guidelines on human rights defenders: European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2023 on the EU guidelines on human rights defenders (2021/2204[INI]). para. 40 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0086_EN.pdf

European Parliament. (2024) Parliamentary question E-000459/2024(ASW): Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell i Fontelles on behalf of the European Commission. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2024-000459-ASW_EN.html

European Union. (2007). Consolidated versions of the treaty on European Union and the treaty on the functioning of the European Union. Treaty of Lisbon. *Official Journal of the European Union* (51). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

Freedom House. (2024, February 16). NEW DATA: More Than 20 Percent of the World's Governments Engage in Transnational Repression. *Freedom House.* https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-data-more-20-percent-worlds-governments-engage-transnational-repression

Furstenberg, S. (2025). The European Union's Response to Transnational Repression: Are we Moving Towards Securitisation? *European Journal of International Security*, 1–25.

Giannopoulos, G. et al. (2020). *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model.* Ispra: European Commission. https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Conceptual-Framework-Hybrid-Threats-HCoE-JRC.pdf

Glasius, M. (2018). Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework. *Globalizations*, 15(2), 179–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1403781

Gorokhovskaia, Y. & Linzer, I. (2022). *Defending Democracy in Exile. Understanding and Responding to Transnational Repression.* Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Complete_TransnationalRepressionReport2022_NEW_0.pdf

Grzymala-Busse, A. (2019). How Populists Rule: The Consequences for Democratic Governance. *Polity*, 51(4), 707–717. https://doi.org/10.1086/705570

Human Rights Watch. (2024, October 11). EU: Human Rights Should be Priority at GCC Summit. *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/11/eu-human-rights-should-be-priority-gcc-summit

Inspireurope. (2024). *Transnational Repression and Academic Freedom*. Insipreurope. https://sareurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Inspireurope-Briefing-Transnational-Repression.pdf

Lemon, E. (2019). Weaponizing Interpol. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2), 15-29.

Meyer, J. (2019, May 16). 'Saudi Arabia Wants to Stop my Work.' Activists Are Facing New Threats for Continuing Jamal Khashoggi's Efforts. *TIME*. https://time.com/5590171/new-threats-saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi/

Michaelsen, M. & Furstenberg, S. (2021, May 13). How Europe Helps Authoritarian Regimes to Export Repression. *Open Democracy*. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-europe-helps-authoritarian-regimes-export-repression/

Michaelsen, M. & Ruijgrok, K. (2024). Autocracy's Long Reach: Explaining Host Country Influences on Transnational Repression. *Democratization*, 31(2), 290-314. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2267448

Mohyeldin, A.M. (2019, June 29). No One Is Safe: How Saudi Arabia Makes Dissidents Disappear. *Vanity Fair*. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/07/how-saudi-arabia-makes-dissidents-disappear?srsltid=AfmBOorXekLMTzQm4mscdzPSZhX7E8g7QrXp3J4ToVjCqJzwL6GX8L93

Moss, D.M. (2022). *The Arab Spring Abroad: Diaspora Activism Against Authoritarian Regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moss, D.M., et al. (2022). Going After the Family: Transnational Repression and the Proxy Punishment of Middle Eastern Diasporas. *Global Networks*, 22(4), 735-751. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12372

Negri, G. (2020). How European Civil Society is Pushing Back Against Democratic Erosion. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Negri_EU_Civil_Society.pdf

Oppenheim, B. (2019, May 2). You Never Listen to Me: The European-Saudi Relationship After Khashoggi. *Centre for European Reform*. https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2019/you-never-listen-me-european-saudi-relationship-after

Parent, D. & Levitt, T. (2024, July 18). UK 'Turning a Blind Eye' to Threats to Kill Saudi Activists Living in Exile. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/jul/18/saudi-arabia-uk-exiles-threats-transnational-repression-human-rights

Sadurski, W. (2019). *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schenkkan, N. et al. (2020). *Perspectives on "Everyday" Transnational Repression in an Age of Glob-*

balization. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/perspectives-everyday-transnational-repression-age-globalization

Schenkkan, N. & Linzer I. (2021). Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Complete_FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev020221.pdf

Smolka, T. (2021). Decline of democracy—the European Union at a crossroad. Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft, 15(1), 81–105.

Tsourapas, G. (2021). Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-optation in World Politics. International Studies Review, 23(3), 616–644. *https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061*

Ziblatt, D. & Levitsky, S. (2018). How Democracies Die. New York: Crown.

Digital Repression in Iraq: How Disinformation and Troll Farms Undermine Democracy

Marina Ayeb[1]

University of Urbino

Abstract

This paper explores how disinformation and troll farms operate as instruments of digital repression in post-2003 Iraq, eroding democratic aspirations and reshaping political subjectivity. These campaigns are not spontaneous but part of organized systems of ideological labor embedded within political parties, militias, and foreign-aligned media networks. Drawing on digital labor theory and media studies, the paper argues that disinformation disciplines dissent, fragments public discourse, and fabricates consensus. While the European Union rhetorically promotes democracy and human rights, its engagement in Iraq has largely overlooked the digital infrastructures of repression. The paper critiques this strategic gap and calls for a reoriented international approach, guided by frameworks such as the EU's New Agenda for the Mediterranean, to prioritize information integrity, digital rights, and independent media as foundations for meaningful democratic development.

Keywords

Disinformation, Troll Farms, Democracy, Iraq, Digital Repression

Introduction

In Iraq's post-2003 political landscape, disinformation has emerged as both a symptom and a tool of systemic dysfunction. Amid ongoing cycles of protest, repression, and state fragility, the country's information environment has become deeply polarized, fragmented, and weaponized. Rather than serving as a space for pluralistic debate, Iraq's digital public sphere has evolved into a chaotic battleground in which falsehoods are deployed strategically to manipulate public perception, discredit dissent, and reproduce existing power structures (Al-Kaisy, 2021). In this context, disinformation is not simply a media problem, it is a form of political repression.

Since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Iraqi media ecosystem has undergone a profound transformation. The post-invasion liberalization of media opened the door for a proliferation of outlets, but this pluralism has largely been co-opted by partisan, sectarian, and militia-affiliated actors. Social media, once seen as a promising alternative to legacy channels, is now deeply embedded in these same networks of influence. Politicians, armed groups, and foreign

---

interests all participate in a system where truth is contested and digital manipulation is normalized (Al-Kaisy, 2021).

At the center of Iraq's disinformation landscape are troll farms: institutionalized groups of internet users who are paid or otherwise incentivized to manipulate political discourse online (De Seta, 2017). These operations are a core component of what Woolley and Howard (2018) define as "computational propaganda", the strategic use of algorithms, automation and big data to shape public life. In this context, disinformation is not merely circulated; it is systematically amplified, targeted and optimized to distort perception and suppress dissent. While troll farms have drawn international attention in relation to high-profile events such as the 2016 U.S. elections and the Brexit referendum (Pomerantsev, 2019), their role in the Arab world remains underexamined. In Iraq, they do not operate at the margins. On the contrary, they function as structured, professionalized digital workplaces, often housed within media arms of political parties or paramilitary factions. Far from being spontaneous or amateurish, these operations are embedded in formal communication infrastructures and engaged in the routine, organized labor of manufacturing consensus and delegitimizing opposition (Ayeb & Bonini, 2024; Al-Rawi, 2021).

This paper explores two central questions. First, how do troll farms and disinformation campaigns operate as tools of digital repression in Iraq's post-2003 political landscape? Second, how has the European Union responded to these evolving threats to information integrity and democratic development? These questions are essential not only for understanding Iraq's internal dynamics, but also for critically assessing how international actors engage with fragile democracies shaped by digital threats.

The inclusion of the European Union (EU) in this analysis is not incidental. As one of Iraq's key international partners, the EU has invested substantially in post-conflict stabilization, state-building, and democratic governance. Through electoral assistance, civil society support, and human rights programming, it has consistently positioned itself as a normative power committed to promoting democracy, the rule of law, and information integrity. In recent years, this commitment has been reinforced by a suite of digital policy instruments, including the Digital Services Act, the EU Action Plan Against Disinformation, and the Team Europe Democracy framework, which collectively articulate a more robust vision for countering information manipulation. However, despite these advancements, the EU's engagement in Iraq remains largely disconnected from the country's rapidly evolving digital and media environment. Disinformation, media capture, and online repression continue to shape Iraq's political sphere, yet these challenges have not been meaningfully integrated into the EU's foreign policy toward the country. This disconnect between normative ambitions and strategic action not only limits the EU's credibility in supporting democratic development but also highlights the urgent need for more context-specific, digitally literate interventions to confront disinformation and protect political agency in fragile media systems.

Drawing on media studies, digital labor theory, and postcolonial approaches, this paper portrays disinformation in Iraq as a form of digital repression. It examines how information control intersects with violence, labor, and ideology, and reflects on what it means to struggle for democracy in an environment where truth itself is under siege.

Theoretical Framework: Disinformation, Democratic Aspirations and Digital Labor

Understanding the role of disinformation in Iraq's political life requires a theoretical approach that brings together concepts from media studies, digital labor, and postcolonial theory. Disinformation in fragile and authoritarian-leaning contexts is not just a matter of poor information quality; it is deeply entangled with power, ideology, and the structures of repression. This section offers key conceptual tools to make sense of how disinformation operates as a form of digital repression, how democratic aspirations emerge and are threatened, and how troll farms function as sites of ideological and organised labor.

Definitions and Distinctions: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

Understanding the landscape of information manipulation requires clarity about the distinctions between three closely related yet analytically distinct concepts: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. These terms, though often used interchangeably in public discourse, carry specific meanings that help us understand not just what is being said, but why, how, and to what effect.

- Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is shared without the intent to cause harm. It may result from rumors, misinterpretations, or flawed reporting. Misinformation is often spread by individuals who believe the content to be true or who fail to verify its accuracy before sharing it (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).
- Disinformation, by contrast, is the deliberate creation or dissemination of false information with the intention to deceive, manipulate, or cause harm. It is a strategic act often driven by political, financial, psychological, or ideological motivations (Wardle, 2018). Historically, the term has roots in the Soviet concept of dezinformatsiya, which referred to state-sponsored efforts to plant false narratives in domestic and foreign media (Mahairas & Dvilyanski, 2018). In today's context, disinformation has been reconfigured by digital technology, allowing it to travel faster and reach broader audiences, particularly via social media platforms (Benkler, et al., 2018).
- Malinformation refers to truthful information that is weaponized or shared with harmful intent. This includes the deliberate leaking of private data, hate speech, or the selective amplification of truthful content out of context to mislead or harm individuals or groups (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For example, a leaked photo might be authentic, but its publication at a particular moment may be intended to discredit an activist or incite violence.

Claire Wardle (2018) describes the overall phenomenon as an "information disorder", arguing that the proliferation of digital platforms, combined with weakening institutional trust and polarized public discourse, has created a chaotic and unstable information ecosystem. Within this disorder, distinctions between these categories often collapse. What begins as misinformation may be reappropriated and reframed as disinformation when amplified by political actors, troll farms, or partisan media. In Iraq, where the media landscape is highly fragmented and heavily politicized, such transitions are common and often instrumentalized.

Moreover, computational propaganda has become a core tactic in Iraq's digital environment. Political parties, militias, and regional actors increasingly rely on troll farms, bots, and paid influencers to seed confusion, promote sectarian narratives, and drown out dissenting voices (Al-Kaisy, 2021; De Seta, 2017). These actors blur the boundaries between falsehood and truth, between

strategic messaging and outright fabrication, making the task of verification nearly impossible in some cases.

In such an environment, what matters most is not simply the accuracy of information, but its intent, impact, and function within asymmetrical power relations (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Disinformation in Iraq operates not only to mislead, but to discipline, marginalize opposition, delegitimize protest, and secure the hegemony of dominant political and military actors.

A History of Disinformation in Iraq: From Propaganda to Digital Repression

Disinformation in Iraq is neither a recent nor isolated phenomenon. It has evolved over decades, shaped by shifting political regimes, foreign interventions, and new technologies of control. Under Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, the media were centrally controlled and functioned as an instrument of state propaganda. Television, radio, and print were used to glorify the president, suppress dissent, and maintain a unified national narrative through the strategic distortion of truth (Isakhan, 2009). This early infrastructure of narrative control planted the seeds for a wider culture of disinformation, where truth was less a matter of public debate and more a tool of regime survival.

The fall of the regime in 2003 did not mark a rupture in this logic, but rather its fragmentation. With the U.S.-led invasion, the Coalition Provisional Authority and occupying forces introduced their own forms of strategic communication, ranging from leaflet drops to the establishment of al-Hurra Iraq, a satellite television channel funded by the U.S. government through Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA) is a U.S. state-owned international broadcaster, often described as a soft-power tool aimed at promoting American values and perspectives abroad. While al-Hurra was framed as a vehicle for democratic communication, it often mirrored the propagandistic strategies it was meant to replace, pushing foreign narratives and undermining local credibility (Al-Kaisy, 2021). What followed was the emergence of a chaotic, highly politicized media landscape. In the absence of effective regulatory frameworks, Iraq's burgeoning media sector was quickly captured by political parties, sectarian interests, and foreign-aligned actors, transforming media into weapons of political competition and disinformation.

As the authority of the Iraqi state continued to erode, new actors, particularly militias and foreign-aligned groups, moved in to fill the resulting vacuum. Among the most influential were the media arms of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs), a coalition of predominantly Shiʿa paramilitary groups that emerged in 2014 to combat ISIS and was later integrated into the formal security apparatus. These media outlets became key instruments for promoting the PMFs' legitimacy while discrediting their critics. Through a combination of satellite channels, online platforms and informal rumor networks, they extended their influence deep into Iraq's fractured information environment. By 2018, digital manipulation had become a routine feature of Iraqi political life. That year, during national elections, a wave of deepfake videos, many targeting women candidates, spread across social media. In one widely publicized case, a fabricated sex tape forced parliamentary candidate Intidhar Ahmed Jassim to withdraw from the race (Al-Kaisy, 2021). This gendered disinformation campaign was not an isolated incident, but part of a broader pattern aimed at silencing reformist and marginalized voices through shame, fear, and reputational harm.

With the rise of social media, the mechanics of disinformation in Iraq grew more sophisticated. Plat-

forms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Telegram became central arenas for political messaging and narrative warfare. "Electronic flies", networks of coordinated troll accounts and bots, began flooding the digital space with content designed to confuse, intimidate, and dominate. Investigative reports revealed that political and paramilitary actors spent millions of dollars on Facebook advertising, boosted posts and fake profiles to amplify disinformation (Al-Kaisy, 2021). Some of the largest of these operations were traced to groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, with evidence pointing to training and coordination from Lebanese Hezbollah operatives (Al-Kaisy, 2021). These campaigns were not random acts of online noise; they were calculated efforts to shape perception, discredit dissenters, and secure ideological control in a fractured political system.

In this context, disinformation must be understood as more than the circulation of falsehoods. It functions as a form of digital repression. Rather than silencing citizens directly, it overwhelms them with conflicting messages, emotional triggers, and epistemic instability. It blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction, creating an atmosphere where people no longer know what to believe or whom to trust (Roberts, 2018). This confusion is not accidental, it is deliberate. Disinformation creates cognitive fatigue, weakens collective agency, and makes democratic mobilization more difficult. It becomes easier to delegitimize protests, justify violence, and fracture solidarity when the discursive space is flooded with competing realities.

This form of repression is particularly potent when it emerges in response to democratic aspirations. Rather than taking democracy as a fixed institutional model, it is more useful to view it through a postcolonial and critical lens, as a collective longing for justice, dignity, and political renewal under conditions of exclusion and violence (Chouliaraki, 2013). In Iraq, this longing became especially visible during the Tishreen uprising of 2019. Young Iraqis demanded not only jobs and services, but a complete transformation of the corrupt, sectarian political system imposed after 2003. Their protests were grounded in anger, hope, and a deep sense of affective solidarity, a refusal to normalize failure and repression.

But this emergent political subjectivity provoked counter-reactions. The streets were met with live ammunition, and the online spaces were met with organized digital violence. Troll farms, fake pages, and partisan media accused the protesters of being foreign agents, atheists, or morally deviant. These narratives were not marginal, they were amplified by influential media channels, politicians, and militia-aligned influencers. The aim was clear: to fragment the movement, discredit its leaders, and exhaust its base of support.

Case Studies: Protests, Elections, and Foreign Policy Moments

Understanding the present context in Iraq, marked by persistent instability, elite fragmentation and contested democratic aspirations, helps to frame the broader regional dynamics of disinformation and digital repression. Similar patterns of state and non-state actors leveraging online platforms to control narratives and suppress dissent can be observed in neighboring countries. The following case examples from Iran further illuminate how protests, elections and foreign policy developments become focal points for sophisticated digital repression strategies that resonate across the Middle East.

Iran's recent history provides multiple case examples that illustrate how protests, elections and foreign policy developments intersect with digital repression strategies, producing widespread

distrust, political apathy, and self-censorship among the population. The social unrest that erupted during the 2019 protests over fuel price hikes and economic grievances exemplifies this dynamic. While initially galvanizing public outrage, the regime's swift response combined physical repression with a sophisticated online campaign to control the narrative (HRW, 2019). State-linked troll farms and coordinated disinformation efforts framed protesters as foreign agents and criminals, delegitimizing their grievances and sowing division among potential sympathizers (Rahimi, 2011). This digital offensive, coupled with offline threats and arrests, instilled fear that permeated social media spaces, driving many citizens to withdraw from public debate or modify their expressions to avoid surveillance and reprisals.

