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Itziar Murillas García

The Security-Democracy Trade-Off?

EU Policies and Civic Space in Morocco

European Master's Programme
in Human Rights and Democratisation

Itziar Murillas García

The Security-Democracy Trade-Off?

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Foreword

The European Master's Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA) is a one-year degree established in 1997 as a joint initiative of ten universities, and with support of the European Commission, has grown into a network of 43 universities found in all EU member states, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Based on an action- and policy-oriented approach to learning, it combines legal, political, historical, anthropological and philosophical perspectives on the study of human rights and democracy with targeted skills-building activities. The aim of the EMA programme is to prepare young professionals to respond to the requirements and challenges of work in international organisations, field operations, governmental and non-governmental bodies, and academia. As a measure of its success, EMA has served as a model of inspiration for the establishment of seven other EU-sponsored regional master's programmes in the area of human rights and democratisation all over the world. Today these programmes cooperate closely in the framework of the Global Campus of Human Rights, which has its headquarters in Venice, Italy.

Up to 90 students are admitted to the EMA programme each year. During the first semester in Venice, they learn from leading academics, experts and representatives of international and non-governmental organisations. During the second semester, they are hosted by one of the 43 EMA participating universities to follow additional courses in an area of specialisation of their own choice and to conduct research under the supervision of the university's EMA Director or their academic colleagues. On successful completion of the requirements of the degree, students are awarded the European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation, which is jointly conferred by seven EMA universities who accredit the programme.

Each year the EMA Council selects five theses, on the basis of:
1. Originality of the research topic, and its relevance and importance (including its contribution to the promotion and implementation of human rights and democratic values);
2. Innovation with respect to argument, methodology, and theoretical approach, including case studies;
3. Exceptional knowledge of the academic literature and excellent capacity for critical analysis;
4. Clarity of structure, language and argumentation of a publishable standard with minimum revisions

The EMA awarded theses of the academic year 2024/2025 are:

— Bourne, Hebe, *Between the Lines: Subtle Media Discourse and the Normalisation of Anti-Migrant Sentiment in the Run Up to the United Kingdom 2024 Riots*. Supervisor: Katarzyna Blay Grabarczyk, Université de Montpellier.

— Dulce Ramírez, María, *The Right to Own or the Right to Live? Re-examining the Human Right to Private Property in the Age of the Socio ecological Crisis through Indigenous and South Sámi Knowledge and Struggles*. Supervisors: Julien Pieret, Oona Le Meur, Université Libre de Bruxelles. This thesis will remain unpublished in accordance with the author's wishes.

— Lyons, Ben, *Lost for Words. The Silence of Peacebuilding on Minority Language Rights in the North of Ireland and Euskal Herria*. Supervisor: Faris Kočan, University of Ljubljana.

— Murillas García, Itziar, *The Security – Democracy Trade-Off? EU Policies and Civic Space in Morocco*. Supervisor: Harlan Koff, Université du Luxembourg.

— Nogueira de Sá Rosas de Castro, Clara, *To Be or Not to Be Neuroenhanced? Personal Identity under Siege in the Age of AI-powered Neurotechnology*. Supervisor: Thérèse Murphy, Queen's University Belfast.

The selected theses demonstrate the breadth, depth and reach of the EMA Programme and the passion and talent of its students. We are proud of the range of topics as well as the curiosity and research skills demonstrated by this year's cohort. On behalf of the Governing Bodies of the EMA programme, we applaud and congratulate these graduates for their work.

Prof. Manfred Nowak
Global Campus Secretary General

Prof. Thérèse Murphy
EMA Chairperson

Dr Orla Ní Cheallacháin
EMA Programme Director

Biography

Itziar Murillas García is an EMA graduate with a Bachelor's in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, specialising in European governance and human rights. She has conducted research and fieldwork on border securitisation and civil society, complemented by project development experience at CARE Maroc. Her academic path includes exchanges in Luxembourg, Prague and Venice. Her work focuses on research, evaluation and policy analysis in human rights contexts. She is particularly driven by questions of governance, gender equality and the role of civil society.

Abstract

This study critically examines how the securitisation of EU external policy in Morocco affects the country's prospects for democratisation. It places civil society at the centre of the analysis, framing it as a key actor in bottom-up democratic transformation. The research argues that the EU's securitised agenda undermines these efforts by reinforcing authoritarian practices and constraining the development of a genuinely free and independent civic space. This occurs primarily through the instrumentalisation of civil society engagement mechanisms to implement EU migration objectives, and through the marginalisation of critical or politically sensitive actors whose involvement might jeopardise stable relations with the Moroccan government.

The study draws on critical literature and document analysis to explore the intersection between the EU's strategic interests and its normative claims in Morocco, alongside an assessment of the country's associational landscape. It also presents a case study based on fieldwork in the Melilla-Nador border region, incorporating interviews with civil society representatives. These local perspectives shed light on how EU actions are perceived on the ground, and how civil society actors interpret the dynamics of democratisation, securitisation and migration governance.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to thank every civil society organisation member who generously shared their views on securitisation and democratisation in Morocco with me. Speaking with them was not only deeply insightful for my thesis but also truly inspiring. It takes immense courage and determination to fight for genuine democratic transformation in Morocco, and I am profoundly grateful to have engaged in conversation with such knowledgeable and committed individuals.

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Thank you also to my supervisor, Harlan Koff, for his constant support and guidance. And to the University of Luxembourg, and especially to the EMA director there, Robert Harmsen, for his support throughout the programme. This research was made possible through the financial support of the University of Luxembourg, which funded the fieldwork component of this thesis – for which I am especially grateful.

Lastly, I want to thank my family and friends for their patience and unconditional support throughout these months.

I dedicate this thesis to all human rights and democracy defenders in Morocco, who continue to work tirelessly despite repressive conditions. Your resilience and commitment are a reminder that, even in difficult circumstances, the struggle for justice and dignity persists.

Table of Abbreviations

BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
ESS	European Security Strategy
CS	Copenhagen School
CSO	Civil society organisation
EFSD	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
EU	European Union
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programmes
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

SMC	Southern Mediterranean country
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean

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Introduction

Security and stability have long been central pillars of the European Union's (EU's) engagement with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Following the Arab Spring, the EU prioritised these goals in order to contain the rise of political Islam and ensure that regional elites remained aligned with Western interests. At the same time, the increase in irregular migration flows through the region has led to the framing of migration as a security threat, placing border control at the core of EU cooperation with many neighbouring states. These developments are compounded by the EU's strategic interests in the region – from energy security and trade to migration governance – which further incentivise pragmatic, interest-driven partnerships.

Among these partnerships, the case of Morocco is particularly revealing. Historically a key trade partner of the EU, Morocco has in recent decades become increasingly central to the EU's external migration strategy. This is largely due to its geographical proximity to Europe and the presence of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which constitute the EU's only land borders with Africa. As a result, EU-Morocco relations are shaped by a complex mix of geopolitical, economic and migration-related concerns. Despite this pragmatic orientation, the EU continues to assert a rhetorical commitment to promoting human rights and democracy abroad, in line with its normative aspirations as articulated in articles 8 and 21 of the Treaty on European Union.[1]

This study arises from an interest in examining the less immediate, longer-term and more systemic consequences of this securitised approach to EU external action. While the human rights

[1] European Union, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2012] OJ C326/13.

violations associated with EU border control policies have been widely documented, their structural and longer-term effects – particularly on the political landscape of partner countries – remain underexplored. Specifically, this thesis investigates how the EU's emphasis on security and strategic cooperation has shaped its engagement with Moroccan civil society, and how this, in turn, affects the country's prospects for democratisation.

The research centres on civil society as a key actor in democratic change, arguing that the EU's securitised agenda in Morocco risks undermining the very democratic forces it claims to support. By critically examining this dynamic, the thesis contributes to a growing body of work that interrogates the democratic costs of securitisation in EU foreign policy. It aims to provide a rigorous and evidence-based answer to a set of core research questions: How does the securitisation of EU external policy in Morocco affect civil society? How is democratisation hampered by the dynamics generated by the EU's actions in the country? Is authoritarianism challenged or reinforced? And how do civil society actors in Morocco perceive the EU's role in the region – is the EU seen as promoting human rights and democracy, or as primarily serving its own strategic interests?

The overarching objective of this study is to critically assess how the EU's securitised agenda in Morocco interacts with local political conditions – and whether it contributes to, or hinders, the possibility of democratic transformation.

To answer these questions, the thesis develops both a theoretical and empirical investigation. It begins by reviewing the academic literature on Morocco's political and associational landscape, with particular attention to context-specific definitions of key concepts such as 'democratisation' and 'securitisation'. This review underlines the need to move beyond essentialist and universalising definitions of democracy, and instead ground the analysis in local understandings, socio-political specificities and power relations.

Building on this literature, the thesis develops a theoretical framework centred on the role of civil society in processes of democratic transformation. It argues that in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, a free, independent and locally embedded civil society is indispensable to any meaningful democratic progress. At the same time, civil society in Morocco operates within a highly constrained and monitored political environment – one in which ex-

ternal actors like the EU also play a shaping role. The framework thus examines how EU engagement interacts with domestic power structures, enabling or restricting civil society's capacity to act as a democratic force.

To explore these questions empirically, the thesis combines document analysis with fieldwork. The policy analysis is divided into two parts. First, it draws on secondary literature to trace the historical development of EU-Morocco relations, focusing on the period from the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995 up to 2019. This allows the study to situate current dynamics within a longer trajectory of cooperation shaped by shifting border regimes, geopolitical interests and colonial legacies. Second, from 2019 onward, the analysis turns to a close reading of key EU policy documents – including the New Pact on Migration and Asylum,[2] the Multiannual Action Plans[3] and the EU's Strategic Plan for Civil Society in Morocco[4] – to examine how the EU frames its priorities and engagement strategies in more recent years, particularly regarding migration, civil society and democratisation.

This analytical framework is further supported by fieldwork conducted in May 2025 in Granada, Melilla and Nador. Interviews with academic experts and civil society representatives were carried out to understand how EU policies are perceived and experienced on the ground. This methodological choice was essential for capturing perspectives that are often absent from EU-level discussions – especially those of smaller, grassroots organisations that rarely have a voice in official consultations but play a critical role in local governance, service provision and rights advocacy.

In combining these methodological and analytical approaches, the thesis offers a comprehensive and grounded account of how the EU's external action in Morocco – particularly its securitised migration agenda – intersects with civil society and democratic transformation.

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2 European Commission, Communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum COM(2020) 609 final.

3 European Commission, 'Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy: Multiannual Indicative Programming 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021); European Commission, 'Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations: Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021)

4 European External Action Service, 'L'Union européenne lance le Programme d'appui stratégique à la société civile au Maroc' (21 February 2024) <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/morocco/lunion-europ%C3%A9enne-lance-le-programme-d%E2%80%99appui-strat%C3%A9gique-%C3%A0-la-soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9-civile-au-maroc_fr> accessed 15 April 2025.

In sum, this thesis offers a critical examination of EU-Morocco relations, questioning how the EU's normative claims hold up when confronted with the lived realities of its external action. While firmly rooted in Morocco's specific political context, the analysis also speaks to broader tensions between security-driven cooperation and democratic aspirations that characterise EU foreign policy more broadly. The following chapter reviews the relevant academic literature, tracing how scholars have approached the EU's role in Morocco and the complex relationship between external governance, civil society and democratisation.

1. Literature review

1.1 Introduction

The main objective of this literature review is to map the current research agenda on Morocco-EU relations, with a particular focus on democratisation and the role of the EU in either facilitating or constraining Morocco's democratic transformation. The securitisation of the EU's agenda in the Southern Mediterranean has been broadly covered by literature in the last decades, but key questions remain: How has this phenomenon shaped the Moroccan hybrid regime, which balances between an autocratic monarchy and a gradually liberalising democratic system? What factors limit democratic development in Morocco, and how does the EU's focus on security and migration control reinforce these limitations?

In order to give comprehensive answers to these questions, understanding the impact of EU policies and assessing the broader implications of external interventions in democratisation is essential. To this end, this literature review will focus on two key areas: first, it will look into the current democratic developments in the country and how the EU has influenced to contribute (or not) to the country's democratic transformation; and second, it will examine existing models of democratisation that will enhance Moroccan people's agency and active participation, as well as the literature on securitisation theory, exploring how security frameworks can align with or undermine democratisation objectives.

These questions have been approached by both empirical and theoretical scholarship, contributing to a rich and inter-disciplinary body of literature. This includes policy reviews and critical discourse analysis of EU plans, postcolonial critiques of democratisation in the MENA region, quantitative studies on Moroccan

public opinion and qualitative research, featuring interviews with international organisation representatives and civil society actors. This interdisciplinarity contributes to the complexification of EU-Morocco relations, with the aim to provide with comprehensive answers to these questions. Thus, beyond mapping existing research, this literature review seeks to identify critical gaps and potential pathways for reimagining democratisation in Morocco, emphasising inclusive and locally driven processes rather than externally imposed frameworks.

1.2 Democratisation in Morocco

The literature concerning the state of Morocco's democratic development is divided in two: on the one hand, those who praise it and make reference to Morocco's exceptionalism, emphasising the political reforms of Mohammed VI, and the state's good relations with the EU and its member states. On the other hand, those who qualify it as strictly authoritarian, highlighting the persistence of authoritarian practices and the limited impact of these reforms on genuine democratic development. In my view, it is important to be able to navigate a path between the literature that characterises the regime as extremely coercive and authoritarian – and makes no reference to the existing resistance against authoritarianism in the country and to the citizen's agency and will for change – and the one which considers it to be the EU's 'model student' and is uncritical of some of its authoritarian practices – a line of reasoning which is reflected in practices such as the EU granting it 'advanced status' in 2008.[5] As Catalano and Graziano put it, 'the semantics of transition and democratisation will often be manipulated and mediatised by political powers to validate and emphasise the scope of the political opening itself'.[6]

So, it seems plausible to recognise that while some political changes, especially after the destitution of King Hassan and during Mohammed VI's mandate – and even more after the Arab Spring Uprisings and the February 20 movement – have created a wider space for citizen participation and decreased the govern-

[5] SL Catalano and PR Graziano, 'Europeanization as a Democratization Tool? The Case of Morocco' (2016) 21 Mediterranean Politics 364.

[6] ibid.

ment's authoritarian practices, broadening the scope of individual and collective freedoms, promoting the judiciary's independence or the strengthening of the status of the Prime Minister,[7] it still reinforced the continuity of the royal institution as the highest authority in the country. As Abdessadek puts it:

> [I]t has become clear that in practice, the constitutional path to democratic transition did not have any tangible impact upon the distribution of authority, power, and strategic decision-making in the country, given the constitution's endorsement of the Kings hegemony over all other institutions and actors.[8]

This can be clearly observed in the fact that the majority of the state's strategic projects and plans are in the hands of the King and his advisors, with the representative government having very limited powers; as well as in the absence of accountability for decision making and marginalisation of elected institutions.[9]

But the fact that Moroccan people's voices and aspirations are systematically left out of power and decision making has not implied that citizens have remained silent nor passive. In this regard, many scholars across the MENA region have criticised how the Arab Spring dominates the discourse on resistance and uprisings in the region, as if insurgent movements did not happen also before and after 2011. Coffman highlights the work of Jasmine K Gani, Rabab El-Mehdi and Lila Abu-Lughod[10] and their efforts to showcase resistance movements active post 2011 in Morocco, in an attempt to rectify the widespread misconception – rooted in Orientalism and Islamophobia[11] that is engrained in Western consciousness – in Western literature that 2011 was the first and on-

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7 M al-Akhssassi, 'Reforms in Morocco: Monitoring the Orbit and Reading the Trajectory' (2017) 10 Contemporary Arab Affairs 482.

8 T Abdessadek, 'The Reality and Future of Reforms in Morocco 2011-2021: The Question of Authority' (2021) 26 Rowaq Arabi 65 <https://doi.org/10.53833/RKVR4626> accessed 1 March 2025.

9 ibid.

10 A Coffman, 'The Struggle Continues: Countering Western Misconceptions about the So-Called 'Arab Spring' and its Aftermath by Highlighting Cases of Protest, Organizing, and Resistance in Morocco Post-2011' (Renée Crown University Honors Thesis, Syracuse University, 2024).

11 Gani's description of Orientalism includes a belief in the lack of Arab agency (due to insufficient rationality) required to break free from authoritarianism and other oppressions, so that the path of liberation had to be learned from the West; see JK Gani, 'From discourse to practice: Orientalism, western policy and the Arab uprisings' (2022) 98 International Affairs 45, 53 <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab229> accessed 13 March 2025.

ly time that people showed resistance to autocratic governments in the MENA region. Successive and uninterrupted protest movements throughout Morocco – the most recent one being a general strike and protests against the government's actions regarding union rights, but also against rising prices and growing unemployment[12]– show that the political implication and desire for change of people is high.

In line with Gani's criticism of Western Orientalism present in both literature and policy in the West regarding the Middle East, I believe it is fitting to distance from any literature that portrays the region as 'inherently undemocratic' and considers authoritarianism to be an embedded characteristic of Arab politics, and therefore see its populations as programmed or inclined to enable and obey despotism.[13][14]

In addition, despite the constitutional limitations to a fully free public space, some authors bring great attention to the fact that there is some limited pluralism in Morocco, together with one of the most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East. As Daadaoui argues, civil society, conceived in terms of formal organisations and structures, has made a substantial impact on policymaking especially in areas of women's and human rights.[15]

Taking all this into account, it is important to understand that the widely mentioned literature of cynic and apathic view of Moroccans towards politics is, in fact, only towards 'partisan politics' and in the electoral system overall. Many authors describe a political scene characterised by nepotism, lack of competence and the overarching and powerful presence of the monarchy. Abdessadek explains how the Moroccan people have become increasingly discontent with the inability of the political system to effect change and reform through the channel of electoral legitimacy and the principle of free choice.[16] To this, scholars like Mouna

[12] F Naim, 'CDT Pressures Government With New Protest Against Economic Struggles' (*Morocco World News*, 17 February 2025).

[13] Even when many regionalist scholars tried to distance themselves from essentialist arguments, hints of the old stereotypes can still be found in their work, with the issue of civilian agency among Arabs dismissed.

[14] Gani (n 11).

[15] M Daadaoui, 'Party Politics and Elections in Morocco' [2010] Middle East Institute Policy Brief 29 <https://www.mei.edu/node/457> accessed 1 March 2025.

[16] Abdessadek (n 8).

add that 'this view of political life and political actors resulted in the emergence of a civil society that is more active in the political sphere'.[17]

1.3 EU democracy promotion in Morocco

The EU's proximity to the region and its security and economic interests have led to the establishment of several plans and strategies that have moved from failed attempts of region building with all MENA countries, towards the development of bilateral relationships between each individual country and the EU. In the last few decades, the agenda for cooperation with those states most willing to partner, as is the case of Morocco, has expanded tremendously, leading to new areas of cooperation and making Morocco a strong partner of the EU, receiving 'advanced status' in 2008 and a total of 1.086 million euros as bilateral commitment funding from the EU between 2007 and 2012.[18] So, what does the literature say about this relationship, specifically focusing on how the EU has influenced (or not) the country's democratic transformation?

Some sources, such as the book *Democratisation against Democracy*, by Andrea Teti, Pamela Abbott, Valeria Talbot and Paolo Maggiolini,[19] place attention on the fact that, after the 2011 uprisings, the EU adopted a 'more for more' approach, a new policy which promised to give incentives for Southern Mediterranean countries (SMCs) to meet the citizen's demands for democratisation, respect for human rights and the rule of law. There is, however, little evidence that the instruments put in place were used effectively, or that they were attractive enough to actually encompass some change or political reforms. Building on Bicchi's affirmation on how the nature of the relationship between the EU and Morocco often corresponded more to a form of soft hegemony than to

[17] K Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State: The Case of Morocco' (2020) 25 (Special Issue) European Foreign Affairs Review 67.

[18] This data is more relevant when observed in comparison with other states' bilateral funding commitments with the EU, as is the case of Egypt, which has over double the population of Morocco but over that same period received 960 million euros; see F Bicchi, 'Lost in Transition: EU Foreign Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy Post-Arab Spring' (2014) 371 L'Europe en Formation 27, 37.

