



European Contestations of EU Democracy Support in Tunisia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the narratives of contestation of the European Union's democracy support practices in Tunisia, focusing on perspectives from both insiders and outsiders within the EU. The study covers thirteen motions for resolution in the European Parliament, six parliamentary debates, and more than forty articles and op-eds produced by human rights organizations, news outlets and think tanks. The timeframe spans from 2021, following Kais Saïed's power grab, to 2023, in the aftermath of the EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

The paper relies on qualitative discourse analysis and identifies two distinct narrative frameworks. The first, labelled as incremental narrative of contestation, calls for a refinement and intensification of EU democracy support to halt further democratic backsliding. The second frames the EU itself as partly responsible for Tunisia's democratic regression, criticising its policies for failing to deliver the expected positive impact on the country's democratic standards.

The findings show that while progressive contestations have shifted from framing Saïed as the primary "villain" to increasingly holding the EU accountable, it is pragmatic narratives that prevail in EU decision-making spaces and shape external action. The EU's stance has shifted decisively toward pragmatism, prioritising security imperatives and regime stability over democracy promotion – a trend epitomised by the MoU. Rather than triggering a reassessment of democracy support, this period reinforced the perception of democracy promotion as ineffective in advancing EU strategic goals, which are now pursued through realpolitik-oriented engagement. This recalibration, driven by conservative forces and reinforced by member-state leadership, has marginalised civil society voices, raising fundamental questions about the actual influence of contestation in shaping EU external governance.

Introduction

Among all the North African and Middle Eastern countries that underwent a process of political renewal in 2011, Tunisia emerged at first as the sole success story. The country distinguished itself through active popular participation, the swift establishment of formal democratic structures, and the relative absence of violent turmoil or immediate democratic backsliding, especially when compared to other nations undergoing political upheavals in the region during the early 2010s (Johansson-Nogués and Rivera Escartin, 2020). The European Union (EU) welcomed Tunisia's democratic efforts with great interest and focused its resources on supporting the country's democratic transition in a region marked by significant instability ([European Commission, *Partnerships for Democracy*](#)).

The wave of political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East in the early 2010s, by the EU's own admission, represented an opportunity to rethink its approach to "democracy support", which had been established in the post-Cold War period and intensified in the Southern Neighbourhood through programmes such as the 1994 European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the 2000 ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (also known as the Cotonou Agreement), and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Slocum-Bradley and Bradley, 2013). Prior to these events, EU democratic support primarily consisted of technical assistance for formal democratic functions. However, this approach was often limited to electoral assistance and capacity building, without fully addressing the specific needs of partner countries, which may have constrained the overall effectiveness of EU democracy support (Huber, 2008).

The EU immediate response to the Arab Spring was to launch the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in 2011 ([European Commission, *Partnerships for Democracy*](#)), which was initially

focused on Tunisia, Egypt, and other ENP countries undergoing transitions. This framework introduced a more explicit conditionality mechanism, offering increased financial assistance, trade concessions, and mobility agreements in exchange for tangible democratic reforms. The EU sought to differentiate this phase from previous efforts by linking democracy support more directly to economic and governance incentives, a principle further reinforced in the 2011 revision of the ENP, which explicitly incorporated the “more for more” principle (European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy*)—rewarding countries that demonstrated commitment to democratic reforms. As Tunisia’s transition progressed, the EU adapted its instruments accordingly, expanding its engagement beyond short-term support to more structured and long-term cooperation mechanisms. The EU-Tunisia Partnership Priorities (2013–2017) (European External Action Service, *Plan EU-Tunisia Action Plan 2013-2017*) and its corresponding Action Plan marked the beginning of a second phase, shifting the focus towards institutional reforms and capacity-building efforts. This phase represented a more tailored, country-specific approach aimed at fostering decentralisation, judicial independence, and civil society participation. Central to this effort was the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which allocated €31 million to support governance improvements and institutional strengthening, ensuring a more structured and sustainable democratic transition.