Elections in Iran further illustrate the erosion of political engagement under authoritarian digital governance. The 2021 presidential elections, held amid growing economic hardship and political frustration, were characterized by low voter turnout and widespread skepticism about the electoral process's fairness (Wintour, 2021). Digital campaigns orchestrated by state actors not only promoted favored candidates but also disseminated narratives that delegitimized reformist challengers as foreign stooges, reinforcing distrust toward opposition forces. The perceived predetermined nature of these elections reinforced apathy, as many voters saw participation as ineffective or even risky in a climate where dissent could lead to persecution. This environment incentivized self-censorship, with many Iranians refraining from openly discussing politics on social media or in public forums.

Iran's foreign policy decisions, particularly its involvement in regional conflicts and negotiations such as the JCPOA nuclear deal, have also been accompanied by digital information operations aimed at shaping domestic and international perceptions. Troll networks amplify nationalistic rhetoric framing Iran as a victim of Western hostility and a defender of regional sovereignty (Azadi, 2019). Simultaneously, these campaigns discredit critics, both inside and outside Iran, as collaborators or traitors, deepening social polarization and deterring open criticism. The effect of these operations contributes to a political culture where distrust toward independent voices and foreign actors becomes entrenched, apathy toward reform gains ground, and self-censorship remains a survival mechanism for many citizens navigating a heavily surveilled digital environment.

Theoretical Grounding: Media Studies, Digital Labor, Critical and Postcolonial Theory

This paper is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that brings together several academic traditions:

- Media studies help us understand how information technologies are not neutral tools, but structured by power relations, platforms, and attention economies. Media scholars emphasize how algorithmic visibility, virality, and platform design shape what narratives gain traction (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).
- Digital labor studies shift attention to the people behind the screens, content moderators, trolls, influencers, and data annotators, whose often invisible work sustains today's information systems. Troll farm workers, like content moderators, operate at the intersection of technological systems and ideological mandates (Roberts, 2019).
- Postcolonial theory reminds us that repression in Iraq cannot be separated from histories of occupation, intervention, and external influence. The epistemic and political crisis faced by Iraqis today is partly a legacy of how power has been imposed and legitimized, both from within and outside the country (Said, 1993; Mbembe, 2001).

Together, these perspectives offer a powerful lens for understanding disinformation as more than a tool of deception. Disinformation functions not merely to mislead, but to discipline; not simply to obscure truth, but to assert control; and not only to undermine democratic processes, but to obstruct their very emergence. In contexts like Iraq, disinformation is not the symptom of a broken system, it is the system. It is produced and circulated through structured operations such as troll farms, which function as digital factories of repression: manufacturing falsehoods, distorting public discourse, and targeting dissent. These operations don't rely on silencing alone, but on overwhelming the information space, making it difficult for people to find reliable information, form clear opinions or engage meaningfully in public debate.

Troll Farms in Iraq: Actors, Strategies, and Effects

Troll Farms as Ideological and Organized Digital Labor

In Iraq's hybrid media-political ecosystem, troll farms represent a key apparatus of digital repression. Far from being loose networks of anonymous users, these operations are highly structured and often embedded within the media and communication arms of political parties, armed groups, or affiliated "media production companies". In some cases, they are outsourced to private firms contracted to manage disinformation campaigns on behalf of state-aligned or foreign-backed actors. These troll farms operate with organizational coherence: hierarchies of supervisors, performance targets, division of tasks, and strategic alignment with political narratives are common features of their daily functioning (Ayeb and Bonini, 2024).

Workers in troll farms are assigned specific roles. Some manage comment sections or post on fake accounts; others track trending hashtags, design visual content, or monitor the digital behavior of political adversaries. While many trolls are paid employees, others operate as "volunteers", motivated by ideological commitment, loyalty to a political movement, or fear of reprisal. For both groups, trolling is not simply a technical activity. It is deeply ideological and affective labor. Trolls are expected to perform outrage, express loyalty, evoke religious or nationalistic sentiment, and simulate the voice of "the people". Their task is not only to disseminate content, but to embody the affective tone of the political forces they serve.

This labor is emotionally intense and morally ambiguous. Trolls are often asked to attack public figures they personally respect, simulate grief over deaths they are indifferent to, or spread lies that may put people at risk. As Ayeb and Bonini (2024) show, workers internalize contradictory emotions, alienation, guilt, pride, and exhaustion, while navigating a job that is officially invisible yet politically central. Trolls work in shifts, often under supervision, sometimes inside offices equipped with multiple screens, pre-approved content templates, and messaging guidelines. Their work is monitored and evaluated based on engagement metrics: how many comments are generated, how widely a hashtag spreads, and how effectively an activist's reputation is undermined.

The ideological function of troll labor is clear. These operations help simulate consensus, discredit dissent, and reinforce dominant narratives. Troll content is rarely neutral; it often reproduces sectarian, nationalist, or moralistic discourses that present the state or affiliated militias as besieged protectors of the homeland and critics as traitors or foreign agents. Through these narratives, troll farms help maintain the symbolic and emotional boundaries of political legitimacy. They do not merely respond to political events; they produce the atmosphere in which such events are interpreted.

Troll workers are typically drawn from the same demographics as the protest movements they are paid to undermine: young, underemployed, digitally literate Iraqis. This irony is not incidental, it reflects the broader contradictions of Iraq's post-2003 order, where the same generation that has been betrayed by political elites is enlisted to defend them online. Troll farms thus reveal not only how digital repression is implemented, but also how it is made sustainable: through the exploitation of precarious labor and the mobilization of ideology as a form of discipline.

Understanding troll farms as sites of ideological and affective labor invites a shift in how disinformation is conceptualized. Rather than treating it solely as a crisis of truth or a failure of media literacy, it must also be seen as the product of organized, exploitative, and politically instrumentalized work. Trolls are not simply spreading lies, they are manufacturing consent, eroding solidarity, and enacting repression, one comment at a time.

Troll Operations and Their Political Backers

Troll operations in Iraq are not fringe activities; they are deeply embedded in the architecture of political power. Since 2003, every major political faction in Iraq has developed its own media ecosystem, complete with television channels, news websites, social media accounts, and digital communications teams. Troll farms have emerged as an integral component of this infrastructure, used not only to promote the party line, but to monitor dissent, attack opponents, and manipulate the contours of public discourse. These operations are often embedded directly within the communications departments of political parties or run through ostensibly independent media production companies that serve multiple clients, including armed groups and foreign patrons (Ayeb and Bonini, 2024).

Shi'a Islamist parties, Sunni tribal factions, and Kurdish authorities alike have built digital strategies into their broader political operations. In many cases, troll teams operate semi-officially from within party headquarters, or out of affiliated PR firms that blur the line between legitimate media work and coordinated disinformation. Some troll farms are tied to satellite channels that provide narratives to be amplified across social media, creating a recursive loop of online and broadcast propaganda. Others operate more discreetly, using pseudonymous accounts and bot networks to seed rumors, attack activists, and steer conversations.

Among the most sophisticated and aggressive digital actors are Iraq's pro-Iranian militias, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and other factions within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs). These groups operate complex media wings that include television channels (e.g., Al-Ahd TV), Telegram networks, WhatsApp groups, and coordinated teams of trolls who work to legitimize the militias' role in state and society. These operations have a dual purpose: they justify the groups' actions, including violence, by framing them as defenders of national sovereignty, and they delegitimize critics by portraying them as agents of Western or Gulf-backed agendas.

Investigative reports have uncovered how these groups spend large sums of money on Facebook advertising, often using fake pages or accounts posing as local influencers, news outlets, or public institutions to mask the origin of content (Bradshaw, S. et.al,. (2029). Their strategies range from algorithmic manipulation, purchasing followers, inflating engagement metrics, to narrative manipulation, crafting entire storylines designed to dominate digital discourse and influence how

events are interpreted by the public.

Foreign actors, particularly Iran, have also played a significant role in bolstering Iraq's disinformation capacity. Evidence suggests that operatives from Lebanese Hezbollah have trained Iraqi digital teams in psychological warfare, information operations, and online manipulation tactics (Al-Kaisy, 2021). This transnational collaboration mirrors hybrid propaganda models seen in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran itself, where digital control is integrated with broader strategies of militarized governance and ideological enforcement.

The political utility of troll operations is clear. They provide a low-cost, high-impact method of narrative control, especially in contexts where legitimacy is fragile and traditional media are distrusted. In Iraq, where the credibility of the state is perennially contested, and where young people increasingly turn to social media for news and political engagement, controlling the online narrative is as important as controlling territory or institutions. Troll farms allow political elites and armed groups to blur the lines between truth and fiction, citizen and enemy, dissent and betrayal.

The EU in Iraq: Normative Commitments, Strategic Silences

Since 2003, the European Union has positioned itself as a key international actor supporting Iraq's post-conflict reconstruction and democratic transition. Through development aid, political dialogue, and technical assistance, the EU has framed its engagement around promoting democracy, rule of law, human rights, and civil society empowerment, reflected in instruments such as the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and more recently, the Team Europe Democracy framework (European Commission, 2024). However, despite this normative agenda, the EU's practical interventions have focused predominantly on state-building, electoral assistance, and institutional reforms, largely overlooking the critical challenges emerging in Iraq's information environment, notably disinformation, media capture, and digital repression.

While the EU has launched ambitious digital regulations and information integrity strategies within its own borders, including the Digital Services Act and the Code of Practice on Disinformation, these frameworks have not been adequately extended to its foreign policy efforts in Iraq (European Parliament, 2022). This omission has created a significant strategic gap: the persistence of media manipulation, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and threats against journalists and activists in digital spaces remain largely unaddressed in EU programming. Such a silence undermines the EU's proclaimed commitment to democratic norms and human rights.

This gap highlights the limits of the EU's role as a "normative power" in Iraq. Although it seeks to influence the international order through values, dialogue and soft power, its failure to engage structurally with the digital dynamics of information production and manipulation renders its democracy promotion efforts partial and vulnerable. Support for civil society and electoral processes is vital but insufficient without safeguarding the information space where political contestation unfolds (Smith, 2022). Consequently, EU initiatives risk becoming symbolic or procedural, focusing on governance form rather than substantive democratic engagement. Furthermore, the EU's reluctance to challenge Iran-backed militias and political factions with entrenched disinformation operations is often explained by geopolitical pragmatism but effectively signals tacit acceptance of information control by powerful local actors (Al-Kaisy, 2021). For the EU to genuinely embody

normative power in Iraq, it must critically reflect on how its interventions might inadvertently reproduce neo-colonial patterns of dominance and paternalism. True support requires moving beyond top-down prescriptions and recognizing Iraqi agency, local knowledge and the complex socio-political realities shaping digital repression. This means fostering partnerships that empower grassroots actors and amplify marginalized voices, while resisting the imposition of external norms detached from local contexts. Only through such an approach can the EU's engagement avoid perpetuating historic asymmetries of power and contribute to a more inclusive and context-sensitive promotion of democracy.

The other argument follows from the fact that "the concept of consent is easier to stipulate than empirically assess" (Barnett, 2015, p.223). Even if the consent of the state and its representatives is clear, the citizens of those countries should have a way to give or retreat their consent. Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania present little policy accountability and high political instability, with repression of civil society and accusations of competitive authoritarianism (especially Tunisia and Egypt). It can thus be argued that consent is not organic in these agreements, and that citizens in any of these three countries would not necessarily be able to retreat their consent if the agreements do not satisfy their preferences.

In this void, regional powers have aggressively expanded their influence over Iraq's media landscape. Iran, in particular, invests heavily in ideological and media infrastructure, supporting satellite channels, training digital operatives, and integrating narrative strategies into its broader regional ambitions. Pro-Iranian militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah operate both military and media wings, deploying coordinated online campaigns alongside physical force to shape public discourse (Watkins, J. 2020). Meanwhile, Turkey and Gulf states actively leverage media outlets, social media networks and digital technologies to advance their strategic interests in Iraq. Turkey, for instance, uses satellite channels and online platforms to promote narratives that support its policies in northern Iraq and among Kurdish populations, often framing its actions as counterterrorism efforts. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, invest in media ventures and digital campaigns that counter Iranian influence by promoting sectarian and political narratives aligned with their regional agendas. This multi-directional media competition contributes to a fragmented and highly polarized information environment in Iraq, where independent journalism and local voices struggle to gain traction amid the cacophony of competing state-backed propaganda, partisan messaging and digital disinformation operations.

The EU's limited presence in this arena is therefore especially significant. By failing to support narrative infrastructure, such as independent journalism, investigative reporting, or cultural production, the EU cedes the information battleground to actors with vested interests in controlling Iraq's political environment. Nonetheless, the EU retains considerable potential to recalibrate its approach. Iraq hosts a vibrant but vulnerable cohort of youth activists, journalists, and digital creators advocating for transparency and participation. Effectively supporting these actors requires more than standard workshops or electoral assistance; it demands structural interventions aimed at protecting digital rights, building media resilience, and amplifying independent voices.

Concrete steps the EU could take include investing in media literacy programs targeted at youth to counter sectarian and disinformation narratives; providing core funding and safety mechanisms for independent journalists facing digital and physical threats; supporting local fact-checking and digital forensic initiatives to expose coordinated disinformation; collaborating with technology platforms to improve transparency and enforcement of content policies in local languages; and integrating digital security measures across all democracy and civil society programs (European Ext-

ernal Action Service, 2024).

Such actions would align with the EU's evolving digital and human rights agenda, including the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020–2024), which calls for stronger engagement with digital threats in foreign policy contexts. Moving beyond rhetorical commitments to concrete engagement with Iraq's digital realities is essential if the EU seeks to remain a credible actor supporting democratic development. Disinformation is not a technical challenge alone but a political weapon; ignoring it abandons those who resist and imagine democracy under the shadow of repression.

Toward a New Framework

Recent shifts in international policy frameworks signal a growing recognition of the need to rethink traditional approaches to engagement in the MENA region. While the UN new approach has yet to be fully operationalized in Iraq, it offers important conceptual and political entry points for a more comprehensive, digitally literate, and locally responsive form of international support.

The EU's New Agenda for the Mediterranean, sometimes described as a "Pact for the Mediterranean", outlines a more holistic vision for regional cooperation, one that links democratic governance, digital transformation, and social resilience. The agenda emphasizes good governance, green transitions, digital innovation, and inclusive economic growth, framed within a partnership logic rather than a donor–recipient model (European Commission, 2021). Importantly, it also acknowledges the urgency of strengthening democratic institutions and civil society in contexts marked by state fragility and digital vulnerabilities.

Although the strategy has so far focused primarily on North African countries, its broader vision provides an opportunity to reframe EU engagement with Iraq beyond the narrow lens of post-conflict reconstruction or electoral assistance. In a country where the digital public sphere has become a battleground for narrative control, sectarian polarization, and foreign influence operations, applying the Pact's principles would mean investing in independent media, digital education, and the protection of civic actors operating online. Moreover, the agenda's emphasis on regional cooperation could foster cross-border initiatives between Iraqi and other Arab civil society actors confronting similar challenges in hybrid media environments.

Complementing these international policy shifts, it is important to recognize the vital role played by Iraqi activists, journalists and digital campaigners who are actively pushing back against disinformation and authoritarian control from within. Across Iraq, grassroots efforts have emerged to challenge the polarized media landscape and reclaim public discourse. Independent fact-checking platforms and media literacy campaigns work to debunk falsehoods and rebuild trust in credible sources, while digital security trainings help vulnerable groups, especially youth and women, navigate online harassment and surveillance. Alternative media outlets, ranging from community radio to podcasts, provide spaces for inclusive storytelling that counters sectarian and political divides. Additionally, coordinated social media campaigns raise awareness of corruption, human rights abuses and electoral fraud, mobilizing public opinion despite heavy repression. Many activists also collaborate regionally, sharing tools and strategies with counterparts facing similar challenges across the MENA region. These efforts, though often conducted under intense threat and resource constraints, demonstrate local resilience and innovation crucial to transforming Iraq's digital public

sphere.

The EU's new framework, if translated into action, could provide crucial support to these local initiatives by moving beyond funding civil society as an abstract category to co-creating safe, pluralistic, and sustainable digital infrastructures. This would involve building capacities for digital forensics, establishing emergency response mechanisms for online harassment, and strengthening legal protections for freedom of expression in online spaces. Such a rights-based, participatory, and digitally informed approach would also help address the deep distrust many Iraqis feel toward international actors. Past interventions have often been top-down, technocratic, or limited in scope. A more engaged and respectful collaboration could rebuild legitimacy and better align external support with the aspirations of those resisting disinformation, repression, and political stagnation from within.

In a moment where the struggle for democracy increasingly takes place online, frameworks like the New Agenda for the Mediterranean offer more than abstract commitments—they represent a chance to stand in solidarity with those reimagining Iraq's political future, byte by byte and post by post.

Conclusion

In Iraq, the promise of democracy remains suspended between aspiration and obstruction. While elections are held and civil society exists, the deeper conditions necessary for democratic life, trust, pluralism, security, and information integrity, remain fragile or absent. This paper has argued that disinformation, far from being an accidental or peripheral phenomenon, is a central component of Iraq's post-2003 political order. Troll farms, coordinated media campaigns, and digital repression serve to discredit dissent, reinforce authoritarian narratives, and erode public confidence in both institutions and collective action.

Disinformation in Iraq is not only a distortion of truth; it is a distortion of possibility. It undermines the affective and imaginative infrastructure needed for political mobilization. It isolates activists, fragments solidarity, and discourages hope. While bullets and tear gas suppress protests in the streets, hashtags and smear campaigns do the same in digital space. Together, these forms of repression make the dream of democracy feel distant and dangerous.

And yet, democratic aspirations endure. They can be found in the chants of the Tishreen protests, iindependent media collectives defying political pressure, and daily acts of resistance carried out by ordinary Iraqis determined to reclaim their dignity. These are not just isolated expressions of discontent; they are evidence of a collective longing for a different political future.