[19] A Teti and others, *Democratisation Against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

a partnership, reflecting the imbalance in terms of economic and political power,[20] Teti and others also argue that despite the EU's rhetoric of 'partnership', it is still in control and continues to see the people of the region as an 'other' that needs to be civilised.[21]

Related to this last point, it is also relevant to note that EU funding for civil society is limited and is often done in a top-down approach. The literature based on interviews with people belonging to Moroccan civil society organisations (CSOs), such as the ones conducted by MedReset, clearly shows that there is an insufficient engagement with and involvement of local stakeholders (especially locally embedded grassroots actors) in project design and funding allocation.[22] Cavatorta's explanation for this lack of funding of civil society activism is due to the fact that there is very little engagement with the truly popular civil society actors: the Islamists;[23] although others tend to argue that it is a matter of maintaining some kind of 'stability' that will not greatly interfere with the government or the EU's security interests in the country.[24]

Teti and others' scrutiny of EU texts related to democracy promotion in the Southern Neighbourhood show that the EU's understanding of democracy is strictly procedural and associated with civil and political rights, with social and economic rights rarely being mentioned and never associated with democracy.[25] This narrow approach that the EU has on democracy promotion in the region has several implications for fundamental pillars of democracy, like on economic, social and cultural rights. As Teti and others argue, reducing social and economic questions to material outcomes of economic processes – and thus avoiding considering them rights – 'depoliticises' both socioeconomic grievances and the actors – mainly unions and CSOs – pursuing them.[26] This source also mentions the deep political implications of shifting from a language of rights to a language of trade when speaking of protecting socioeconomic rights. To this, the findings of the EuroMed Rights 2019 Report, which analysed the economic and

[20] Bicchi (n 18).
[21] Teti and others (n 19).
[22] Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State' (n 17); L Faustini Torres, 'Hindering Democracy Through Migration Policies?' in R Zapata-Barrero and I Awad (eds), *Migrations in the Mediterranean* (Springer 2024).
[23] F Cavatorta, 'Civil Society, Islamism and Democratisation: The Case of Morocco' (2006) 44 Journal of Modern African Studies 203. For further detail, see Appendix A.
[24] Faustini Torres, 'Hindering Democracy Through Migration Policies?' (n 22).
[25] Teti and others (n 19).
[26] Teti and others (n 19).

financial relations between the EU and SMCs, add to the point, concluding that these affect the economic and social rights of citizens in the region, including the testimony of CSOs who argued that the EU's continued promotion of neoliberal economic policies makes it difficult to promote economic and social rights.[27] So, ultimately, by failing to integrate economic and social rights into its democratisation framework, the EU not only reinforces a shallow, procedural understanding of democracy but also actively hinders the development of a key pillar necessary for meaningful democratic transformation.

The EU's liberal conception of democracy has significant implications for its approach to gender equality in the Southern Mediterranean. Rather than challenging structural gender relations, EU strategies tend to focus on integrating women into existing public and economic frameworks – often framing empowerment as a tool for growth rather than transformation. Research by MedReset highlights that this instrumental, individualised model fails to reflect local priorities and is not perceived by stakeholders as grounded in the lived realities of women in the region.[28] Ghosheh's distinction between a 'needs-based' and 'rights-based' approach is especially relevant here: the latter positions women as active agents in both understanding and shaping their rights, offering a more holistic and democratic framework that extends across sectors and could inform a more context-sensitive EU strategy in Morocco. While the exclusion of women from decision-making remains a critical but often overlooked issue in Euro-Mediterranean policy discourse,[29] it must be addressed if the EU aims to support genuine democratic transformation. Gender equality is not simply a development goal – it is a structural condition for democracy.

[27] M Semplici, *Discussing Challenges for Civil Society and the Promotion of Economic and Social Rights* (EuroMed Rights 2019).
[28] H Ghosheh, 'EU Approach to Gender Equality in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Region' (MedReset Policy Paper 9, 2019).
[29] Teti and others (n 19).

1.4 EU securitisation impact on democratisation in Morocco

This somewhat pessimistic analysis of the literature on EU's democratisation efforts in Morocco is further complimented by research on the consequences of EU's security policy in the country. Despite some of the efforts mentioned above, most of the EU's funding and strategies are security and migration-control focused. It is for this reason that, together with insufficient engagement with civil society, one of the biggest impediments to a successful democratisation policy in Morocco is this focus on the EU's interests.

To begin with the exploration of the literature on this issue, I will start by looking into the extensive research on the political debate regarding the migration-security nexus in EU external policy in the Southern Neighbourhood, among which not much attention is directed to the linkage between border security and human security. Since the early 1990s, there has been great attention devoted to how migration has been securitised and border security management has also attracted much attention.[30] All these measures have happened at the expense of human rights and human security where they have been promoted, like in the case of Morocco. Hence, the EU's role as a normative power and its promotion of liberal values such as democracy and human rights has proved to be ambivalent.[31]

The book *Democratisation against Democracy*[32] offers an overview of the evolution of EU-Morocco relations, and how it shifted from a regionalist approach during the Barcelona Process in the 1990s, to bilateral cooperation, starting from the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 – and its 'market democratisation' framework[33] – and strengthened by the neo-functionalist approach of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The 2015 revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) marked the shift towards a prioritisation of economic development and security – with a focus on short-term stability objectives and on pragmatic issue-spe-

[30] S Panebianco, 'Conceptualising the Mediterranean Global South: A Research Agenda on Security, Borders and Human Flows' (2021) 4(1) De Europa 17.
[31] ibid.
[32] Teti and others (n 19).
[33] ibid.

cific cooperation[34] – while de-prioritising democratisation and human rights protection, which essentially showed the EU's willingness to work with authoritarian regimes in order to protect these, effectively abandoning any claim to be a normative actor.[35]

For researching how these shifting priorities affected democratisation efforts in Morocco, I have found the book *Migrations in the Mediterranean*[36] to be very comprehensive in relation to all the variables that can be affected by increased securitisation in the EU's foreign policy. Chapter 3 of this book includes an analytical framework from which to tackle this less-explored intersection between democratisation, autocratic resilience and the politics of international migration in Morocco, focusing on security practices rather than narratives. I find this particularly interesting, given the extensive literature about the gap between the EU's rhetoric and action in this field.[37] In this chapter, Faustini Torres develops an analysis on how autocratic resilience of authoritarian regimes is influenced by international factors, both directly and indirectly,[38] and, in the case of Morocco, explains the crucial role that migration diplomacy plays as a bargaining tool in EU-Morocco relations. This directly affects the EU's position when negotiating for good democratic practices and respect for human rights, making migration a source of power for gatekeeper elites in the country. Lastly, this author also rightfully develops on the argument that the externalisation of EU migration policy can impact the regime's organisational power, through funding of surveillance tools, and security forces such as the Moroccan Auxiliary Forces, the Directorate General of National Security and the Directorate of Migration and Border Security – a lot of which, according to Faustini Torres, are the same forces that support the regime's coercive apparatus.[39]

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34 S Panebianco and G Cannata, '(Im-)Mobility Partnerships: Limits to EU Democracy Promotion Through Mobility in the Mediterranean' in R Zapata-Barrero and I Awad (eds), *Migrations in the Mediterranean* (Springer 2024) 71.

35 Teti and others (n 19).

36 R Zapata-Barrero and I Awad (eds), *Migrations in the Mediterranean* (Springer 2024).

37 B Dimitrovova, 'Cultural Bordering and Re-Bordering in the EU's Neighbourhood: Members, Strangers or Neighbours?' (2010) 18 Journal of Contemporary European Studies 463 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2010.535702> accessed 9 March 2025; JC Völkel, 'Money for Nothing, the Cricks for Free: Five Paradoxes in EU Migration Policy' (2014) 2(2) Comparative Migration Studies 151.

38 Faustini Torres, 'Hindering Democracy Through Migration Policies?' (n 22).

39 L Faustini Torres, 'Bolstering Autocracy, Hindering Democracy: Local Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Effects of EU Migration Policy Externalization in Morocco' [2025] International Migration Review 1.

Furthermore, Chapter 5 also has some insightful contributions to this research, since it analyses the outcomes of EU-Morocco Mobility Partnerships, concluding that none of its three main working points – liberalisation of trade, offers and facilitated mobility – have been credible incentives for leveraging democratic change, mostly because they were disconnected from Moroccan people's needs, and that they were seen to be more advantageous for the EU than for its partners.[40] This matter is also brought up by authors like Pace[41] and Sadiki and Saleh[42] who argue that failed European democracy promotion policies in the region are due to the disconnect between the EU's notion of democracy in the MENA, fixated on 'stability and security', and the democratic conceptions of Arabs, mainly anti-authoritarianism, collectively overcoming fear.

Finally, amongst the literature on the securitisation of the EU's Southern borders, some authors, such as Dias and Freire, explain how reading the problems in the Mediterranean as a European crisis or as a security threat that profoundly affects the EU ignores the structural role that the EU plays in the aggravation of a growing climate of insecurity in the EU's southern neighbourhood, demonstrating the organisation's ability to deal with the intersection between the protection of the human subject and border control practices.[43] Moreover, these authors' perspective on EU border management needing to be framed as a complex process operating in multiple dimensions and involving different actors and political fields serves as a bridge between the critical framework on democratisation mentioned before, and the study of the securitisation of the EU's border management.

Overall, what the revision of the literature on the EU's democratisation efforts in Morocco seems to indicate is the fact that the lack of engagement and local knowledge directly affect democratic transformation, as the EU is guided by economic and security interests over social justice and democratic objectives.

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40 Panebianco and Cannata (n 34).

41 M Pace, 'The EU's Interpretation of the "Arab Uprisings": Understanding the Different Visions About Democratic Change in EU–MENA Relations' (2014) 52(5) JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 969.

42 L Sadiki and L Saleh, 'Degeneration and the Demos in North Africa: Towards a Critical Study of Democratisation?' (2023) 28(6) The Journal of North African Studies 1444.

43 VA Dias and MR Freire, 'Insecurities in EU Border Management: The Unintended Consequences of Securitization Processes in the Mediterranean' (2022) 10(2) methaodos: Revista de Ciencias Sociales 297 <https://doi.org/10.17502/mrcs.v10i2.561> accessed 1 March 2025.

1.5 Conceptualisation of democratisation

Considering what has been observed in literature, I argue that a wider focus on civil society engagement on the EU's part when it comes to democratisation efforts is needed in order to properly support the country's democratic transition. For this reason, I will now consider the state of the art concerning alternative models of democratisation that are embedded in local context and that are critical of the Eurocentric and neocolonial perspectives of some approaches to democratisation.

To begin with, a theoretical analysis of the concept of democratisation must start with a clear rejection of those frameworks exclusively based on Western history and experience to understand the limitations and opportunities of democratisation in North Africa. These approaches to democratisation have traditionally been anchored in a liberal, procedural understanding of democracy, which prioritises free and fair elections, multi-party systems and civil and political rights as the central markers of democratic governance.[44] These models are heavily informed by the historical experiences of Western Europe and North America, often positioning the liberal democratic state as the universal endpoint of political development.[45] Within this framework, democracy is largely understood as a set of institutional arrangements rather than a dynamic, context-specific process shaped by local histories, struggles and socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, Western democratisation models frequently adopt a top-down approach, assuming that external actors such as international organisations or donors can promote democratic reforms through conditionality, institutional capacity-building or civil society support.[46] These approaches tend to marginalise economic, social and cultural rights, viewing them as secondary to political liberalisation, and often overlook the complex interplay between power, history and local agency in shaping democratic transitions.[47]

To this end, some of the literature points towards creating an alternative framework that is more comprehensive towards the region's specificities and intricacies. It must be considered that de-

[44] L Diamond, 'Toward Democratic Consolidation' (1994) 5 Journal of Democracy 4.
[45] F Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press 1992).
[46] S Levitsky and LA Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (CUP 2010).
[47] Teti and others (n 19).

mocracy and democratisation happen within specific linguistic, intellectual, cultural, social, political, temporal and spatial contexts. In the words of Sadiki and Saleh:

> widening the democratic horizon away from individualistic and teleological models may empower Arabs, Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans to enrich democracy with dosages of age-old, sage traditions of learning, being, thinking, feeling and acting invested in values of social justice, communal solidarity, material modesty, and aesthetic experiences.[48]

Regarding the EU's role in Morocco's democratisation, a part of the literature argues that the EU's ability to shape a Mediterranean Neighbourhood in accordance with its values and specific needs is clearly restricted partly because it has ignored the political significance and impact of non-EU and non-state agency, thus creating a need to understand the situated political and social concerns of local societies in the Mediterranean region.[49] This approach, which focuses on agency rather than structure, and processes rather than outcomes, sets the ground for a – necessary – radical re-thinking of the geographical imaginaries of Euro-Mediterranean policies.

In relation to this, another important point to mention would be Faustini Torres' argument on how externalisation of EU migration policies to African countries of origin and transit does not operate in a vacuum, but rather in a complex political and social realities that should be problematised and unpacked, by looking at how it intersects with domestic policies, governances, sociopolitical dynamics and prospects for democratic reform.[50] In all, this scholar proposes a multi-level framework of structural variables and domestic agency which provides a compelling lens for exploring the intersection between EU migration policy externalisation and domestic democratisation dynamics.

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[48] Sadiki and Saleh (n 42).

[49] JW Scott and others, 'Between Crises and Borders: Interventions on Mediterranean Neighbourhood and the Salience of Spatial Imaginaries' (2017) 63 Political Geography 174.

[50] Faustini Torres, 'Bolstering Autocracy, Hindering Democracy: Local Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Effects of EU Migration Policy Externalization in Morocco' (n 41).

In light of these critical reflections on mainstream approaches to democratisation, it becomes essential to reconsider how the EU conceptualises and implements its democracy promotion agenda in Morocco. Rather than replicating top-down, state-centric models rooted in Euro-American historical experiences, this thesis proposes an alternative approach grounded in local realities, participatory practices and the empowerment of civil society.

Since the 1990s, the EU has positioned itself as an agent of international democracy promotion in its neighbourhood, strongly emphasising its role as a normative power. This, however, has been contradicted by the apolitical content and the non-interference – and even collaboration – with autocratic domestic systems in third countries such as Morocco. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig[51] explain that in the EU's multifaceted democratisation policy we can distinguish three models – linkage, leverage and governance – although EU policy has mostly put in practice the 'leverage' model, a top-down approach targeted mostly at state institutions and using conditionality as a main tool (with low compliance).

The one that I consider to be the most fitting, however, to take up as ideal model for democratisation is linkage. The reason for this is that it is a democratisation model based on activities tackling the societal preconditions for democracy, giving support to the democratic opposition and other civil society actors in the target country.[52] I believe that this model holds the underlying conviction that democratisation in Morocco – and in any country, for that matter – must be studied within its own history, socioeconomic, political and cultural features. The other two models pointed by Lavenex and Schimmelfennig focus on more procedural aspects of democracy, as they do not include civil society actors, nor consider the possibility of including or opening up to other views, values and norms on democracy.

This vision of democratisation accounts for the fact that democracy and democratisation happen in specific contexts: linguistic, intellectual, cultural, social, political and temporal and special. It problematises democratisation by questioning the epistemic imposition of Euro-American categories that seem to oversimplify complex socio-political processes and phenomena,

[51] S Lavenex and F Schimmelfennig, 'EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighbourhood: From Leverage to Governance?' (2011) 18(4) Democratization 885 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.584730> accessed 17 February 2025.

[52] ibid.

and to use foundationalist epistemology.[53] In other words, the idea that there is no 'democratic reality' without practices, social, political and linguistic constructs, and that there is no 'objective' truth in democratisation, as it happens to be a Western construct in the first place.

Hence, the model of democratisation that I will be using in this thesis will be based on this bottom-up approach, operating at the level of society and targeting socioeconomic preconditions for democratisation. A model less focused on procedural aspects of democracy such as free and fair elections – which does not mean that these are not important, but rather than they cannot be the only focus when speaking of democratisation – and more focused on inclusivity and collective, localised conceptualisations of democracy. Within this particular model of democracy promotion within the EU external action framework, I have set the main analytical focus on the social capital – or civil society – as key component of a strong and sustainable democratic transformation, to conduct the critical analysis of the EU's policy in Morocco.

To this end, and in line with Lavenex and Schimmelfennig's hypothesis that the more the EU supports pro-democratic CSOs, the more the linkage model of democracy promotion will be effective,[54] civil society engagement is conceptualised as the channel through which to gain insight into specific local social norms, at the same time as adopting a non-state-centred approach by including other kinds of actors. In addition, in Morocco, where political parties are seen as having no political ideas and having only electoral objectives, civil society has transformed into the driving force of change, aiming to lift the monarchy's hegemony and instigate political change.[55]

In all, studies on processes of democratisation often highlight the positive role that an active civil society plays in transitions from authoritarianism.[56] Although, Cavatorta[57] also argues with Dimitrovova that civil society does not always have a positive impact on democratic reforms, since some CSOs are aligned

[53] Sadiki and Saleh (n 42).
[54] Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (n 51).
[55] J Sater, *Civil Society and Political Change in Morocco* (Routledge 2007).
[56] Cavatorta, 'Civil Society, Islamism and Democratisation' (n 23).
[57] ibid.

with the state and its authoritarian practices.[58] Despite the importance of making this remark, it must not go as far as to adopt the belief that North African civil societies are inherently authoritarian, as most of these organisations' political discourse is couched in the language of democratic principles, their internal structure is mostly reliant on democratic procedures and they have a precise understanding of pluralism, being increasingly tolerant of groups and associations that do not necessarily share their societal outlook.[59]

As a final note on this definition of 'democratisation', I find relevant the strong relationship between civil society and economic, social and cultural rights and gender equality. In relation to the former, as Huber and Paciello argue, a policy of social justice and human rights is necessary in order to rebuild an equal Mediterranean space and a flexible, inclusive and responsive EU role in it.[60] In a study which aimed to move against the marginalisation of local perspectives, and which included interviews to civil society stakeholders, they found that these actors considered access to basic social services as crucial for stability and how it should be seen as a 'humanitarian practice'.[61] Furthermore, Honneth and Farrell consider socioeconomic justice as an internal component of every genuine idea of democracy.[62]

From an empirical point of view, the importance of socioeconomic rights for democratisation also lie in the fact that the neoliberal economic policy that the EU has implemented in the last decades have not shown any positive impact on the country's economic transformation, nor did they respond to long-term social, political and economic demands emerging from SMCs in general.[63] In this regard, CSOs have argued that the EU's continued promotion of neoliberal economic policies makes it difficult to promote economic and social rights.[64] Taking all this into con-

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58 B Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco: Boundary Setting, Integration, and Consolidation' (CEPS Working Document No 323, December 2009) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604037> accessed 9 March 2025.

59 Cavatorta, 'Civil Society, Islamism and Democratisation' (n 23).

60 D Huber and MC Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice and Human Rights Back In' (MedReset Working Papers No 11, May 2018).

61 ibid.

62 A Honneth and JM Farrell, 'Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today' (1998) 26(6) Political Theory 763 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591798026006001> accessed 1 April 2025.

63 Teti and others (n 19).

64 Semplici (n 27).

sideration, socioeconomic rights appear as a crucial point in Morocco's democratisation, since the EU's focus on 'hard security' in the country has undermined long-term social cohesion and resilience, as well as progressive political and socioeconomic transformations that EU policies pursue in theory. Consequently, EU policies have contributed to maintain existing patterns of domestic and international inequality, thereby creating structural barriers that hinder genuine democratisation.

In regard to the relationship between gender equality and civil society in the context of democratisation, with more than 30 women's rights associations in the country, there is a strong pluralism concerning the understanding of what gender equality means. On the one hand, more elitist organisations such as the ADFM (Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc) have an elite character and are focused on the protection and promotion of women's civil and political rights and refer to international law norms; while, on the other hand, Islamic movements with different interpretation of women's rights consider the ultimate sources of legal legitimacy to be religious texts (shari'a),[65] and are more popular amongst women in rural areas. This is just an example on how civil society engagement in EU democratisation policy is vital in order to balance different priorities within the Moroccan society, whilst safeguarding the fundamental rights of women in the country, a crucial step for an equal and inclusive democratic transformation.

