

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND TUNISIAN
CIVIL SOCIETY AND HOW IT CAN SUPPORT THE EMERGING DEMOCRATIC
PARTICIPATION IN TRADE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION**

Najwa Akermi

Younes Boujelbene

Faculty of economic and management of Sfax – Tunisia

Abstract

In the two policy realms of economic liberalization and anti-corruption, this article investigates the extent to which the EU incorporates Tunisian civil society actors in bilateral political processes. It finds that, while the EU has made a significant commitment to more such interaction, there are still gaps between its discourses and practices. We see differences in both sectors and between countries. In Tunisia, civil society is considerably more actively involved in EU policymaking, thanks in part to the EU's adherence to several of the Tunisian government's red lines. Furthermore, when it comes to openness and anti-corruption, the EU is more inclined to involving civil society than when it comes to trade. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that EU interests on the former are better aligned with those of civil society than on the latter.

Keywords: democracy promotion; democratization; anti-corruption; trade negotiations; civil society.

Introduction

This paper examines how far the EU has made a concerted and consistent effort to successfully engage Tunisian civil society in bilateral and transnational political processes in order to strengthen their democratic agency. To that purpose, it investigates the nature and scope of ostensibly "holistic" EU democratic support programs in the region (European Council, 2019, p. 4). It also aims to contribute to the post-Arab revolutions literature by studying how the events of 2010–2011 have altered relations between Arab and European countries. In this regard, analysts believe that the EU's post-uprising programming has underlined the need of the EU engaging more closely with civil society rather than just with governments and state bureaucracy (Dumas (2016)).

This is the starting point for our article, which looks at how far such reforms have gone in practice. The study focuses on Tunisia, two Mediterranean countries with long-standing ties to Europe, particularly to their former colonial power, France. Both governments have been essentially pro-European and pro-Western since their independence, with primarily market-based outlooks and long-standing trade and cooperation connections with the EU.

As a result, following the Arab upheavals, they were among the first to be invited to negotiate Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with the EU, and they were given relatively large financial purses (Colombo & Voltolini, 2014). They have the closest sociocultural linkages to Europe among the EU's Southern neighbors, with robust civil society and elite networks crisscrossing the Mediterranean. Both countries have been significant targets of traditional democracy promotion efforts: Tunisia as a poster-boy for democratization since the early days of the worldwide democratization agenda, and Tunisia specifically since

the revolt of 2010–2011. Tunisia, on the other hand, is a case in point. The former is still a hybrid/semi-authoritarian regime, and the latter is still trying to establish its budding democracy. Furthermore, the degree to which Europe is interested in democratization differs in the two countries. Despite its long-standing democracy assistance programs, the EU supports Morocco's authoritarian stability while also backing Tunisia's democratic consolidation (Khakee 2019).

The focus of this article is on contacts between the EU and Moroccan/ Tunisian civil society in two areas: trade negotiations and international anti-corruption efforts. There are four reasons why these two topic areas were chosen. First, as will be detailed further below, they have been viewed as strategically and economically vital by both sides since the Arab Uprisings. Second, they fall outside of more "conventional" civil society advocacy topics including human rights, youth, gender, and social inclusion. Third, and as will be discussed further in the following, the importance of civil society involvement in these areas has been emphasized by all parties. Fourth and last, one is a 'harder' case and the other a 'easier' one. Even though the European side has stressed the importance of the involvement of civil society in recent trade negotiations, the merits and perils of interest representation in trade liberalization efforts constitute a deep, longstanding controversy. Meanwhile, involving civil society in anti-corruption efforts is usually seen as at least unproblematic, if not necessary and desirable. The comparative case studies concentrate on mechanisms established at the EU (as well as the Tunisian governments) for Tunisian civil society consultations and policy communication with EU entities, as well as civil society's impressions of these processes. They aim to respond to the following questions posed in the introduction to this special issue: What is the EU's strategy for interacting with Tunisian civil society? Is civil society representatives included in trade and anti-corruption policy consultations? Is inclusion selective or broad-based, if so? To what extent does non-state actors in the Southern Mediterranean feel (dis-)empowered by their contacts with the EU? In practice, how much say do they have in policy formulation? Is the EU using these actors for its own ends as a result of its practices? As a result, the case studies are intimately related to the subject of this special issue on practices - the daily, routine decisions about which interlocutors to reject and which to include, in what manner and to what extent. They also address and expand on the central concept introduced in this special issue, namely the extent and conditions for the projection of (democratic) norms in the everyday practice of interactions between states and foreign civil society actors on issue areas where both have interests to defend, beyond any donor-recipient relationship (Börzel (2021)).