Over the years, cooperation between the EU and Tunisia in the security sector has steadily gained momentum. This shift reflects a broader pattern in the EU’s engagement with third countries, particularly with its southern neighbours and their regional counterparts, where security concerns have increasingly shaped bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Pinto Arena, 2024). This approach reflects a recurring dilemma in EU external relations: balancing long-term objectives, such as democratic advancement, with short-term priorities, often centred on ensuring stability in third countries. In framing issues such as migration and terrorism, the EU has predominantly pursued an approach centred on strengthening Tunisia’s security sector through targeted measures, strategic funding, and institutional cooperation (Maryon, 2024)⁸. This strategy has allowed the EU to externalise the management of these challenges, particularly in response to mounting pressure from far-right parties and the inability to develop a unified and collective migration policy within its member states (Kaunert et al., 2022). At the same time, as evidenced during past cooperation with the Ben Ali regime, security collaboration has also provided local governments with greater stability, reinforcing their capacity to exert control over civil society and suppress political opposition (Cassarino, 2014). These efforts were explicitly outlined in the EU-Tunisian strategic priorities for the period 2018–2020 (EU-Tunisia Association Council, Decision (EU) 2018/1792 of 9 July). However, in many cases, the emphasis on enhancing the efficiency of the security sector has come at the expense of democratic principles in Tunisia, particularly in relation to human rights protections, as will be further explored in this paper. The discursive narratives surrounding the European Union’s role in supporting democracy in Tunisia have revealed a continuous tension between two above mentioned dominant frames. While the EU has maintained a rhetorical commitment to democratic values, the way this commitment has been articulated within public and institutional debates has shifted, reflecting underlying political and strategic considerations.

1 Framing the Democratic Backsliding in Tunisia

The democratic backsliding in Tunisia took place progressively. On 25 July 2021, President Kais Saïed, citing the government's failure to tackle corruption, took decisive action by suspending Parliament, removing the Prime Minister, and consolidating nearly all executive powers within his control (Yerkes and LaHood, 2022). In the following months, Saïed's centralisation of power took an increasingly

assertive trajectory: he extended control over the judiciary, cracked down on independent media, and restricted civil society organisations (Yerkes and Alhomoud, 2022). In addition to that, Saïed promoted a referendum to change the 2014 Constitution, introducing a presidential system that grants the President full control over both the executive and judicial branches, while significantly reducing the Parliament’s authority (Amnesty International, 2022).

This paper examines the discursive contestation surrounding the EU’s democracy support practices in Tunisia, focusing on perspectives from both insiders and outsiders within the EU. The analysis is grounded in the conceptual framework provided by the Working Paper on Democracy Learning Loop Concept (2024), developed within the SHAPEDEM-EU project. To achieve this, the paper analyses thirteen motions for resolutions in the European Parliament, six parliamentary debates, and more than forty articles and op-eds from relevant human rights organisations, news outlets, and think tanks. The timeframe under analysis spans from 2021, following the initial stages of Saïed’s democratic backsliding, to 2023, in the aftermath of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the EU and Tunisia. Structuring the timeline in this way enables a comprehensive examination of the evolution of contestation practices, beginning with the political crisis triggered by Saïed, followed by a phase of reflection and culminating in the signing of the MoU, which signals an implicit EU stance on Tunisia’s democratic trajectory. This study employs qualitative discourse analysis, focusing on two distinct narrative frameworks. The first, referred to as the incremental narrative of contestation, reflects the perspective that the EU should continue its democracy support measures, making refinements without fundamentally altering its approach. The underlying message of this narrative is that the EU should intensify its efforts to prevent further democratic backsliding. The second framework consists of narratives that directly attribute responsibility to the EU for Tunisia’s democratic decline. From this perspective, actors argue that the deterioration of democratic standards is a direct consequence of the EU’s policies, which have failed to deliver the expected positive impact on Tunisia’s democratic framework. The findings will demonstrate that while contesting narratives from the progressive camp have shifted from framing Saïed as the villain to increasingly holding the European Union responsible for Tunisia’s democratic backsliding, it is the pragmatic contestations that gain traction within the EU’s decision-making space and ultimately shape its external actions.

2 The Incremental Narrative

2.1 Empowering Civil Society

In this initial phase of contestation, which emerged in October 2021 following President Saïed’s suspension of parliament, the debate centred on the EU’s need to reinforce its dialogue with Tunisian civil society. This approach was seen as essential for ensuring continuity in the EU’s democratic support, even in the face of Saïed’s actions. The Verts/ALE parliamentary group actively promoted this strategy, emphasising the importance of maintaining democratic engagement despite Tunisia’s evolving political landscape ([European Parliament, Motion for a Resolution B9-0524/2021](#)).

This position was further reinforced by calls for the resumption of the “Tripartite Dialogue” between the EU, Tunisian authorities, and civil society—an initiative designed to reaffirm civil society’s role as a counterbalance to Saïed’s growing authority ([European Parliament, Motion for a Resolution B9-0524/2021](#)). Within this framework, the EU’s narrative followed an incremental logic, portraying democracy as a shared objective between the EU and Tunisian civil society. The EU’s role was not fundamentally questioned but rather seen as requiring expansion to enhance its impact. Civil society was framed as the hero, entrusted with safeguarding democratic principles, while Saïed’s government was implicitly cast as the villain, obstructing democratic progress.