However, these aspirations cannot thrive without structural support, both domestically and internationally. The European Union, in particular, has the tools, resources, and normative frameworks to play a more meaningful role in this space. But to do so, it must move beyond symbolic gestures and engage with the realities of Iraq's digital and political terrain.

Iraq's future depends not only on its ability to hold elections or form governments, but on its capacity to cultivate a shared political imagination, one based on truth, dignity, and collective agency. Disinformation threatens this imagination. It turns hope into suspicion, and activism into isolation. Countering this threat requires more than technical fixes or rhetorical commitments. It demands

69

solidarity, strategy, and sustained investment in the people who continue to resist, create, and care for the fragile possibility of democracy.

References

Al-Kaisy, A. (2021). The information environment in Iraq: Authoritarianism, manipulation and regional influence. London School of Economics and Political Science.

Al-Rawi, A. (2021). Disinformation under a networked authoritarian state: Saudi trolls' credibility attacks against Jamal Khashoggi. Open Information Science, 5(1), 140-162.

Ayeb, M., & Bonini, T. (2024). "It was very hard for me to keep doing that job": Understanding troll farm's working in the Arab world. Social Media + Society.

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics. Oxford University Press.

Bradshaw, S., et al. (2019). Country Case Studies Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation. University of Oxford.

Chouliaraki, L. (2021). The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism. Polity Press.

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism. Stanford University Press.

De Seta, G. (2017). Trolling, and other problematic social media practices. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media (pp. 390–411).

European Commission. (2021). New Agenda for the Mediterranean: A Pact for the Mediterranean. European Commission Communication.

European Commission. (2024). Decision amending the Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027 for the Asia and the Pacific region following the 2024 mid-term review of NDICI–Global Europe programming [Report]. European Commission.

European External Action Service. (2024). Digital rights and democracy in fragile states: EU strategic priorities. EEAS Policy Paper.

European Parliament. (2022). Digital Services Act and Code of Practice on Disinformation: Legislative framework for information integrity in the EU. European Parliament Briefing.

Human Rights Watch. (2019, October 10). Iraq: Lethal force used against protesters. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters

Isakhan, B. (2009). Discourses of democracy: 'Oriental despotism' and the democratisation of Iraq (Doctoral thesis, Griffith University). Griffith Research Online.

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2013). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 6(4), 353–369.

Mahairas, A., & Dvilyanski, M. (2018). Disinformation – Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya). The Cyber Defense Review, 3(3), 21–28.

Mbembe, A. (2001). On the Postcolony. University of California Press.

Pomerantsev, P. (2019, July 27). The disinformation age: A revolution in propaganda. The Guardian.

Rahimi, B. (2011). The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the Formation of Dissent and Consolidation of State Power in Postelection Iran. The Communication Review, 14(3), 158–178.

Roberts, M. E. (2018). Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall. Princeton University Press.

Roberts, S. T. (2018). Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media. Yale University Press.

Said, E. W. (1993). Culture and Imperialism. Vintage Books.

Smith, T. (2022). Strategies for Combatting Disinformation in Eastern Europe. Media and Democracy Journal, 8(1), 30–45.

Wardle, C. (2018). The Need for Smarter Definitions and Practical, Timely Empirical Research on Information Disorder. Digital Journalism, 6(8), 951–963.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe.

Watkins, J. (2020). Iran in Iraq: The limits of 'smart power' amidst public protest (LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series No. 37). London School of Economics and Political Science.

Wintour, P. (2021, June 18). Low election turnout could spell trouble for Iran regime, experts say. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/18/iran-presidential-voting-begins-with-hardline-cleric-expected-to-win

Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (Eds.). (2018). Computational propaganda: Political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media. Oxford University Press.

EU Transactionalism, Erdoğan and Competitive Authoritarianism

Martina Canesi [1]

LUISS University, EST

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between European Union (EU) transactionalism and the rise of competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). EU-Türkiye relations, initially shaped by democratic conditionality, have progressively shifted towards a transactional approach that prioritizes pragmatic interests over normative values. This shift coincides with Türkiye's democratic backsliding and the consolidation of a competitive authoritarian regime. Drawing on the framework developed by Levitsky and Way, which links a country's ties to the West and its democratization prospects, this study examines three cases: the Gezi protests in 2013, the 2016 migration deal, and the Imamoglu scandal. The findings contribute to understanding the implications of EU external action on authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Keywords

Türkiye, European Union, Authoritarianism, Transactionalism, Democracy

Introduction

In April 2017, nearly one year after the coup attempt, Turkish citizens voted in a constitutional referendum that significantly altered Türkiye's political trajectory. With a turnout of approximately 80%, the referendum approved a set of constitutional amendments replacing the parliamentary system with a presidential system. These amendments granted President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sweeping powers, dismantling many of the institutional checks and balances that had previously constrained the executive office. The legitimacy of the vote was contested, with some observers raising concerns about potential irregularities and manipulation. In the EU, the referendum was interpreted as further evidence that the post-coup measures undertaken by Ankara were part of a broader strategy to centralise authority and overhaul the state apparatus. Despite these concerns, Brussels responded with caution, issuing carefully worded statements that softly criticised Türkiye's authoritarian drift without taking concrete actions that could jeopardize relations with Ankara.

This episode captures the increasingly complex relationship between the EU and Türkiye. Once a normative actor committed to promoting democracy and human rights, the EU has increasingly prioritised strategic interests and transactional cooperation, particularly in security across all its components. This shift has coincided with the rise of a competitive authoritarian regime in Türkiye.

The EU's democratic conditionalities has become more and more ineffective in impacting Ankara's domestic developments, particularly in the area rule of law.

This paper explores the impact of EU transactionalism on the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye. Drawing on the seminal framework developed by Levitsky and Way, it argues that the EU's shift from normative conditionality has undermined its ability to exert democratic leverage. As the external costs of human rights violations and other non-democratic practices have diminished, Ankara has faced fewer incentives to refrain from democratic backsliding.

The study makes two key contributions. First, it challenges the assumption that democratic erosion in Türkiye is driven solely by domestic factors, emphasizing instead the role of external dynamics. Second, it aims to provide a basis for future research linking EU transactionalism to authoritarian consolidation in other key partners across the MENA region, such as Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, which occupy prominent positions on the EU's external agenda.

To this end, this paper is structured as follows: the first section reviews the existing literature on Türkiye's democratic backsliding. Thereafter, the second section presents the theoretical framework connecting external relations and regime type. The third outlines the methodology, which relies on process tracing and case study analysis. This is followed by an analysis of evidence collected. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications and contributions of the study.

Democracy and Authoritarianism in Türkiye

Türkiye's democratic backsliding has prompted widespread academic debate. The country's earlier trajectory of democratic progress has been reversed, giving way to populism, exclusionary policies, and increasing authoritarianism. While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise onset of autocratic tendencies, the police crackdown on the 2013 Gezi protest and Erdogan's abolition of the parliamentary system in 2017 mark turning points.

The academic literature on Türkiye's regime trajectory can be divided into two main strands: studies that examine democratic progress, and those that explore democratic backsliding (e.g., Tol, 2022; Kirişci & Sloat, 2019; Tanca, 2025). The first – less recent compared to the second – examines the drivers of democratic reforms. Scholars generally agree that these reforms were not purely normative as much as they were strategic. When the AKP came to power in 2002, Erdogan sought to disempower the secularist establishment and give a voice to the Sunni conservative constituency who had endured decades of oppression and marginalization under Kemalism (Phillips, p. 34). However, confronting the powerful military was out of the question, this is what Erdogan thought. In fact, Türkiye's tumultuous history of military influence, coups (in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997) and terrorist attacks had legitimised the military's overstretched influence in politics and complicated the country's democratic consolidation.

It was in this context that EU accession became a strategic goal for Ankara. Aligning with the Copenhagen Criteria enabled Erdogan to legitimize reforms aimed at curtailing military influence (Phillips, 2017, p. 34). A military-ruled Türkiye could never join the EU and so was an Islamist one. Consequently, the AKP recalibrated its ideological positioning to kickstart negotiations with Brussels. Notable reforms included expanding freedom of expression, easing restrictions on Kurdish broadcasting, and bringing Turkish courts under the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human

Rights. Pursuing EU accession also served as a foreign policy tool to distance Ankara from Washington, especially following the US invasion of Iraq (Phillips, 2017, p. 35).

However, EU-Türkiye relations began to lose momentum by 2004, particularly after the EU accepted the Republic of Cyprus as a member despite Greek Cypriot rejection of the UN peace process, which Erdogan had surprisingly supported. This decision, combined with European pressure on Ankara to recognise genocide and other separate disagreements, deepened Turkish public skepticism towards the EU project. Rising anti-EU sentiment also began to threaten public support for the AKP, which had anchored much of its legitimacy on the promise of EU accession.

Hence, Erdogan's commitment to democratisation began to erode, and his focus shifted towards power consolidation. What began as a democratization project increasingly transformed into a struggle for political survival and, ultimately, a project of monopolising power. Following the Ergenekon trials, which diminished the military's influence, Erdogan systematically restructured state institutions, including the judiciary, to align with AKP interests. This raises a critical question: Was the EU accession process a genuine driver of Türkiye's partial democratisation? Likewise, did the deterioration in EU-Türkiye relations directly trigger democratic backsliding? While there is no single answer, the accession process clearly played a dual role: it incentivised reform when negotiations were active, but discouraged it when momentum stalled, particularly after 2006 (Kirişci & Sloat, 2019). In this sense, EU conditionality functioned as a double-edged sword.

That said, the literature diverges on the drivers of Türkiye's authoritarian turn. Some attribute the drift to a mix of factors including power centralisation, institutional erosion, corruption and cronyism (e.g., Phillips, 2017; Demirel-Pegg & Dusso, 2022; Freedom House, 2025). However, many of these elements may be more accurately seen as manifestations of authoritarianism rather than its root causes. Erdogan's leadership style and strategic maneuvering, particularly after the failed 2016 coup attempt, are central to many analyses. The post-coup period enabled him to justify sweeping purges across state institutions. From the judiciary to the military, academia to the media, few sectors remained outside presidential control.

Many scholars focus on internal dynamics, particularly the AKP's systematic dismantling of checks and balances. The 2017 constitutional referendum, preceded by years of erosion, formalized this process. It established a judiciary controlled by a council whose members are appointed by the president and the parliament, weakening judicial independence (Karaömerlioğlu, 2022, p. 84). Thus, democratic rollback in Türkiye is partly explained by the erosion of institutional checks on executive power.

For another group of scholars, Türkiye's authoritarian turn is less contingent on recent political actors and more rooted in historical legacies of centralized governance. Drawing from theories of path dependency and authoritarian resilience, this view argues that institutional choices made in the past constrain present political possibilities (Pierson, 2000). Whether under Ottoman rule or during the Kemalist republic, Türkiye has long been governed through a highly centralized state apparatus. Under the Ottomans, political authority was concentrated in the bureaucracy and military, with little room for pluralism or power-sharing (Acemoglu, 2014). The Republican period brought modernization but retained the centralization of power.

Finally, a growing strand highlights external dynamics. Scholars such as Tol argue that Erdogan has strategically instrumentalised foreign policy to consolidate power. More importantly, the stalled negotiations removed a key incentive for reform.

Although the existing literature has profusely discussed the drivers of authoritarianism, few scholars have focused on the impact of external dynamics, particularly the potential influence of EU external policy. While there is scattered analysis linking the EU and Turkish politics, there are not, to the best of our knowledge, studies that cover the impact of transactionalism, a specific angle in EU external policy, on Turkish politics.

Transactionalism and Competitive Authoritarianism

While there is broad consensus that Türkiye has experienced democratic backsliding for at least a decade, scholars differ on how best to characterize the current regime. The binary classification of democracy versus autocracy fails to capture the complexity of regimes that operate in a 'grey zone', and Türkiye is a prime example. Various terms could be applied to describe the hybrid nature of the political regime in Ankara, including outright autocracy, semi-democracy, liberalized autocracy, and illiberal democracy (Brumberg, 2002; Zakaria, 1997). Some scholars have also used the term Erdoganism to underscore the centralisation of power and the personalized style of governance (Phillips, 2017, p. 153; Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018).

This paper adopts the framework of competitive authoritarianism, developed by Levitsky and Way, as the most suitable lens for comprehending the Turkish political regime (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016). Competitive authoritarian regimes are hybrid systems that combine formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices. Unlike full-fledged autocracies, such regimes preserve elections, multipartism and state institutions as a democratic facade. Institutions, however, are heavily skewed in favor of incumbents, who manipulate the playing field through media control, the abuse of state resources, and the harassment and prosecution. While a degree of openness is required to survive internally and externally, it is tightly constrained by tight control of the state and security apparatuses. In competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbents are adept at addressing dissent, believing that regime survival is contingent on the ability to prevent and suppress resistance in its various forms. Competitive authoritarianism is, above all, a flexible and adaptive form of rule.

Two central concepts in the work of Levitsky and Way (2010) are leverage and linkage. Leverage refers to the extent to which Western actors can exert pressure on a regime to democratize, whether through carrots (e.g., the promise of EU membership) or sticks (e.g., sanctions). Complementarily, linkage captures the density of economic, geopolitical, social, communication and transnational ties to the West. High linkage increases the cost of reputational and material cost of authoritarian practices, making democratic backsliding less attractive.

Interestingly, leverage and linkage do not always operate in tandem. A regime can be highly linked to the West but relatively immune to external pressure. This has been the case in Erdogan's Türkiye. While the country's linkage to the EU (i.e., linkage) has remained strong, the EU's leverage over domestic aspects has significantly declined, particularly starting 2011. This decline coincided with a shift in the EU's approach from normative conditionality to transactionalism. Transactionalism refers to a pragmatic engagement that reflects ad hoc commitment rather than long-term one, and that adheres to a need/interest basis (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2019). In the case of Türkiye, this shift became salient with the 2016 migration deal, where the EU prioritized the containment of refugee flows over concerns about democratic backsliding.

From this point, this paper argues that high linkage, when coupled with low leverage, is insufficient

to induce democratization or prevent democratic backsliding. In other words, EU transactionalism contributes to the persistence of competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye because EU-Türkiye relations remain close but the EU no longer exerts the extent of leverage it used to during the active phase of accession negotiations. Erdogan's Türkiye is a MENA case that illustrates how competitive authoritarian regimes can consolidate when western actors pursue a foreign policy that is overwhelmingly transactionalist and less normative. The EU's initial use of democratic conditionality, albeit being a tool with many limitations, did give impetus to democratic reforms in Türkiye, but once transactionalism took over, leverage dropped, making the EU less capable, and arguably less willing, to curb Ankara's authoritarian tendencies.

Methodology

In order to examine the impact of EU transactionalism on the persistence of competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye, this paper uses a process tracing in a within-case study. Process tracing is a qualitative method used to identify and analyze the causal mechanisms linking an independent variable (EU transactionalism) to a dependent variable (the persistence of competitive authoritarianism) through "observable empirical manifestations of theorized mechanisms" (Beach, 2017). It is a method that analyzes the trajectory of causation and makes causal inference by finding and interpreting diagnostic evidence (Collier, 2011).

The paper focuses on Türkiye for three reasons. First, the country has undergone a well-documented democratic decline. According to Freedom House, Turkiye was downgraded from 'Partly Free' to 'Not Free' in 2018, shortly after the 2017 referendum. Second, the resilience of EU-Türkiye relations no longer appears contingent on the progress of EU accession talks. Despite profound differences when it comes to the foreign policy-security nexus, EU-Türkiye relations are increasingly shaped by strategic interests, suggesting that linkage remains high or has even increased (Tastan, 2024). Third, Türkiye represents a case of competitive authoritarianism within the MENA region. We are more interested in regimes that fall in the grey zone rather than full-fledged authoritarian regimes because they are ideal for exploring how the EU transactionalism functions as far as democratic backsliding is concerned.

This research draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including European and Turkish official statements, academic works, media reports and NGO documents. We analyze five key episodes between 2013 and 2025 that reflect how transactionalism lowers EU leverage, coincides with increased linkage and lowered democratizing pressure:

- Case 1. 2013 Gezi Protests: a case of domestic unrest and excessive force that puts the EU's normativity to the test.
- Case 2. 2016 migration deal: a case that underlines Türkiye's increasing political leverage as a transit country.
- Case 3. The Imamoglu scandal: a case that illustrates Türkiye's growing contribution to European defense, particularly amid the war in Ukraine.

From the above sub-cases, we trace the following mechanism (hypotheses) to see if there is enough empirical evidence to support it:

- H1. The EU increasingly prioritises strategic interests over normative values;

- H2. (As a result), EU leverage declines while linkage remains high
- H3. Ankara realises the EU's declining leverage
- H4. Ankara consolidates competitive authoritarianism

That said, this study does not go without limitations. The most significant limitation, common to the case study approach, is generalisability. While the findings may help understand similar cases within the MENA region, especially competitive regimes that also share high linkage with Brussels and individual EU member states, such generalisations must be carried out with caution. Indeed, the primary goal of this research is to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on EU principled pragmatism and authoritarian consolidation, potentially paving the road for future solid research on cases such as Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia.

Analysis and Findings

Case 1: Gezi Park Protests

In May 2013, Türkiye witnessed one of the most marking episodes of social resistance in its modern history. On the European side of Istanbul, in the Beyoğlu district, a group of protesters gather at Gezi park to prevent the government's planned demolition to build a shopping mall. The government took an uncompromising stance. To disperse the massive crowds who had set up tents in the park, the police used excessive force, including tear gas, plastic bullets, and water cannons (Özmen, 2013). What started as an 'environmentalist' sit-in rapidly escalated into a nationwide protest movement addressing power breaches and calling for the rule of law.