Between May 2015 and April 2019, a total of 22 semi-structured interviews with EU officials as well as Tunisian civil society activists were conducted in Brussels, Tunis, Berlin, and over the phone. Civil society interviewees were chosen to represent a cross-section of significant Tunisian and Moroccan trade and anti-corruption actors. In addition, the case studies are based on a careful assessment of relevant papers, documents, and statements from the EU, Tunisian governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and press media. In theory, policy discussion is a top priority for the EU in its relations with civil society in the Arab world after the uprisings (European Commission, 2011). While such conversation has become more essential discursively, our contribution indicates that practice has lagged behind, though not universally. There are variances in policy areas, with the EU and its officials being more receptive to civil society input where it is expected to align with EU priorities. As a result, in the Tunisian

example, there is greater inclusion and dialogue on anticorruption than on trade. On trade, the limited contact that does take place appears to be aimed at informing civil society about EU policy and attempting to justify it by bringing activists on board after the fact. Country differences, on the other hand, are equally essential. Tunisian civil society activists have a lot better access to the EU than their Moroccan counterparts. Unlike women and human rights, where the EU is more amenable to working with Moroccan civil society organizations, corruption and trade (not least in the case of Western Sahara) are too politically contentious. As a result, while the EU has become more open to societal actors in Tunisia in particular, its own interests – such as its desire to maintain cordial relations with Tunisian governments and conclude trade agreements with them – continue to set some, and at times rather strict, boundaries.

We examine the relevance of these two concerns in post-Arab uprising Mediterranean politics after quickly examining the relevant literature to highlight the scarcity of research concentrating on CSO inclusion in trade negotiations and anti-corruption measures. Following these sections is a summary of current EU-Tunisian trade and anti-corruption measures, as well as the extent to which they prioritize civil society participation.

Having thus set the scenario, the two ensuing parts assess the involvement of Tunisian civil society actors in trade negotiations and anti-corruption policy development conducted by the EU and the two Southern Mediterranean states.

Moving beyond the donor-recipient focus

A large amount of research has looked at the impact of donors, particularly the EU, on the structure of civil society in countries that have received democracy aid. Notably, this literature has highlighted and challenged a tendency known as 'NGOization' (Jad, 2007), in which nonprofits adopt a technocratic and non-political 'service-delivery' approach, focused on how to effectively implement donors' wishes in order to secure additional funding.

This has resulted in the growth of "briefcase NGOs" (Dicklitch (2004)), or groups whose leadership and personnel are highly skilled, urban, and possibly foreign – and who may have little interaction with the people they profess to serve and advocate for (Henderson, 2002). Thus, EU assistance for civil society reflects a goal to make civil society groups more capable implementers of EU initiatives, rather than a drive to make civil society organizations more outspoken advocates for democratic reform (Wetzel & Orbie, 2012).

Hobson & Kuri (2012) refers to this as 'neoliberal governmentality,' in which the EU promotes rights-based CSOs, but only those who promote what the EU considers to be the 'correct' kind of norms and practices. These occurrences have also been reported in Tunisia, in their respective contexts. The provision of far greater cash to NGOs than to the formal political arena has been challenged as part of international support for Tunisia's transition (Yerkes & Muasher (2017)). As a result (Bhatt et al. (2019)) diagnoses the rise of a "NGO business" that has transformed "resistance into a well-mannered, sensible, salaried, nine-to-five job rather than a true challenge to the system." Parts of civil society have been questioned as to whether they have been depoliticized, limiting themselves to implementing the agendas and preferences of donor states and organizations, changing civic involvement from an idealist vocation into a lucrative career path (Weilandt, 2019). However, research on how the EU or other donors interact with civil society actors outside of the donor-recipient relationship is scarce. Some study focuses at how NGOs and individual people are included in the EU's domestic

policymaking process (Dumont et al. 2013), but the EU's non-financial involvement with non-EU groups has gotten a lot of attention (de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Similarly, there are few studies on civil society participation in trade negotiations (Lederman, (2016)). Existing research looks at civil society participation in general, rather than separating European and non-European organizations. The two main studies (Dür & De Bièvre, 2007; Lederman, (2016)) both conclude that access and inclusion have increased in recent decades, with the EU serving as a poster-boy in this regard, according to Hannah (2016, p. 2):

Among major trading powers, the European Union (EU) stands out for its significant and dramatic response to new demands for access and participation. Non-state actors, including economic actors like business and industry associations and noneconomic actors like NGOs have seen sustained, aggregate improvements in access and participation in the external trade policy-making process since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round. They do, however, come to the conclusion that, while access and participation improve process legitimacy, they rarely have an impact on policy shape. Because these studies take a broad perspective, they don't tell us much about civil society's role in trade negotiations between the EU and its southern neighbors. Some studies have looked at earlier trade negotiations with a focus on civil society participation.