However, as the Tunisian crisis deepened, this initially optimistic narrative began to shift. A key turning point occurred on July 25, 2022, when Tunisia held a constitutional referendum promoted by President Saied following a two-month online public consultation. The proposed constitutional changes established a presidential system that granted the President full control over both the executive and judicial branches while significantly diminishing the authority of Parliament (Amnesty International, 2022). For this reason, in October 2022, during a parliamentary debate on Tunisia, Emmanuel Maurel, a member of the Verts/ALE group, reaffirmed the importance of supporting Tunisian civil society as a means of sustaining the EU's commitment to democracy ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2022/2869](#)). At the same time, he underscored the EU's limitations in effectively shaping the country's political trajectory. On one hand, he acknowledged the complexity of the situation, pointing to the Tunisian population's growing disillusionment and the potentially severe repercussions of imposing sanctions. On the other, he depicted the EU as lacking the capacity to intervene in a way that could meaningfully alter Tunisia's course of events ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2022/2869](#)).

By 2023, this trajectory of disillusionment continued, as emphasised by MEP Mounir Satouri (Verts/ALE) during another parliamentary debate, where he urged the EU to adopt a more proactive approach in addressing Tunisia's worsening democratic crisis ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2023/2556](#)). However, while criticisms of the EU's lack of strategic direction intensified, no clear alternative vision was articulated beyond the continued reliance on civil society. This shift in discourse reflects a broader tension between the EU's normative aspirations and its practical constraints: early discussions framed EU support as a necessary expansion of its role, while later interventions exposed the growing skepticism about its actual capacity to shape democratic outcomes in Tunisia.

2.2 Pragmatic Narrative

While the above-mentioned contestation emphasises the need for a stronger commitment to rule of law and democratic principles, an alternative perspective has emerged over time, prioritising Tunisia's stability for security and geopolitical reasons. This pragmatic approach suggests that a singular focus on democracy promotion may undermine the EU's broader interests in the Mediterranean region, particularly in managing migration, trade, and energy security.

Within this narrative of contestation, the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue is portrayed as the central moral of the story, envisioned as the key mechanism for stabilising Tunisia while maintaining the EU's influence in the region. This is particularly evident in Vincenzo Sofo's position (ECR), articulated in a 2021 parliamentary debate, where he called for a shared EU-Tunisia agenda centred on economic and security cooperation ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report of 2021/2903](#)). According to Sofo, framing the EU-Tunisia dialogue around these key issues was intended to prevent Tunisia from following Libya's trajectory—descending into instability and falling under the control of unspecified foreign powers that could weaken the EU's access to energy resources and security partnerships.

From this perspective, the villains are external actors seeking to increase their presence in Tunisia at the expense of the EU's influence. However, in some instances, the EU is portrayed as both a victim of external interferences and of its own missteps, particularly if its engagement with Tunisia remains excessively focused on democracy promotion while neglecting broader geopolitical imperatives.

This narrative was further reinforced in parliamentary debates in 2022 and 2023, particularly through Thierry Mariani's statements on behalf of the ID group. Here, Tunisia's stability is positioned as a prerequisite for safeguarding European interests, particularly in security and migration management. President Kais Saied is framed as the hero, undertaking the necessary task of restoring order in a fragile

and fragmented political system. In this context, democratic backsliding is not viewed as a failure but as a necessary corrective measure to rebuild state authority and ensure Tunisia's long-term stability ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2022/2869](#)).

Furthermore, the Islamist party Ennahda is explicitly cast as the villain, with its influence depicted as a destabilising force. In contrast, Saied's government is portrayed as actively working to combat Islamist influence and re-establish Tunisia's international financial relations, reinforcing his role as a stabilising force rather than an authoritarian threat ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2022/2869](#)).

A core argument underpinning this perspective is the rejection of Western democracy promotion as an effective model for Tunisia. Drawing on the failures of EU-backed interventions in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, this narrative presents democracy support as a disruptive and ultimately destabilising force that has contributed to regional chaos rather than sustainable ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2023/2556](#)).