After having outlined what this study will consider as the 'ideal model' of democratisation within the EU external action framework, it can be clearly observed how the definition of democratisation engrained in the EU's discourse is radically different from the linkage model described above. In this regard, the EU's securitisation of its relations with Morocco does not radically interfere with its democratisation goals, in the sense that it never gave up most importance to civil society engagement nor to the revalorisation of Moroccan people's agency. On the other hand, the proposed definition of what an 'ideal' democratisation would look like would radically interfere with the EU's security and border management policies. This argument will be further developed in the following chapters.

[65] Dimitrovova, 'Cultural Bordering and Re-bordering in the EU's Neighbourhood' (n 37).

1.6 Conceptualisation of securitisation

Most of the literature on securitisation focuses on the debate between traditional approaches to the concept, and the Copenhagen School (CS)'s approach. The CS's concept of securitisation is rooted in Carl Schmitt's notion of the state of exception, which argues that security threats must be framed as existential causes to justify extraordinary measures. Despite the special focus given in literature to this notion of 'exceptionalism', it is interesting to note Stępka's point on how this '"exceptionalisation" of security puts the securitisation framework in a "straight jacket", eliminating the possibility of analysing other relevant articulations of security that exist below the threshold of exception'.[66] So, while the CS's focus on speech acts and exceptionalism remains dominant, alternative frameworks emphasise how security is enacted through everyday bureaucratic, political and institutional practices,[67] and authors like Balzacq critique the CS for neglecting the role of contextual power dynamics in shaping securitisation processes.[68] In this regard, I agree with the idea that there is a need for a more inclusive conceptualisation of security,[69] a more political understanding of the concept, which is dynamic, constantly evolving and inherently unstable. In Stępka's words, 'By committing to a rather rigid framework driven by speech act theory and exceptionalism, the Copenhagen School has overlooked the complexities, embeddedness and depth of the process associated with the construction and application of security'.[70]

Following this line of reasoning, a number of scholars have incorporated alternative notions of security into the securitisation framework, investigating concepts such as human security[71] or re-

[66] M Stępka, *Identifying Security Logics in the EU Policy Discourse: The 'Migration Crisis' and the EU* (Springer 2018).

[67] D Bigo, 'Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease' (2002) 27 Alternatives 63; J Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (Routledge 2006).

[68] T Balzacq, *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Routledge 2011).

[69] O Corry, 'Securitisation and "Riskification": Second-Order Security and the Politics of Climate Change' (2012) 40 Millennium 235; A Hammerstad and I Boas, 'National Security Risks? Uncertainty, Austerity and Other Logics of Risk in the UK Government's National Security Strategy' (2014) 50(4) Cooperation and Conflict 475; A Lupovici, 'The Limits of Securitization Theory' (2014) 16 International Studies Review 390; M Stępka (n 66).

[70] Stępka (n 66).

[71] S Watson, '"Framing" the Copenhagen School: Integrating the Literature on Threat Construction' (2012) 40(2) Millennium: Journal of International Studies 279.

silience[72] as some of the logics that shape specific modes and consequences of the securitisation process.[73] Stępka's argument on how it is necessary to look deeper into the different notions, modalities, vocabularies and practices of security and to explore how they intervene in the process of securitisation, in order to look at securitisation's internal complexity and dynamics.[74] Building on this, Watson argues that securitisation is not solely defined by the state of exceptionality or even risk, but is embedded within a broader institutionalised constellation of meanings.[75] This perspective is crucial in understanding that the EU's securitisation of its relations with Morocco has not happened in a vacuum, but in a very specific geopolitical context and within a long history of colonial power and violence.

In relation to this point on the need to further contextualise and consider all the factors influencing securitisation, Opi's postcolonial critique of the CS is also worth mentioning. This scholar's main argument lies in the fact the CS does not provide with a solid ground on which to critically evaluate claims of an existential threat or the state of emergency.[76] In other words, while this theory acknowledges that security threats are socially constructed – meaning that something becomes an issue because it is framed as one, not because it is inherently dangerous – it fails to address the question on why and how certain issues are framed as security threats in the first place. It lacks a critical perspective on power, politics or strategy behind securitisation, overlooking who gets to define security threats and for what purpose. Building on this critique, Andersson shows how the EU's border externalisation strategy reinforces neocolonial governance by outsourcing migration control to third countries like Morocco, embedding securitisation within broader geopolitical power structures.[77]

[72] P Bourbeau, 'Resiliencism: Premises and Promises in Securitization Research' (2013) 1 Resilience 3.
[73] Stępka (n 66).
[74] ibid.
[75] Watson (n 71).
[76] BO Opi, 'The Securitisation of African Borders' in BO Opi, *Refugee Coloniality: An Afrocentric Analysis of Prolonged Encampment in Kenya* (Palgrave Macmillan 2024) 91.
[77] R Andersson, *Illegality, Inc: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (University of California Press 2014).

Lastly, this critical approach is complimented in research by a body of scholars[78] who link the concept of securitisation to the concepts of human security and human rights. Addressing the securitisation issue through a normative rather than a merely analytical lens, provides with a comprehensive standpoint from which to answer this thesis' research question, directly related to the interconnection between security, human rights and democracy. By introducing the concept of 'liquid securitisation' – where almost anything can be framed as a security threat, leading to the normalisation of securitisation – this approach provides a strong foundation to argue that the securitisation of EU-Morocco relations is not an isolated or exceptional case. Instead, it is a systematic outcome of the deeply entrenched colonial power imbalance between the two. This securitisation process has far-reaching, long-term consequences, as it heavily and systematically shapes other policy areas, such as democracy promotion, ultimately reinforcing restrictive and security-driven governance frameworks. Krasteva expresses it clearly: 'the permanent state of securitisation threatens the foundation of democratic societies – the civic agency and the sphere of its activity'.[79]

Against this backdrop of evolving critiques and reconceptualisations of securitisation theory, it becomes clear that a narrow focus on exceptionalism or state-centric frameworks is insufficient for capturing the dynamics at play in the EU's engagement with Morocco. Rather than treating securitisation as a discrete event triggered by existential threats, this thesis adopts a broader, more critical lens – one that considers how power, context and historical hierarchies shape the continuous and strategic deployment of security logics. The following section therefore builds on these theoretical insights to establish the conceptual approach to securitisation most relevant to this study. It draws in particular on Krasteva's and Opi's critical and decolonial perspectives to understand how the EU's securitising agenda in Morocco systematically reshapes the political landscape, constrains civil society and undermines democratisation efforts.

[78] A Krasteva, 'Editorial: Securitisation and Its Impact' (2017) 1 Global Campus Human Rights Journal 315; L Dencik and J Cable, 'The Advent of Surveillance Realism' (2017) 11 International Journal of Communication 763.

[79] Krasteva (n 78).

Taking this into consideration, the approach better suited to address the concept of securitisation embedded in the research question is the one introduced by Krasteva, who critically questions the securitarian paradigm through the assumed normative lenses of human rights and human security. In her research, this author goes through what the reasons for the transformation of securitisation into a hegemonic discourse and policy are, and the conditions that have made this fundamental change possible, together with the factors that catalyse and accelerate it.[80]

Building upon this constructivist perspective, the securitisation of EU-Morocco relations can be understood as a process in which security policy has transitioned from being one policy area among many to assuming a dominant, hegemonic role, effectively redefining 'the political' itself. In this context, securitisation serves as a mechanism for reinterpreting traditional security concerns to advance the security agenda of a particular political or economic elite – namely, the EU and its Member States. This process is not merely about ensuring stability but is also instrumental in perpetuating the power structures that benefit these actors. In the case of EU-Morocco relations, securitisation has been particularly evident in the domains of migration and border control. From a broader perspective, it also functions as a means to maintain cooperative relations with Morocco's autocratic regime, which, despite its democratic deficits, is perceived as a stable partner. Crucially, this self-interested security agenda is framed as a national – or in this case, regional – imperative, thereby securing legitimacy from the broader public.[81] Within this framework, the securitisation of EU policy prioritises state security as the security of those who hold political power, marginalising individual security and human rights.

Expanding on this argument, Edmunds highlights how human rights frameworks can, paradoxically, become complicit in securitising politics, inadvertently contributing to the disempowerment of citizens through what he terms 'surveillance realism'.[82] In the specific case of Morocco, securitisation in border management has resulted in two particularly vulnerable groups – migrants

[80] Krasteva (n 78).

[81] K Appiagyei-Atua and others, 'State Security, Securitisation and Human Security in Africa: The Tensions, Contradictions and Hopes for Reconciliation' (2017) 1 Global Campus Human Rights Journal 326.

[82] AJ Edmunds, *Human Rights, Security Politics and Embodiment* (Anthem Press 2023).

and human rights activists – becoming the primary targets of securitisation, exposing them to heightened risks of human rights violations.[83] This dynamic is especially pertinent in EU-Morocco relations, as the EU continues to uphold a discourse on human rights promotion and protection – often in a patronising manner – while simultaneously reinforcing its security agenda across the MENA region. Krasteva's analysis aligns closely with this case, demonstrating how the EU's security priorities have eclipsed other policy concerns, including development, thereby entrenching a securitarian hegemony.[84] As a result, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are not only marginalised but also systematically subordinated to the dominant logic of security.

In this critical view of securitisation, it is interesting to bring up Opi's decolonial perspective on the issue. His main argument is that securitisation in Africa is not a recent issue but rather has been a part of colonial expansionism in order to gain control of territories and the people within them for centuries.[85] He argues that the literature on securitisation holds a state-centric approach to security based on the logics of survival and the politics of fear, in which social relations are structure based on distrust.[86] This state-centric approach to security elevates the interests of the state above those of migrants and, as is particularly relevant to this study, also above those of local populations in transit and destination countries, such as Morocco. To conclude this remark on the neocolonial dynamics of securitisation of EU policy in the Southern Neighbourhood, it seems relevant to note how securitisation has become a model of governmentality, operating the law in a way which is consistent with colonial practice.[87]

In conclusion, I believe that shifting away from mainstream Western theories on securitisation, and looking in the direction of critical, decolonial and human rights centred perspectives on the issue is a much more coherent approach, aligning closely with the theoretical framework outlined in the next chapter. The EU's focus on security policy and migration control in Morocco has pushed the promotion of human rights to the sidelines of the international security agenda, promoting marginalisation and political exclu-

[83] Krasteva (n 78).
[84] ibid.
[85] Opi (n 76) 91.
[86] ibid.
[87] ibid.

sion of migrants trying to cross the border in search of a better life, but also of those choosing to stay in Morocco. In the following chapters, I will further argue how the EU's discourse, policies and practices are clearly undermining the possibilities of long-term political stability and preconditions for successful democratisation in the country.

1.7 Literature review synthesis

This literature review has synthetised the key areas of study on democratisation in Morocco, as well as the consequences of securitisation of EU policies to the country's political system. It has showed the main discussions regarding the theoretical framework from which to approach the research question, and it has also brought up the relevance of qualitative research in prioritising people's agency, as it aligns with a bottom-up approach by capturing individual perspectives, experiences and voices, thus fostering a more inclusive and participatory research process which properly grasps the consequences of securitisation in Morocco whilst keeping the people's agency as a priority. Finally, this review has examined the conceptual foundations of its two core themes – democratisation and securitisation – providing a critical foundation for the study's analysis.

In this regard, the research for this thesis will contribute to apply a critical theoretical framework to the analysis of security and border control measures in the country. This theoretical analysis will then be complemented by qualitative research to provide with an agency-based approach to the challenges that Moroccan citizens face as a result of the EU's securitisation of its agenda in the country.

In the following section, the theoretical framework will further elaborate on the literature reviewed, looking into the importance of a fully free and independent civil society for genuine democratisation. It will also examine the EU's relationship with civil society and the role of the Moroccan government in shaping this engagement. In doing so, it asks whether the EU is reinforcing authoritarian tendencies by prioritising political stability and cooperation with the Moroccan state over a genuine commitment to supporting an independent and empowered civil society.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Contextualising the theoretical framework: analysis of Morocco's main limitations to democratisation in data

In order to ground the theoretical framework that guides this thesis, it is important to begin with a brief overview of the current state of democracy in Morocco. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative assessments – particularly the 2024 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) – this section highlights key limitations in political participation, the rule of law and international cooperation that shape the country's democratic prospects and the role of civil society within them.

Morocco is classified by the BTI as a hard-line autocracy, ranking 106th out of 137 in political transformation.[88] While it maintains moderate governance and economic scores, its democratic institutions are weak and subordinated to the monarchy, which dominates all branches of government and undermines judicial independence. Civil liberties, including fair trial rights and freedoms of expression and association, are severely constrained – especially for critics of the monarchy, Islam or Morocco's position on Western Sahara.[89] Political participation remains limited, with elections serving more as a democratic façade than a mechanism for meaningful contestation. These constraints have led to widespread political disengagement and public distrust in political institutions.

[88] Bertelsmann Stiftung, 'BTI 2024 Country Report: Morocco' (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024).
[89] ibid.

At the same time, Morocco has developed one of the most vibrant civil societies in the MENA region. Despite facing legal limitations, surveillance and targeted repression, CSOs continue to play a crucial role in rights advocacy, service provision and public discourse.[90] However, the state's hybrid regime – marked by superficial liberalisation alongside deep authoritarian resilience – shapes the boundaries of civic activity. International partnerships, including with the EU, have not translated into structural reform or inclusive development, with the BTI noting limited state capacity and persistent inequality.[91] In this context, civil society becomes both a key actor in democratisation and a site of political contestation shaped by national and international forces. This framework provides the basis for analysing how EU engagement intersects with these dynamics.

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 Introduction: civil society as central lens to understand democratisation in Morocco

Data on Morocco's political landscape reveals persistent democratic weaknesses. Political parties are widely mistrusted by the public, perceived as depoliticised and primarily focused on electoral gains. In this context, Morocco has developed one of the most vibrant and pluralist civil societies in the Arab world – positioning civil society as a critical, though complex, actor in the country's political evolution.

While some scholars highlight the pivotal role of civil society in fostering democratisation,[92] this study adopts a more nuanced perspective, grounded in the specificities of the Moroccan context. To support this approach, the following section will first present a definition of civil society. It will then examine the legal and institutional framework shaping civil society in Morocco, and how these structures influence its political function. The chapter will also explore civil society's role in Moroccan democratisation, critically engaging with teleological and normative understandings

[90] Bertelsmann Stiftung (n 88).
[91] ibid.
[92] L Diamond, 'Toward Democratic Consolidation' (1994) 5 Journal of Democracy 4; SE Mavee, 'The Relevance of Civil Society Participation in Democratic Governance' (2022) 30 Administratio Publica 171.

of democracy. Finally, it will consider how the EU's relationship with Morocco – particularly through its securitisation agenda – has shaped the conditions under which civil society operates, and how this, in turn, affects prospects for democratic transformation.

As a first step, the following section examines how civil society is defined in both classical and critical scholarship – an essential starting point, given that its meaning, function and perceived legitimacy vary significantly across contexts. This conceptual foundation is crucial for analysing civil society's role in democratisation in Morocco, and for understanding how EU securitisation policies shape and constrain that role.

2.2.2 What is civil society?

Despite having been a central concept of study in democratisation theory, there is no consensus upon what constitutes civil society. In line with this thesis' arguments, it seems fitting to first introduce a more traditional definition of the concept, and to complement it with a more nuanced, critical approach. In this regard, Diamond conceives civil society as 'the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely), self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules'.[93] This vision sees civil society as distinct from society in general, as it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, though excluding individual and family life, business and political efforts to take control of the state.[94] A key aspect in Diamond's definition, particularly relevant to this thesis, is the emphasis on autonomy from the state, society and party systems – framing civil society within a rigid binary of 'with the state' or 'without it'.

However, critical perspectives have challenged this normative conception of civil society and make two relevant points. First, authoritarian regimes take very different forms and therefore produce very different configurations of civil society. As such, the binary distinction between 'dependent' and 'independent' from the state does not account for how the nature of the regime itself directly affects the form and function of civil society. It is therefore important not only to examine its internal structure, but also its embeddedness in broader political contexts, and how these mu-

[93] Diamond (n 92).
[94] ibid.

tually shape one another. Second, many traditional views of civil society posit a definitional and inherently positive, pro-democracy role for civil society – a view that critical scholars contest. As Cavatorta and Durac argue, 'both as a theoretical concept and as a concrete entity it should be construed as a neutral analytical category'.[95]

Jamal's contribution effectively bridges these two critiques: by arguing that 'the ability to remain above or below the fray of politics is virtually impossible',[96] she illustrates both the difficulty of identifying 'aligned' and 'non-aligned' civil society actors, and the impossibility of assuming that civil society is inherently good or bad for democratisation. Instead, CSOs are always politically embedded, and their democratic potential must be assessed in relation to the broader context in which they operate, including power dynamics, state strategy and external influences such as donor priorities. This reinforces the importance of treating civil society not as a fixed category, but as a dynamic and contested space shaped by political interests, historical legacies and external pressures.

Given the importance of the historical and political context in defining civil society, this thesis follows Sater's argument, that it is impossible to define civil society in global or universal terms without glossing over cultural and historical differences. In this analysis, civil society must therefore be defined within its Moroccan context.[97]

Given these complexities – and the ways in which civil society is shaped not only internally but also by the broader political regime – it is necessary to examine how civil society functions within authoritarian or hybrid contexts like Morocco's before considering its theorised role in democratisation. Only by understanding these structural constraints can we meaningfully assess civil society's potential, or its limitations, as a force for democratic transformation. In doing so, this thesis remains attentive to how securitisation and external governance frameworks, particularly those of the EU, further influence these dynamics. This framing also pro-

[95] F Cavatorta and V Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (Routledge 2011).

[96] A Jamal, 'Introduction: Democratic outcomes and associational life' in A Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton UP 2007) 1.

[97] J Sater, 'The Dynamics of State and Civil Society in Morocco' (2002) 7(3) The Journal of North African Studies 101.

vides the analytical foundation for examining how EU securitisation policies shape the democratic space in Morocco by empowering certain civil society actors while marginalising others.

2.2.3 Civil society in authoritarian contexts: the case of Morocco

This section provides an overview of the legal and political framework regulating CSOs in Morocco, highlighting how the regime uses these mechanisms to retain control over civic space. While Morocco presents a relatively liberal legal framework on paper, in practice the state maintains a high degree of scrutiny over CSOs – ensuring that critical organisations are denied legal status, thereby excluding them from public funding, participation and influence.

The right to freedom of association is formally guaranteed by article 9 of the Moroccan Constitution, the Royal Charter of 1958 and the Royal Decree of 27 November 1958.[98] These were amended in 1973, 2002 and 2006 with the aim of facilitating association registration. Morocco has also ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, making freedom of association a constitutional right.[99] This apparent liberalisation of civil society and right to association regulations has developed during Mohammed VI's regime as a response to the increase in number of CSO associations supporting human rights, democracy and rule of law during the 1970s and 1980s.[100] As Dimitrovova notes, formal rejection of an association's registration is rare – unless it challenges one of the regime's red lines: national territorial integrity (particularly with regard to the question of Western Sahara), the primacy of Islam and the legitimacy of the king.[101] Thus, the activities of Moroccan CSOs are largely limited by the omnipresence and vigilance of the state, which has proven highly skilful at co-opting social movements.[102]

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98 Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco (2011) art 9; Royal Charter (Morocco, 1958); Royal Decree (Morocco, 27 November 1958).

99 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), art 22; K Kausch, 'How Serious is the EU About Supporting Democracy?' (FRIDE Working Paper, 2008).

100 Cavatorta and Durac (n 95).

101 B Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco: Boundary Setting, Integration, and Consolidation' (CEPS Working Document No 323, December 2009) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604037> accessed 9 March 2025.

102 ibid.