Gautney et al. (2009) demonstrates how the EU was able to leverage the Moroccan government system's non-democratic and non-consultative nature to its advantage during the 1992–1995.

A growing body of literature exists on the role of civil society in the fight against corruption. Work in this area emphasizes that fighting corruption is essentially a societal shift and citizens forming coalitions to strive for universal values, rather than a procedural or technical endeavor including legal and institutional change. External actors, it is claimed, should work with such civil society initiatives – carefully and sensitively – in order to achieve progress – which has so far been scarce in international anti-corruption efforts (Drapalova et al. (2019); Mungiu-Pippidi & Dusu (2011)). However, specific contributions to EU anti-corruption efforts in the Southern neighbourhood have once again paid little attention to civil society, instead emphasizing that the current EU support format focuses on institution and capacity building (Warkotsch, 2017). A word on how we define civil society, which is known for being "conceptually hazy and experimentally difficult to capture" (Khakee & Weilandt (2021)).

We define civil society, in the words of Heinrich & Hodess (2011) and (Scholte 2002), as a space between state, market, and family "where voluntary associations intentionally seek to shape the rules [in terms of specific policies, more general norms, and deeper social structures] that govern one or the other aspect of social life." It precludes organizations seeking public office or commercial profit on a practical level. Environmental movements, ethnic/regional lobbies, faith-based groups of various types, human rights NGOs, labour unions, local community groups, philanthropic foundations, professional bodies, think tanks, academic institutions, or women's and youth organizations are examples of registered and non-registered organizations of various political/societal persuasions and goals.

Trade and anti-corruption: Central and contentious in post-Uprising politics

Following the Arab upheavals, trade liberalization and anti-corruption policies were both high on the Euro-Mediterranean agenda. Despite their importance, both topics have quite diverse perceptions on both sides of the Mediterranean. From the perspective of the North, they are part of a renewed European focus on stability. 'The EU's own stability is based on democracy,

human rights, the rule of law, and economic openness,' according to a key document. 'The new ENP will prioritize stability as its core political objective in this mandate' (European Commission, 2015). Freer trade, according to EU reasoning, is a major component of economic openness, and anti-corruption is an integral part of effective rule of law and the promotion of a solid business climate, all of which are essential for economic progress.

The two policy domains are similarly essential from a Tunisian perspective, however the perspectives are not always the same: in both situations, the justice aspect is more prominent. Corruption has been at the heart of popular uprisings in Tunisia, and was a driving force behind the 2011 upheavals. Tunisians were particularly vociferous in obtaining international support for the restitution of funds looted by the former regime following the revolt (Åström et al. (2011)). Economic rights violations, such as corruption, are part of the mandate of Tunisia's transitional justice apparatus, the Instance Vérité et Dignité (Belhassine, 2015). Corruption has also been high on Tunisia's agenda as a result of transitional political instability in the aftermath of the revolt (International Crisis Group, 2016). Corruption, both petty and large, has been a recurring concern in Tunisia for decades, especially since 2011. As a result, the updated Moroccan constitution, which was ratified in 2012, made public integrity a major aspect (El Mesbahi, 2013).

As a result, policymakers on both sides of the Mediterranean have emphasized the importance of combating corruption in various international fora (Hibou & Tozy, 2009), signing up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (which includes language on corruption) and the Open Government Partnership, and ratifying the United Nations Convention Against Corruption. Anticorruption has thus had important international dimensions, despite not being as intrinsically international as trade, both because it frequently involves parties from multiple states and because its proceeds are frequently hidden abroad, as well as because efforts to combat it have increasingly moved to the international arena in recent years. While less contentious in theory than trade (try finding a politician or civil society activist who publicly supports corruption), policies have been hard-fought and often acrimonious in practice, which explains our focus.

In the Southern Mediterranean, on the other hand, trade liberalization has a tumultuous history. As the Common Agricultural Policy evolved, the EU adopted different policies, including growing protectionism against vital Maghrebi commodities (G. White, 2001). In the ensuing decades, further trade (re-)liberalization accords with Tunisia must be viewed against this backdrop. The current EU-Tunisia Association Agreement, which went into effect in 1998, is "limited to the progressive eradication of customs tariffs on manufactured goods and minor concessions for agricultural product trade" (European Commission, 2016).