The Gezi protests are significant in EU-Türkiye for two main reasons. First, they revived the debate about Ankara's human rights record. Despite earlier reforms to comply with the Copenhagen criteria, the EU has long been wary of Ankara's commitment to democracy. When police brutality broke out, several senior EU diplomats urged the Turkish government to show restraint and to respect freedoms. This situation deepens normative distance between Ankara and Brussels, which raises the assumption that the EU would prioritize normative considerations over pragmatic ones in guiding its relations, particularly when it comes to accession negotiations (Saatçioğlu, 2018). The second reason is that the Gezi events were met with what seemed to be utter disregard from the Turkish government. It seemed that the government no longer placed much value on democratization, the accession process, and EU institutions altogether. This, alone, suggests that EU leverage was weak.

The aftermath of Gezi offers compelling evidence for the EU's declining leverage over Turkish political structures (H2) and Ankara's realization of that (H3). Four indicators:

- Indicator 1: Instead of acknowledging the reality of police excesses when it comes to protests, then-prime minister Erdogan opted for bellicose rhetoric against the protesters. He used labels like vandals and looters to describe them despite the fact that the Turkish constitution guarantees freedom of assembly (Harding, 2013).
- Indicator 2: Ankara used an escalatory rhetoric against EU member states, accusing them of hypocrisy and double standards. Erdogan relies on allegations, foreign conspiracy theories and hypothetical fallacies to deflect criticism and normalize police brutality (e.g., foreign interest groups orchestrated Gezi) (David Côrte-Real Pinto, 2017)

- Indicator 3: Erdogan dismissed the European parliament's resolution of June 2013 (2013/2664(RSP)), framing it as an attempt to interfere in Türkiye's sovereignty (European Parliament, 2013).
- Indicator 4: Türkiye failed to comply with the Kavala v. Türkiye judgment issued by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The Turkish government accused philanthropist Osman Kavala of orchestrating the Gezi protests despite substantial evidence indicating that the protests did not have a leader and that civil society was the principal force that operationalized the movement (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Esen, 2023).

However, if EU leverage was in decline, the same does not apply to linkage. By supporting Turkish CSOs, the EU managed to maintain a high linkage. Turkish civil society is perceived as a democratizing vehicle because it constrains, in one way or another, the power of the state (David & Côrte-Real Pinto, 2017). Put differently, CSOs in candidate countries like Türkiye play a watchdog role in the sense that they are delegated with the responsibility of monitoring government abuses and lack of commitment to the Copenhagen criteria (Bal, 2022). In this essence, the EU financially supported Turkish civil society through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA I, IPA II, IPA III) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). IPA programmes involve the Turkish government and they aim to boost the capacity of CSOs and encourage reform. This means that the EU Delegation in Turkey and the Turkish government decide the fund allocation. Contrarily, EIDHR is more focused on right-based organizations, and in this sense, it maintains independence vis-à-vis government involvement.

Although EU support for CSOs does not go without shortcomings, linked mainly to grassroot support and impact, the EU has remained by far the <u>first external donor</u> despite ups and downs in EU–Türkiye relations.

Case 2: The EU-Turkey Migration Deal

The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, signed in March 2016, exemplifies the EU's growing prioritization of strategic interests over normative commitments (H1). While originally framed as a cooperative response to an acute migration crisis, the agreement marked a turning point in EU-Turkey relations. In exchange for Turkey's commitment to curb irregular migration and accept returns from Greece, the EU pledged €6 billion in aid, eased visa requirements, promised to resettle Syrian refugees, and agreed to revive stalled accession-related discussions and customs union updates. As the EU increasingly relied on Turkey for external migration management, its leverage in promoting democratic reform waned (H2), while functional linkage through aid, trade, and cooperation remained high. The transactional nature of the deal sent a political signal that authoritarian practices within Turkey would not be a barrier to cooperation (H3). Indeed, Ankara interpreted this accommodation as a green light to further consolidate its competitive authoritarian regime, as seen in the subsequent erosion of the rule of law and continued democratic backsliding (H4).

Although the agreement had a concrete impact on migration management, it is now one of the most obvious symbols of the transactional approach adopted by the EU towards Turkey, in which strategic interests – border security and migration control – have clearly prevailed over the promotion of democratic values and respect for human rights. The 2016 agreement was not only a technical tool for border management, but also a clear political message: the EU was willing to tolerate the erosion of the rule of law in exchange for strategic cooperation.

The spring 2020 border crisis further reinforced these dynamics. When Turkey temporarily opened its borders and threatened to send thousands of migrants toward the EU, Brussels responded with caution and appeasement, further exposing its dependency on Ankara. This episode highlighted the EU's reduced capacity to influence Turkish domestic politics and revealed the structural asymmetry of the relationship. Turkey, hosting millions of refugees, emerged not just as a partner, but as a regional power capable of instrumentalizing migration for strategic ends. As such, the 2016 agreement stands as a critical case in understanding how normative retreat undermines EU leverage and enables authoritarian entrenchment.

Case 3: The Arrest of Istanbul Mayor Imamoglu

The imprisonment of Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu revived the debate on the EU's prioritization of strategic interests over normative values. In March 2025, Erdogan's political rival was charged with diploma falsification, corruption and alleged links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Journalists, civil servants and civil society representatives were also arrested. Despite the potential validity of some of the accusations, Imamoglu's trial was perceived by many, including the CHP and its supporters, as a carefully orchestrated attempt by Erdogan to clear away the political scene. Indeed, Imamoglu was amassing massive support, and his victory in the municipal elections of 2024 showed Erdogan that the CHP will be a strong opponent in the presidential elections of 2028. Türkiye witnessed the largest protests since Gezi. In Brussels, the events happening in Türkiye did not go unnoticed. It voiced its concern about Ankara's democratic decline.

The imamoglu case is important as far as EU transactionalism is concerned for two reasons. First, it coincides with the war in Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye, member of NATO and the European Council, chose a balanced approach between Russia and Ukraine. Second, it highlighted the discrepancy between the European Parliament and the European Commission in terms of values and commitments.

This case offers compelling evidence on the EU's increasing prioritization of strategic interests over normative values (H1) and

- Indicator 1: The European Parliament (EP) has issued direct condemnation statements towards Türkiye, contrary to the EU Commission, which took a cautious stance. For example, EP vice-president Katarina Barley paid a visit to Imamoglu to show the institution's support. Contrarily, the EU Commission used expressions like "[Türkiye is] expected to apply the highest democratic standards and practices" (European Commission, 2025c).
- Indicator 2: Following the Imamoglu scandal, the Commission hosted the EU–Türkiye High–Level Economic Dialogue. Turkish Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek met with EU officials in Brussels, including Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos (European Commission, 2025a).
- Indicator 3: Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan participated in the so–called Gymnich, an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers. The previous year, the diplomat had also received an invitation from the EU to attend the meeting, after a five–year pause. This timing shows that amid the volatile security climate in the EU neighborhood, Türkiye is increasingly perceived as a strategic ally (Aslan, 2024).
- Indicator 4: Commissioner Kos, which had fiercely criticized Türkiye following the Imamoglu scandal, canceled a visit to the Antalya Forum in Türkiye to meet with Fidan. However, the EU diplomat visited Türkiye in July 2025 to discuss various topics, including visa liberalization and the Cyprus issue (European Commission, 2025b).
- Indicator 5: The Turkish Permanent Delegation to the EU blasted EU criticism of the Imamoglu trial, describing it as an attempt to shift attention to the EU's internal problems. In a statement,

- EU ambassador Faruk Kaymakcı accused EP of being a platform of "irrational" and "tactless" claims, and the meetings of being a platform of "extremist and racist factions." On Kos' canceled visit, the delegation said the decision was politically-motivated (Berker, 2025).
- Indicator 6: EU Commission spokesperson Markus Lammert stated the need for the EU to readjust its engagement with Türkiye while "keeping open channels to discuss topics of mutual interest" because Türkiye remains a strategic partner (Daily Sabah, 2025).

The indicators listed above reveal two realities. First, there is a discrepancy between the Commission and the Parliament. Whereas the first adopted a human rights narrative, calling on Türkiye to reverse the trend of democratic backsliding, the second is more diplomatic, nuanced and mirrors member states' consensus. On a side note, the EU is not so concerned on the Imamoglu trial per se (because he could be guilty of the charges or at least some of them) as much as it is concerned about Erdogan's maneuvers to eliminate political rivals and recalibrate the country's democratic institutions. While this is a feature rather than a flaw, it tends to affect EU credibility. It seems that human rights and rule of law are important, but not to the point of overriding strategic interests. This shows that that is a reversing or change in the leverage aspect in EU-Turkish relations. The linkage is high, but it is Ankara that holds most of the leverage; which makes the EU condemn any blatant and egregious rights excesses but without moving past condemning speeches or statements.

Second, Türkiye's criticism also showcases this trend. Ankara is well aware of its strategic positioning vis-à-vis the EU, which translates into leverage. Borrowing Erdogan's words, "European security without Turkey is unthinkable." This statement shows confidence, but it is not completely dissociated from reality. When it comes to regional security cooperation, Türkiye knows its importance amid Europe's volatile security landscape. As much as the EU strives to become self-reliant when it comes to defense, Türkiye, NATO member with a growing defense industry, proves to be a solid partner. When it comes to Ukraine, Türkiye played a considerable role by supplying drones. Türkiye provides reliable, lethal and relatively cheap drone technology. It has also been engaged in various defense partnerships, including with Italy's Leonardo.

Conclusion

The EU is stuck between two seemingly irreconcilable demands: so-called EU values of democracy, freedom and rule of law, and strategic interests. In an increasingly complex and volatile neighborhood, the EU can no longer be the normative actor it had aspired to be. This paper has explored the relationship between EU transactionalism and the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye under the AKP, offering a novel contribution to the literature on external influences in regime change and resilience. By applying Levitsky and Way's framework of leverage and linkage, the study has demonstrated that the EU's increasing reliance on transactional engagement has critically weakened its ability to influence domestic developments in Türkiye. The case studies of the Gezi protests, the 2016 migration deal, and the Imamoglu scandal provide empirical evidence that, while linkage between Türkiye and the EU remains high, leverage has markedly declined. This asymmetry has allowed Ankara not only to resist external pressure for democratization but also to consolidate an increasingly authoritarian regime under a competitive authoritarian guise.

The findings challenge the prevailing view that Türkiye's democratic erosion is primarily a result of domestic factors, emphasizing instead the complicity, albeit unintentional, of the EU's foreign policy

shift in facilitating authoritarian entrenchment. The EU's conditionality, once a powerful democratizing tool, has been eroded by a foreign policy guided more by pragmatism than principle. In doing so, the EU has inadvertently signaled that authoritarian behavior is tolerable so long as cooperation on key issues like migration and security is maintained.

While Türkiye remains a unique case in many respects, the implications of this analysis extend beyond its borders. The EU's approach to Türkiye may well serve as a cautionary tale for its relations with other competitive regimes in the MENA region, such as Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia. If normative values continue to be subordinated to transactional imperatives, the EU risks undermining both its credibility and its long-standing identity as a normative power. Future research should therefore further investigate how the EU's shifting external strategy impacts authoritarian resilience in other strategic partner countries—and, more broadly, whether principled pragmatism is a sustainable foreign policy model in the context of rising authoritarianism globally.

References

Acemoglu, D. (2014, May 22). The failed autocrat: Despite Erdoğan's ruthlessness, Turkey's democracy is still on track. Foreign Affairs. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-05-22/failed-autocrat

Aslan, D. (2024, August 30). Türkiye and Gymnich: Too hard to ignore. Daily Sabah. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/turkiye-and-gymnich-too-hard-to-ignore

Bal, S. (2022). EU financial assistance to civil society in Turkey: Shrinking the political space in the post-Gezi process? Alternatif Politika, 14(3), 486–518. https://doi.org/10.53376/ap.2022.17

Bashirov, G., & Yilmaz, I. (2019). The rise of transactionalism in international relations: evidence from Turkey's relations with the European Union. Australian Journal of International Affairs, 74(2), 165–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495

Beach, D. (2017, January 25). Process tracing methods in the social sciences. In W. R. Thompson (Ed.), Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics: Qualitative Political Methodology. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.176

Beken Saatçioğlu. (2018). Turkey's EU membership process in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. In Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the seeds of a new Turkey at Gezi (Chapter 15). Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048526390-018

Berker, M. (2025, April 3). Türkiye warns EU against interfering with its judicial independence. Anadolu Agency. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-warns-eu-against-interfering-with-its-judicial-independence/3527721

Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. PS: Political Science & Politics, 44(4), 823–830. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429

Daily Sabah. (2025, April 4). Türkiye warns EU of double standard, interference in judiciary. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-warns-eu-of-double-standard-interference-in-judiciary

David, I., & Côrte-Real Pinto, G. A. (2017). The Gezi Protests and the Europeanization of the Turkish public sphere. Journal of Civil Society, 13(3), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2017.1359887

Demirel-Pegg, T., & Dusso, A. (2022). Partisanship versus democracy: Voting in Turkey's competitive authoritarian elections. Political Studies Review, 20(4), 648–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299211030446

Esen, B. (2023, July 12). What does the Gezi trial tell us about Erdoğan's regime in Turkey? Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/what-does-the-gezi-trial-tell-us-about-erdogans-regime-in-turkey

Esen, B., & Gümüşçü, S. (2016). Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. Third World Quarterly, 37(9), 1581–1606. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732

European Commission. (2025a, April 3). The Commission hosts EU-Türkiye High-Level Economic Dialogue. Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. References

European Commission. (2025b, July 28).Joint Statement by Turkish Foreign Minister H.E. Hakan Fidan and EU Commissioner for Enlargement H.E. Marta Kos Following their Meeting in Istanbul. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1924

European Commission. (2025c, March 19). Joint statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kallas and Commissioner Kos on the recent events concerning Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_2515

European Parliament. (2013, June 13). Situation in Turkey (Resolution 2013/2664(RSP)). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2013-0277_EN.html

Freedom House. (2025, February 26). Turkey: Freedom in the World 2025 country report. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2025

Harding, L. (2013, June 7). Erdoğan accuses EU members of hypocrisy over Turkey protests. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/07/erdogan-accuses-eu-hypocrisy-turkey-protest

Human Rights Watch. (2022, July 12). Landmark judgment against Turkey for ignoring European ruling. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/12/landmark-judgment-against-turkey-ignoring-european-ruling

Karaömerlioğlu, M. A. (2022). Populism in Turkey: From a political style to a model for global politics. In J. Jongerden (Ed.), The Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Turkey (pp. 75-89). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429264030

Kirişci, K., & Sloat, A. (2019, February). The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-and-fall-of-liberal-democracy-in-turkey-implications-for-the-west/

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Özmen, E. (2018, May 28). Reflecting on Turkey's Gezi Park protests, five years on. Magnum Photos. https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/politics/emin-ozmen-turkey-gezi-park-protests-5-year-anniversary/

Phillips, D. L. (2017). An uncertain ally: Turkey under Erdoğan's dictatorship. New York: Routledge. Pierson, P. (2000). Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. The American Political Science Review, 94(2), 251-267. https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011

Tanca, D. E. (2025). Global politics and Turkey's democratic backsliding. Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2494377

Tastan, K. (2024). EU-Turkey economic relations in the era of geo-economic fragmentation (SWP Comment No. 40/2024). Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. https://doi.org/10.18449/2024C40

Tol, G. (2022). Erdoğan's war: A strongman's struggle at home and in Syria. Oxford University Press.

Yilmaz, I., & Bashirov, G. (2018). The AKP after 15 years: emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey. Third World Quarterly, 39(9), 1812–1830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447371

Bridging Sectors, Connecting Regions, and Building Democracy: Youth in Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation [1]

Valentina Gruarin[2]

University of Catania, EST

Abstract

This paper explores the potential role of young people from the Euro-Mediterranean region in actively supporting long-term regional stability through knowledge exchange and cross-sectoral dialogue. Despite youth constituting a significant part of the population living across the Mediterranean – i.e. Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East – their needs and perspectives are often overlooked when designing policies. While existing literature addresses cultural exchanges and mobility across the region, it tends to focus on short-term macroeconomic impacts rather than the broader contributions youth could bring to long-term regional cohesion and stability. Shifting the focus from traditional macro-level, state-centric policies to a micro-level, long-term perspective, this research demonstrates the transformative potential of young individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs). The research employs a mixed-methods approach, with data collected through both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Participants include youth under 40 – students, researchers, young professionals, as well as those engaged with research institutes, consulting firms, and grassroots organisations across the EU and MENA region. Drawing on neo-functionalist and transnationalist theories, the study examines the current role of young people in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation system.The collected data demonstrates that youth – despite perceiving several barriers to engagement – are willing to proactively participate in regional cooperation and that cross-sectoral dialogue can serve as an effective mechanism to foster stability at a regional level. The study offers both theoretical contributions to international relations theories and practical recommendations to position young people as key agents of positive change in the Mediterranean regional scenario.