So, in reality, the state maintains an appearance of pluralism and cooperation with civil society, while promoting only those organisations that do not threaten its authority. An example of this unequal application of the law is the possible exceptions that article 3 of the constitutions encompasses, which allow for the authorities to shut down entire associations on the basis that they are in breach of the provisions in the article.[103] Human Rights Watch documented how these restrictions go beyond registration, highlighting that these administrative obstacles undermine the activities of associations throughout their 'life', affecting their most basic everyday activities, such as renting office space of meeting halls, opening bank accounts or exclusion from official events and ineligibility for subsidies, among others.[104]

In relation to this, the state not only maintains control over how organisations are created, ensuring that those that it does not approve of do not obtain legal status, but even after they have acquired legal status, it still uses a variety of tactics to maintain control over them.[105] In addition, as it is the state who is in control of directing funding to these associations, it ensures that CSOs that have been set up by persons close to the regime continue to enjoy close relationships with the authorities.[106] Denoueux and Gateau argue that many Moroccan CSOs are more closely linked to the state than to the real concerns of society.[107] They underline the elite character of many urban associations, and how this has contributed to widespread scepticism toward the Anglo-Saxon idea of an 'active and responsible' citizenry rooted in community involvement.[108]

The broader political party landscape also plays a key role in shaping civil society in Morocco's hybrid regime. Mouna explains how, in a non-democratic system, political parties should remain weak and failing, because they serve less to build institutions, rally people and govern and more to ensure the divide of resources and functions, to give legitimacy to public policies, to encourage investors and international actors; from this point of view, Moroccan

[103] Cavatorta and Durac (n 95).
[104] Human Rights Watch, *Freedom to Create Associations: A Declarative Regime in Name Only* (Human Rights Watch 2009).
[105] Jamal (n 96).
[106] ibid.
[107] G Denoueux and L Gateau, 'L'Essor des associations au Maroc: à la recherche de la citoyenneté?' (1995) 150 Monde Arabe Maghreb-Machrek 19.
[108] An illustrative example is provided in Appendix B.

political parties play their role perfectly.[109] The silence of political parties and their co-optation by the authorities has led civil society to become very active in the public sphere, driven by a human rights paradigm. However, it is confronted with two major difficulties: lack of resources and professionalism, and the nature of power and its centralisation.[110] Moreover, Sater points out how this Moroccan political scene, which has seen a separation develop between political parties and political associations, has been accompanied by increasing mutual suspicion, increasing fragmentation of the Moroccan political scene[111] and further weakening the democratic potential of civic actors.

In addition to this, civil society is not immune to political penetration from both the state and political parties, and its ability to remain autonomous has proven very difficult, with many of them succumbing to regime co-optation and penetration whenever economic or political necessities appeared. The state has, for decades, been diffusing the analytical distinction between civil society and the state, by becoming the major player in the context of human rights, diffusing to its advantage critical aspects of the dialogue and stressing more acceptable and less combative aspects of education and culture.[112]

In sum, independent CSOs in Morocco face not only obstacles to legal recognition and institutional support, but also constant political and administrative pressure. Whether through overt repression or subtle incentives, the regime ensures that civil society remains largely contained within boundaries that serve its interests. This complex and often contradictory functioning of civil society in Morocco – as simultaneously tolerated, co-opted and restricted – has significant implications for its capacity to contribute meaningfully to democratisation. While the legal framework suggests openness, the political reality reveals a highly controlled civic space, shaped not only by the monarchy but also by international actors. In particular, the EU's role in funding and legitimising specific forms of civic engagement adds another layer to this

[109] K Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State: The Case of Morocco' (2020) 25 (Special Issue) European Foreign Affairs Review 67.
[110] ibid.
[111] Sater (n 97).
[112] ibid.

dynamic, raising important questions about which actors are empowered, which are marginalised and what vision of democracy is ultimately promoted.

The following section turns to the theoretical role of civil society in democratisation, critically assessing its potential in hybrid regimes like Morocco and setting the foundation for analysing how external policies – especially those rooted in securitisation – can support or constrain democratic transformation.

2.2.4 Role of civil society in democratisation

The relationship between civil society and democratisation has been extensively debated in both theory and practice. In this thesis, democratisation is not understood narrowly as the holding of elections or institutional reforms, but as a broader, bottom-up process rooted in local agency, inclusive participation and the protection of fundamental rights. Particularly in hybrid regimes such as Morocco – where authoritarian structures coexist with formal democratic elements – democratisation involves expanding civic space, enabling contestation and enhancing accountability. Within this broader conception, civil society becomes a potential vehicle for transformative change, depending on how it is embedded in political, social and institutional contexts.

Two broad positions dominate the literature. On the one hand, those who consider the concept of civil society as inherently positive for democratisation in non-democratic states, the civil society sector plays a significant role in lobbying and pressuring government to democratise politics and subsequent policy.[113] From this perspective, civil society is positioned as an intermediary sphere between the private and political realms – autonomous from the state and oriented toward public interest.[114] From this perspective, authoritarian control is seen as a constraint on civil society's activity,[115] but not something that fundamentally reshapes its democratic potential.

In contrast to liberal-democratic assumptions, a second body of literature sees civil society in the Arab world as a key tool used by liberalised autocracies – such as Morocco – to consolidate power rather than challenge it. From this perspective, civil society is

[113] Mavee (n 92).
[114] Diamond (n 92).
[115] Mavee (n 92).

not necessarily a force for democratisation, but can instead be shaped, co-opted or selectively empowered by the state to reinforce authoritarian rule.[116]

In the specific case of Morocco, scholars have shown how the monarchy has reasserted control over civic space through socio-economic policy frameworks. Mouna, for instance, discusses the creation of the National Human Development Initiative in 2005 – an initiative tied to the Ministry of Interior, whose minister is appointed by the king – as a clear example of how public policy has been used to expand regime influence over civil society.[117] While the programme ostensibly aimed to support local development, its funding mechanisms were limited, non-transparent and subject to clientelism and nepotism.[118] These practices align with a broader strategy of authoritarian 'reformism', where the state seeks to appear responsive without ceding genuine political control.

Importantly, these dynamics also shape the international perception of civil society and its relationship to democratisation. As Dimitrovova warns, analyses that maintain a narrow, instrumental link between civil society and democratic transition risk overlooking the diversity of civic actors – especially those who operate outside donor frameworks or who challenge the legitimacy of the regime.[119]

This thesis adopts a more nuanced position. While it is evident that a significant portion of Moroccan civil society has been co-opted by the state and no longer plays a transformative democratic role, there remains a critical and independent sector – albeit one that operates under immense structural pressure. These actors may not bring about institutional reform at the national level, but they contribute to local democratic empowerment and grassroots resistance. As Cavatorta and Durac point out, 'the existence of a strong and widespread repressive apparatus indicates that genuine opposition does indeed exist in the Arab world'.[120]

[116] Jamal (n 96); Cavatorta and Durac (n 95).
[117] Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State' (n 109).
[118] ibid.
[119] Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco' (n 101).
[120] Cavatorta and Durac (n 95).

Building on this critique, Jamal offers a deeper theoretical challenge to liberal assumptions about civil society.[121] She argues that many of the claims linking associational life to democratisation rely on evidence from Western, democratic contexts – where autonomous groups already exist and have access to institutions that can be influenced through bottom-up participation.[122] In contrast, in non-democratic states, associational life is embedded in very different political realities. Participation in civil society does not necessarily foster democratic norms; rather, it can reinforce authoritarianism by normalising clientelism, dependency and regime-aligned behaviour.[123]

A clear illustration of this dynamic can be found in the 2004 case of women's rights organisations in Morocco. After years of advocacy for a new family code, many of these groups realised that aligning with the regime offered a more effective path toward legal reform than opposing it. In response, they adopted a cooperative stance, working with the monarchy to pass the legislation. While this resulted in policy success, it also exemplified how civil society actors may temper their demands and moderate their discourse in exchange for regime approval.[124] Through such political and economic incentives, the regime effectively curtails the transformative potential of civic activism.

As Jamal concludes, CSOs in authoritarian and polarised regimes can, at times, undermine democratisation rather than support it.[125] By promoting associational agendas that align with the regime's interests, governments extend their control over political discourse while maintaining the appearance of pluralism. These insights are particularly relevant to the Moroccan case, where civil society's role is deeply shaped by both domestic authoritarian structures and international pressures – especially those coming from foreign donors.

While recognising that authoritarian contexts shape the behaviour and capacity of CSOs, it is essential to avoid deterministic readings that frame the MENA region as inherently authoritarian. Morocco's civil society landscape includes both regime-aligned actors and a vibrant, critical sector working for rights and account-

[121] Jamal (n 96).
[122] ibid.
[123] ibid.
[124] ibid.
[125] ibid.

ability – albeit under immense pressure. This thesis adopts a nuanced view: that democratisation cannot be reduced to institutional reform or donor-led initiatives, and that independent CSOs can still foster local democratic cultures. However, it also argues that EU foreign policy plays a key role in marginalising these critical actors, prioritising stability, migration control and economic partnership over the promotion of inclusive, locally grounded democratic transformation.

This complex picture of Moroccan civil society – as simultaneously a space of contestation and control – demands a closer look at how external actors interact with it. The next section turns to the role of the EU, examining how its securitised foreign policy shapes civil society dynamics in Morocco, and influences which voices are empowered or silenced in the process of democratisation.

2.2.5 External actors and civil society

Given Morocco's constrained civic environment – due to structural underfunding, selective repression and frequent co-optation of civil society by the regime – the EU emerges as a key external actor. On paper, the EU presents itself as a normative power, committed to democracy, human rights and the promotion of civil society. But in practice, its actions raise important questions: can the EU play a meaningful role in supporting Moroccan civil society? Or does it, instead, end up reinforcing the very dynamics that limit democratisation?

As discussed in previous sections, the close cooperation between Morocco and the EU – driven largely by shared interests in trade, security and migration – has led to a series of partnerships and policy frameworks that frame the EU as both an economic partner and a political reform actor. Over the years, the EU has launched various initiatives intended to support democratisation in the Southern Neighbourhood, often with civil society positioned as a central pillar. However, despite this focus, democratic stagnation – if not outright backsliding – continues to characterise Morocco's political trajectory.

In line with the broader international turn toward civil society support as a democratisation strategy, the EU has heavily invested in funding initiatives aimed at strengthening CSOs across the region. Motivated by the liberal belief that a vibrant civil society fosters democracy and political stability, EU institutions have en-

thusiastically funded activities deemed likely to empower civic actors.[126] As Khakee and Weilandt point out, 'civil society inclusion' has become something of a buzzword in EU external relations.[127]

One of the clearest examples of this approach is the MEDA[128] Democracy Programme, developed under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) to promote democracy in the region. Yet in Morocco, its implementation revealed major structural imbalances: between 1996 and 2000, only nine projects (representing just 19% of the programme's funding for non-governmental bodies) were directed at national CSOs, while the majority of funds (over 70%) went to international NGOs.[129] This reflects broader issues of accessibility: many local and rural associations lacked the technical knowledge to meet the programme's administrative requirements, and some were unaware of the funding altogether. In addition, many religious associations were excluded by default, either because they were denied legal recognition or simply considered incompatible with EU priorities.[130]

These issues are further compounded by the way EU funds – particularly under MEDA and later the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) – were channelled through government bodies and framed not around democratic transformation, but around a vague logic of 'modernisation'.[131] As a result, civil society support often bypassed genuinely independent or critical actors, favouring instead those aligned with regime objectives or capable of delivering measurable project outcomes. Far from enabling bottom-up empowerment, this model reinforces donor-driven, top-down logics that prioritise institutional efficiency and political stability over democratic deepening.

Beyond these problems related to funding distribution, this thesis has identified three main ways in which the EU's securitised agenda undermines meaningful democratisation in the country.

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[126] Jamal (n 96).

[127] A Khakee and R Weilandt, 'Supporting Democratic Participation' (2022) 27 Mediterranean Politics 456.

[128] The MEDA Regulation is the principal instrument of economic and financial cooperation under the EMP. It was launched in 1996 and amended in 2000. It enables the EU to provide financial and technical assistance to SMCs; European Union, 'MEDA Programme' <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:r15006> accessed 15 April 2025.

[129] S Haddadi, 'Political Securitisation and Democratisation in the Maghreb' (Working Paper AY0403-23, University of California 2004).

[130] ibid.

[131] Kausch, 'How Serious is the EU About Supporting Democracy?' (n 99).

First, market liberalisation promoted through EU economic policies reinforces the position of political and economic elites, further enabling their control over civic space and resources. Second, the EU's support for state-controlled institutions under the banner of human rights contributes to the reproduction of a hollow rights discourse, giving the appearance of pluralism while silencing critical voices. And finally, the securitisation of migration governance reorients the work of some CSOs – particularly those working on borders, mobility and humanitarian protection – towards EU priorities, in ways that are often at odds with local democratic needs and human rights commitments.

Market liberalisation – reinforcement of economic and political elites

The EU-Morocco relationship is shaped by the Union's reluctance to challenge the Moroccan regime or disrupt the existing balance of power. As a result, the EU tends to avoid politically sensitive issues and focuses its civil society support on relatively 'uncontroversial' sectors.[132] This dynamic plays out clearly in the EU's economic and trade policies, where the prioritisation of market liberalisation often sidelines democratic concerns.

During the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area negotiations, for instance, civil society actors reported a clear power imbalance – not only between EU institutions and Moroccan authorities, but also between European and Moroccan CSOs. Interviews conducted by MedReset reveal that European NGOs at times exerted outsized influence in civil society spaces, effectively shaping the agenda and limiting the voice of local actors.[133] Moreover, when domestic CSOs requested that the EU include social rights in the trade negotiations, these demands were ignored, with the EU choosing instead to prioritise its own strategic interests – particularly in the fields of agriculture, fishing and migration.[134]

Because the EU's primary interlocutor in Morocco is the central government, these negotiations often reinforce the position of ruling elites who already dominate the country's political and economic institutions.[135] As Faustini Torres argues, the authoritarian

[132] Khakee and Weilandt (n 127).
[133] D Huber and MC Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice and Human Rights Back In' (MedReset Working Papers No 11, May 2018).
[134] ibid; Khakee and Weilandt (n 127).
[135] Khakee and Weilandt (n 127).

nature of Morocco's regime makes it unlikely that the goals of civil society align with those of the state.[136] Thus, when the EU fails to engage local civic actors in the design of trade agreements, it contributes to a dynamic of power concentration and exclusion – empowering elites while marginalising the population's economic and social interests.

In this context, it is also important to note that the EU's emerging geopolitical strategy in Morocco has been shaped by its desire to manage the negative externalities of economic liberalisation[137] – such as migration, instability and inequality – rather than by a commitment to structural democratic transformation. While these liberalisation and modernisation policies have largely benefitted Moroccan elites, they have also provoked strong criticism from grassroots actors, particularly leftist and Islamist groups, who denounce the state's failure to address socioeconomic inequality and environmental degradation.[138]

State-aligned funding and the illusion of rights

A further obstacle to the democratising potential of civil society in Morocco lies in the EU's continued funding of state-aligned organisations, including NGOs that are closely linked to government structures. These are often presented as civil society actors but, in practice, operate in ways that uphold authoritarian rule and reinforce the regime's controlled human rights narrative. As one civil society actor interviewed by Mouna notes, 'the EU finances the associations and political actors as well; however, political actors use these funds to gain power … marginal actors are excluded from these funds'.[139] Funding is not distributed equitably or based on democratic potential, but rather along historical and political lines: associations in the north are supported by Spain, those in the centre by the EU, while peripheral or critical groups are systematically excluded.[140]

In some cases, EU funds even support state institutions that are widely seen as obstacles to democratic development. Corruption, favouritism and nepotism are embedded within these struc-

[136] L Faustini Torres, 'Bolstering Autocracy, Hindering Democracy: Local Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Effects of EU Migration Policy Externalization in Morocco' [2025] International Migration Review 1.
[137] Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco' (n 101).
[138] ibid.
[139] Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State' (n 109).
[140] ibid.

tures, which play a central role in the regime's management of civil society and its monopolisation of power.[141] As Kausch argues, unless NGOs and the selection and allocation processes are fully independent from the state, EU funding risks becoming little more than 'a counter-productive democratic PR vehicle for the incumbent elite'.[142]

A particularly illustrative example is the EU's financial support for Morocco's National Initiative for Human Development, a programme established by the monarchy and tightly monitored by state authorities.[143] By funding these kinds of associations, which clearly fall within the category of CSOs that do not contribute to democratisation, but rather feed state power by reinforcing its carefully constructed image as a 'liberalised autocracy', the EU is able to keep its migration control and security interests in Morocco by maintaining good relations with the monarchy. Thus, this alignment serves both sides: the EU maintains access and influence in a strategic region without compromising its interests, and the Moroccan regime strengthens its international standing while avoiding substantive democratic reforms. In the process, independent civil society is weakened, and the potential for a bottom-up, locally driven democratisation process is significantly undermined.

But it's not just about who the EU funds – it's also about how these funding priorities redirect the work of civil society actors, pushing them to align with European security interests, particularly in the domain of migration management. The next section explores how this securitisation logic shapes the agendas, practices and legitimacy of CSOs working on migration, often at the expense of human rights advocacy and bottom-up democratic engagement.

Establishing new priorities for civil society: the case of migration

The EU's increasing focus on security within the ENP, and its broader buffering logic in the Southern Mediterranean, has not only had damaging consequences for human rights, but has also imposed new priorities on civil society. As part of its push for

[141] Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State' (n 109).
[142] Kausch, 'How Serious is the EU About Supporting Democracy?' (n 99).
[143] Cavatorta and Durac (n 95).

'shared responsibility' in combating irregular migration and 'common security threats', the EU has opened up new funding opportunities in the field of migration management. However, this shift is viewed by many as incompatible with a rights-based approach, and ultimately counterproductive to the promotion of democracy and human rights.[144]

Rather than fostering the values of pluralism and civic engagement, EU funding in this domain has pushed civil society actors to align with European priorities – acting as local agents of EU migration control rather than independent defenders of human rights. As Dimitrovova puts it, 'the EU has found common ground with the state but less so with civil society, turning some CSOs into "guardians" of Western interests of economic hegemony'.[145]

This dynamic was described in practice by a representative of GADEM, a Moroccan anti-racist organisation defending the rights of migrants and foreigners:

> [W]e were approached by several international organisations, mainly Italians, to cooperate on anti-migration projects – basically to stop and prevent people from moving to Europe. This goes against the most fundamental right, which is freedom to move. In our view, it is not the responsibility of civil society to serve the interests of the EU and its member states. Our job is to help and protect those who suffer from the EU's anti-migration and security policies.[146]

Rather than supporting the creation of a pluralistic and inclusive civic space, this approach encourages the co-optation of CSOs into a securitised policy agenda – undermining their legitimacy, redirecting their missions and weakening their ability to act as democratic agents. In this context, ruling elites in Morocco have found common cause with the EU, using migration as a bargaining tool to secure economic, political and security concessions, while sidelining both the rights of migrants and the democratic aspirations of Moroccan citizens.

[144] Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco' (n 101).
[145] ibid.
[146] ibid.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the EU's securitised migration agenda not only reorients civil society work but also limits the emergence of a genuinely democratic public sphere – an issue that becomes central when assessing the EU's broader impact on democratisation in Morocco.

2.3 Conclusion and application to research

After revisiting the concept of civil society, its role in democratisation and the specific context of Morocco-EU relations, the main takeaway for this thesis is the importance of recognising how civil society is shaped by its relationship with ruling governments and by the broader political and institutional landscape in which it operates. At the same time, this framework rejects deterministic assumptions that deny the possibility of a critical and independent civil society within autocratic regimes such as Morocco.

This theoretical framework aims to equip with the study with the conceptual and analytical tools necessary to critically assess how the EU's securitised agenda in Morocco affects the country's prospects for democratic transformation. It has centred on a theoretical exploration of civil society and its democratising potential, while also integrating a contextual analysis of how Morocco's hybrid political structures shape associational life. Taken together, this framework enables a deeper understanding of the interconnections between EU democracy promotion, security priorities and broader political and economic dynamics.

The chapters that follow will offer a detailed and critical overview of EU-Morocco relations, particularly in the domains of democratisation and security. The theoretical foundations outlined here will guide the analysis of how the EU's prevailing interests – trade, migration control and maintaining good relations with the Moroccan regime – shape its civil society engagement strategies and, in turn, reinforce existing power asymmetries.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction to research

To address the research question – *How has the securitisation of EU policies in Morocco affected civil society and democratisation in the country?* – this study adopts a qualitative, descriptive methodology, guided by a critical theoretical framework. The research design combines desk-based analysis of secondary sources with fieldwork involving semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the Melilla-Nador region.