Because of the high levels of competition in Tunisia and Morocco, trade liberalization is an interesting case study. Furthermore, the EU views trade liberalization not primarily through an economic lens — the two Southern neighbors contribute for just around 1.6 % of EU foreign trade — but rather through the perspective of political stability (Van der Loo, 2016). As a result, it's even more important to look at the role of players who help the trade negotiation process gain political legitimacy. Similarly, the European Commission and European Parliament's efforts to ensure the EU-Moroccan agricultural trade agreement's ongoing validity to Western Sahara in the aftermath of the CJEU judgements slamming it down are particularly interesting from a participation aspect. Consultations with the people of Western Sahara were vital, as one

of the key reasons for the CJEU's rejection of the EU-Moroccan agricultural trade agreement's application was that the Sahrawi had not given their approval.

Post-Uprising Euro-Mediterranean trade negotiations and anti-corruption initiatives

The EU's ongoing push for trade liberalization has resulted in some Southern Mediterranean countries being encouraged to negotiate DCFTAs. This follows the model of earlier DCFTA agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Gill (2016)). As a result of the Arab upheavals, trade negotiations with Tunisia began in October 2015. Four rounds of negotiations have taken place in Tunisia, with no clear end date in sight.

The European Union and Tunisia shall maintain a high level of transparency and communication with civil society, both European and Tunisian, in DCFTA negotiations, according to the EU's official discourse. The publishing of the European Union's initial negotiating papers demonstrates that both parties are receptive to appeals from civil society on both sides to participate in the negotiation process. Throughout the negotiation process, they are also prepared to maintain an open and inclusive conversation with members of civil society and other stakeholders.

This echoes a strong emphasis on civil society inclusion in the relevant European Parliament (EP) resolution, which emphasizes that Tunisian civil society should be closely involved in trade negotiations, that clear procedures should be put in place to ensure this, and that the agreement signed should alleviate its concerns, given its crucial role during the transition period. Because this was a demand from Tunisian civil society, the EP also required extensive impact evaluations with input from Tunisian specialists, as well as a possible ex post facto examination of the socio-economic consequences of the 1995 Association Agreement (European Parliament, 2016). Thus, in this example, consultation was one of only two overarching goals, rather than one of several in a complex negotiation process. In the area of anti-corruption, collaboration between the EU and Tunisia has taken the form of bilateral cooperation objectives outlined in Action Plans and other bilateral instruments. Support for Tunisian efforts to repatriate illicit funds and property acquired by Ben Ali and members of his family and frozen in EU nations is included in the EU-Tunisia Action Plan for 2013–2017. However, nothing in this important paper mentions the role of civil society in the battle against corruption. However, nothing in this important paper mentions the role of civil society in the battle against corruption. However, Tunisia's 2017–2020 Single Support Framework (SSF), which includes the fight against corruption as a key goal, specifically mentions people' and civil society involvement. A comparable, but more thorough, chapter on the fight against corruption can be found in the EU-Morocco Action Plan for 2013–2017. It addresses the UN Convention Against Corruption's implementation, as well as the importance of European principles and norms in this regard. It also includes a rather comprehensive list of anti-corruption legislative, judicial, administrative, technological, and policy measures. This list contains, among other things, "reinforcement of civil society participation in the prevention of corruption."

Involvement of Tunisian civil society actors in trade negotiations

The EU's campaign for trade liberalization between the Mediterranean's two beaches has been met with skepticism among North Africa's civil society. This is based on both ideology

(activists tend to be economically left-leaning) and personal experiences with the EU's current trade regime, which is typically viewed as unfavorable, as mentioned in the previous section. In Tunisia, there are also broader misgivings of European goals, which are sometimes rooted in the country's former colonial connection with France.

Furthermore, even when the EU and its officials do consult civil society on current or potential future trade deals, the civil society actors participating frequently regard such involvement as a window-dressing exercise. This is partly due to the meetings' style, in which EU representatives explain what they aim to do and why to invited activists rather than genuinely listening to their concerns and opinions (see also Weilandt, this special issue).

As mentioned in the previous section, civil society actors have become something of a catchphrase in the EU in recent years. The EU has committed to taking civil society's views and inputs seriously when making decisions, particularly in Tunisia, where it regards civil society as a critical ally in aiding the country's democratic transition. In the case of the consultation with civil society in Western Sahara, the same is true, but for quite different reasons. However, when it comes to commerce – perhaps the area of cooperation where EU policy has the most direct influence on Tunisians – such rhetoric does not necessarily equate to meaningful civil society participation and dialogue. Part of the reason for this is political interest (particularly in the case of Western Sahara), and part of it is deeply rooted discourses on the benefits of free trade.