Keywords

Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, Youth, Democracy, Intercultural Dialogues

Introduction

As the Mediterranean youth population grows – whether residing permanently or transiting through the region – their engagement in policies and programmes is slowly gaining recognition. However, political prioritization by the EU and national institutions concerning youth involvement in regional cooperation remains insufficient. States of the region tend to adopt short-term responses to phenomena, such as regional migration and socio-economic crises, adopting bilateral and intergovernmental policy tools and often overlooking individuals and micro-level structures as agents of change. Moreover, the EU has also supported state-centric approaches focused on intergovernmental border control and macro-economic strategies, employing the Memorandum of Understanding as one of the main tools for strengthening relationships between states. These instruments have frequently failed to address the deeper socio-political and cultural complexities of the region. The current context requires a shift toward grassroots strategies, particularly involving young people, who represent both the present and future of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Although some EU institutions increasingly recognize – on paper – youth as potential agents of change, policy implementation often relegates them to the role of beneficiaries rather than active contributors. CSOs, educational institutions, and non-state actors' networks have tried to bridge this gap by actively supporting regional dialogue, and intercultural and knowledge exchange. However, these initiatives remain fragmented and underfunded, hindering young people's willingness to play a proactive role in regional cooperation. Furthermore, academic literature on youth participation in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation remains limited, often concerning isolated studies on migration or education, while lacking an overall perspective on the interconnected challenges and opportunities youth face.

This study aims to address these gaps in both literature and policy implementation by placing young people as potential key actors in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation process. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, the paper identifies key academic and political gaps. While the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) acknowledge the need for increased youth participation in institutional documents, they often tend to overlook the role of education, knowledge and cultural diplomacy in empowering youth as key drivers of progress when designing regional policies. Moreover, current studies rarely explore whether and how youth groups – including students, researchers, and young professionals – interact with each other across sectors to create pathways for meaningful engagement. The research was guided by several key questions: How do young people perceive the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework, and what are their interests? What challenges are youth facing in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Does multi-sectoral dialogue among youth enhance Euro-Mediterranean cooperation? By addressing these questions, the study aimed to challenge the prevailing notion of youth as passive recipients of top-down policies and instead highlighted their role as active agents of regional change.

Throughout the research, a mixed-methods approach was employed via the analysis of EU institutional documents coupled with semi-structured online questionnaires administered to a total of 86 young workers, researchers, and students under 40. People surveyed were affiliated with universities, research institutes, consulting firms, non-governmental organizations, and CSOs engaged in Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation. Respondents were asked about their role in Mediterranean affairs, their perceptions on the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and possible opportunities for them to actively participate in it. This approach has allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the interactions between institutional actors and youth at both macro and micro levels.

The study was further anchored in transnationalist and neo-functionalist theories of international relations, which provided a robust academic framework for examining the circulations, interactions, cultural and knowledge exchanges influencing regional dynamics. By mapping these interactions, the research identified actionable strategies and policy recommendations for renewing regional cooperation through multi-level approaches which take into account micro-structures and young individuals as proactive subjects. Finally, the study advocates for an evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation system to incorporate more structured support for youth-driven and youth-oriented initiatives, including educational and knowledge exchanges, skill-sharing, and cross-border cultural and professional projects.

Policy Documents and Literature Review

The Role of Youth and Migrants in ENP, EU and UfM Policies

In 1998, as part of the third chapter of the Barcelona Process – "partnership in social, cultural, and human affairs" – the Euro-Med Youth Programme was established, aiming to encourage lasting dialogue among young people across the Euro-Mediterranean region (European Parliament 2003). However, the programme's initiatives were short-lived, coming to an end before the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. A subsequent effort, NET-MED (2014-2018), was funded by the EU's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR) to improve youth's access to education, employment, and participation in national planning across Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (European Commission 2017). The programme was managed by external bodies such as the Anna Lindh Foundation and, after its conclusion, it was not renewed. In practice, NET-MED functioned less as a bridge between European and MENA youth and more as a policy instrument aimed at increasing youth engagement within national contexts in the MENA region. The 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) placed a stronger emphasis on Mediterranean young people, identifying youth unemployment in neighbouring countries as a critical issue and calling for "partnerships for youth" as essential tools for strengthening ties between young Europeans and their counterparts in partner countries. This involved encouraging people-to-people exchanges – especially through schools and universities – to improve understanding and cooperation across the Euro-Mediterranean region (European Commission 2015, p. 21). Migration was also a prominent theme in the document, though it was mostly framed in terms of border security. Still, the review made a modest attempt to recognise migration as a broader human security[1] issue and suggested a need to look at its root causes. This hinted at a possible shift towards policies that could, eventually, support more legal mobility (European Commission 2015, p. 15).

The 2021 Joint Communication on a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood echoed many of the earlier sentiments, at least on paper. It again highlighted youth as key players in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation (European Commission 2021, p. 3). The document continued to advocate for improved legal migration pathways and greater socio-economic opportunities in the region. Despite these stated ambitions, the EU's actions on youth mobility and migration have, over the past decade, largely leaned toward border security measures, often taking the form of bilateral agreements, such as the EU's Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, backed by Italy and the Netherlands (European Commission 2023). These agreements have largely prioritized border management and the containment of migration flows through externalisation policies over fostering legal channels of mobility for students, young researchers, and professionals across the region. Moreover, both the 2015 and 2021 policy documents do not adequately address the need to link

migration with youth policies within the ENP and the broader Euro-Mediterranean partnership framework. Given that a significant proportion of youth living or crossing the Mediterranean are under 40, including many minors, EU policies should place greater emphasis on ensuring their access to formal and non-formal education, and knowledge and skills exchanges. Prioritizing engagement opportunities for these young individuals would not only align with the EU's human rights commitments but also contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive approach to migration, focused on freedom of movement and interactions, emphasising the youth's potential to shape the region's socio-economic and political future.

More recently, the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 addresses inclusive education and training for young migrants, aiming to enhance their employment prospects and facilitate skills recognition (European Commission, 2020). While the EU positions itself as a donor and advocate for these initiatives, the responsibility for migrant assistance and inclusion ultimately falls on individual member states, leading to policy fragmentation. This is evident in recent Memoranda of Understanding with Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon, which prioritize national interests over a unified EU migration strategy. Moreover, Action Plans serve primarily as soft power tools rather than legally binding commitments, allowing states to implement them selectively or disregard them altogether.

 In the absence of a dedicated EU framework for youth-focused policies, much of this responsibility has shifted to the UfM, which introduced the Youth Strategy 2030 (UfM, 2021). Despite its ambitious goal of positioning youth as key actors in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, this strategy functions more as a general framework than a concrete, enforceable policy. Given the intergovernmental nature of the UfM, implementation is left to individual member states and non-state actors, who have the responsibility of implementing related projects. This delegation of responsibility further reflects the EU's limited direct engagement in youth-related challenges in the region. As a result, CSOs and NGOs play a central role in managing youth engagement and supporting migrants, often serving as the primary facilitators of connections between young people across the Euro-Mediterranean area. While these organizations, such as the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), frequently receive EU funding, they operate independently, with little strategic coordination or direct involvement from EU institutions, further highlighting the fragmented approach to youth and migration policies in the region (Gruarin, 2024). The following section will examine the existing literature on the role of non-state actors within the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework, particularly those engaged in cultural diplomacy, education, socio-economic collaboration, and migrant reception.

Non-State Actors and Youth through Neo-functionalism and Transnationalism

EU's institutional documents consistently emphasize the potential of youth as agents of change. However, practical political actions often prioritize reinforcing the power of national governments or influential non-state actors, focusing on issues like military security or macroeconomic stability to maintain the current global order. In this context, non-state actors serve as intermediaries between the EU and youth groups across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Through primarily EU funding, these actors implement projects that address a diverse range of challenges that   Euro-Mediterranean youth are facing. Unemployment, socio-economic uncertainty, energy, food and climate insecurity, as well as issues related to migration and integration, are just some of the pressing concerns these youth groups face. In this context, the role of non-state actors in engaging youth amid regional instability is essential; understanding their behaviours is especially important in the fluid and unstab-

–le geopolitical landscape of the Euro-Mediterranean space. This analysis is grounded in the transnationalist approach to international relations, primarily informed by the work of James Rosenau, Joseph Nye, and John Burton. Burton conceptualizes the global system as a "cobweb" of relationships among numerous actors engaged in transnational interactions, making the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs increasingly blurred (Burton, 1972). Building on Burton's perspective, I argue that analysing interactions at a regional level – in this case, within the Euro-Mediterranean context – helps to clarify complex interdependencies. Rosenau further explores how micro- and macro-level units within the global system interact, distinguishing between "accidental" and "deliberate" aggregations (Rosenau, 1979, pp. 219-252). Accidental aggregations refer to local events that gradually impact the macro level, often taking time to be acknowledged on the global political agenda (Rosenau, 1979, p. 225). Migration in the Mediterranean region exemplifies this dynamic: what starts as an issue at the micro level (the individual) escalates into a macro-level challenge, prompting spontaneous responses before it gains political priority. Deliberate aggregations, on the other hand, involve micro-level organized actions intended to influence macro-level structures (Rosenau, 1979, p. 226). In the Euro-Mediterranean context, this can be seen in the actions of non-state actors and their networks who rally youth groups to shape regional cooperation with the goal of enhancing youth inclusion. Building on Rosenau's perspective, Joseph Nye further examined how transnational networks impact global power structures, particularly through soft power mechanisms such as cultural diplomacy and cooperative initiatives (Nye, 2004). The influence of non-state actors in engaging Mediterranean youth extends across multiple policy domains (from climate change, migration, to intercultural relations) potentially generating spillover effects – i.e. "a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create a further condition and a need for more, and so forth" (Lindberg, 1963) – that align with neo-functionalist concepts of regional integration. Neo-functionalism is particularly relevant to this study as it examines how political integration in certain world regions can emerge from incremental engagements, often beginning with economic cooperation (Haas, 1964). Although neo-functionalist theories have been increasingly challenged – particularly for their inability to fully explain why deeper political integration within the EU, and by extension, the Euro-Mediterranean region, has not materialized – this research reassesses their applicability. In this context, non-state actors and collaborative networks can significantly influence the EU's engagement with Mediterranean partners, shaping cooperative policies within the region. They, indeed, play a crucial role in bridging EU institutions with local Mediterranean societies. However, the EU's approach to engaging with non-state actors in the Mediterranean can be considered both selective and strategic (Del Sarto, 2020). The EU often prioritises support for actors aligned with its own policy objectives and values. This selective support can create hierarchies within local civil society, where EU-backed groups gain legitimacy and resources. However, the organisations that do not adhere to EU protocols (e.g. human rights protection) are marginalised from Western institutions, resulting in not receiving or refusing Europe's fundings.

Moreover, youth policies are frequently delegated by the EU to non-state actors for both formulation and implementation. However, their adoption serves as a political tool: European governments aim to integrate youth into market economies as required by capital demands, while MENA states may utilise these policies as a means of controlling and legitimising their governance over young people (Murphy & Sika, 2021). On the one hand, the EU recognizes the importance of non-state actors in this sphere, providing funding and opportunities for youth organisations in the Euro-Mediterranean region to pursue grassroots, bottom-up initiatives. On the other hand, due to a lack of core interest, the EU remains an inactive participant in the process of genuine youth empowerment.

In the Euro-Mediterranean region, the role of youth is often overlooked, despite their expertise and involvement in technology-driven communication – a powerful tool for forging   connections today. Before migrating, young people often form their perceptions of Europe through online media, where internet access provides a virtual bridge to European culture and society. Many students, researchers, and professionals participate in Euro-Mediterranean interactions through virtual courses, think tanks, and interactive platforms, often establishing connections long before meeting in person. As technology increasingly becomes the primary medium for cross-border engagement, it raises a critical question: why does the EU remain reluctant to concretely recognize young people as key agents of change within its policy framework? Lamonica (2023) highlights the need for a deeper analysis of how young Mediterranean perspectives influence EU policies, particularly in the fields of technology and artificial intelligence. Moreover, further studies and proposed concrete measures to leverage technology for youth engagement would not only strengthen their participation in regional cooperation but also expand opportunities for mobility – facilitating a transition from virtual interactions to greater physical exchanges across the Mediterranean.

This institutional hesitation towards youth engagement in policy design becomes even more critical when considering the broader context of migration, especially regular, where young migrants – in particular unaccompanied minors – arrive in Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and France without formal and non-formal education. These young people often face barriers to schooling and social inclusion, yet contribute significantly to local economies, as shown in studies by researchers like Cangiano and Strozza (2018) and Alpes and Spaan (2018). Their research highlights young migrants' economic contributions, particularly in agriculture and caregiving, while also noting the importance of mental health support and educational resources for their social inclusion. However, existing literature could further explore the long-term contributions of youth mobility across the Mediterranean and the crucial role of both formal and non-formal education in fostering migrant youth inclusion within regional cooperation processes.

The EU and the UfM have taken steps to study, through external consultancy, Mediterranean youth more broadly. For instance, the Youth on the Move report by the European Commission (2020) explores both the challenges and economic contributions of young migrants in Europe, reinforcing the demographic impact they bring to host societies. Additionally, the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC, 2024) policy study, "Youth Involvement in Social and Civil Dialogue in the Mediterranean Region", calls for stronger support mechanisms to enhance young people's participation and inclusion into unions and policymaking regional processes. Although these studies may signify an initial recognition of the issue, a comprehensive and strategic approach to youth within the European Union's policies towards the MENA region remains absent in institutional documents and research.

Literature Gap

Despite extensive attention on Euro-Mediterranean relations and youth dynamics, several critical gaps are not yet sufficiently explored in scholarly literature and in political action. Firstly, there is a lack of a long-term focus on youth empowerment. Although institutional documents and policy discussions frequently emphasize the potential of youth as change agents, much of the research does not explore sustainable frameworks for genuine youth empowerment in the Euro-Mediterranean region, often overlooking the implications of youth engagement beyond short-term socio-economic and political stability. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive analyses that consider how youth empowerment can contribute to enduring regional stability and

inclusive growth within the Euro-Mediterranean landscape.

Secondly, there is limited research examining the connections among different youth categories in the Mediterranean – such as young social workers, irregular migrants, students, and researchers. Studies often examine these groups in isolation, failing to capture the shared challenges and overlapping experiences that shape their roles as potential agents of change. Investigating these intersections would provide a more nuanced understanding of how diverse youth groups across the Mediterranean contribute to regional cooperation, cultural diplomacy, social and civil dialogue. Moreover, the importance of schooling and formal and non-formal education for both legal and irregular migrants across the Mediterranean has not been sufficiently prioritized in academic literature. Formal education is a foundational element for long-term youth engagement and social cohesion, yet many studies focus primarily on economic contributions of migrants without considering educational access or skill acquisition as central factors. An increased focus on formal and informal education would provide insight into how these factors impact youth's socio-economic mobility, mental health, and ability to integrate into host societies.

Finally, while the role of non-state actors and youth in shaping youth policies is acknowledged, there is limited research exploring how they engage in both accidental and deliberate aggregations to enhance cultural diplomacy and support educational initiatives for youth across the Mediterranean. This particular literature gap has been addressed in the full FEMISE paper through three focus groups (Gruarin, 2025). Non-state actors often act as intermediaries between EU institutions and local communities, but their capacity to influence Euro-Mediterranean cooperation policies through cultural and educational projects has been underexplored. Further analysis is required to understand how non-state actors contribute to youth empowerment and the broader Euro-Mediterranean cooperation agenda, particularly by leveraging soft power strategies and fostering cross-border dialogue.

Addressing these gaps would deepen our understanding of youth's potential role in shaping the Euro-Mediterranean future, as well as the importance of education and the strategic involvement of non-state actors in promoting sustainable, youth-centered policy initiatives. The further explanation of these gaps and how they have all been addressed can be found in the full FEMISE paper (Gruarin, 2025).

Research Design and Data Analysis Methods

Building on identified gaps in both the literature and in policy formulation and implementation, this study examines the roles and potential of various categories of youth living in or passing through the Mediterranean. The central research questions guiding this research are the following: How do young people perceive the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation system, and what are their interests in enhancing it? What challenges are youth facing in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Can multi-sectoral dialogue among youth strengthen Euro-Mediterranean cooperation? This study proposes that Mediterranean youth can be collectively examined through a transnationalist perspective, focusing on their interactions. Furthermore, enhancing dialogues among these actors may improve support for formal and non-formal education, employment, and cultural diplomacy. Finally, it has been measured how, through spill-over effects, youth empowerment has the potential to significantly enhance socio-economic and political cooperation across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

This study has adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative analyses to achieve a comprehensive understanding of youth involvement in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation system. Firstly, document analysis has been conducted through a systematic review of EU policy documents, reports, and academic literature related to youth within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and EU migration policies. Examining the relationship between EU institutions, their   policies, and youth has allowed this paper to identify power dynamics and patterns of influence, employing theoretical frameworks such as transnationalism and neo-functionalism to explore the complex "cobweb" of interactions across the Mediterranean. The following categories of young individuals have been mapped for this study: workers under 40 (including social workers and business workers), researchers under 40, whether self-employed or employed by an institution, and students under 30 enrolled in undergraduate or master's programmes. Several non-state actors have also been mapped, each with distinct roles in supporting or engaging with these youth categories. Concerning students and researchers, the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) promotes student mobility and intercultural dialogue through EU-funded projects, while research institutes and their networks, such as IEMed's EuroMeSCo, focus on fostering Euro-Mediterranean cooperation through events, initiatives and calls for papers aiming to enhance knowledge exchange and occasions to engage in discussion. Intergovernmental organisations such as the Anna Lindh Foundation, The FAO's Mediterranean Youth Task Force, with both governments and civil society involved, also favour the interactions between institutions and youth groups. Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations such as EuroMed Rights, the Mediterranean Youth Council (MYC), the Moroccan Youth Council for Diplomatic and International Cooperation (MYCDIC), the Euro-Med Youth Federation, are centred on empowering youth in the Mediterranean region from the grassroot level. Business associations, including the Euro-Med Economists Association and the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Business Development (EMCBD), support young entrepreneurs through networking and training opportunities.