The first stage of the research involved a thematic and critical review of both academic literature and EU policy documents. Two main types of sources were analysed: first, academic work on Morocco's civil society and EU foreign policy in the MENA region and, second, official EU documents related to external governance and migration policy, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs), the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.[147] This component of the research aimed not only to map institutional frameworks and policy shifts but also to critically assess how the EU's emphasis on border control and migration management has shaped its engagement with civil society and democratic norms in Morocco.

[147] European Commission, 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy' COM(2011) 303 final; European Commission, 'Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy: Multiannual Indicative Programming 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021); European Commission, 'Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations: Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021); European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours' (2021); European Commission, Communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum COM(2020) 609 final.

To complement the desk research and incorporate grounded, locally informed perspectives, a two-week fieldwork trip was conducted in May 2025. The first week of which took place in Granada, where I engaged in informal discussions with professors and researchers at the University of Granada working on EU external policy, border securitisation and Spanish-Moroccan relations. These exchanges provided crucial contextual insights into the historical, geopolitical and social dynamics of the Melilla-Nador region and informed the design of the interviews conducted during the second phase of fieldwork.

The second week of fieldwork was carried out in Melilla and Nador, where I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews and two informal conversations with members of local CSOs.[148] Interviews were conducted between 13 and 15 May 2025, with three held in person, one via online video call and one via Whatsapp messaging. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, based on their involvement in migration-related work, human rights advocacy or civic engagement in the Nador border region. Initial contacts were established through online research and academic networks, with further referrals made during fieldwork. While respondents were asked about issues of border policy and securitisation, the primary aim of the interviews was to assess the impact of EU engagement on Morocco's civic space. As such, no interviews were conducted with organisations based in Melilla.

A total of five interviews were conducted. However, one participant later withdrew their consent for the publication of their testimony. In line with ethical research standards, this interview is not included in the public version of this thesis, and no data derived from it is used in the analysis.

While this thesis uses the term CSO in line with the academic literature, all interview participants identified their organisations as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The term NGO is therefore used in direct quotations and where appropriate to reflect participants' own language. Analytically, however, CSO is re-

[148] A sample of the questionnaire used as a guiding framework for the interviews is provided in Appendix C. While the conversations were semi-structured and allowed to flow naturally, the questionnaire served as a reference point.

tained as an overarching category, in keeping with the conceptual framework and broader references to civic actors beyond the interviewed organisations.[149]

Interview notes and transcripts were analysed thematically to identify recurring concerns, perspectives and tensions in how civil society actors interpret EU engagement and securitisation. These themes were interpreted in light of the study's broader critical framework.

In addition to formal interviews, engaging in informal conversations with CSO members, which were not recorded or systematically structured, provided valuable unfiltered reflections on EU policy and local realities. These informal interactions were complemented by participant observation, as during my time in Melilla and Nador, I observed the material and social effects of border securitisation – including physical infrastructure, cross-border restrictions and everyday experiences of mobility. This experiential component enriched the analysis by offering a direct, embodied understanding of the region's political landscape and the practical constraints facing civil society actors.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Considering the specific context in which interviewed organisations work, all participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to the interview. The form included detailed information about the aims and scope of the research, the use of the data and their rights as participants. To ensure transparency and ethical compliance, interviewees were informed that their personal data would be anonymised and that neither their names nor the names of their organisations would be disclosed in the thesis or any related publications. Data has been stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

It is also important to acknowledge the political constraints under which some of these organisations operate, and how some topics, including migration, security or EU funding can be sensitive, as criticism of these issues may implicitly or explicitly involve

[149] B Tomlinson, 'Annex 1: NGOs and CSOs – A Note on Terminology' in Tomlinson B, *Working with Civil Society in Foreign Aid: Possibilities for South–South Cooperation?* (UNDP China 2013) 123.

critique of the Moroccan government. Given documented instances of repression and limitations on civil and political rights in Morocco, these dynamics inevitably shape how civil society actors operate and how openly they can share their experiences.

A short reflection of my own positionality as researcher is also necessary in this context, as a European researcher conducting fieldwork in a border region deeply shaped by colonial history and contemporary securitisation, I was acutely aware of the privileges that came with my passport and position. The ability to move freely between Melilla and Nador, while many local residents face strict visa regimes and militarised border controls, underscored the asymmetry that underpins both EU border policy and my own presence in the field. This dynamic shaped not only logistics but also interpersonal encounters and power relations during the research.

Moreover, on several occasions, my questions about EU policy or democracy promotion prompted laughter or gentle critique from interviewees, who viewed them as naïve or detached from the realities they experience on the ground. These moments were important reminders of the distance between EU discourse and lived experience, and they prompted me to revisit my assumptions, listen more attentively and remain open to being challenged. Rather than undermine the research, these encounters revealed the richness of local knowledge and highlighted the need for a bottom-up approach to studying civil society and EU external action.

3.3 Limitations

This study faces some limitations, primarily related to the scope and conditions of fieldwork. The number of interviews conducted was limited due to the short time frame available for fieldwork and the challenges of accessing CSOs in Morocco without prior contacts or formal recommendations. This lack of access also meant that no interviews were conducted with Islamic CSOs, which are an important part of the civil society landscape in Morocco. Similarly, due to time constraints, it was not possible to include interviews with Moroccan government officials – a perspective that would have enriched the analysis by offering insight into how EU engagement is perceived and managed from the state's side. As a result, although the organisations interviewed reflect a

degree of variation in their focus and roles, the sample does not represent the full diversity of civil society actors operating in the country.

Another important limitation is the gender imbalance among participants. All interviewees identified as male. This was not due to a lack of women's participation in Moroccan civil society, but rather reflects broader gendered dynamics in organisational leadership, where men continue to occupy the majority of decision-making positions. During fieldwork, I observed that women were actively involved in the day-to-day work of several organisations, often participating in project implementation and community outreach. However, they were largely absent from senior or representative roles, which influenced who was available and authorised to speak on behalf of the organisation. In addition, a language barrier further constrained access to women's perspectives: the limited interaction I had with women staff members was mediated through male colleagues, as many of the women did not speak French but rather communicated primarily in Amazigh. The absence of women's perspectives among interviewees may have shaped the findings and potentially omitted gender-specific insights into the effects of EU policies on civic space.

Finally, the political context in which the interviews took place must be considered. CSOs in Morocco – and particularly in the Rif region – often operate under significant surveillance and pressure from the state. Public criticism of government policies can carry serious risks, including detention or harassment. While participants openly discussed the impact of EU securitisation on civil society, it is possible that their responses were constrained when addressing topics related to Moroccan state policy or broader institutional repression.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into an underexplored topic: how EU external action and securitisation affect civic space and democratic agency in Morocco. The views of CSOs based in Nador – at the frontline of border and migration governance – represent a critical, yet often overlooked, perspective within debates on democracy, security and civil society in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood.

4. Historical review of EU engagement in Morocco

This section traces the evolution of EU policies on democracy promotion, development and security in Morocco from the 1980s to the present. It is divided into two parts: the first draws primarily on grey literature to examine how EU-Morocco relations have historically prioritised security and stability over genuine political transformation, covering the period from the 1980s to 2019. The second part turns directly to EU policy documents to assess how these tendencies persist – or shift – in more recent years, focusing in particular on the period from 2019 onwards.

4.1 The foundations of EU-Morocco engagement: a historical lens on securitisation and democratisation

In order to understand how the EU's securitised approach to Morocco has affected civil society and, by extension, the country's democratic trajectory, it is crucial to trace the broader political context and evolution of EU-Morocco relations. While the EU has long framed itself as a normative power committed to human rights and democratisation, its external action – particularly in the Southern Mediterranean – has often prioritised stability, border control and economic interests over meaningful political reform.

The foundations of the EU's current security agenda can be traced back to the Schengen Agreement of 1985 and the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999, which linked the free movement within EU

borders to reinforced control at its external frontiers.[150] These agreements laid the groundwork for a security architecture increasingly focused on migration control. Over the past two decades, this security-first approach has intensified, with militarisation and externalisation of EU borders – particularly in Southern Europe and North Africa – becoming central to EU policy.

Yet, security has never been the EU's only stated priority. As early as 1989, initiatives like the Redirected Mediterranean Policy and the Euro-Maghreb Partnership signalled a desire to combine regional cooperation with political dialogue, democracy promotion and development. This dual ambition was institutionalised with the launch of the EMP (1995), followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), and, later, a dense network of association agreements and financial instruments such as the ENPI and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).[151]

Despite this, critics argue that the EU's democracy promotion efforts have often been undermined by the primacy of security and economic interests. Since the 1990s, democracy promotion has been used more as a strategic tool than a consistent objective.[152] Morocco, long hailed as a 'privileged partner', has benefited from EU praise and funding, while continuing to restrict civic and political freedoms. Rather than supporting oppositional or independent civil society, the EU has frequently chosen to partner with the state, favouring technocratic governance reforms over political pluralism and accountability.[153]

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150 M Akkerman, *Border Wars: The Arms Dealers Profiting from Europe's Refugee Tragedy* (Transnational Institute & Stop Wapenhandel 2016); Agreement between the Governments of the States of the Benelux Economic Union, the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Republic on the gradual abolition of checks at their common borders (signed 14 June 1985); Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts (signed 2 October 1997, entered into force 1 May 1999).

151 S Haddadi, 'Political Securitisation and Democratisation in the Maghreb' (Working Paper AY0403-23, University of California 2004); A Khakee and others, *Pragmatism Rather than Backlash: Moroccan Perceptions of Western Democracy Promotion* (MEDAC & GERM 2008).

152 F Cavatorta, 'Geopolitical Challenges to the Success of Democracy in North Africa' (2001) 8 Democratization 175; M Kurki, 'How the EU Can Adopt a New Type of Democracy Support' (FRIDE Working Paper 112, 2012).

153 R Youngs, 'Democracy Promotion as External Governance?' (2009) 16(6) Journal of European Public Policy 895.

4.1.1 The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

Launched in 1995 at the Barcelona Conference, the EMP was the EU's flagship initiative to consolidate its influence in the Mediterranean region. Framed as a comprehensive project to transform the Mediterranean Basin into 'an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity', the EMP was built around three key dimensions: political dialogue, economic relations and socio-cultural cooperation.[154] However, in practice, security concerns – particularly around irregular migration and political stability – quickly rose to the forefront of the EU's agenda.

Between 1995 and 2006, seven bilateral Association Agreements (AAs) were signed, reflecting the EMP's declared priorities. These agreements endorsed neoliberal economic policies, socio-economic development, investment in human capital and infrastructure, rural development, environmental protection and democratic governance.[155] Despite this seemingly broad and progressive framework, cooperation with authoritarian regimes in the region – particularly Morocco – often prioritised short-term stability over meaningful democratic reform.

As Cavatorta notes, Moroccan authorities were able to suppress democratic demands while benefitting from EU-provided financial aid, which overlooked EMP clauses on human rights and governance.[156] Although democracy and security were linked in theory, authoritarian regimes were treated as strategic allies, undermining the normative ambitions of the EMP.[157]

Two critical events shaped the implementation of the EMP in Morocco: the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US and the 2003 Casablanca bombings. These incidents intensified EU security concerns across the Maghreb, reinforcing a cautious and ambiguous democracy promotion strategy. As Haddadi observes, this approach allowed authoritarian governments to selectively adopt superficial reforms that did not challenge their hold on power.[158]

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[154] A Teti and others, *Democratisation Against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

[155] ibid.

[156] Cavatorta, 'Geopolitical Challenges to the Success of Democracy in North Africa' (n 152).

[157] F Cavatorta, S Kritzinger and R Chari, 'EU External Policy-Making and The Case of Morocco: "Realistically" Dealing with Authoritarianism?' (2008) 13(3) European Foreign Affairs Review 357.

[158] Haddadi (n 151).

While the EMP may have contributed to short-term stability, it did so at the expense of human rights and democratic progress. The marginalisation of these priorities – and the preference for authoritarian cooperation – ultimately contributed to the erosion of civic and political freedoms in the region during this period.[159]

4.1.2 The European Neighbourhood Policy

The post-Barcelona EU discourse continued to promote the export of democracy, but increasingly intertwined this ambition with boundary maintenance. Within this framework, partner countries were expected to commit to shared values – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and to work towards implementing them. However, ENP policy documents reveal a reliance on an idealised, Eurocentric conception of liberal democracy as the benchmark for assessing democratic progress in neighbouring states – despite the fact that these values do not always resonate with local conceptions of democracy, which often link it more closely to economic and social outcomes.[160]

The ENP encouraged 'people-to-people' exchanges and civil society initiatives supporting human rights and democratisation. However, this approach was soon reshaped by the launch of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), which introduced a stronger emphasis on security and counterterrorism. The ESS influenced the operationalisation of the ENP by prioritising short-term stability and external border control over longer-term goals of political transformation in the Southern Neighbourhood. So, despite rhetorical emphasis on civil society, the actual impact of ENP civil society programmes remained limited. For instance, EuroMed Youth, one of these initiatives, only reached approximately 20,000 individuals across the entire MENA region.[161]

Morocco's ENP Action Plan reflected this selective and cautious approach. While it set out ambitious reform goals, these ultimately aligned with the Moroccan ruling elite's strategy of modernisation without deep political transformation — focusing on reforms in areas that did not challenge existing power structures.[162] The EU's acceptance of this framework, whether due to strategic

[159] Cavatorta, Kritzinger and Chari (n 157).
[160] Teti and others (n 154).
[161] Cavatorta, Kritzinger and Chari (n 157).
[162] K Kausch, 'Morocco' in R Youngs (ed), *Is the EU Supporting Democracy?* (FRIDE 2008) 42.

pragmatism or limited leverage, contributed to a reform process that prioritised stability over structural democratic change. As a result, the so-called liberalisation process largely entailed the incorporation of opposition parties into the formal political system, fostering their co-optation and contributing to their consensual depoliticization.[163]

Several scholars have criticised the EU's actions during this period for lacking strategic coherence. Bicchi, for instance, characterises this phase as one in which the EU lost its strategic vision for the region, pointing to a significant gap between democratic rhetoric and actual policy implementation.[164] Kausch similarly notes that the Action Plan for Morocco failed to define specific timeframes, responsible actors, implementation tools or evaluation mechanisms – thus undermining the realisation of its own reform objectives.[165] Civil society actors echoed this concern, calling for a logical framework that would define concrete goals, clear responsibilities, timelines and necessary resources for each proposed action.[166]

The impact of securitisation on democracy promotion and civil society engagement is perhaps most evident in the EU's funding allocation patterns. Between 2005 and 2006, the EIDHR – which directs funds to independent NGOs and pro-democracy initiatives – received just under €2 million.[167] In contrast, the MEDA/ENPI programmes received €275 million during the same period, with funds channelled predominantly through state institutions such as the Moroccan Ministry of Justice or regime-aligned bodies. Strikingly, only 2% of these funds were specifically earmarked for governance and human rights programming.[168] This stark imbalance reveals a funding strategy that privileges government-led development over independent or grassroots civic engagement – undermining the EU's own stated commitment to empowering civil society.

[163] SL Catalano and PR Graziano, 'Europeanization as a democratization tool?' (2016) 21 Mediterranean Politics 364.
[164] F Bicchi, 'Lost in Transition: EU Foreign Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy Post-Arab Spring' (2014) 371 L'Europe en Formation 27.
[165] Kausch, 'Morocco' (n 162).
[166] ibid.
[167] ibid.
[168] ibid.

This analysis ultimately suggests that while instruments like the EIDHR offered useful and relevant support for NGOs, their scale was limited and funding insufficient. This stands in sharp contrast with the European Parliament's 2007 evaluation, which emphasised that civil society support should be a cornerstone of the ENP, 'regardless of the degree of willingness of partner countries' governments to cooperate'.[169]

4.1.3 The Union for the Mediterranean

Following the limitations of the ENP and the persistent challenges to the EU's democratisation agenda in the region, the launch of the UfM in 2008 marked yet another shift in the EU's external action. While presented as a revitalisation of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, this strategy further distanced itself from earlier commitments to political reform. Political transformation and democratic development were no longer central to the agenda; instead, the UfM focused primarily on technical and economic cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, energy, transport, water management and SME development.[170] In practice, the EU's main tools remained trade facilitation and limited aid – tools which, although impactful in specific sectors, had little bearing on advancing inclusive governance or citizen participation.

Although there were some attempts to revive democracy promotion – such as renewed EIDHR funding for bottom-up initiatives – these efforts remained marginal and had limited influence on broader political structures in the Southern Mediterranean. Moreover, the persistent underfunding and operational constraints of the EIDHR continued to weaken its role. For instance, in 2010, the EIDHR underspent its budget in the Mediterranean by €3.7 million – an amount that never reached civil society on the ground.[171] The projects that were funded typically focused on supporting vulnerable populations – women, street children or people living with HIV/AIDS – but were ultimately undermined by broader neoliberal policies that prioritised market

[169] Kausch, 'Morocco' (n 162).
[170] Catalano and Graziano (n 163).
[171] F Bicchi and B Voltolini, 'EU Democracy Assistance in the Mediterranean: What Relationship with the Arab Uprisings?' (2013) 9 Democracy and Security 80 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2012.736313> accessed 20 March 2025.

integration over redistributive justice. This reinforced the image of the EU as a promoter of embedded neoliberalism, rather than a consistent advocate for social democracy.[172]

In parallel, the EU intensified its external security agenda. In 2011, Frontex's mandate was expanded to allow deeper cooperation with third countries, including technical support for migration governance and border control, the organisation of joint operations on third-country territory and enhanced cooperation on returns.[173] These developments marked a clear pivot toward securitisation and stabilisation, with growing investments in security sector reform across neighbouring states.

Civil society actors and EU partners continued to call for more long-term, participatory approaches. According to the 2009 IDEA International report, partners emphasised that democracy support had become too short-term and top-down. They urged the EU to engage in genuine dialogue, emphasising mutual exchange, shared priority-setting and equal partnership.[174] The report also underlined the lack of coherent long-term strategy within the EU, pointing to inconsistencies between member states and institutions, and the absence of mechanisms to ensure democracy is meaningfully integrated across all policy areas.[175]

In this context, the UfM can be seen as a continuation – and even a consolidation – of previous trends: a further shift towards technocratic and security-driven cooperation, the marginalisation of democratisation efforts and the entrenchment of strategic, state-centric priorities in EU policy towards the Mediterranean.

4.1.4 Revisitation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in light of the Arab Spring

The Arab Uprisings marked a turning point in the EU's engagement with its Southern Neighbourhood, particularly in how democracy and security were understood in the context of EU-Morocco relations. Three years after launching the UfM – which had already deprioritised political transformation in favour of techni-

[172] M Kurki, How the EU Can Adopt a New Type of Democracy Support (FRIDE Working Paper No 112, 2012).
[173] S Wolff, 'The External Dimension of the EU's Internal Security' in C Hill, M Smith and S Vanhoonacker (eds), *International Relations and the European Union* (3rd edn, OUP 2017).
[174] International IDEA, *Democracy in Development* (International IDEA 2009).
[175] ibid.

cal cooperation – the EU published a revisitation of the ENP, reflecting a perceived need to adopt a more active and comprehensive democracy support strategy.

However, as Kurki argues, this shift in rhetoric did not represent a transformation in the EU's underlying conceptualisation of democracy.[176] While the revisitation acknowledged the importance of contextualising liberal democratic reforms and improving aid delivery, the normative framework of democracy remained largely unchanged: the EU continued to prioritise procedural markers such as free and fair elections, rule of law, judicial independence and security sector reform. A deeper or more inclusive understanding of democracy – responsive to local demands for social justice and participation – remained absent. As such, the revisitation of the ENP stopped short of a paradigm shift, offering no real dialogue on democracy's meaning and failing to enable participatory control over political and economic decision-making.