Tunisia

Much of Tunisian civil society's current perspective is influenced by the history of EU-Tunisian trade relations. The EU's starting point was, and continues to be, that trade liberalization benefits both sides economically, and hence serves as a tool to aid Tunisia's democratic transition. Many activists, on the other hand, believe that earlier trade agreements under the EU-Tunisian Association Agreement mostly benefited the ruling elites while affecting the general populace. As a result, they believe the EU's consultations should be limited to informing and clarifying the DCFTA to invited activists. That was stressed by one activist. We are not starting from scratch; we have a history of economic and financial cooperation with the EU. So, before we start new discussions, it's a good idea to review our previous experiences. To comprehend and avoid making the same mistakes.

Tunisian civil society does not consider the EU's offer to be acceptable or beneficial. It is agreed that the EU's offer recognizes the uneven character of the relationship by proposing asymmetric trade liberalization. In other words, Tunisian enterprises are expected to get instant access to EU markets, whilst EU firms will have to wait for a period during which Tunisian firms will have the opportunity to become competitive. This, however, does not persuade all skeptics. As one researcher and activist put it:

We made experiences with transition periods. They offer a transition period, they think it will be enough to get our sectors competitive. The experience shows that wasn't the case for the industry, which had an adjustment period of 12 years. It didn't change, it vanished.

There is widespread concern that Tunisia's agriculture sector may suffer the same fate. Agriculture in Europe is not just extremely efficient, but it also receives significant EU subsidies that Tunisian competitors do not. Tunisian farmers, on the other hand, are going to struggle to meet European requirements. As a result, it is believed that liberalizing the market may result in fierce domestic competition, with Tunisian farmers potentially losing their ability

to export to EU countries. As a result, civil society activists have branded the EU's proposals as "abusive" and "fatal" to local farmers. The Tunisian General Labour Union UGTT warned of the DCFTA's "severe ramifications" for the Tunisian economy and pledged to organize a national fight against it. Tunisian civil society's opposition to the DCFTA, according to Scott, J & Scott, B (2020), is "similar to the movement against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in Germany and Europe."

Because of the EU's apparent lack of flexibility and adaptability to Tunisian demands, it is seen as a paternalistic and patronizing player rather than a partner operating on an equal footing. One Tunisian trade unionist summed up his experiences with EU trade dialogues by saying, "We explain how this works, take it or leave it." Instead of listening to civil society's concerns, the EU is said to rely on studies conducted by consulting firms, which are seen as mindlessly supporting the EU position rather than providing an independent analysis.

Furthermore, when EU discussions with civil society on the DCFTA are held in Tunis, activists sometimes get the impression that their feedback is not communicated up the hierarchy or that it has no impact if it is. It is worth noting, however, that Brussels officials are frequently present at least at the tripartite meetings that precede the EU-Tunisian subcommittee sessions that govern the Association Agreement (see also Weilandt, Wolff, this special issue). And, according to an EU delegation official, they do take notice: 'It's taken into account.' Particularly if it's something specific, something hot, something new, since everything civil society says is constantly monitored.' Intra-institutional issues, particularly in the case of commerce, also have a role. Different actors within the EU's institutional structure do not always follow the same reasoning or consult with one another on a regular basis. The EU Commission's Directorate General for Trade (DG Trade) in particular has a distinct viewpoint.

Civil society, in particular, sees DG Trade, which is in charge of the DCFTA discussions, as technocratic, overconfident in its own ideas, and unwilling to adjust them significantly to local situations. One activist phrased it this way:

We don't know what to expect from the Economic Commission officials (sic). They are government officials who advocate for policies that support the liberal viewpoint, based on a rationale. One can wish for people who are more open to debate, a little more nuanced, a little more modest – but they are dogmatic people who refuse to change.

Such opinions appear to be based on and reinforced by interactions with officials from the DG Trade. As part of a journey arranged by the left-leaning Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a team of civil society members visited EU institutions in spring 2019 to discuss the DCFTA. This includes a meeting with the DCFTA's main negotiator. He wasn't well-prepared for the meeting, according to one participant, and he hadn't brought anything to take notes with him. As a result, he was viewed as being uninterested in the Tunisian guests' issues and viewpoints, and instead viewing the meeting as an educational session for the visitors – and as a politeness. Furthermore, he was either unable or unwilling to stay for an extended period of time. He began the discussion by speaking about himself, emphasizing his trade negotiations experience with Latin American and Southeast Asian countries. He appeared to be attempting to exploit these experiences to demonstrate his suitability for negotiating the Tunisian DCFTA. His Tunisian counterparts, on the other hand, were reinforced in their belief that the EU takes a "one size fits all" approach to external trade, with countries varying considerably in terms of geography and economic structure essentially being treated in the same way.