The data collection process involved semi-structured online questionnaires, firstly distributed to some selected non-state actors, such as the UNIMED or EuroMeSCo, who facilitated their completion by young individuals from designated categories. To expand the respondent pool across the Euro-Mediterranean region, the author employed LinkedIn to engage with young professionals, researchers, and students involved in Mediterranean politics, society, and environmental issues. A total of 86 individuals under the age of 40 participated in the survey, comprising 44 professionals, 28 researchers, and 14 students. This analysis has visualized interactions among youth groups, illuminating opportunities for enhanced support in areas like formal and non-formal education, cultural diplomacy, and cooperation. Throughout the research, ethical integrity has been fundamental – with a strong emphasis on respecting the diverse social, cultural, and legal frameworks across the Mediterranean. There was no imposition of external values, and the study explicitly rejects Eurocentrism. Rather than aiming to export European ideals, the research has engaged with youth on their own terms, valuing their unique perspectives without positioning any single system or cultural framework as superior. This approach has aimed to foster an inclusive dialogue, allowing Mediterranean youth to share their perspectives freely, without the influence of external biases or assumptions about the "right" way to approach regional challenges.

To explore how technological tools facilitate cross-Mediterranean interactions, particularly among youth, data collection has been conducted entirely online. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire combining closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions, resembling an online written interview, for the qualitative dimension. The closed-ended questions, tailored for each group, collected data on nationality, age, formal education,

professional background, and personal interests related to Mediterranean challenges. Except for age and nationality, most questions allowed multiple-choice responses, enabling participants to express themselves more freely regarding their work, research, studies, and perceptions of Mediterranean politics and society. This stage aimed to establish a foundational profile of participants and assess their engagement with regional issues. Each participant also completed an online written interview, consisting of three to four open-ended questions designed to explore their interests, experiences in the Mediterranean, and perspectives on the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. These questions were customized for each category to gain deeper understanding on youth-related issues in the region. A key aspect of the data interpretation was defining how youth interact in civil dialogue among each other. Indeed, the study argues that strengthening both sectoral and transversal dialogues is crucial to enhancing the engagement of EU and national policymakers in youth-focused initiatives. A core objective is to foster closer collaboration among young people across various sectors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), NGOs, EU agencies, international organizations, and the business community. The research is based on the premise that facilitating youth interactions might contribute to improving multi-level governance in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

As for the analysis, data collected through Google Forms were processed using the platform's built-in analytical tools, which provided descriptive statistics on the responses. Specifically, closed-ended questions were analysed in terms of frequencies, percentages, and response distributions, while rating scale questions were assessed by calculating mean scores. To enhance the analysis, the data were exported for further statistical examination. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative approach was employed to examine open-ended responses and focus group discussions. Textual data were analysed using T-LAB, which facilitated content analysis, thematic coding, and the identification of discourse patterns. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the statistical trends and the underlying narratives within youth interactions. Integrating these methods has offered a comprehensive view of youth engagement, combining structural insights from the policy network analysis with the nuanced perspectives gathered through thematic analysis.

Surveys: Youth Under 40 Across the Mediterranean

The data collected from 86 young respondents – workers, researchers, and students under the age of 40 – across Mediterranean and affiliated countries reveals a multidimensional portrait of youth perspectives, priorities, and experiences in the context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. While respondents come from varied backgrounds, their answers converge on several key issues: youth exclusion from decision-making, uneven access to mobility opportunities especially between North and South, and the urgent need for more integrated and interactive professional sectors and fields of knowledge.

In terms of demographic and geographic profile, participants represented nearly all Mediterranean countries, with the highest national shares from Tunisia (17.4%), Italy (11.6%), Libya (8.1%), Lebanon (7.0%), and Egypt (5.8%). A small number of respondents also came from countries outside the Mediterranean basin, such as Brazil, India, and Venezuela, highlighting global interest in the engagement happening in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Women made up 58.1% of the total respondents, men 38.4%, and 3.5% identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose gender, pointing to a consistent gender imbalance that reflects the increasing involvement of young women

in civil society and policy dialogue across the Mediterranean. In terms of age, the majority – 51.2% – were aged 26 to 32, followed by 26.7% in the 33 to 40 age range, and 22.1% aged 18 to 25, confirming the significance of extending the definition of "youth" up to age 40 in this context. Indeed, the Mediterranean region currently faces multifaceted socio-economic crises, which, combined with the relatively weak welfare systems of some states, may discourage young people from pursuing their studies or delay their entry into the job market.

Across all three respondent groups, a strong engagement with Mediterranean-related issues was evident: 80.2% declared that their professional or academic work is centred on Mediterranean affairs. The most prominent fields of work and study (multiple answers allowed) included: international and regional cooperation with 70.9% of respondents identifying it as their professional or study sector, andhuman rights and governance which sees 51.2% of youth professionally or academically involved. 45.3% of young respondents identified environmental sustainability and climate action as part of their studies or job, while 44.2% declared to focus on cultural exchange and diplomacy dimensions of Mediterranean affairs. Economic development and migration and mobility studies were selected respectively by 30.2% and 20.9% of respondents. This reflects a scenario in which youth are engaged in multifaceted dimensions of Mediterranean politics, including scientific, normative and applied aspects of Mediterranean cooperation – from academic research and policy to grassroots social work and institutional advocacy on humanitarian, socio-political, economic and environmental affairs. Indeed, when measuring perceptions of the Mediterranean region, young people across all sectors predominantly conceptualize it not merely as a geographic entity but as a dynamic cultural and political space where different dimensions of life are interconnected. 81.4% of respondents defined the Mediterranean area as a bridge of cultures, 70.9% a point of connection and 54.7% a platform for sustainable development. 38.6% perceive the region as an economic or environmental concern, suggesting that youth feel a heavy burden when considering issues such as a lack of jobs, limited opportunities, and climate change. 30.2% of respondents view the Mediterranean space as a geopolitical competition zone, where powerful state and non-state actors confront each other, overlooking the needs   of populations. Finally, 19.8% of respondents identify the region as a threat or source of instability, reflecting the unease of some young people and the barriers they face. This illustrates a dominant perception of the Mediterranean as a space of potential multi-sectoral dialogue – rather than conflicts – while also acknowledging complex challenges the region is facing.

A recurrent theme across all three groups was mobility inequality. Respondents from Southern Mediterranean countries – particularly youth workers and students – highlighted visa restrictions and administrative matters as significant barriers to equal participation in regional programs. Over 45% of Southern Mediterranean respondents described these restrictions as a major obstacle to professional, academic, and civic mobility. Comparatively, researchers were a bit less affected by mobility restrictions, mainly due to research grants they manage to secure – even though these are often for short-term periods and without a guarantee of   visa access for entering European countries. Another cross-cutting concern was youth exclusion from decision-making. While young people contribute actively through research, advocacy, and education, many feel their roles are symbolic rather than substantive. Approximately 60.5% expressed dissatisfaction with the degree to which youth are integrated into formal policymaking processes. Workers (51.2% of respondents) engage through activism, social and humanitarian work, and civil society networks, focusing on practical responses to regional challenges – such as climate action, migration, and human rights. Researchers (32.6%) contribute through policy analysis, academic research, and expert forums, emphasizing the need for governance reforms, the excessive focus on macroeconomic policies, and the lack of interest in shared humanitarian, social and environmental challenges. Students (16.3%),

primarily involved through education, intercultural exchanges, and academic mobility, view the Mediterranean as a learning and dialogue space and are especially enthusiastic about what some of them define as a growing "international solidarity system" and renewed willingness to engage in cultural exchanges. Despite differing approaches among the youth categories, the common denominator is a strong commitment to regional cooperation, knowledge sharing, and intercultural understanding.

Analysis of open and closed responses revealed shared priorities for improving the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation system: first, youth surveyed asked for more inclusive common governance structures in the Mediterranean region. Indeed, a significant majority (over 60%) across all groups called for decentralization, increased youth representation, and stronger civil society involvement in shaping regional policies. Another element highlighted by most of the 86 respondents was the need for better South–South and North–South cooperation. Beyond the statistical trends, the open-ended responses convey a more descriptive picture of what Euro-Mediterranean cooperation feels like to those living it. Many respondents spoke from lived experience rather than abstract policy positions, situating mobility not only as a logistical matter of "visa restrictions" but as a question of dignity, equality, and reciprocity. For a youth worker, the inability to travel freely "means a true exchange won't take place," while another cautioned that current mobility regimes risk "reproducing a colonial approach" that keeps the South in a position of dependency. Others pointed to a gap between institutional discourse and practice: despite their involvement in research networks, policy dialogues, or civil society forums, young people often feel they are "invited to the table but not given the menu," contributing energy and ideas without influence over final decisions. Calls for reform went beyond incremental adjustments, advocating a rethinking of governance structures to shed their "top-down, EU-centric" character in favour of co-owned, bottom-up mechanisms. Respondents described the Mediterranean in expansive terms – a "shared space of diversity and opportunity," a bridge between continents, a laboratory for climate resilience and green innovation – but consistently stressed that this potential will remain unrealised without fairer access to mobility, meaningful youth leadership, and a multidimensional agenda linking economic, environmental, and cultural priorities. The recurring emphasis on green jobs, digital entrepreneurship, and vocational education reflects not only a desire for employment but also for a form of cooperation rooted in sustainability, solidarity, and the everyday realities of Mediterranean life. Respondents urged for a shift away from top-down, EU-centric models to more balanced, co-owned frameworks, emphasizing South–South integration in economic and environmental domains. Many respondents criticized existing silos in regional governance (e.g., handling migration separately from climate or economic issues) and identified multi-sectoral dialogue and an enhanced integration between different sectors as vital for constructively renewing the cooperation system. They advocated for multidimensional, cross-sectoral approaches that link environmental sustainability with economic development, human mobility, and youth participation. Youth called for greater support for green jobs, digital innovation, and social entrepreneurship, along with strengthened investment in education, particularly vocational training and Mediterranean studies. Finally, these findings offer a compelling snapshot of a vibrant, diverse, and critically engaged Mediterranean youth, who, despite institutional barriers and mobility inequities, remain committed to building a more connected, just, and sustainable region. Their unified call for structural reforms, equal access to opportunities, and meaningful participation in decision-making signals both a demand and a readiness for greater ownership of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation process.

Conclusion: theoretical contributions, policy implications and recommendations

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of youth engagement in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, contributing to theoretical, empirical, and policy debates. It provides an application of transnationalist theory of international relations to real phenomena involving youth living in or passing through the Mediterranean region. Indeed, this research has examined youth participation through the lenses of Burton's "cobweb" model, which sees interactions happening among non-state actors in the global arena as of fundamental importance to examine the international scenario. Moreover, Rosenau's definition of "accidental aggregations" which affirms the importance of decentralised, non-hierarchical networks, was also essential to define the extent to which youth surveyed have engaged with peers on diverse aspects of Mediterranean affairs, through joint initiatives, research and cultural programmes, and international solidarity. Findings highlight persistent power asymmetries between Northern and Southern Mediterranean youth, institutional barriers, and "youth-washing" by institutions, all of which challenge assumptions of equal agency and influence within these frameworks. The study also contributes to soft power discourse by showing how youth-led initiatives – including digital activism, educational exchanges, and informal collaborations – act as vehicles of influence beyond state-centric diplomacy, though constrained by structural inequalities, limited mobility, and economic precarity. Beyond theory, the research engages with migration and digital studies, foregrounding how youth-specific migration policies and digital tools shape political agency, regional identity, and transnational activism. Despite engaging a broad and diverse youth sample, the study notes limitations in access to marginalised groups—particularly irregular migrants—and underrepresentation of youth embedded in formal policymaking. Data were primarily perception-based, lacking quantitative measures of engagement impact. These gaps suggest a need for further research using ethnographic methods, greater socio-economic inclusion, and the integration of institutional data to assess youth participation more multidimensionally.

The study's practical implications and subsequent policy recommendations are significant. It calls for institutional reforms to involve youth meaningfully in policy and decision-making spaces, promote more productive sectoral and transversal dialogues across the region through joint initiatives and projects, and shift the EU's role from donor to partner in youth-led and youth-oriented initiatives. Enhancing mobility, education, technical support for civil society organisations, and digital innovation are recommended strategies to strengthen youth agency and regional cohesion. The research urges stronger ex-post evaluation of EU-funded projects to ensure accountability, inclusiveness, and alignment with local and regional needs. Ultimately, the study concludes that youth are not peripheral actors but central agents in shaping a more inclusive, resilient Euro-Mediterranean partnership. While current institutional models fall short, transnational youth engagement—if properly supported—holds transformative potential. Bridging informal activism with formal policy channels, expanding digital and mobility access, and addressing regional inequalities are essential to realising this vision. Future research must continue exploring how youth navigate and reshape regional cooperation, ensuring their voices influence both the present and future of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

References

Abdel-Latif, O. (2022). The role of civil society organizations in fostering regional integration in the Mediterranean. Euro-Mediterranean Journal of Politics and Society, 15, 122-140.

Aboueldahab, N. (2022). Track II Diplomacy: How Can It Be More Effective?. Middle East Council on Global Affairs. https://mecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/English.pdf

Akıncılar, N., Alexieva, A., Brindisi, J., Doğan, E., Rogers, A. E., & Schimmang, B. (Eds.). (n.d.). Young minds rethinking the Mediterranean (Mensur Akgün & Lenka Petková, Eds.).

Anna Lindh Foundation. (2023). Intercultural trends in the Euro-Mediterranean region 2023: The role of youth and civil society organizations. Anna Lindh Foundation.

Arvanitis, R., & Mhenni, H. (2021). Youth, technology, and social change in the Mediterranean region. International Journal of Mediterranean Studies, 11, 97-114.

Burton, J. (1972). World Society. Cambridge University Press.

Euro-Med Rights. (2023). Youth and women empowerment in the Euro-Mediterranean region: Challenges and opportunities. Euro-Med Rights Network.

Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association (EMEA). (2023). Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises through youth-driven innovation: A regional analysis. Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association.

EuroMeSCo. (2022). Annual conference and young researchers lab report: Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and youth engagement. EuroMeSCo Network.

European Commission. (2021). Review of the European neighbourhood policy: Engaging youth for better integration. Commission Staff Working Document. European Commission.

European Economic and Social Committee. (2024). Youth involvement in social and civil dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region: Towards effective integration. European Economic and Social Committee Report.

European External Action Service. (2023). The impact of youth mobility on socioeconomic integration in the Mediterranean. Working Document on European Neighborhood Policy. European External Action Service.

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). (2023). Youth as a strategic resource in the Euro-Mediterranean region: Policy recommendations for EU engagement. European Union Institute for Security Studies.

Feliu, L., & Wimmen, H. (2022). Civil society and democratization in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Journal of European Integration, 44(1), 45-60. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2022.2000984
Haas, E. B. (1964). Beyond the nation-state: Functionalism and international organization. Stanford University Press.

Haas, E. B. (1986). What is nationalism and why should we study it? International Organization, 40(3), 707744.

Lamonica, A. G. (2022). Youth deliberation and participation in the Euro-Mediterranean region: Recommendations for a responsible approach to enhancing artificial intelligence and frontier digital technologies. EuroMeSCo Policy Brief. EuroMeSCo Network.

MacDonald, K., & King, L. (2020). Lessons from the Global South: Youth-driven grassroots initiatives and institutional change. Mediterranean Politics.

Mayo, P., & Vittoria, P. (2020). Educational spaces as drivers for change: Building solidarity in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Policy Futures in Education, 18(2), 178-193. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210319869191

Murphy, E., & Sika, N. (2021). Euro-Mediterranean partnership and youth policies in the MENA: Why policy discourse travels but implementation doesn't. Mediterranean Politics, 26(4), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1935282

Peregrina, J. M. (2024). Meaningful inclusion: Enhancing the youth, peace, and security agenda in Euro-Mediterranean conflict resolution. Euromesco. https://www.euromesco.net/publication/meaningful-inclusion-enhancing-the-youth-peace-and-security-agenda-in-euro-mediterranean-conflict-resolution/

Rosenau, J. N. (1990). Turbulence in world politics: A theory of change and continuity. Princeton University Press.

Sozen, A. (2024) Track II Diplomacy. The Way Out in the East Mediterranean? Special issue. Europolitika. https://www.europolitika.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Track-II-Diplomacy-Special-Issue-2.pdf

UNIMED. (2022). Promoting cultural dialogue and mobility in the Mediterranean: The role of universities and educational networks. Mediterranean Universities Union.

Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat. (n.d.). Youth Strategy 2030. https://ufmsecretariat.org/youth-strategy/

Democracy and Geopolitical Re-ordering in the Sahel: Mapping of the Realignment of Russian and Chinese Influence in the Wake of Western Retreat

Francesco Prencipe[1]

EST

Abstract

The Sahel is undergoing a profound geopolitical transformation marked by the retreat of traditional Western powers and the rise of Russia and China as influential actors. Military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have accelerated this shift, replacing long-standing partnerships with France, the EU, and the US with alternative alliances. Russia's engagement is rooted in military assistance, elite backing, and anti-Western narratives, often through private military companies, while China pursues economic statecraft via infrastructure projects, resource agreements, and non-interference pledges. These divergent strategies reshape both the external alignments and the domestic political economies of Sahelian states, enabling military regimes to consolidate power and resist international pressure under the banner of sovereignty and regional solidarity, particularly through the Alliance of Sahel States. This paper examines why Sahelian regimes are turning away from the West, how they use Russian and Chinese partnerships to secure regime survival, and the broader implications for regional stability.

Keywords

Sahel, Russia, China, European Union, Geopolitics, Security, Stability

Introduction

TThe Sahel region is undergoing a profound geopolitical realignment. Once regarded as a Western security laboratory, with France, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States holding significant power (Ajala, 2024), the region is now shifting towards other alternatives. Military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have accelerated this process, marking a break with long-standing Western alliances, particularly with France, in favour of new partnerships with Russia and China. These changes are not only tactical; they reflect a deeper search for sovereignty, regime stability, and strategic autonomy in an era of contested global influence (Dirk, 2024).