Between 2011 and 2017, the EU released several policy statements that, at face value, suggested a more inclusive approach to democracy promotion. Yet a closer analysis reveals these were largely rhetorical repackagings of earlier approaches, maintaining a narrow, liberal-procedural understanding of democracy.[177]

By the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy and its 2017 implementation report, this dilution of ambition had become more explicit. Civil society was increasingly treated as a consultative partner rather than a political agent. Stability, migration control and economic cooperation took precedence over democratic reform.[178] Despite the early post-uprisings rhetoric of promoting 'deep democracy', the EU ultimately returned to a technocratic, state-centric model that sidelined grassroots demands for political and social justice. As Colombo and Voltolini note, these reforms introduced only minimal change and left the substance of the EU's democracy promotion approach largely untouched.[179]

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[176] Kurki (n 172).

[177] For a detailed overview of key EU strategic documents related to civil society in the Southern Neighbourhood following the 2011 revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy, see Appendix D.

[178] European Commission, *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy Review* JOIN(2015) 50 final; Teti and others (n 154).

[179] S Colombo and B Voltolini, '"Business as Usual" in EU Democracy Promotion Towards Morocco? Assessing the Limits of the EU's Approach Towards the Mediterranean after the Arab Uprisings' (2014) 371 L'Europe en formation 42 < https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.371.0041> accessed 15 March 2025.

4.1.5 What happened after 2015?

Between 2015 and 2019, EU-Morocco political dialogue was severely strained following rulings by the General Court of the EU declaring that Western Sahara was not part of Morocco. This prompted Morocco to suspend political dialogue with the EU, although sectoral policy dialogue between the EU delegation and certain Moroccan ministries continued on an ad hoc basis, without a formalised strategy or clear objectives.[180] Despite this, in 2019 the European Parliament and the Council approved amendments to protocols on fisheries and agriculture, effectively reinforcing economic cooperation by treating Western Saharan exports the same as those from Morocco.[181]

This recalibration in EU-Morocco relations was further formalised with the adoption of the 2019 Joint Declaration following the first Association Council meeting since 2015, marking the official resumption of high-level political dialogue and reaffirming shared priorities in areas such as security, migration and economic cooperation.[182]

Amid this political tension, two policy priorities remained central to EU-Morocco cooperation: counterterrorism and migration. In the wake of the 2015 European Agenda on Security, counterterrorism was elevated as a core pillar of the ENP, and new initiatives were launched to combat ISIS both within and beyond EU borders. That year, security and intelligence experts were deployed to EU delegations in Morocco and several other countries to shape political dialogues and design counterterrorism action plans. A total of €142 million was allocated to building counterterrorism capacities in third countries.[183] This agenda increasingly relied on the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability – a development aid instrument launched in 2015 – to finance both counterterrorism and migration management.[184] While EU documents referenced

[180] European Court of Auditors, 'EU Support to Morocco: Limited Results So Far; (Special Report No 09, Publications Office of the European Union 2019).

[181] ibid.

[182] Council of the European Union, Joint Declaration by the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco for the Fourteenth Meeting of the Association Council (27 June 2019) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/27/joint-declaration-by-the-european-union-and-the-kingdom-of-morocco-for-the-fourteenth-meeting-of-the-association-council/> accessed 20 February 2025.

[183] Wolff (n 173).

[184] ibid.

strengthening the rule of law and human-rights-based approaches to counterterrorism, these were rarely elaborated upon or translated into concrete safeguards.[185]

In parallel, migration emerged as another major policy priority, framed in increasingly securitised and militarised terms. Alarmist rhetoric cast migration as a security threat, calling for a 'robust fight against irregular migration'.[186] The 2016 launch of the Global Approach to Migration Management exemplified this shift. This strategy centred on border protection through cooperation with neighbouring countries, enabling the EU to externalise migration controls through legislative, administrative and discursive tools involving both state and non-state actors.[187] In Morocco, this translated into collaboration on drafting migration legislation aligned with EU governance logics.[188]

This approach has had direct consequences for Moroccan civil society. As Stock observes, CSOs have increasingly shifted toward providing short-term humanitarian relief to vulnerable and stranded migrants at the borders – effectively reinforcing a 'migration-rescue industry'.[189] Meanwhile, longer-term integration policies and social rights have been left in the hands of Moroccan state institutions, with limited involvement from independent civil society.[190] This marginalisation of CSOs from long-term policymaking illustrates how the EU's migration agenda deprioritises socioeconomic rights and treats civil society engagement as peripheral.

Crucially, these two priorities – migration and counterterrorism – were not pursued as distinct tracks. As Gazzotti shows, 2015 marked a shift in which development projects focused on irregular migration were rebranded as counterterrorism initiatives.[191] This further entrenched the securitisation of development aid and contributed to a portrayal of Moroccan youth not as political

185 Wolff(n173).
186 Akkerman (n 150).
187 I Stock, *Time, Migration and Forced Immobility: Sub-Saharan African Migrants in Morocco* (Bristol UP 2019).
188 P García Andrade and others, *EU Cooperation with Third Countries in the Field of Migration* (European Parliament 2015).
189 Stock (n 187).
190 ibid.
191 L Gazzotti, 'From Irregular Migration to Radicalisation? Fragile Borders, Securitised Development and the Government of Moroccan Youth' (2019) 45 Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 2888.

agents but as latent threats – either as would-be irregular migrants or radicalised individuals – thus erasing their democratic aspirations and potential for bottom-up transformation.

The EU's development aid practices also reflect this broader trend. Morocco remained one of the largest beneficiaries of the bilateral EI programme, receiving contract commitments totalling €562 million between 2014 and 2018, with actual payments of nearly €206 million.[192] However, these transfers – classified as Budget Support – were not earmarked, meaning funds entered the national treasury without transparency or mechanisms to track their allocation. Moreover, performance assessments were based on self-reported data from the Moroccan government, and financial negotiations lacked documentation.[193] In many cases, sectoral strategies lacked action plans, baseline data or meaningful indicators.[194]

Altogether, these developments demonstrate how the EU's securitised approach to Morocco prioritises short-term stability and cooperation over genuine democratic reform. Civil society is not seen as a partner in long-term transformation, but rather as an instrument for implementing or mitigating the fallout of security and migration agendas. By sidelining socioeconomic rights and reinforcing state-centric governance, EU policy has contributed to a political climate where the potential of civil society to support bottom-up democratisation is increasingly constrained.

4.2 Latest developments: how securitisation of EU-Morocco relations has affected democratisation since 9

Having explored the evolution of EU-Morocco relations from the 1980s up to 2019 through the lens of grey literature, it becomes clear that while democracy promotion has long been present in official rhetoric, it has consistently taken a backseat to security, migration control and economic cooperation. Despite occasional shifts in language and strategy, the EU's overarching approach has largely remained guided by stabilisation objectives and the reinforcement of state-centric frameworks. In order to better under-

[192] European Court of Auditors, 'EU Support to Morocco' (n 180).
[193] ibid.
[194] ibid.

stand how these trends have developed in more recent years – particularly following the formalisation of the revised ENP and the growing emphasis on security cooperation – this study now turns to a closer analysis of official EU policy documents since 2019. By doing so, it aims to assess whether any substantive changes have occurred in the EU's conceptualisation of democracy and civil society in Morocco, and how these may continue to shape the country's political trajectory.

4.2.1 Renewed Partnership in the Mediterranean

The first document I will refer to in order to grasp how securitisation has taken precedence over democratisation in the EU's agenda in Morocco since 2019 is the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood, which broadly outlines the development of the EU's relations with its North African and Middle Eastern partners. This document defines five key policy areas: human development, good governance and the rule of law; resilience, prosperity and digital transition; peace and security; migration and mobility; and green transition, climate resilience, energy and the environment. To keep the analysis concise and focused, I will concentrate on the areas most relevant to this study.

The first area is human development, good governance and the rule of law, where the document highlights the importance of 'effective coordination and partnerships across policy fields, including with youth organisations' to promote cooperation and increase 'people-to-people contacts' – framed as a successful cooperation area delivering tangible benefits 'for all'.[195]

The second relevant area is peace and security, where the EU positions itself not only as a provider of humanitarian and development assistance, but also as a security actor. The document stresses the need to strengthen the capacities of, and cooperation between, law enforcement, judicial and civil authorities, with support from EU agencies such as Frontex.[196] Although this could be seen as paving the way for police and military cooperation with authoritarian regimes, the document simultaneously states that

[195] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours' (2021).
[196] ibid.

such engagements must ensure that law enforcement and judicial systems meet high standards of data protection and respect for human rights.[197]

The third key area analysed is migration and mobility, given that the securitisation of EU-Morocco relations has largely unfolded in response to increasing migration flows. Here, the Commission highlights the need to 'strengthen cooperation on migration governance, while providing international protection to those who need it',[198] attempting to balance a human rights-based approach with a more securitised logic. This section also mentions addressing the root causes of migration and includes specific action points on migrant rights – concerning asylum, mobility and socioeconomic integration – alongside an emphasis on 'effective return and readmission',[199] which continues to be a major sticking point in EU-Morocco relations.

Although this document broadly covers a diverse region and therefore remains quite general in its formulations, it nevertheless provides a useful starting point for the analysis, as these broad policy orientations lay the foundation for the EU's subsequent initiatives with Morocco, particularly in sectoral strategies and funding programmes developed through the MIPs. Importantly, while the emphasis on civil society engagement and respect for human rights remains theoretically present, a major shortcoming lies in the instruments used to implement the partnership. The main funding mechanisms – the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) – have been subject to criticism: the European Court of Auditors found that the methodology for the allocation of NDICI-Global Europe funds lacked full transparency, consistency and comprehensiveness.[200] Furthermore, the latest EFSD implementation report dates back to 2020, highlighting a concerning lack of up-to-date monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for these key funding instruments.

[197] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (n 195).
[198] ibid.
[199] ibid.
[200] European Court of Auditors, 'Programming the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe' (Special Report 14, 2023).

In this framework, it is also relevant to analyse the Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood, which offers a more concrete overview of the mechanisms through which funding is allocated to specific sectors. Although the most relevant areas for this study – such as the social sector, education and financial inclusion – as well as the areas receiving the largest amounts of funding – such as green growth, climate action and energy transition – are covered, the majority of the funds are delivered in the form of budget support, that is, through Morocco's central government, with no follow-up or monitoring activities to evaluate how these funds are spent. This reveals how, despite the stated intention to strengthen civil society capacities and promote democratisation in Morocco, the funding mechanisms remain highly state centric. As a result, actors critical of or opposed to the government can be easily marginalised, limiting their access to resources intended to foster democratic development.

Following this broader overview of the Renewed Partnership framework, it is necessary to turn to a more specific and critical area: migration governance. The next section will therefore analyse the Action Plan for Morocco developed under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, examining how security imperatives continue to shape the EU's relationship with Morocco, particularly regarding the externalisation of migration management and its implications for democratic transformation and civil society space.

4.2.2 New Pact on Migration and Asylum

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum[201] sets the tone for the EU's external migration policy, prioritising return, readmission and operational cooperation with third countries. It formalises a securitised and transactional approach, linking migration control to development aid and foreign policy incentives, while expanding Frontex's role and relying on informal arrangements that reduce transparency and accountability.[202] Although the Pact briefly acknowledges fundamental rights, it lacks enforceable safeguards and offers limited space for civil society engagement. As such, it reflects a broader shift away from rights-based cooperation, raising concerns about its impact on democratisation and

[201] European Commission, Communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum COM(2020) 609 final.
[202] ibid.

governance in partner states. These dynamics are particularly relevant in the case of Morocco, where the logic of the Pact is further operationalised through the Draft Action Plan for Morocco.

Draft Action Plan for Morocco

The next document analysed is the Draft Action Plan for Morocco under the framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. This document provides more concrete information on how the Pact's priorities are being operationalised at the country level. Particularly relevant to this study is the allocation of the migration-related funding portfolio between 2014 and 2020. According to the Action Plan, €238 million were mobilised for Morocco, of which 80% was allocated to institutional support and border management, while only 11% targeted protection measures and around 7.5% focused on socioeconomic integration.[203]

The funding breakdown reveals a striking imbalance among different policy areas: €6.5 million was implemented by CSOs for the protection of migrants; €2.14 million aimed at enhancing self-reliance and access to rights for refugees; €2 million (under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa) was directed towards supporting CSO capacity building. In stark contrast, €101.7 million was allocated under a budget support programme between 2019 and 2021 to directly strengthen the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior – including reinforcing cooperation with Frontex and Europol – alongside a €144 million border management package.[204] Additionally, only €0.6 million was earmarked for pre-departure assistance, return counselling and reintegration activities for returnees.[205]

While the document formally highlights the EU's support for Morocco's efforts to align national asylum legislation with international standards and to strengthen its asylum system, the concrete funding patterns suggest otherwise. Given the overwhelming concentration of resources on border control, surveillance and security cooperation, it remains unclear whether these efforts are genuinely intended to enhance the protection of migrants' rights within Morocco, or rather to reinforce Morocco's role as the EU's

[203] Council of the European Union, 'Draft Action Plan: Morocco' (2021) <https://www.statewatch.org/media/3154/eu-council-operationalization-pact-morocco-draft-plan-11948-21-rev2.pdf> accessed 25 February 2025.
[204] ibid.
[205] ibid.

outsourced 'guardian' – policing Europe's external borders while allowing the EU to maintain its self-image as a promoter of human rights.

This ambiguity becomes even more evident when examining the document's language regarding operational cooperation. The EU explicitly 'counts on Morocco's enhanced and sustained efforts in preventing irregular departures, strengthening border controls, search and rescue capacities and operations, and dismantling smuggling networks'. It also 'welcomes the strategic dialogue with Frontex and Europol' and 'encourages structured cooperation between Morocco and EASO (European Agency for Asylum)'.[206] These provisions, paired with the highly asymmetrical funding allocations, illustrate how migration control, rather than rights protection or inclusive governance, has become the true priority of EU-Morocco cooperation in this field.

In short, despite the rhetoric surrounding rights protection and partnership, the operationalisation of the New Pact in Morocco largely follows a securitised, state-centric model. It reinforces a transactional logic focused on containment and enforcement, at the expense of fostering the conditions necessary for long-term democratic transformation or for empowering independent civil society actors.

4.2.3 Multiannual Indicative Programmes

As this thesis explores the impact of the securitisation of the EU agenda on democratisation in Morocco – with a specific focus on its consequences for civil society – it is also important to briefly examine the EU's MIPs for the period 2021-27, particularly those addressing human rights and democracy, and CSOs. Although these documents remain broad and largely programmatic, they offer important insights into the EU's rhetorical commitments to bottom-up democratic engagement and civil society empowerment, elements that are central to the theoretical framework developed in this study.

[206] Council of the European Union (n 203).

Multiannual Indicative Programme for Human Rights and Democracy

The Multiannual Indicative Programme on Human Rights and Democracy directly acknowledges the challenges posed by the shrinking civic space, recognising civil society's critical role as a watchdog in monitoring governmental conduct and defending human rights. Among its actions, the programme outlines short-, medium- and long-term holistic support mechanisms for human rights defenders – including engagement with the international community – and the need to reverse restrictions and barriers imposed by governments on civil society itself. These objectives are highly relevant to the Moroccan context, where legal and administrative barriers severely limit the activities of independent organisations, yet the EU's engagement with this reality often remains superficial.

The programme also places emphasis on supporting pro-democracy organisations, networks and alliances, strengthening political pluralism and inclusiveness, and promoting active citizenship. Under its first axis of action, focused on strengthening democratic, accountable and transparent institutions, the MIP commits to fostering civil society participation in parliamentary monitoring – for example, by supporting parliamentary monitoring organisations and election observation initiatives. The second axis, aimed at promoting participatory and representative decision-making, also stresses the need to bolster civil society's role in oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Importantly, the document highlights the role of different types of civil society actors – local, national, regional and international, including non-registered organisations and natural persons – as key players in defending human rights.[207] Nevertheless, a critical shortcoming of the programme lies in its lack of nuanced reflection on the relationship between civil society actors and authoritarian regimes, such as Morocco's, where government-controlled or government-aligned organisations often dominate the civic space. While this omission may partly stem from the general nature of the document, it nonetheless reflects a persistent gap in

[207] European Commission, 'Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy: Multiannual Indicative Programming 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021).

the EU's external democracy promotion strategy: the insufficient attention to structural power dynamics that restrict genuine grassroots democratic mobilisation in authoritarian settings.

Multiannual Indicative Programme for Civil Society Organisations

While the Multiannual Indicative Programme on Human Rights and Democracy provides a broad framework for supporting civic engagement and political participation, the Multiannual Indicative Programme for Civil Society Organisations (2021-27) focuses more specifically on strengthening civil society actors as independent agents of governance and development. Analysing this document allows for a deeper understanding of how the EU envisions the role of civil society in third countries, and highlights both the ambitions and the structural limitations of its external democracy promotion strategy.

The programme acknowledges that the inability of CSOs to operate freely remains a widespread reality in the majority of EU partner countries, explicitly identifying the strengthening of CSOs as independent actors of good governance and development as its central objective.[208] Importantly, the programme reflects a degree of institutional reflexivity, notably in its 'lessons learned' section,[209] where it identifies weaknesses and areas for improvement based on previous cycles of engagement. This recognition of past shortcomings represents a crucial step towards more effective and context-sensitive civil society support.

Strategic Support Programme for Civil Society in Morocco

In recent years, the EU Delegation in Morocco has launched a targeted initiative aimed at strengthening civil society's capacity to influence public policy and governance processes. Known as the Programme d'Appui Stratégique à la société civile au Maroc, the programme is currently documented in only two publicly available sources: a 2022 call for proposals and the official press release announcing its launch in February 2024.

[208] European Commission, 'Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations: Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021–2027' (European Commission 2021).
[209] ibid.

The programme's initial design – based on a call for proposals – suggests a potentially bottom-up approach, giving CSOs an opportunity to define their priorities and contribute to shaping the programme itself. However, as noted in earlier critiques of EU civil society support, this strategy risks sidelining smaller, rural or less formalised organisations that often lack access to timely information or familiarity with European application and administrative processes.

According to the 2022 call, the initiative aims to 'support the structuring of civil society as an actor of change and good governance and to promote its effective and efficient participation in public action'.[210] The programme was officially launched in 2024 with a total budget of €9.5 million. In its public communication, the EU delegation framed civil society as playing a pivotal role in societal development and stated that the programme draws inspiration from Morocco's 2011 Constitution. The EU Ambassador to Morocco underscored this by noting that, 'in the context of cooperation between the EU and Morocco, civil society is recognised as an actor at the service of the harmonious development of society'.[211]

The programme sets out to achieve three main goals: improving the organisational and governance capacities of CSOs, enhancing dialogue between civil society and public institutions to promote their engagement in governance and policymaking, and reinforcing the capacities of strategic actors in the priority sectors of EU-Morocco cooperation.[212] This last objective, while important, also raises critical questions about the EU's role in shaping the definition of 'strategic' civil society, and whether it might reflect a tendency to privilege actors aligned with EU priorities over those rooted in local, potentially more contentious, advocacy work.

The programme is structured around three main components. The first, called DIALOGUE, focuses on supporting CSOs working in the areas of disability rights, children's rights, women's rights and access to justice. The aim is to strengthen these actors' ability to engage in public policy implementation as con-

[210] European External Action Service, 'L'Union européenne lance le Programme d'appui stratégique à la société civile au Maroc' (21 February 2024) <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/morocco/lunion-europ%C3%A9enne-lance-le-programme-d%E2%80%99appui-strat%C3%A9gique-%C3%A0-la-soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9-civile-au-maroc_fr> accessed 15 April 2025.

[211] ibid.

[212] ibid.

structive and recognised partners. The second component, AMUSSU, is led by a consortium of international organisations – the Association Migration & Développement (a Franco-Moroccan NGO), the Association des Enseignements de Vie et de la Terre Maroc (affiliated with the French Ministry of Education) and COSPE (an Italy-based development NGO). This element of the programme seeks to foster structured dialogue between civil society and public authorities, while providing not only financial support, but also technical and strategic assistance to enhance the operational and thematic capacities of CSOs. The third component, referred to simply as Technical Assistance, aims to reinforce the capacities of CSOs engaged in partnerships with the EU.

While this initiative undoubtedly represents a step forward in formalising civil society participation and potentially contributing to the development of a more engaged civic sphere, it also presents certain limitations. The fact that all three organisations leading the AMUSSU component are international or internationally affiliated raises concerns about the extent to which the programme is truly rooted in local realities. This reliance on foreign partners may limit the inclusion of grassroots organisations with strong local ties but limited access to EU frameworks. As a result, the programme could risk reinforcing a technocratic or externally shaped model of civil society, potentially undermining its transformative potential.