Various Tunisian civil society activists echoed these sentiments. One respondent went on to point out flaws in one of the EU's early draft negotiation offers as an example. According to him, the first plan provided to Tunisian officials appeared to be plagiarized from a South Korean draft. 'They hadn't managed to replace it entirely, so in several places it said South Korea instead of Tunisia,' he explained. While activists viewed DG Trade as being motivated by what they called "neoliberal ideology," they were more positive about other EU officials and institutions. In the case of the aforementioned meeting, the EEAS personnel whom the civil society group saw were seen as much more positive and willing to listen to the activists' viewpoints. Similarly, discussions with MEPs were regarded well, however it should be emphasized that the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a centrist think tank, had scheduled meetings with members of the Socialists and Democrats faction. These more favorable attitudes, on the other hand, are a more widespread sentiment. One activist said.

The European Parliament, in contrast to the EU Commission, is more constructive, more understanding, more open to talks, and even more prepared to listen to our concerns and fears. They also make an effort to help us. However, criticism is not limited to the EU. Activists not only criticize the Tunisian government's lack of transparency in trade discussions, but also question its competency in dealing with European counterparts and accuse it of allowing itself to be exploited. Nonetheless, while many activists are unified in their skepticism of or outright hostility to the DCFTA, civil society appears to have provided scant input into their view of a suitable trading partnership. Some organizations, such as Solidar Tunisie and Euromed Rights, have conducted research and released analyses on the deal (Johansson-Nogués & Rivera Escartin (2020)). Many of these analyses, however, focus on the impact of a deal whose specific shape and implications are unknown at this moment. A common line of criticism from the European side – but also from within Tunisian civil society – is Tunisia's perceived lack of meaningful and practical counterproposals. This criticism is intended at activists and researchers working in the field of trade liberalization, as well as the Tunisian government officials involved.

These issues, both with the EU's strategy to engage with civil society and with Tunisian civil society in general, were mirrored in the EU's 2016 online public consultation on the DCFTA. It was open to anyone who was interested in joining, but it only garnered 30 responses from Tunisian stakeholders, including eight NGOs. Each stakeholder was asked to answer 96 questions in total, although many did not finish the entire survey, with the more technical questions yielding low responses. This indicates that the EU's approach to consulting Tunisian civil society is not always appropriate. According to Weilandt (this special issue), the way the EU organizes meetings with civil society, the technical nature of the documents it provides, the short notice on which inputs are requested, as well as language barriers, various actors are excluded from truly participating in the consultation process.

Involvement of Tunisian civil society actors in anti-corruption

While civil society activists in Tunisia frequently clash with the EU over trade policy, both sides are in principle more unified in the battle against corruption, despite differing underlying reasons. While the EU supports civil society's ethical objectives for fighting corruption, it also sees such efforts as a prerequisite for the formation of a well-functioning market economy. Although economic performance motivates civil society players, they place a greater focus on transparency and anti-corruption as a foundation for social justice. Though the EU and Tunisian

protestors have identical anti-corruption goals, they disagree on how to achieve them and how they should be prioritized over other political goals. The level to which the EU is willing to press each country's government on anti-corruption differs, as will be seen in the next sections, as does its readiness to interact with civil society players involved in the issue. There is significantly less engagement in Morocco, owing to the fact that corruption is a considerably more sensitive subject for the country's administration and the EU's adherence to its red lines.

Tunisia

I-Watch and Al-Bawsala, two of Tunisia's most famous civil society organizations dedicated to transparency and anti-corruption, have received significant EU financing for their efforts. They do, however, tend to meet with EU officials on a frequent basis outside of the financing connection. To begin, official interactions take place in the context of tripartite consultations organized by the EU delegation prior to the above-mentioned EU-Tunisian subcommittee sessions. The general consensus on these sessions is positive, while certain concerns about their format have been highlighted. Meetings in Tunis are mainly held on working days and during working hours. Because the EU delegation does not cover any expenditure, discussions are generally controlled by Tunisian activists. Due to time constraints, the format itself provides participants limited time, especially if a meeting is well-attended. 'Of course, it's not an ideal process because it takes three hours and everyone just speaks for two or three minutes,' says a regular attendee from Al Bawsala. It does, however, afford access to those who attend that they would not normally have. As a member of the same team puts it:

I'm not sure if it's advantageous. It's crucial for us to be there because it's the only chance we have to face the government and the EU about the priorities they've agreed on - what's been done and what hasn't. As a result, it's a form of shadow reporting. What's terrible is that in this tripartite discussion dynamic, the EU has a stronger voice than our own government. So it makes me wonder if it is truly healthy for the government to be forced to sit down in a formal process and demonstrate a minimum level of accountability to civil society by the largest donor. This is in line with a broader view of the EU's role in Tunisia's democratic transition. While there is less hostility to the EU influencing Tunisia's government than there is in the areas of trade or structural reform, there is still apprehension about foreign involvement. Foreign pressure is not totally unwanted in the absence of a sufficiently serious commitment by the Tunisian administration to combat corruption. Activists, on the other hand, tend to insist that external players take a backseat even when the EU and civil society have similar goals.

Other opportunities, including less formal interactions, supplement the engagement in the context of the tripartite consultations. 'When we need to press for something, we merely talk to [four EU officials' first names] from the delegation.' 'It's all really casual.' In the context of these less formal meetings, EU officials may be able to offer more practical assistance by directing campaigners to national ambassadors who may be prepared to help. Contract agents, rather than EEAS officers or seconded diplomats from member states' foreign services, are frequently the points of contact for civil society in the EU delegation.

Some of them have even worked in non-governmental organizations before, thus they are sympathetic to civil society and its advocacy. Institutional and political concerns and limits may hinder EU officials from assisting activists directly at times. The EU delegation's involvement in routinely coordinating with EU member states' embassies in Tunis, on the other hand, provides its officials with an understanding of their activities and preferences. As a result,

EU authorities may refer activists to diplomats from those member states' embassies who may be ready and able to assist them with specific difficulties.

So the Swedish embassy would handle certain matters, while the German ambassador would handle others. And we get a lot of aid in that regard because they know where we stand and who is willing to take on particular topics, which is quite beneficial to us.

The contacts are generally regarded as positive, with the EU side treating transparency and anti-corruption advocates fairly. 'They typically accept civil society feedback and take it into consideration,' said one I-Watch staff member. Al Bawsala's senior staff member noted not only the strong working relationship, but also a certain knowledge of the institutional constraints their EU delegation interlocutors face:

To be honest, it usually goes well with the delegation, and it's been a pleasant experience. Of course, we do not agree with all EU policies, but we feel very much heard when we speak with members of the delegation. Now, just because you have the impression that you are being heard does not guarantee that your complaints, worries, or requests will be taken into account. But, even in informal processes, there is generally some level of accountability where we receive a clear explanation of why it isn't going to work and what their constraints and limits of action are, given their mandate as well as the broader dynamic of the member states, and so on.

Conclusions

Following the Arab uprisings of 2011, the EU pledged to work more closely with civil society actors in the area. While the EU has stated its commitment to more engagement, there are still gaps between its discourses and realities. However, the disparities vary widely depending on the sector and country. After studying EU engagement with civil society in Tunisia and Morocco on both anticorruption and trade, it is obvious that engagement is strongest in Tunisia on anticorruption and lowest in Morocco on anticorruption. Overall, Tunisia's civil society is far more heavily involved in EU policy processes than Morocco's, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In Tunisia, civil society engagement takes several forms, but one that stands out is a more personal contact between EU representatives and activists, which allows for more casual dialogue. In Morocco, there is significantly less interaction in general, and informal participation is especially low. Because the EU does not want to disturb Morocco's regime or the country's status quo, it is more hesitant to assist civil society activism and prefers to focus on more 'uncontroversial' sectors, such as trade and anti-corruption.

Differences between the two sectors add to the total differences between the two countries. In the case of Tunisia, the EU is more amenable to genuinely involving civil society in anti-corruption efforts than in trade negotiations. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that EU interests on the one hand are increasingly aligned with those of civil society on the other. While civil society might be a further impediment to trade liberalization, which even governments are not always convinced of these days, activists can serve as a local partner in the fight against corruption, which the EU emphasizes as a vital goal. In Morocco, the fight against corruption is a serious threat to the political status quo, especially given how difficult it is to consider it as an apolitical, technical exercise of creating capacity and new technocratic institutions following years of failures in this field. Consultations with Saharawi communities on fisheries and agricultural trade are also a risky exercise for the EU, since it crosses another Moroccan red line. As a result, there is little interaction between EU and Moroccan civil society beyond the donor-recipient relationship, and the consultation process with Saharawi

organizations, while remarkable on paper, was far less so in practice.