The reasons behind this shift are complex. Western engagement, especially from France and the EU, has been marred by perceptions of neocolonial interference, unmet security promises, and a failure

---

[1] Francesco Prencipe is a Research Fellow at the EST Observatory's Sahel Desk, specialising in geopolitical shifts, migration policy, and governance across West Africa and the MENA region.

address the socio-political roots of instability (Wilen, 2025). As frustration with Western approaches grew, Russia and China stepped in with alternatives, each offering distinct models of engagement. Russia, leveraging private military companies like the Wagner Group and its post-Prigozhin legacy, focuses on military assistance, elite support, and anti-Western ideological narratives (Daly, 2023). China, in contrast, relies on economic statecraft: infrastructure projects, resource extraction deals, and promises of non-interference, seeking long-term economic influence without direct involvement in domestic politics (Bouregba & Aissat, 2025).

These diverging approaches matter because they reshape not only external relations but also domestic political economies in the Sahel. Military regimes in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey are leveraging these new alliances to consolidate power, marginalise domestic opposition, and defy international pressure. They claim legitimacy through assertions of self-determination and regional solidarity, notably via the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). (Bouregba & Aissat, 2025). This is transforming the Sahel from a zone of Western-backed stabilisation efforts into a theatre of multipolar contestation, with authoritarian powers offering attractive alternatives to liberal democratic models.

This paper explores four central research questions: First, why are Sahelian military regimes rejecting Western and multilateral actors after decades of dependence? Second, how are these regimes using partnerships with Russia and China to assert sovereignty and ensure regime survival? Third, what are the key differences between the Russian and Chinese modes of influence in the Sahel, especially regarding methods, objectives, and long-term impact? Finally, what are the implications of these shifts for the region's stability: is the Sahel sliding into a fragmented and competitive multipolar disorder, or does this realignment represent the birth of a new strategic coherence?

Methodologically, this paper is based on a critical review of existing literature, including think-tank reports, academic articles, and policy briefs focusing on Russia and China's expanding roles in the Sahel. The analysis is structured into four main sections: the motivations behind shifting alliances; the distinct models of Russian and Chinese influence; the Western strategic dilemma; and the regional consequences of this external reordering. This structure aims to map the contours of the Sahel's evolving geopolitical landscape and assess its broader implications. By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the study of African politics, international relations, and security by doing three main things. First, it connects the debate on African political agency with the analysis of great power competition, showing how Sahelian regimes actively shape their foreign alignments rather than simply responding to external pressures. Second, it offers a detailed comparison of Russian and Chinese engagement in the region, highlighting differences in their methods, objectives, and political consequences. Third, it places the Sahel's realignment within current research on multipolarity, assessing whether the decline of Western influence leads to greater instability, emerging patterns of cooperation, or mixed outcomes. These contributions aim to inform both academic debate and policy discussions, providing insights that are relevant to governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society actors navigating the Sahel's changing strategic environment.

Overview and Background on the Sahelian states and their dynamics

Mali

Mali's military government, established after the 2020 and 2021 coups, has adopted a pragmatic

t assertive posture toward foreign influence. Ideologically, the junta emphasizes sovereignty and nationalism, framing its break with France and Western partners as a rejection of neocolonialism. Mali was the first Sahel country to invite Russia's Wagner Group, marking a strategic pivot to non-Western security partnerships (Ajala, 2024). This move reflects Bamako's strategy of leveraging Russian military support to maintain regime stability and counter jihadist insurgencies, while signaling independence from traditional Western actors. Mali remains the most overtly Russia-aligned in the AES, and its leadership often seeks to set the tone for regional cooperation, though its domestic political instability and international sanctions complicate this role.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's trajectory diverged somewhat after its two coups in 2022 and 2023. While sharing Mali's nationalist rhetoric and rejection of France, Burkina Faso's military regime has shown a more cautious engagement with external partners. It has embraced Wagner for security support but has also maintained some dialogue with ECOWAS and the African Union, suggesting a degree of strategic flexibility (Carbone, 2024). Ideologically, the Burkinabè junta blends anti-Western sentiment with a populist appeal to local communities affected by insurgency and economic hardship. Unlike Mali, Burkina Faso's leadership has faced significant internal opposition and fragmented security challenges, which have tempered its ability to lead the AES cohesively.

Niger

Niger's military government, installed by the 2023 coup, initially aligned closely with Western partners, especially France and the US, which maintained drone bases and intelligence cooperation crucial for regional counterterrorism (Wilen, 2025). However, growing domestic opposition and political uncertainty pushed the junta to pivot rapidly toward Russia and closer ties with Mali and Burkina Faso within the AES framework. Niger's ideological stance is less explicitly anti-Western compared to Mali and Burkina Faso but is driven by pragmatism—balancing external pressures while ensuring regime survival. The recent coup and rapid realignment illustrate Niger's role as a potential swing state within the AES, navigating between competing influences.

Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Dynamics

The AES brings together these military regimes under a banner of regional sovereignty and mutual support, often framed as a counterweight to ECOWAS and Western-led interventions. However, the alliance is not without tension. While united in rejecting Western dominance, the member states have differing priorities and levels of alignment with external actors. Mali's dominance and closer ties to Russia create friction with Niger, which has historically leaned more toward Western cooperation, though this is shifting. Burkina Faso's internal instability and diverse security challenges also limit its capacity to contribute effectively to AES cohesion (Ajala, 2024). The AES functions more as a pragmatic security bloc than a unified political entity. Its members coordinate on military and intelligence matters, sharing resources and backing each other diplomatically, but often pursue national interests independently. These dynamic undercuts any simplistic view of the Sahelian military regimes as a monolithic group. Instead, the AES is better understood as a fluid alliance of convenience, shaped by the unique domestic politics and foreign policy strategies of its members.

Shifting Alliances and Regional Autonomy

The Sahel region today represents one of the most volatile theatres of geopolitical realignment, as military-led regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger seek to redefine their external partnerships amid a conscious rejection of Western presence. Once perceived as the "backyard" of French influence in Africa, this subregion has witnessed an unprecedented push to expel long-standing multilateral actors such as France, the European Union, and the United Nations. The military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) have framed this radical shift not merely as a diplomatic maneuver but as a necessary correction to decades of perceived Western domination and policy failure (Wilén, 2025).

The expulsion of French forces, the ending of Operation Barkhane, and the abrupt suspension of European training missions (EUTM) were driven by mounting popular discontent and skepticism towards Western security assistance (Ahmed, 2025). For instance, in Mali, widespread protests against the French military presence reflected frustrations over persistent insecurity despite years of foreign intervention (Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2022). Similarly, the forced closure of MINUSMA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) marked a profound institutional retreat, symbolizing the region's unraveling faith in multilateral solutions to its protracted security crisis (Wilén, 2025).

At the heart of this realignment lies the formation of the AES, a bloc comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, each governed by military juntas that seized power amid popular unrest and institutional collapse (BBC News, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). The AES represents more than a loose security pact; it embodies a shared ambition to assert autonomy from Western and regional pressures, including those stemming from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), whose sanctions and diplomatic condemnation further alienated these regimes.

The AES leaders have capitalized on nationalist rhetoric to justify their rupture with former partners. Anti-French sentiment has been weaponized to legitimize military takeovers and frame foreign disengagement as a victory for sovereignty (Ahmed, 2025). This discourse resonates with local populations disillusioned by the West's inability to curb jihadist violence, reduce poverty, or support genuine political stability. In effect, the AES regimes portray themselves as defenders of national dignity against external manipulation (Wilén, 2025).

Concurrently, these governments have sought for new partnerships to compensate for the loss of Western security and financial assistance. Russia's entry into the Sahel (via the deployment of Wagner Group operatives and the provision of arms) has filled this vacuum, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso (Daly, 2023). These regimes rely on Russian support to fortify their hold on power, pursue counterinsurgency operations, and suppress internal dissent. In this sense, Russian involvement is transactional and regime-centric: Moscow offers security guarantees in exchange for mining concessions and geopolitical leverage (Daly, 2023).

China's approach, by contrast, is less militarized but equally strategic. Beijing has expanded its economic footprint through infrastructure projects, investment in critical minerals, and diplomatic overtures positioning itself as a development partner rather than a security actor (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). While its role in the Sahel remains secondary to Russia's in the realm of hard power, China's presence is growing, especially in Niger's energy sector and trans-Sahelian connectivity initiatives (South China Morning Post, 2024). Thus, AES regimes are diversifying their partnerships, leveraging Russian military assets while courting Chinese capital, a dual strategy to

insulate themselves from economic isolation and security vulnerability.

Public perception within the Sahel regarding this foreign policy pivot is complex but revealing. Surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that a significant segment of the population welcomes the departure of French troops, viewing it as liberation from neocolonial tutelage (Le Monde, 2024). However, enthusiasm for new patrons such as Russia and China is tempered by uncertainty about their long-term intentions and the tangible benefits they can deliver. On the one hand, Russian forces, despite their tactical successes against insurgent groups, have been implicated in human rights abuses, fueling concerns about state repression (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024). On the other hand, Chinese investments, while potentially transformative, risk perpetuating patterns of elite capture and corruption unless accompanied by transparent governance mechanisms (China Africa Research Initiative, 2023; Financial Times, 2023).

This recalibration of alliances also reflects a broader regional dynamic of fragmentation. The rupture with ECOWAS signals the AES bloc's rejection of traditional West African multilateralism in favor of sovereign-centered, regime-driven cooperation. Whether this marks the emergence of a coherent geopolitical pole or a descent into regional disorder remains uncertain. Nonetheless, the AES's defiance of regional and international norms suggests a recalibrated Sahelian agency, one shaped less by external dictates and more by the survival instincts of military regimes navigating an unstable landscape (Wilén, 2025).

In sum, the Sahel's shifting alliances are not merely the outcome of Western missteps but the result of calculated agency by embattled regimes seeking to consolidate power, redefine sovereignty, and exploit new great power rivalries. Russia and China provide alternative models and resources that enable these governments to assert autonomy, even as the long-term costs (economic dependence, human rights risks, and geopolitical isolation) remain to be fully realized. The region stands at a crossroads: between the promises of multipolar partnerships and the perils of authoritarian entrenchment and strategic fragmentation.

Western Decline and Strategic Dilemmas

The deterioration of Western influence in the Sahel marks one of the most consequential geopolitical shifts in the region's postcolonial history. Over the past decade, persistent insecurity despite extensive foreign military interventions, frustration with perceived neocolonial attitudes, and the limited impact of development assistance have eroded local trust in Western actors. Coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger accelerated this backlash, as new military rulers rejected long-standing partnerships and expelled foreign forces. Once the predominant security and development actor, the West, embodied by France, the European Union, the United Nations, and to a lesser degree, the United States, has seen its position collapse in the face of growing local hostility, political upheaval, and the rise of non-Western alternatives such as Russia and China. This decline has exposed structural flaws in Western engagement strategies and forced policymakers in Brussels and Washington to reconsider their future role in the region.

Roots of Western Failure

Several factors explain the erosion of Western leverage in the Sahel. Chief among them is the pater-

nalistic nature of Western interventions, which often disregarded local agency and preferences. As Ajala (2024) argues, Western actors approached Sahelian states as fragile entities requiring external tutelage, rather than as sovereign partners with distinct political calculations. This attitude bred resentment among both governing elites and broader societies, who perceived Western engagement as neocolonial and dismissive of local priorities (Bouregba & Aissat, 2025).

The overreliance on a security-first approach compounded this perception. Western missions, particularly France's Operation Barkhane and EU training and capacity-building programs (Ajala, 2024) prioritized counterterrorism over governance, economic development, or institution-building. While aimed at containing jihadist insurgencies, this militarized focus produced few sustainable gains and was widely seen as serving Western security interests rather than local needs. Meanwhile, failures in delivering economic dividends or state legitimacy left Sahelian regimes exposed to popular discontent and political volatility.

Lack of local ownership further undermined Western efforts. Interventions were often designed in European capitals or multilateral institutions, with insufficient consultation of Sahelian stakeholders (Bouregba & Aissat, 2025). This top-down dynamic alienated local actors and created dependency without empowerment, a vulnerability that Russia and China have been quick to exploit with their sovereignty-respecting, regime-centered approaches (Wilen, 2025).

The Expulsion of Western Forces

The rejection of Western actors in the Sahel has been both dramatic and highly symbolic, unfolding through a series of political ruptures that reshaped the regional security order. France—the region's former colonial power and principal military presence—was first expelled from Mali in 2022, following the breakdown of relations between Bamako's junta and Paris over alleged interference and criticism of the junta's delays in returning to civilian rule. French forces were ordered to leave within months, with little room for negotiation, and redeployed to Niger. In Burkina Faso, a similar scenario played out in 2023: after a second coup in less than a year, the new leadership accused France of failing to contain jihadist violence and demanded the withdrawal of French troops. This request was carried out swiftly and without armed confrontation, but under a climate of intense anti-French demonstrations. In Niger, hostility toward France intensified after the July 2023 coup, with the military leadership annulling security agreements and forcing the departure of French forces amid large-scale rallies, despite Paris initially resisting calls to leave.

These expulsions were not isolated events but part of a domino effect, with each junta drawing lessons from its neighbours. While Mali set the precedent by replacing French support with Wagner Group contractors, Burkina Faso followed suit, cultivating security ties with Russia and deepening coordination with Mali. Niger's shift was more abrupt, breaking from its prior role as the West's most reliable partner in the region. Key differences lay in the speed and scope of the changes: Mali pursued a phased severing of ties with Western institutions, Burkina Faso moved more rapidly to expel foreign troops, and Niger's pivot occurred in the wake of a coup that immediately reset its foreign policy orientation.

Beyond France, other Western actors also faced setbacks. The European Union's military training missions (EUTM) in Mali and Burkina Faso were suspended or terminated under mounting political pressure, while the UN's MINUSMA peacekeeping force was ordered to withdraw from Mali in 2023 by the ruling junta (Ajala, 2024). These moves reflected more than just diplomatic disagreements—

they signified a collapse of trust between Western powers and Sahelian regimes. Military juntas accused their former partners of undermining sovereignty, meddling in domestic politics, and failing to deliver meaningful improvements in security (Ajala, 2024). This narrative of betrayal was amplified by Russian and local propaganda, which deepened popular suspicion toward Western intentions and further eroded the legitimacy of their presence.

For France, the humiliation has been particularly acute. Long positioned as the region's security guarantor, Paris underestimated the depth of anti-French sentiment and the readiness of juntas to replace Western partners with Russian or other non-Western actors (Ajala, 2024). The EU and UN, tied to French strategic priorities, suffered collateral damage as their missions were drawn into the same wave of expulsions. The United States, though less visible in counterinsurgency operations, maintained a network of drone bases and intelligence assets in Niger, using them for regional counterterrorism surveillance. The 2023 coup cast this presence into doubt, with Washington forced to negotiate new terms or risk losing critical infrastructure. As Russian influence deepens and Chinese economic engagement grows, the geopolitical shift threatens to sideline the US and its allies, reducing their ability to shape security and political outcomes in the Sahel.

Strategic Dilemma for the West

The collapse of the Western position in the Sahel has forced a reckoning in European and American policy circles. Two competing visions have emerged.

The first advocates pragmatic engagement with the new military regimes. Proponents argue that Western interests (counterterrorism, migration control, geopolitical stability) require working with de facto authorities regardless of their democratic credentials. This camp favors conditional aid, security cooperation, and selective dialogue, echoing the realpolitik of Russia and China (Wilen, 2025).

The second vision insists on a value-driven approach. It contends that legitimizing military juntas would betray democratic principles and long-term stability goals. Instead, this camp calls for isolating coup regimes, supporting civil society, and using development aid as leverage for political reform (Ajala, 2024). Critics warn, however, that such conditionality has lost credibility and risks driving regimes further into the arms of authoritarian patrons (Carbone, 2024).

Neither path presents a straightforward solution. Pursuing pragmatic engagement—maintaining dialogue and cooperation despite authoritarian practices—risks legitimising military regimes, damaging the West's credibility, and reinforcing governance models that sideline democratic norms. On the other hand, adopting a strictly value-driven approach—conditioning aid and partnerships on political reforms—may have little impact if Western influence continues to shrink and alternative partners remain available. In the current environment, Sahelian military rulers have shown skill in exploiting this strategic dilemma, balancing relationships with multiple external actors, extracting military, financial, and political concessions, and rejecting reforms that might weaken their hold on power.

Possible New Approaches

Amid these dilemmas, a range of alternative strategies has emerged in academic and policy debates. One proposal envisions a stronger role for regional organizations such as the African Union or ECOWAS—if they withstand the challenge posed by the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—to serve as interlocutors in restoring multilateral frameworks (Wilen, 2025). Another emphasizes building grassroots partnerships with non-state actors, municipalities, and civil society to rebuild local legitimacy from the ground up, bypassing hostile central regimes (Carbone, 2024). A third, more radical idea, reflecting growing pessimism in Western policy analysis, suggests accepting the current multipolar disorder as a given and instead focusing on humanitarian aid, conflict mediation, and risk containment rather than pursuing grand strategic influence (Opondo, 2023). These options reflect the diversity of thought within research and expert circles about how Western and international actors might respond to the Sahel's evolving challenges.

Authoritarian Influence: Russia vs China

The Sahel has become a crucial theater for external authoritarian powers seeking to expand their influence amid the Western retreat. Russia and China, while sharing the overarching objective of displacing Western leverage and forging new partnerships with military regimes, have pursued distinct models of engagement (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Their contrasting approaches, militarized versus developmental, highlight the multiplicity of strategies shaping the region's political, economic, and security landscapes.