That said, this critique must be qualified by the current lack of transparency regarding the broader pool of Moroccan CSOs involved. Until more detailed information is made available, it remains difficult to fully assess the degree to which the programme incorporates a diverse and representative spectrum of civil society actors operating within Morocco's constrained political landscape.

Overall, the examination of these recent documents reveals important continuities and subtle shifts in the EU's engagement with Morocco, particularly regarding the balance between securitisation and support for democratisation. A clear pattern emerges across key post-2019 initiatives – including the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the MIPs on Human Rights and Civil Society: despite increasingly refined rhetorical commitments to democracy promotion and civil society engagement, securitisation and migration management continue to dominate the practical agen-

da. These documents consistently expose a gap between discourse and implementation. While the EU formally affirms its support for human rights and an independent civic space, its funding mechanisms, state-centric partnerships and instrumentalisation of aid for border control purposes largely reinforce authoritarian practices.

At the same time, the recent launch of the Programme d'Appui Stratégique à la société civile au Maroc represents a notable development – and perhaps an attempt to recalibrate aspects of the EU's approach. With its stated aim of strengthening civil society's role in governance and its acknowledgement of constitutional references to participatory democracy, the programme marks a shift in tone and ambition. However, as the analysis has shown, its reliance on international implementing partners and the lack of transparency regarding local CSO inclusion raise questions about its capacity to foster genuinely inclusive, bottom-up democratic transformation. Rather than fully departing from earlier logics, this initiative appears to reflect a hybrid approach: one that layers technical support for civil society over a broader framework still shaped by security imperatives and strategic state cooperation.

Taken together, these trends suggest that while elements of innovation exist, the EU's engagement remains constrained by its overarching prioritisation of stability and containment. The relative scarcity of Morocco-specific, grassroots-oriented democratisation initiatives – beyond the limited scope of the 2024 programme – underscores the EU's enduring tendency to privilege transactional partnerships over transformative change.

The following section moves beyond official policy frameworks to examine how these dynamics are experienced and interpreted by Moroccan civil society actors themselves. By centring their perspectives, this study aims to assess the real-world implications of EU engagement – and to confront the dissonance between European rhetoric and the lived realities of civic actors navigating Morocco's contested democratic space.

5. Empirical section

5.1 Contextualisation

As outlined in the preceding section, the EU positions civil society as a central pillar in its engagement with the Southern Neighbourhood, and specifically with Morocco. However, this study critically interrogates how that commitment plays out in practice – particularly in light of the EU's increasing focus on border security and migration management. The objective of this research is to understand how the securitisation of the EU's agenda has affected the work of Moroccan CSOs and, more broadly, the prospects for democratisation in the country. To this end, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs[213] operating near the border region, in order to capture their perceptions of the EU's role in both democracy promotion and migration control.

As covering such a broad area and scope was unattainable for this research project due to time constraints, the empirical research was conducted on the border area between Spain and Morocco, specifically around the Spanish enclave of Melilla.[214] Since this is one of Europe's only direct borders in the African continent, it is one of the areas where the consequences of the increased securitisation are more clearly observed, as funding for increased border control, as well as programmes for armed forces and police cooperation have been signed between Spain and Morocco, under the auspice of the EU. It is for this specific reason that this region

[213] In the theoretical chapters, this thesis uses CSO as an analytical umbrella term. In the empirical chapters, the term NGO is used to reflect participants' own language and organisational self-identification, as discussed in the methodology.

[214] See Appendix E for a map of the Melilla-Nador border region.

is not only a site of migration control, but a space where EU priorities collide. It is precisely this friction – between the EU's discourse on democracy and its practices on security – that makes the region an ideal case for studying how civil society experiences the real effects of EU external policy.

It should be noted, however, that the aim of this case study is not to generalise its findings to the entire country or region, but to offer a situated, context-specific perspective on how EU-Morocco relations are interpreted on the ground. The Rif region – historically marginalised and politically sensitive – carries its own specificities, and as a border zone, it is subject to dynamics that may differ from those in other parts of the country. This case is thus intended to illustrate how broader EU trends play out in one particularly strategic and contested space, shedding light on patterns that may resonate beyond it, while recognising the limits of its representativeness.

Before presenting the empirical findings of the fieldwork, a short but comprehensive contextualisation of the specific situation in the region is needed.

5.1.1 Historical overview of the Melilla-Nador border region

As Ferrer-Gallardo notes, the roots of the current (EU)ro-African border trace back to 1492, when Spain began expanding beyond the Strait of Gibraltar.[215] Melilla, then part of the Kingdom of Fes, was seized by Castile in 1497 and became a border outpost.[216] Over the centuries, Melilla shifted between military garrison and trade hub, developing strong cross-border ties with the Rif region, including Nador.[217] Despite tensions, trade remained vital, especially after Melilla's designation as a free port in 1863.[218]

Following the 1906 Treaty of Algeciras, Spain gained control over the Rif, facing strong tribal resistance until 1926.[219] From the 1930s, Melilla and Nador saw growing populations and econom-

[215] X Ferrer-Gallardo, 'The Spanish-Moroccan Border Complex' (2008) 27 Political Geography 301.
[216] L Soto Bermant , 'Small Places, Large Issues: Identity, Morality and the Underworld at the Spanish-Moroccan Frontier of Melilla' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford 2012).
[217] S Steinberger, 'Mapping Belonging: Analysing Spaces with Oral History in the Border Region of Melilla and Nador' (2023) 13 Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej 64.
[218] Soto Bermant (n 216).
[219] Ferrer-Gallardo (n 215); ibid.

ic ties, despite colonial hierarchies and social.[220] Though not officially part of the Spanish Protectorate, Melilla functioned as a regional capital and became increasingly integrated with its surroundings.[221]

After Moroccan independence in 1956, Spain's sovereignty over Melilla and Ceuta was contested, and the border became a symbol of unresolved tensions.[222] Meanwhile, state neglect of the Rif deepened grievances. Uprisings in 1958-59 and 1984 were violently repressed, reinforcing perceptions of marginalisation.[223]

Despite these tensions, Melilla and Nador remained economically linked. Spain's entry into the EU and the Schengen Area led to tighter border controls, but special arrangements – such as ID-based access for Nador residents – maintained high levels of daily cross-border movement.[224] These flows created a dynamic, often informal, labour and trade market.[225]

The 2017 Hirak protests, triggered by longstanding socio-economic grievances, were met with state repression and further constrained civil society in the Rif.[226] In 2020, the end of visa-free access to Melilla for Nador residents disrupted livelihoods dependent on cross-border trade.[227] Meanwhile, Morocco redirected economic focus toward strategic projects like the Beni Ensar port and Mar Chica resort, while militarisation of the border intensified.[228]

In sum, the historical relationship between Melilla and Nador reveals a border shaped not only by colonial legacies but also by contemporary dynamics of exclusion, securitisation and strategic cooperation. Understanding this evolving borderland is essen-

[220] Soto Bermant (n 216); S Steinberger and M Aziza, 'Historia de una frontera europea en África. Las relaciones transfronterizas entre Melilla y Nador (1860–2000)' (2022) 24 Illes i Imperis 217, 218.
[221] Soto Bermant (n 216).
[222] Steinberger and Aziza (n 220).
[223] Steinberger (n 217).
[224] Steinberger and Aziza (n 220); Steinberger (n 217).
[225] Ferrer-Gallardo (n 215).
[226] CH Schwarz, 'La socialización política transmediterránea: El movimiento Hirak, la diáspora marroquí y Europa como imaginario político' (2019) 28-29 Quaderns de la Mediterrània 280; A Wolf, 'Morocco's Hirak Movement and Legacies of Contention in the Rif' (2019) 24(1) The Journal of North African Studies 1.
[227] Babiker (2024).
[228] Steinberger and Aziza (n 220).

tial for assessing the impact of EU external action in Morocco – particularly how security logics continue to reproduce imbalances in mobility, governance and democratic space.[229]

5.1.2 Why this case study is relevant

Drawing from the intricate complexities that characterise the history of the border between Melilla and Morocco, this specific case study will aim to understand how securitisation of EU policies in the region – one of the places where it can be more clearly observed – has affected civic space in Nador. As two traditionally interdependent and interconnected cities, how has the increased militarisation of the border, and the subsequent mobility restrictions, affected their daily work? How have perceptions of civil society actors towards the EU changed as these securitisation practices spread? How have all these changes affected civic space in Nador, and how do they interact with the EU's democratisation and civil society support efforts in the region?

5.1.3 Nador's associative landscape

Before presenting the findings from the interviews, it is important to contextualise the associative landscape of Nador, as perceived through field observations and preliminary interactions with civil society actors. During the fieldwork conducted in mid-May 2025, a diverse and active civil society was observed, comprising international, national and local NGOs. Many organisations in the region focus on migrant rights and humanitarian support, particularly for Sub-Saharan African migrants arriving in Morocco. Others prioritise local development initiatives, including youth empowerment, women's education and professional training.

Religious associations also play a visible role in the region. Catholic organisations offering humanitarian assistance were relatively accessible and maintained online visibility. In contrast, Islamist associations were more locally embedded and difficult to contact, with little to no online presence.

Interestingly, the issue of NGO co-optation by the Moroccan state – a theme widely discussed in the literature – did not arise during interviews. Instead, participants more frequently referred to what one interviewee described as 'European' co-optation: the

[229] Ferrer-Gallardo (n 215).

instrumentalisation of NGOs to implement EU migration control objectives. One respondent estimated that up to 70% of all NGOs in Nador operate under this logic.

Through participant observation, gender dynamics within CSOs also became evident. Despite the presence of numerous NGOs focused on women's rights and empowerment, women appeared largely absent from senior decision-making positions. Most of the women observed were engaged in project delivery roles, such as teaching or facilitation, rather than in leadership or administrative functions.

The NGOs interviewed varied in scale and scope. All were based in Nador: one operated internationally, two were national NGOs with branches across Morocco and one was a strictly local organisation working in Nador and surrounding areas such as Beni Ensar. Their areas of activity ranged from direct medical and psychological support for migrants to labour market integration, vocational training for women and youth education.

The organisations appeared relatively well-resourced and professionalised, with permanent staff, administrative infrastructure and a mix of contracted personnel and volunteers. However, this may not be representative of all civil society in the region. Those interviewed were selected partly due to their online visibility and international networks – including academic connections – which may have skewed the sample toward more formalised and internationally linked organisations.

To ensure confidentiality, the NGOs will be anonymised as NGO A, NGO B and NGO C. No detailed descriptions of the organisations will be provided, in order to preserve the anonymity of both institutions and individuals involved.

5.2 Analytical section

This section will analyse the qualitative data collected during the interviews within the theoretical framework of this study, to explain how CSOs' work has been affected by the securitisation of the EU's agenda in Morocco – more specifically, in the bordering region of Nador.

This chapter is organised into three thematic sections. The first examines the EU's selective engagement with civil society, highlighting how funding and partnership dynamics have steered

NGO agendas toward migration control – eg through sensibilisation programmes – rather than human rights and democratisation. The second explores the migration-security nexus, focusing on how the EU's securitised approach contributes to the shrinking of civic space in Nador. The final section considers NGO perspectives on the long-term implications of this securitisation, including their views on what should be improved and the EU's potential role in supporting meaningful democratic transformation in the region.

5.2.1 Selective funding and instrumentalisation of associations to advance on migration agenda

A recurring theme across the interviews was the perception that EU civil society engagement in Morocco is shaped by a selective and instrumental logic. Rather than supporting the development of an independent and pluralistic civic space, many interviewees described a system in which NGO agendas are steered toward the EU's priorities – particularly migration control – at the expense of broader human rights or democratisation goals. This section explores how this selectivity operates in practice, how it is experienced by both local and international NGOs and how it affects funding access, legitimacy and the autonomy of civil society actors. It also highlights the consequences of this approach: the co-optation of some NGOs into securitised programming – they referred to these NGOs as 'client' NGOs or 'mission' NGOs –, the marginalisation of others and the emergence of a stratified associative landscape where only certain voices are heard or resourced. These dynamics are not merely technical, but deeply political, with direct implications for the future of democratisation in Morocco.

A consistent concern raised across the interviews was the emergence of numerous in recent years, most of them dedicated to putting in place projects which align with the EU's agenda of migration 'prevention', and 'sensibilisation' on the dangers of migration, rather than on improving migrants' conditions in a transit – and, in recent years, destination – country like Morocco, or in tackling the root causes of migration.

In the case of national and local NGOs (NGOs A, B and C), they argued that the EU's selectivity concerning who to fund – that is, exclusively funding those NGOs who develop policies which are aligned with their interests – was preventing them from accessing

any funding and therefore pushing them away from decision and policy making. A representative from NGO B expressed it this way: 'the aim of all EU projects is to stop irregular migration. … But migration just keeps existing'. To which they added: 'The EU develops sensibilisation programmes and not programmes that give concrete solutions'.

This interviewee even argued that sometimes they present their application for the '*appel à projets*' for EU funding, already 'knowing' that they will be rejected, since they 'know' that a 'client' NGO of the EU has already been preselected:

> Sometimes we apply for a project, and we already know in advance that our application will not have any results, because X association is already preselected because it works with them [EU], so I can say that maybe they want experimented associations and everything, but that is not legitimate.

A representative from NGO A explained it the following way:

> European migration policy works in two ways in this border: directly, through the Moroccan and Spanish authorities, who apply migration policy: refoulement, detentions, deaths, etc.; and another way, increasingly used by migration policy, which is through NGOs, many NGOs have been created these last years to sub contract this policy. A lot of money is being given to certain NGOs to serve projects of migration policy. They have been created specifically to receive funding to serve projects in fields like integration. But migrants do not want to integrate, there are dozens, hundreds of projects like this. But they do not improve conditions of migrants, they are useless.

Along these lines, another perception on these 'client' NGOs of the EU was the inefficiency of their projects. One representative from NGO B explained how they felt they merely 'copy pasted' previous projects, developing the same projects repeatedly in the same way, thus having no impact on society in Nador. Another representative, this time from NGO A, also mentioned that 'Most of these "mission NGOs" are not focused on migrants' rights, but rather just on receiving this funding and delivering their projects, without any results'. Both organisations argued that the EU was

advancing solutions that were disconnected from on-the-ground needs, serving institutional and political interests more than the work of human rights defenders.

This representative from NGO A also explained how these 'mission NGOs', who are often created in the context of European funding, are inscribed in a technical and operational logic of migration control, and they just apply European policies which aim to control migratory fluxes or at keeping migrants in southern countries, like Morocco. They added that their NGO's approach is radically different, explaining that their perspective is based on a universal and indivisible conception of human rights, considering migration as a fundamental right and refusing all instrumental logic. They explained how they reject the transformation of Morocco into 'Europe's policeman' and defend migration policies which are based on dignity, equality and justice.

In this regard, another representative from the same organisation – NGO A – offered a concrete example to illustrate how EU-funded projects often fail to address the specific needs of the local population in Nador. He pointed out that around 240 migrants were being held in Nador's prison without access to legal assistance or guarantees of a fair trial – yet no EU-funded projects were in place to support them. Legal aid had only been provided through voluntary lawyers from their own organisation. This, he argued, revealed a broader pattern in EU funding priorities: 'The projects that serve their policy, they finance them, but the projects that do not serve their policies are not financed'.

Not only was these organisations' criticism towards the selectivity and the instrumentalisation of certain NGOs, but also with the fact that they perceived the EU to always want to find 'the simplest solution'. A representative of NGO B explained that they did not perceive it to be making many efforts, as 'they already have their clients here ... they look for partners that are easy to find, and do not make any efforts to look for others'. This organisation argued that it was not a lack of transparency, but rather a lack of communication, a lack of 'sharing their projects with everyone'.

This tendency of the EU to prioritise funding for simplistic and not structural programmes pointed out by civil society actors would align with Khakee and Weilandt's argument on how the EU avoids politically sensitive issues, focusing its civil society support

on 'uncontroversial' sectors.[230] It also complements Huber and Paciello's fieldwork, which also revealed how European NGOs tended to outsize influence in civil society spaces, thus shaping the agenda and limiting the voice of local actors.[231]

One last interesting point on how the securitised EU agenda affects civil society actors in Morocco was brought up by the representative of NGO B, who explained that most of the EU's meetings were conducted with the state's ministries, at the central level and with official institutions, such as the regional council or the provincial council, 'with associations, meetings are very limited'. This point would come to confirm, once again, Khakee and Weilandt's argument on the fact that the EU's primary interlocutor in Morocco is the central government often reinforces the position of ruling elites,[232] undermining civil society's capacity to act independently, because, as Faustini Torres argues, the authoritarian nature of Morocco's regime makes it unlikely that these two actors' goals align.[233]

These findings reflect key concerns raised in the theoretical framework regarding how the EU shapes civil society in Morocco – not only through funding, but by effectively setting the agenda. By determining which projects receive support, the EU imposes external priorities that often override locally defined needs. This dynamic aligns with Dimitrovova's argument that the EU's approach fosters the co-optation of CSOs into a securitised policy agenda, thereby undermining their legitimacy, redirecting their goals and weakening their capacity to act as independent democratic agents.[234]

Both national and local organisations who were very critical with this approach also agreed on the fact that this selective funding system contributes to weaken the independence of the associative tissue. One representative from NGO A explained:

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230 A Khakee and R Weilandt, 'Supporting Democratic Participation' (2022) 27 Mediterranean Politics 456.

231 D Huber and MC Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice and Human Rights Back In' (MedReset Working Papers No 11, May 2018).

232 Khakee and Weilandt (n 230).

233 L Faustini Torres, 'Bolstering Autocracy, Hindering Democracy: Local Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Effects of EU Migration Policy Externalization in Morocco' [2025] International Migration Review 1.

234 B Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco: Boundary Setting, Integration, and Consolidation' (CEPS Working Document No 323, December 2009) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604037> accessed 9 March 2025.

> By conditioning funding to adhesion to certain political orientations – especially concerning migration – the EU is favouring a certain type of associations over others. This creates a sort of 'sorting' at the core of civil society: on the one hand, those technical associations, financially well-endowed, and on the other, critical and independent structures ... marginalised and excluded.

To which another representative from NGO B added: 'This is a big problem because there is no concurrence between associations. Normally, there should be a concurrence, there should be equality between associations. That does not exist anymore, and we notice it'.

In conclusion, the EU's selective approach to funding civil society actors in Morocco contributes to the co-optation of NGOs into a securitised policy agenda, while marginalising those that do not align with its priorities. This dynamic deeply affects civic space by constraining the development of a genuinely democratic public sphere, thereby narrowing the possibilities for meaningful democratisation. By channelling its security agenda through civil society structures, the EU extends the logic of securitisation beyond migration policy into a broader, hegemonic framework. As Opi argues, securitisation in this context becomes not merely a strategy, but a model of governmentality.[235]

5.2.2 EU civil society engagement in an authoritarian context: the security-migration nexus

This section explores how the EU's securitised approach to migration is experienced and interpreted by civil society actors in Nador, particularly through the lens of the migration-security nexus. While the EU often frames its external migration policies in terms of 'partnership' and 'stability', interviews with NGO representatives reveal how this framing translates on the ground into a highly militarised and constrained civic environment. Drawing on both field observation and interview material, the section examines how securitisation is not only visible in physical infrastructure and border procedures, but also in how CSOs understand their role, respond to repression and navigate shrinking space for

[235] BO Opi, 'The Securitisation of African Borders' in BO Opi, *Refugee Coloniality: An Afrocentric Analysis of Prolonged Encampment in Kenya* (Palgrave Macmillan 2024) 91.

dissent. It begins with a personal account of crossing the border – used here to illustrate the material embodiment of securitisation – before moving into a broader analysis of its democratic and civic implications.

The securitisation of migration in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood is not only visible in policy frameworks or funding flows – it is also tangible in the physical and procedural experience of crossing the border. When entering Nador from Melilla to conduct interviews, the notion of 'securitisation' moved from abstract policy to lived experience.