Reference

- Åström, J., Granberg, M., & Khakee, A. (2011). Apple pie–Spinach metaphor: Shall e-democracy make participatory planning more wholesome?. *Planning Practice and Research*, 26(5), 571-586.
- BELHASSINE, O. (2015). L'Uggt est traverse par une crise d'autorité. *La Presse de Tunisie*, 20-5.
- Bhatt, D. L., Steg, P. G., Mehta, S. R., Leiter, L. A., Simon, T., Fox, K., ... & Goldberg, R. (2019). Ticagrelor in patients with diabetes and stable coronary artery disease with a history of previous percutaneous coronary intervention (THEMIS-PCI): a phase 3, placebo-controlled, randomised trial. *The Lancet*, 394(10204), 1169-1180.
- Börzel, T. A. (2021). EU democracy projection: Does the EU practice what it preaches?. *Mediterranean Politics*, 1-10.
- Colombo, S., & Voltolini, B. (2014). 'Business as Usual' in EU Democracy Promotion Towards Morocco?. *L'Europe en formation*, (1), 41-57.
- de Zúñiga, H. G., Huber, B., & Strauß, N. (2018). Social media and democracy. *Profesional de la Información*, 27(6), 1172-1180.
- Dicklitch, S., & Rice, H. (2004). The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and faith-based NGO aid to Africa. *Development in Practice*, 14(5), 660-672.
- Drapalova, E., Mungiu-Pippidi, A., Palifka, B. J., & Vrushi, J. (2019). Corruption and the Crisis of Democracy. *Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer*, March, 6.
- Dumas, M. J. (2016). My brother as "Problem" neoliberal governmentality and interventions for black young men and boys. *Educational policy*, 30(1), 94-113.
- Dumont, P., Kies, R., & Poirier, P. (2013). Luxembourg. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union* (pp. 244-268). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Dür, A., & De Bièvre, D. (2007). Inclusion without influence? NGOs in European trade policy. *Journal of public policy*, 27(1), 79-101.
- El Mesbahi, K. (2013). La Prévention de la corruption au Maroc, entre discours et réalité. *Pouvoirs*, (2), 83-97.
- Gautney, H. D., Smith, N., Dahbour, O., & Dawson, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Democracy, States, and the Struggle for Social Justice*. Routledge.
- Gill, S. (Ed.). (2016). *Globalization, democratization and multilateralism*. Springer.
- Heinrich, F., & Hodess, R. (2011). Measuring corruption. *Handbook of global research and practice in corruption*, 18-33.
- Hobson, C., & Kurki, M. (Eds.). (2012). *The conceptual politics of democracy promotion* (Vol. 20). Routledge.
- Jad, I. (2007). NGOs: Between buzzwords and social movements. *Development in Practice*, 17(4-5), 622-629.
- Johansson-Nogués, E., & Rivera Escartin, A. (2020). Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in) consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model. *Democratization*, 27(8), 1376-1393.
- Khakee, A. (2019). European democracy promotion in the Southern Mediterranean.
- Khakee, A., & Weilandt, R. (2021). Supporting democratic participation beyond democracy promotion? EU Relations with Moroccan and Tunisian civil society in the areas of trade and

anti-corruption. *Mediterranean Politics*, 1-27.

Lederman, S. (2016). Philosophy, politics and participatory democracy in Hannah Arendt's political thought. *History of Political Thought*, 37(3), 480-508.

Mungiu-Pippidi, A., & Dusu, A. E. (2011). Civil society and control of corruption: Assessing governance of Romanian public universities. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(5), 532-546..

Scholte, J. A. (2002). Civil society and democracy in global governance. *Global Governance*, 8(3), 281-304.

Scott, J. M., & Scott, B. J. (2020). Ideas and Interests: European Democracy Aid and the Democracy-Security Dilemma, 1990-2010. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 9(1), 61-81.

Warkotsch, J. A. N. A. (2017). Tunisia: great expectations. *The Anticorruption Report 4*, 104.

Weilandt, R. (2019). Divisions within post-2011 Tunisia's secular civil society. *Democratization*, 26(6), 959-974.

Wetzel, A., & Orbie, J. (2012). The EU's Promotion of External Democracy: In search of the plot. *CEPS policy brief*, (281).

Yerkes, S., & Muasher, M. (2017). *Tunisia's corruption contagion: A transition at risk* (Vol. 25, pp. 1-40). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.