3 Tunisia Backsliding with EU Complicity?

The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the European Union and Tunisia in 2023 marked a significant shift in EU-Tunisia relations. Framed as a strategic measure to enhance migration control, the agreement provided substantial financial assistance to Tunisia to curb irregular migration flows, aligning with the EU's broader policy of externalising border management ([European Commission, 2023 Memorandum of Understanding](#)). However, the agreement emerged in a politically fraught context. On one hand, the sharp increase in migrant arrivals in Lampedusa had reignited political pressure in Italy and across Europe, leading to calls for stronger cooperation with Southern Mediterranean states to contain irregular migration (European Council on Refugees and Exile, 2023)²⁶. On the other, serious human rights concerns arose as images circulated of Tunisian police forces violently expelling migrants into the desert along the Libyan border (Amara, 2023), accompanied by openly xenophobic rhetoric from President Kais Saied ([Amnesty International, 2023a](#)). This dual reality—growing political demands for stricter migration control in Europe and the evident violations of migrant rights in Tunisia—set the stage for an intense contestation of the MoU by multiple European political actors, particularly within the European Parliament. The debate reflected deeper tensions between the EU's geopolitical pragmatism and its normative commitment to human rights and democracy, questioning whether the agreement aligned with the Union's foundational principles or represented a capitulation to authoritarian pressures.

Within this framework, a notable shift in perspective can be observed among socialist and progressive members of the European Parliament regarding the situation in Tunisia. Prior to the signing of the MoU, debates were marked by a sense of optimism, with the EU still perceived as having the capacity to counter Saied's policies and support democracy through enhanced efforts ([European Parliament 2021; 2022; 2023; Verts/ALE Group, 2021](#)). However, following the signing of the MoU, the EU is increasingly portrayed as directly responsible for Tunisia's democratic backsliding, rather than as a force capable of mitigating it.

Firstly, the failure of past border externalisation policies was a key point of contention, particularly among Members of the S&D group such as Brando Benifei and Pietro Bartolo ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2023/2556](#)). They criticised the effectiveness of outsourcing migration control, drawing on past experiences in Libya, where similar agreements had failed to curb migration while leading to widespread human rights abuses. They warned that the EU-Tunisia agreement was repeating the same mistakes, reinforcing authoritarian governance without achieving tangible results.

Secondly, critics denounced the EU's direct complicity in Tunisia's authoritarian shift. By signing an agreement with no clear democratic or human rights conditionality, the EU was seen as providing financial and political support to a repressive system rather than using its leverage to demand governance reforms. At the same time, MEPs from the Verts/ALE group, including Tineke Strik and Mounir Satouri, alongside The Left's Malin Björk ([European Parliament, Verbatim Report 2023/2556](#)), framed the agreement as a betrayal of the EU's historical mission of democracy support. By endorsing inhumane pushbacks and legitimising Saied's regime, the EU was no longer acting as a democracy promoter but as an actor willing to compromise fundamental values for strategic gains.

The contestation of the EU-Tunisia MoU reflects a fundamental transformation in the discourse on EU democracy support. While earlier critiques ([European Parliament Verbatim Report 2021/2903](#), [2022/2869](#), [2023/2556](#); [Verts/ALE Group, 2021](#)) focused on the insufficiency or inefficacy of EU actions in fostering democracy, the current debate increasingly casts the EU as the villain in Tunisia's democratic decline. The EU is no longer portrayed as failing to do enough; it is now accused of doing harm, shifting from a benevolent but ineffective actor to an active enabler of authoritarian rule. This transformation underscores a broader crisis in the EU's external governance model, particularly in its Southern Neighbourhood. By prioritising security cooperation—particularly in reducing migration flows to Europe—as a precondition for engagement in other policy areas, the EU risks sidelining human rights and weakening institutional checks and balances. Tunisia serves as a clear example of this dynamic, which ultimately pushes recipient states further away from the democratic objectives that the EU claims to uphold in its normative role on the international stage.

The above-mentioned contestation to the MoU revealed a deep contestation of the traditional narrative surrounding EU engagement in Tunisia. Critics challenged the usual portrayal of the EU as a champion of democracy and framed its role in a different light. In this revised narrative, President Kais Saied emerged as an autocratic leader, leveraging migration control to consolidate political power while enforcing repressive measures against both political opposition and migrants. However, within this discourse, the EU itself was not merely a passive actor but was increasingly depicted as complicit in legitimising and strengthening Saied's rule. The agreement was framed as an explicit recognition of his regime, leading to a shift in the EU's positioning from democracy promoter to enabler of authoritarian governance. Migrants and asylum seekers, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, were portrayed as the primary victims of this agreement, exposed to violent pushbacks, police brutality, and racial discrimination in Tunisia. More broadly, the Tunisian population itself was also described as suffering from a wider authoritarian turn, exacerbated by EU policies that prioritised migration control over democratic development. The EU, rather than being seen as merely ineffective in supporting democracy, was actively accused of facilitating the erosion of democratic norms by legitimising Saied's actions in exchange for cooperation on migration control.