Russia's Model: Security and Elite Capture

Russia's resurgence in the Sahel has been driven primarily by security provision and political backing for military regimes. Central to this model is the use of private military companies, notably the Wagner Group, which provided regime protection, counterinsurgency operations, and security training until its structural reshaping after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023, leader of the group and key figure until his death (Daly, 2023). Though the Wagner brand has faded, its functions have been absorbed into entities like Africa Corps, allowing Moscow to retain its operational footprint in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic (RAND Corporation, 2025).

The Russian offer appeals to Sahelian juntas for three reasons. First, it supplies direct, regime-oriented military assistance untied to human rights conditions, unlike Western partners such as France or the EU. Second, Russian political messaging consistently supports military governments' claims of sovereignty and resistance to neocolonial interference, bolstering local legitimacy among anti-French or nationalist constituencies (Wilen, 2025). Third, this model fosters elite capture: Russian deals, arms shipments, and security packages are channeled through ruling cliques, consolidating power without wider state or institutional reform (Nossiter, 2025).

Russia's influence has thus been security-centric and politically transactional, marked by short-term regime survival guarantees rather than systemic state development. In exchange, Moscow has secured mining concessions, geopolitical leverage, and diplomatic alignments in forums such as the UN General Assembly (Daly, 2023).

China's Model: Infrastructure and Developmental Engagement

China, in contrast, has embraced an economic-developmental model premised on long-term state-to-state partnerships. Its approach emphasizes infrastructure investments, concessional loans, telecommunications technology, and support for state capacity-building, underpinned by the principle of non-interference in domestic governance (Wilen, 2025).

In the Sahel, Chinese projects, ranging from highways and railways to hospitals and digital infrastructure, offer military regimes developmental dividends without demanding political reform or transparency. This 'no strings attached' model aligns with the priorities of juntas, eager to claim economic progress while resisting Western governance conditionalities (Nantulya, 2025). Beijing's role in constructing critical infrastructure—such as Mali's Bamako-Sénou International Airport expansion or Niger's Kandadji Dam—demonstrates its commitment to embedding itself in national development trajectories (Nantulya, 2025).

Technological engagement is also a distinctive pillar of China's influence. The spread of Huawei surveillance systems and digital platforms offers Sahelian authorities tools for internal control and population monitoring, serving regime consolidation goals without overt military intervention (Nantulya, 2025). Unlike Russia's elite-centered model, China's strategy involves cultivating state institutions, bureaucracies, and economic ministries, suggesting a broader institutional impact.

Comparative Analysis: Diverging Models, Converging Objectives

Despite their shared objective of weakening Western influence and expanding geopolitical reach, Russia and China's models in the Sahel display significant differences.

Russia's militarized approach prioritizes regime protection, elite capture, and short-term security contracts. Its engagement hinges on personalist ties with ruling (military) juntas and the deployment of mercenary forces that operate outside conventional diplomatic or developmental frameworks (Karr, Ford, & Banane, 2025). This strategy suits volatile environments such as Mali, where Russian operatives have reportedly replaced French and UN forces in securing key installations and combating insurgents and protesters (Daly, 2023).

China's developmental model, by contrast, relies on economic infrastructure, long-term loans, and technological transfers. It builds influence through formal agreements, institutional partnerships, and the embedding of Chinese state-owned enterprises in national projects. This approach is designed for sustainability, enhancing Beijing's image as a reliable development partner across the African continent (Nantulya, 2025; Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2024).
The difference in methods creates distinct power dynamics. As a result, while Russia's footprint is more immediately visible in military environments, China's presence shapes the Sahel's infrastructural and technological environment over the long term (Wilen, 2025).

However, areas of potential friction or complementarity between these models remain underexplored. In states like Mali or Burkina Faso, simultaneous Russian security and Chinese economic engagement could generate coordination challenges or opportunities for mutual reinforcement (Nantulya, 2025). For example, while Russian mercenaries secure regions vulnerable to insurgents, Chinese companies may implement infrastructure projects with greater security guarantees, a de facto division of labor beneficial to both authoritarian powers (Daly, 2023).

Yet divergence is also possible. Russia's appetite for mining concessions or arms sales may clash with Chinese developmental priorities if instability jeopardizes infrastructure safety or loan repayments. Moreover, differing timelines, Russia's short-term regime support versus China's long-term economic embedding, could produce conflicting interests should political transitions or coups disrupt state continuity, as it will be explained in the following section below.

The Strategic Implications of Dual Authoritarian Presence

The simultaneous projection of Russian and Chinese influence in the Sahel reconfigures the region's external dependencies. Both powers offer alternatives to Western engagement but shape state trajectories in different ways: Russia reinforces militarized, coup-prone regimes reliant on force and coercion; China embeds itself in development paths that may outlast individual juntas but preserve authoritarian governance models (Karr, Ford, & Banane, 2025).

For Sahelian military rulers, this duality allows strategic diversification. By balancing Moscow's security guarantees with Beijing's economic resources, regimes can insulate themselves from Western conditionality while extracting rents from both authoritarian patrons. The risk, however, is fragmentation: competing interests, uncoordinated projects, and the lack of integrated development-security strategies may entrench regional disorder rather than stability (Daly, 2023).

For the West, the rise of dual authoritarian influence underscores the collapse of traditional leverage mechanisms—aid conditionality, military cooperation frameworks, and multilateral diplomacy—in favor of transactional, regime-centric engagements (Karr, Ford, & Banane, 2025). The space once occupied by EU training missions or UN peacekeeping has been filled by Russian operatives and Chinese contractors, signaling a profound shift in the Sahel's geopolitical landscape (Wilen, 2025).

Regional Fallout and Geopolitical Fragmentation

The withdrawal of Western forces and diplomatic missions from the Sahel has not only opened the door to new external actors but has also exposed and deepened fractures within the region itself. The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, represents a significant rupture with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), once the principal framework for regional cooperation (Aning & Pokoo, 2023). This schism reflects the broader geopolitical realignment underway, shaped in part by the competing influences of Russia and China, as well as the declining credibility of traditional Western powers (Shinn, 2023).

The AES bloc's formation signals a rejection of ECOWAS, whose perceived closeness to Western political and economic agendas has alienated the military regimes in Bamako, Niamey, and Ouagadougou. These juntas have portrayed ECOWAS not as a guarantor of regional stability but as an enforcer of foreign (particularly French) interests. By forming their own alliance, these states seek to assert autonomy and insulate themselves from ECOWAS sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Yet this regional break carries profound risks. Fragmentation diminishes collective capacity to address transnational challenges such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and irregular migration, which no single state can manage alone (International Crisis Group, 2024; Aning & Pokoo, 2023).

At the same time, the AES-ECOWAS split creates space for a "multipolar disorder," in which various

external powers exploit divisions to secure influence over different regimes. Russia's presence is most prominent in the AES countries, where the deployment of Wagner Group operatives and the provision of military equipment underscore Moscow's growing security footprint (Daly, 2023; Shinn, 2023). China, meanwhile, has avoided overt involvement in the political reshaping of the Sahel but maintains extensive infrastructure and trade commitments across ECOWAS and non-ECOWAS states alike. This divergence in approach may lead to differentiated spheres of influence: a militarised Russian-backed AES zone and a Chinese economic zone spanning the wider West African region (Nantulya, 2025).

The potential consequences of this fragmentation are far-reaching. Firstly, as AES countries deepen ties with Russia, their dependence on military support risks entrenching authoritarian governance and militarisation of politics (Daly, 2023). The suppression of civil liberties, exclusion of opposition movements, and perpetuation of military rule could become enduring features of political life, undermining prospects for democratic transition. Secondly, Chinese infrastructure and loan agreements, while ostensibly apolitical, raise concerns about future debt sustainability and economic sovereignty (Gu, 2022). The risk of debt traps,–whereby states cede control over critical assets or policy autonomy in exchange for financial relief- is especially acute in fragile Sahelian economies (Wilen, 2025).

This evolving landscape complicates the prospects for any renewed regional integration. The AES-ECOWAS rift reduces the effectiveness of joint counter-terrorism initiatives, border security cooperation, and development programmes that require cross-border coordination. It also weakens the negotiating position of West African states vis-à-vis external actors; divided, they become more susceptible to bilateral arrangements that favour foreign powers at the expense of regional interests (International Crisis Group, 2024; Aning & Pokoo, 2023).

Several realignment scenarios emerge from this dynamic. One possibility is the consolidation of an AES-led bloc under Russian military patronage, counterbalanced by a residual ECOWAS grouping oriented towards Western or Chinese economic engagement (Nantulya, 2025; Shinn, 2023). Alternatively, the AES states may seek to leverage both Russian and Chinese partnerships, cultivating a flexible multipolar diplomacy that maximises external support while playing rivals against each other. Yet such manoeuvring carries risks of strategic overreach, as excessive dependence on authoritarian powers may invite long-term instability and undermine national sovereignty (Nantulya, 2025).

The broader danger is that the Sahel's fragmentation could become self-perpetuating. As states retreat into rival blocs, collective regional identity and cooperation mechanisms erode, making it harder to mount coordinated responses to common threats. The proliferation of external actors with competing agendas further complicates this picture. Russia and China, while presently avoiding direct conflict in the Sahel, may eventually find their interests diverging in ways that destabilise the region, particularly if Chinese investments or debt recovery measures clash with Russian security operations or political backing for certain regimes (Gu, 2022).

In the long term, the consequences of this fragmentation could be severe. The militarisation of politics, erosion of regional unity, and deepening economic dependence on non-Western authoritarian powers threaten to lock the Sahel into a cycle of instability. Without effective mechanisms for dialogue and reconciliation between AES and ECOWAS, and without a coherent strategy from Western actors to re-engage constructively, the region risks sliding into a state of permanent political contestation. In such a scenario, sovereignty is compromised not only by foreign

influence but also by the inability of African states to act collectively in their own interest (Wilen, 2025).

Thus, the current phase of realignment in the Sahel is marked not merely by a shift from Western to non-Western influence but by a more profound structural transformation: the emergence of a fragmented, contested, and potentially unstable regional order shaped by the interplay of local regimes and competing external powers. Whether this leads to new forms of cooperation or deepens disorder will depend largely on the strategic choices made by both African states and their external partners in the coming years.

Conclusion

The Sahel region stands at the crossroads of a profound geopolitical transformation. This paper has traced how the retreat of Western actors (especially France, the EU, and the UN) has created space for Russia and China to assert their influence through markedly different but overlapping strategies. In this unfolding realignment, Sahelian military regimes are actively reshaping their external relations to secure regime survival and assert a sovereignty long perceived to be compromised by dependency on Western multilateralism.

The analysis reveals that Russia and China offer distinct models of engagement that resonate with the region's current power holders. Russia prioritises security provision, elite capture, and political support for ruling military juntas. Its use of private military contractors, anti-Western discourse, and offers of regime protection has filled the void left by departed Western forces, especially in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. China, by contrast, avoids direct involvement in security or domestic political affairs, by advancing long-term infrastructure, trade, and technological investment projects. Its appeal lies in promises of economic development, non-interference, and access to resources—priorities that match the broader development needs of the region.

Yet these emerging partnerships come with risks. The militarisation of politics, growing debt exposure, and the erosion of regional cooperation frameworks—such as ECOWAS—may undermine both state and regional stability. The AES-ECOWAS split, as analysed, points to a fragmenting regional order where collective responses to terrorism, migration, and economic development become harder to coordinate. External actors, far from offering stabilising alternatives, may deepen these divisions by pulling regimes in conflicting strategic directions.

What emerges is not a simple transition from Western to non-Western dominance, but the early stages of a multipolar disorder—a complex, contested space where African agency meets external interests in unpredictable ways. Neither Russia nor China offers a blueprint for sustainable political or economic renewal in the Sahel. Rather, their involvement reflects and reinforces the survival strategies of regimes isolated from the West and beset by domestic insecurity.

The implications of this shift are far-reaching. For Sahelian states, sovereignty risks are redefined not as independence from foreign influence but as the freedom to choose among competing external patrons. Development may become tied to the terms of authoritarian powers rather than driven by local priorities. Meanwhile, Western actors will continue to face the dilemma of irrelevance unless they rethink engagement strategies that respect regional autonomy while offering meaningful partnerships.

Future research will need to assess whether the Sahel is sliding toward a Cold War-style proxy theatre—where rival powers carve out spheres of influence—or into a new and uniquely fragmented order shaped by local and external bargains. Critical questions remain: will AES solidify into a durable alternative to ECOWAS, and can such blocs manage cross-border security and economic challenges independently? Will Russia and China compete or coordinate as their interests expand? And can Western actors find a role that avoids past paternalistic errors?

The Sahel's trajectory will be determined not only by great power competition but by the choices of its own leaders and societies. Whether these choices lead to new forms of sovereignty and development or deepen instability and dependence remains uncertain—but the stakes, for the region and for global security, could not be higher.

References

Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2024, March 5). China's expanding economic footprint in the Sahel. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-expanding-economic-footprint-in-the-sahel/

Ahmed, F. (2025, February 11). Changing alliances: A critical analysis of France's exit from Francophone Africa. Democracy in Africa. https://democracyinafrica.org/changing-alliances-a-critical-analysis-of-frances-exit-from-francophone-africa/

Ajala, O. (2024, January). Scramble for the Sahel – why France, Russia, China and the United States are interested in the region. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/scramble-for-the-sahel-why-france-russia-china-and-the-united-states-are-interested-in-the-region-219130

Al Jazeera. (2024, January 28). Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger quit ECOWAS, form new Sahel alliance. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/28/mali-burkina-faso-niger-quit-ecowas-form-new-sahel-alliance

Amnesty International. (2024, January 10). Burkina Faso: Reports of abuses by Russian mercenaries. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/01/burkina-faso-reports-abuses-russian-mercenaries/

Aning, K., & Pokoo, J. (2023). The Sahel crisis and the limits of regional cooperation: ECOWAS and beyond. African Security Review, 32(1), 1–18.

BBC News. (2024, January 29). Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger form Alliance of Sahel States bloc after ECOWAS exit. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68111005

Bouregba, A., & Aissat, F. (2025). A Geopolitical Study Of The Sahel Region. Revue De Recherches Et Etudes Scientifiques, 19(1). https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/263027

Carbone, M. (2022). Democracy and authoritarianism in Africa: Challenges and policy options. African Affairs, 121(483), 1–22.

China Africa Research Initiative. (2023, November 28). Chinese investments in Africa: Risks and rewards. https://www.sais-cari.org/publications/chinese-investments-in-africa-risks-and-rewards

Daly, S., & Bassou, A. (2023, March 2). Russia's influence in Africa, a security perspective - Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russias-influence-in-africa-a-security-perspective/

Dirk, K. (2024). Navigating Rivalries: Prospects for Coexistence between ECOWAS and AES in West Africa. MPRA. https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/121554/2/MPRA_paper_121554.pdf

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. (2024, September 5). Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240905_11485719.html

Gu, X. (2022). China's engagement in Africa: activities, effects and trends. Center for Global Studies (CGS).

Human Rights Watch. (2023, December 15). Mali: Wagner forces implicated in atrocities. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/15/mali-wagner-forces-implicated-atrocities

International Crisis Group. (2023, May 24). Wagner Group's growing role in the Sahel. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/wagner-groups-growing-role-sahel

International Crisis Group. (2024). Defining a New Approach to the Sahel's Military-led States. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-mali-niger/defining-new-approach-sahels-military-led-states

Karr, L., Ford, Y., & Banane, J.-P. (2025). Africa File, April 3, 2025: Russia-Sahel Summit; Sahelian juntas target Chinese mining, M23. Institute for the Study of War. https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-april-3-2025-russia-sahel-summit-sahelian-juntas-target-chinese-mining-m23

Le Monde. (2024, February 1). In the Sahel, the end of French presence is seen as a liberation. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/01/in-the-sahel-the-end-of-french-presence-is-seen-as-a-liberation_6214013_4.html

Nantulya, P. (2025). China's expanding influence in Africa: Security and development strategies in the Sahel. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-expanding-economic-footprint-in-the-sahel/

Nossiter, F. (2025, June 9). Mali and Russia restructure their security partnership: What's the endgame?   https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali-russia-internal/mali-and-russia-restructure-their-security-partnership-what-end

Observer Research Foundation. (2025, June 17). Wagner's final chapter in Africa. https://www.orfonline.org/research/wagner-s-final-chapter-in-africa

Opondo, P. (2023). The limits of aid conditionality in Africa's fragile states. Chatham House Research Paper.

RAND Corporation. (2025, June 12). The Wagner Group is leaving Mali. But Russian mercenaries aren't. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/06/the-wagner-group-is-leaving-mali-but-russian-mercenaries.html

Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. (2022, December). Revista IEEE, Número 20 (English Edition). Ministerio de Defensa de España. https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2077206/Revista+IEEE.-+Num.+20.-+Diciembre+2022.ingles.pdf/eab77c69-c618-9619-9158-1e1aa7001692?t=17169006172201

Shinn, D. H. (2023). Russia and China in Africa: Competition and cooperation in the Sahel. *African Affairs*, 122(488), 123-146. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adac001

South China Morning Post. (2024, February 20). China eyes Niger's uranium and energy sector. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3254566/china-eyes-nigers-uranium-energy-sector

The Africa Report. (2024, February 9). Sahel: Public opinion divided on new alliances. https://www.theafricareport.com/332456/sahel-public-opinion-divided-on-new-alliances/

Wilen, N. (2025, April 16). *Silence in the Sahel does not Equal Stability*. Egmont Institute. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/silence-in-the-sahel-does-not-equal-stability/