Beyond the criticism voiced within the European Parliament, the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding has also been contested by a broader network of actors, particularly human rights organisations and advocacy groups. Amnesty International ([2023b](#)), Euromed Rights ([2023](#)), and Human Rights Watch ([Dam, 2023](#)) have strongly denounced the EU's complicity in human rights violations against migrants, reinforcing concerns already raised in political debates. However, an additional layer of contestation emerged from an outsider critique published by *Politico* in September 2023, further expanding the debate ([Francavilla, 2023](#)).

Against this framework the MoU is not merely contested on ethical and human rights grounds; it is also framed as a reflection of the EU's internal crisis in migration governance. This critique operates

on multiple levels. Firstly, the agreement is seen as a symptom of the EU's failure to implement a comprehensive migration policy, with institutions favouring short-term containment strategies over sustainable solutions. The reliance on third countries for migration control replicates previous policy failures, such as those seen in Libya and Turkey, reinforcing a pattern of dependency on authoritarian regimes rather than fostering effective regional cooperation ([Francavilla, 2023](#)).

Secondly, the contestation highlights how the EU's increasing alignment with far-right narratives on migration has contributed to its own internal instability. By adopting a security-driven approach, EU institutions have legitimised demagogic discourses that portray migration as an existential threat, further empowering far-right forces across Europe. This has led to a cycle of political reinforcement, where mainstream parties, in an attempt to counterbalance the rise of the far right, have paradoxically absorbed their rhetoric, shaping policies that prioritise restrictive border control over rights-based governance ([Francavilla, 2023](#)).

Lastly, the EU's decision-making mechanisms themselves are called into question, particularly the continued reliance on unanimity in key policy areas. The MoU is emblematic of a broader institutional deadlock, where political fragmentation prevents the adoption of coherent and principled migration strategies. As a result, the EU is portrayed not only as actively endorsing migration externalisation but also as trapped in a system that renders it unable to effectively address the root causes of migration and uphold its normative commitments ([Francavilla, 2023](#)).

The contestation surrounding the EU-Tunisia MoU reveals a fundamental transformation in the discourse on EU migration governance, moving beyond criticisms of policy inefficacy to a more structural critique of the EU's internal contradictions and declining normative power. The EU is no longer simply seen as failing to protect human rights; rather, it is depicted as actively contributing to the erosion of the very principles it claims to uphold.

Conclusions

An analysis of the EU's approach to democratic backsliding in Tunisia reveals a clear shift toward pragmatism, driven by the imperative to safeguard security policy objectives that have increasingly shaped its external governance. In this context, the MoU fully embodies this strategic orientation. The period of reflection between Saied's democratic rollback in 2021 and 2023, which could have served as a moment of reckoning and prompted a fundamental reassessment of the EU's democracy support role, instead reinforced a decisive departure from its traditional commitment to democracy promotion. As a result, the most influential voices now advocate for an external governance approach aligned with global trends in international politics—characterised by intensifying geopolitical competition and a growing emphasis on *realpolitik*.

This recalibration is notably driven by the increasingly influential conservative parties, whose voices have played a pivotal role in shaping the EU's evolving stance. As things stand, democracy support appears as an ineffective as a tool for advancing the EU's strategic objectives, which now seem more attainable through a dialogue centred on stabilising ruling regimes in countries like Tunisia. Consequently, progressive forces—both within and outside EU institutions—have intensified their contestation of the EU's role. This shift has unfolded alongside a dual process of political regression in EU-Tunisia relations: while the MoU has reaffirmed the EU's strategic priorities, Saied has simultaneously tightened his grip on power, further eroding democratic space within the country.

In response, some members of the European Parliament have called for closer collaboration with Tunisian civil society, signalling not only a refusal to legitimise Saied but also an acknowledgment of

the impossibility of engaging in a meaningful dialogue on democracy with his regime. The fading of 2011—once regarded as a defining moment for Tunisia’s democratic trajectory—from certain contestation narratives reflects a broader transformation in how these debates are framed. The evolving dynamics of EU-Tunisia relations during this period raise fundamental questions about the actual influence of contestation in EU policymaking.

The signing of the MoU by von der Leyen, alongside Rutte and Meloni, underscores a growing shift in engagement with Tunisia—one increasingly led by individual member states rather than the EU as a unified actor. This shift is further reinforced at the operational level, where the mechanism for dialogue on security has been structured externally to the EU, weakening both its supervisory structures and its adherence to the core principles it nominally upholds.

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