The process began at the Spanish border post: a recently inaugurated one-storey building equipped with facial recognition cameras and automated passport scanners – though not yet operational, so a border guard manually checked documents. After this came two heavy, rotating metal doors, which marked the beginning of a narrow cement walkway leading toward the Moroccan checkpoint. It was along this enclosed passage that I could clearly see the Moroccan segment of the border fence: topped with layers of concertina wire, with torn pieces of clothing still caught in the blades – silent markers of earlier, more dangerous crossing attempts. After a brief interaction with the Moroccan border guard, my Spanish passport granted me easy entry. The asymmetry was stark. My ability to pass smoothly through this securitised space underscored not only the physical infrastructure of exclusion, but also the privilege of belonging to the 'right' side of the border regime – a reminder of how mobility itself is a stratified and political resource.

This personal experience reflects the migration-security nexus that increasingly defines the EU's external engagement in the region. Migration is framed not as a humanitarian or developmental issue, but as a threat to be contained. This securitised framing has material effects, not only for those on the move, but also for the civic and political landscape shaped by border governance.

This is also one of the main topics which came up repeatedly in the interviews: the migration-security nexus. Once again, the organisations interviewed which operated on a local and national level shared their criticism on the EU's framing of migration as a security issue, while the representative of the international organisation explained the rationale behind it, adopting a less confrontational approach.

The implications for democratisation of the EU's framing of migration as a security issue are not obvious, but equally relevant. The perception of these NGOs operating in the border region of Nador mostly were that the EU's securitisation of the border responded to a framing of migration as a security issue, and of the migrant as a 'danger' to Europe. This securitisation has been witnessed by the interviewees mainly through human rights violations committed at the borders, and through what one of them – belonging to NGO A – referred to as the transformation of Morocco into 'an open-air detention zone'. These situations also contribute to damage Morocco's civil society, in that increased military presence and frequent police violence become a norm. This raises the point previously quoted by Krasteva, on how the permanent securitisation threatens the foundation of democratic societies, civic agency and the sphere of its activity,[236] the on-the-ground reality of this can be observed in the next quote: 'Your current migration policies do not protect the borders, but rather produce suffering, feed human rights violations and transform countries like Morocco into open air detention zones'.

This interviewee also shared their view on the fact that 'migration policies that are not based on human rights, international solidarity and in tackling the root causes of migration – that is, poverty, wars, climate change and economic exploitation – can only aggravate the already existing injustices'. To this, another interviewee – this time from NGO C – referred to the EU as 'the oppressor and also the *mecène*', arguing that they perceived its commitment to human rights and democracy as merely rhetoric, adding that 'it is funding the authorities [who are committing the violations]'.

Albeit this criticism was widespread amongst almost all organisations, only NGO A directly linked increased border securitisation to increased repression of civil society. When asked about the long-term consequences of the EU's securitised approach to that region in Morocco, they responded with: 'Repression from Moroccan authorities. Me, for example, I have been detained, and I am currently facing legal action'. This organisations' representative criticised the silence of the EU regarding violations of these organisations' members' fundamental rights, as well as on the ad-

[236] A Krasteva, 'Editorial: Securitisation and Its Impact' (2017) 1 Global Campus Human Rights Journal 315.

ministrative and institutional barriers many critical NGOs face in Morocco. He posited how some of these barriers affected the daily work of their organisation, for example in being unable to receive state funding – that they are legally entitled to – for the renovation of their office, or impossibility to open a bank account. 'Despite this we continue to work', they said.

This criticism was accompanied by a broader concern over the EU's silence on the human rights violations committed by Moroccan authorities during the Hirak protests between 2016 and 2018. As one interviewee put it: 'There was total repression here, but we never saw the EU or Spain say something on these arrests, never, never, never'. They added: 'Both on the EU's side, and on the Spanish side, total silence. Morocco played its migration card: during this time there were a lot of migration fluxes'. These reflections point to a pattern in which the EU privileges stability and cooperation on migration over the defence of democratic norms or human rights – particularly when violations are committed by strategic partners. This perspective reinforces Mouna's argument, which contends that the EU continues to support repressive regimes in the region in order to safeguard its own geopolitical interests, viewing regime stability as more important than democratic accountability.[237]

NGOs B was much more cautious when asked about the EU's relationship with the central government. One – belonging to NGO B – of them explained: 'we cannot work, how to say, against the most important directives of the State'. To this, they added how they preferred to be critical from small scale projects, 'that way all goes well, and we do not have any problems with local authorities or partners'. These allegations show the measures that these organisations have to take in order to avoid persecution and repression from the authorities, and how there are certain 'red lines' that they avoid crossing.

These dynamics suggest that the EU, rather than challenging authoritarian restrictions on civic space, often aligns with them by privileging cooperation and stability over accountability. As Huber and Paciello[238] and Weilandt and Khakee[239] explained, civil so-

[237] K Mouna, 'The Role of Civil Society in Morocco: Towards Democracy or Autocracy?' (European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme 2018).
[238] Huber and Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice' (n 231).
[239] Khakee and Weilandt (n 230).

ciety demands are ignored when the EU chooses to prioritise its own strategic interests over genuine democratic transformation. By continuing to work within the limits set by the Moroccan state – and avoiding open confrontation over human rights violations – the EU risks legitimising these constraints and reinforcing a political environment where critical civil society is structurally marginalised.

In addition, framing migration as a security threat has enabled the EU to justify exceptional measures that might not otherwise gain public approval. This securitised logic not only shapes EU policy internally but also has consequences externally: it has empowered the Moroccan state to use migration as political leverage in its dealings with the EU.[240] As a result, the EU has frequently turned a blind eye to human rights violations and democratic backsliding in Morocco, prioritising cooperation on migration control over its stated commitments to democracy and human rights promotion.

Two CSOs – NGOs A and B – mentioned that Morocco's own strategy concerning migration must not be overlooked and insisted that it is using the migration agenda strategically. As one representative from NGO A put it: 'Morocco is playing the migration card in a very intelligent way: it is receiving a lot of money from Europe, but it has its own migration policy, which serves its political, economic and financial position'.

To this, that same representative from NGO A added: 'In using the migration card, Morocco has won a lot facing Spain and Europe. For example, on issues like the Sahara, maritime fishing, to advance its position, to have more funds, it plays the migration card to make pressure, advance its position and have more funds'. This interviewee posed the example of the border opening in 2023, where Moroccan authorities allowed thousands of minors to cross into Melilla, in order to exert pressure over Spanish and European authorities.

One interviewee also highlighted how the reorientation of Sub-Saharan migrants toward the south of Morocco – particularly to the Sahara and routes toward the Canary Islands – is not accidental, but rather part of a deliberate strategy aligned with the

[240] Faustini Torres, 'Bolstering Autocracy, Hindering Democracy: Local Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Effects of EU Migration Policy Externalization in Morocco' (n 233); SL Catalano and PR Graziano, 'Europeanization as a democratization tool?' (2016) 21 Mediterranean Politics 364.

Moroccan government's broader political objectives in the Sahara. Although the speaker did not elaborate further, this observation suggests that migration governance may be serving dual functions, not only to control borders in partnership with the EU, but also to reinforce the state's presence and influence in a politically contested region. This interpretation aligns with recent academic analyses that describe Morocco's use of migration as a geopolitical tool: 'an ingenious manipulation of migrant movements as political weapons of dispute to enhance its economic situation [and] advance its geopolitical interests, including the recognition of Western Sahara as part of its national territory'.[241] While further evidence is needed to fully explore this dynamic, it reflects a local and scholarly understanding of migration management as deeply entangled with national political agendas – a dimension often absent from EU policy frameworks.

While three out of the four organisations interviewed were very critical about the consequences of border militarisation and securitisation – that is NGOs A, B and C – one of them (NGO A) showed scepticism on the potential role of the EU, stating that 'they could not see how they could improve the situation', whilst another showed optimism and explained how they thought these relationships could be improved (NGO B). The third one (NGO C) did not build on their perception of EU strategy in the longer term. This will be elaborated further in the next section.

In sum, the securitisation of EU migration policy is not only felt in physical border infrastructures, but also in the shrinking space available for civil society actors to operate freely, safely and independently. Interviews reveal that while some organisations attempt to maintain a critical stance, others are forced into cautious pragmatism or strategic silence, reflecting broader constraints on civic and political agency. At the same time, Morocco's own strategic use of migration governance complicates the narrative, reinforcing the idea that the EU's priorities are deeply entangled with domestic political agendas. These dynamics not only constrain democratisation, but also reshape the very structure of civic engagement. The next section turns to how CSOs interpret

[241] I Yahmi, '"Not Our Burden": A Principal-Agent Analysis of Morocco's EU-Style Migratory Policies' in M Lynch and G Tsourapas (eds), *The Politics of Migration and Refugee Rentierism in the Middle East* (POMEPS Studies 50, Project on Middle East Political Science 2024) 52.

the long-term implications of these dynamics, and whether they see space for resistance, adaptation or transformation within the current EU-Morocco framework.

5.2.3 The future of Moroccan civil society and the EU: is there room for democracy promotion?

One of the final key themes addressed during the interviews concerned the long-term implications of the EU's securitised approach to migration and its broader engagement with Moroccan civil society. Interviewees were asked to reflect not only on how current policies affect their work, but also on whether and how they believed EU-civil society relations could evolve in a way that meaningfully supports democratisation. Their responses varied: some expressed deep scepticism about the EU's ability – or willingness – to drive positive change, citing its alignment with authoritarian practices and disregard for local realities. Others, while still critical, pointed to possible avenues for reform, including more transparent partnerships, better communication and the development of joint frameworks. This section explores these contrasting views, highlighting the tensions between disillusionment and cautious optimism, and the extent to which civil society actors see space for reimagining their relationship with the EU.

Two out of four of the organisations interviewed – namely NGOs A and C – were highly sceptical on the EU's ability to truly foster democratic change in Morocco. NGO C in particular did not show particular interest in speaking of the future of EU and Moroccan civil society engagement and restricted its view to: 'the EU just lights a fire and then tries to put it out'. While the other, NGO A, build more on how they had lost faith in the EU, when asked about how they thought the EU could change its approach to have a positive impact on their work, they answered: 'No, it will never change', and they argued that they had witnessed how left and right wing European governments were equally indifferent to Moroccan civil society struggles, adding that 'now all of Europe is going towards the far right. They can't change, there will be no change'. They also posed the question: 'is the European migration policy's aim to stop migration, or does it instrumentalise the migration agenda in favour of the extreme right's interests?' and explained how the constant rebuilding and strengthening of the Melilla fence had done nothing to decrease the migration flux go-

ing into Spain, but rather redirected it somewhere else – namely towards the Sahara and the Western route through the Canary Islands.

One of this organisation's – NGO A – representatives also shared an example to show what they perceived to be a total disconnection between EU policy and the needs of origin and transit countries, one representative of NGO A said: 'the day of the massacre [in reference to the Melilla massacre of June 2022[242]], a partner NGO of the EU organised a seminar in a five-star hotel in Nador to speak about integration with local NGOs. On the same day that the authorities committed these violations'.

Another representative from the same organisation, when asked about what they would change in the EU's approach, answered: 'stop externalising your security crises towards southern countries. Do not trade migrants' rights for financial partnerships'. In summary, the perception of these interviewees was that the huge disconnect between the EU and the countries where they operate completely restrained it from having any positive impact on these countries, and, more specifically, on civil society. They perceived the EU's logics respond to a far-right logic where increased security and border control is the main answer to migration, completely sidelining other approaches – considered as the most adequate ones by the interviewees – such as local development.

NGO B showed a more optimistic view of the future of EU relations and saw an important potential concerning the EU's ability to foster spaces for exchange. The first of these organisations argued that there was a need for collaboration between the two Mediterranean shores, emphasising the importance of good communication, as they argued 'the majority of NGOs in Morocco do not know what is happening in Europe, and do not know what the EU is demanding for participation; this is the case for the majority or a huge number of NGOs in Morocco'. They stressed, however, that the EU is making an effort, 'the problem is the method

[242] On 24 June 2022, approximately 2,000 migrants attempted to cross the border fence separating Nador and Melilla. The violent repression used by Moroccan and Spanish law enforcement agents turned the border crossing into a death trap, with 27 people reportedly killed, and more than 70 disappeared; Border Forensics, 'The Nador-Melilla Border Trap: A counter-investigation into the racist massacre of 24 June 2022' (*Border Forensics*, 2024) <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/nadormelilla/?gallery=true&media_id=image-94680918> accessed 4 June 2025.

through which they are implementing these projects … This demands for a reformulation, for an effort … and for the spirit and the procedures of the EU that have to change'.

This same organisation also expressed concern about the disconnect between Moroccan and European civil society, emphasising the lack of coordination and shared frameworks:

> There is a misunderstanding between Moroccan civil society and European civil society. But the states, our government with the European government, they have agreements, they have signatures and all that. But the NGOs on the other shore, they have no orientation. There is no planning, there is no programme with which we can work together.

Despite this critique, the interviewee maintained a degree of optimism about the EU's potential to improve its engagement with civil society. They suggested that more inclusive planning and jointly designed thematic frameworks could lead to more effective partnerships:

> What is necessary is creating together a road map for partnership and cooperation, and one for each topic: a road map for migration, a road map on social economy and solidarity, a road map on human rights, a road map on women's rights and children's rights … If the EU prepared a budget for all this, I am sure that after the implementation of the project here in Morocco, it would be something else, it would be more fruitful. It would have good results.

In conclusion, while the interviews reveal a shared awareness among CSOs of the limitations and contradictions in the EU's current approach, their views on the potential for change are deeply divided. On one side, national NGOs expressed profound scepticism, framing the EU's migration agenda as structurally misaligned with democratic values and rooted in a logic of externalisation and repression. On the other, the only local NGO saw room for improvement – calling for clearer frameworks, more inclusive cooperation and regionally grounded alliances. Together, these perspectives highlight not only the disconnection between the EU and local realities, but also the diverging degrees of faith in its ability – or willingness – to reform.

5.3 Synthesis and preliminary reflections

This section reflects more broadly on what NGOs suggest for the relationship between securitisation, civil society and democratisation in Morocco.[243]

The perspectives shared by CSOs interviewed for this study suggest that the EU does not meaningfully contribute to genuine democratisation in Morocco. This is not necessarily due to an absence of democratic rhetoric, but rather to a narrow, institution-focused understanding of democracy that dominates EU policy discourse. This approach often overlooks the importance of context-specific processes shaped by local histories, struggles and socioeconomic realities.

The empirical findings highlight the relevance of factors that are rarely prioritised in EU democracy promotion, such as an open civic space, a non-militarised public sphere and the existence of channels for civil society to articulate critique and shape policy. These dimensions are essential to democratic life, yet are undermined by a securitised governance model that relies on repression, surveillance and the marginalisation of dissent.

By maintaining a limited conception of democracy, EU policy often fails to account for the long-term effects of its security-oriented interventions, which directly constrain these other key components of democratisation. As Teti and others[244] argue, effective democratic transition requires acknowledging the interplay of power, history and local agency – elements often absent from externally driven democratisation frameworks.

Another theme that emerged indirectly from the interviews was the neglect of socioeconomic rights in EU-funded programming. By securitising its development agenda and channelling resources toward migration control, the EU sidelines initiatives that address unemployment, youth education, access to livelihoods and living wages – issues repeatedly mentioned by local and national NGOs. These concerns reaffirm arguments from the liter-

[243] See Appendix F for a visual overview of the positions of the four NGOs interviewed, mapped according to their interpretations of the EU's agenda and their views on its potential to support democratisation in Morocco.

[244] A Teti and others, *Democratisation Against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

ature[245] regarding the centrality of social and economic justice to any meaningful democratic transformation in the Southern Mediterranean.

Gender equality also surfaced as a recurring theme. All interviewees expressed a strong commitment to addressing gender inequality, and many of their projects prioritised women's access to education, job markets and public life. While some initiatives appeared to support women's political participation, the extent to which women themselves shaped or led these programmes remains unclear. It is also difficult to assess whether the EU's funding promotes a specific conception of gender equality – as suggested by Dimitrovova[246] – since this topic was not explored in depth in the interviews. This reflects a key limitation of the study: the absence of women among the interviewees.

Finally, these findings reinforce the critique that by funnelling funds primarily to international NGOs and prioritising cooperation with an authoritarian state, the EU sidelines non-EU and non-state actors. In doing so, it fails to engage with the situated political and social concerns of local societies, making it structurally difficult to support bottom-up democratic transformation.[247]

Taken together, these insights illustrate the disconnect between the EU's stated commitment to democracy and the lived experiences of civil society actors working under a securitised and constrained environment. Rather than fostering democratic transformation, EU policies often appear to reinforce existing hierarchies – both domestically and internationally – by privileging stability, control and institutional formalism over local agency and structural inclusion. In the following chapter, these reflections will be further situated within the broader theoretical and political context of EU-Morocco relations, in order to evaluate the implications of these findings for future approaches to democratisation and civic space in the region.

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[245] M Semplici, *Discussing Challenges for Civil Society and the Promotion of Economic and Social Rights* (EuroMed Rights 2017); Huber and Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice' (n 231); Teti and others ibid.

[246] B Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco: Boundary Setting, Integration, and Consolidation' (CEPS Working Document No 323, December 2009) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604037> accessed 9 March 2025.

[247] JW Scott and others, 'Between Crises and Borders: Interventions on Mediterranean Neighbourhood and the Salience of Spatial Imaginaries' (2017) 63 Political Geography 174.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how the securitisation of the EU's agenda in Morocco – particularly its migration policy – affects the country's prospects for democratisation. It argued that a genuinely free, independent civil society is essential to any meaningful democratic transformation, especially in authoritarian settings. By placing civil society at the centre of its analysis, this research has critically assessed how EU policy frameworks interact with the constrained political environment in Morocco and the extent to which they empower – or marginalise – local democratic actors.

One of the central findings of this study is that migration control has become a dominant axis of EU-Morocco cooperation, and the securitisation of this issue has increasingly shaped the EU's development and democratisation agenda.[248] This dynamic has had important consequences for civic space. EU funding and programming often tend to favour international or highly professionalised NGOs with the administrative capacity to meet complex reporting and compliance requirements. In contrast, smaller grassroots organisations – which may take more critical stances on EU priorities or adopt approaches that do not neatly align with donor expectations – frequently struggle to access support. While this tendency may be shaped by practical considerations, it also has political implications: by privileging established, less confrontational organisations, the EU maintains smoother cooperation with the Moroccan government. At the same time, this risks rein-

[248] L Gazzotti, 'From Irregular Migration to Radicalisation? Fragile Borders, Securitised Development and the Government of Moroccan Youth' (2019) 45 Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 2888; I Stock, *Time, Migration and Forced Immobility: Sub-Saharan African Migrants in Morocco* (Bristol UP 2019).

forcing a civil society landscape that is less equipped – or less willing – to question underlying power structures or challenge the security-focused direction of migration governance.

Moreover, the document analysis showed that EU policy – from the ENP to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum – lacks a clear, inclusive conception of democracy. While official discourse promotes civil society engagement, participation is largely tokenistic and depoliticised, with little meaningful inclusion of local voices in policy design or implementation. Fieldwork in the Nador region provided illustrative examples of these broader patterns: interviewees described a civic landscape in which critical NGOs are either marginalised or co-opted into EU-led migration agendas, often at the expense of rights-based, locally grounded approaches to development and justice. These patterns were particularly visible in Nador, a region where securitisation is especially pronounced due to its proximity to the EU's external border in Melilla.

This critique is not intended to absolve the Moroccan state of responsibility. The monarchy and central government play a key role in restricting civic and political rights.[249] But if the EU is serious about its normative aspirations, it must do more than rhetorically promote human rights and democracy. It must critically assess the long-term consequences of its securitised agenda and ask how its partnerships are affecting the very actors it claims to empower.

These dynamics are not unique to Morocco. Across the Southern Neighbourhood, EU democracy promotion has often prioritised institutional reforms, electoral processes and liberal procedural norms. While these are important, such approaches frequently underplay the socioeconomic concerns that many local populations see as central to democratic life. Arab Barometer surveys[250] show that issues like social protection, healthcare and workers' rights consistently rank among the top priorities for Maghrebi citizens – yet these are rarely framed as democratic concerns in EU policy. By overlooking such local understandings of rights and justice, the EU risks weakening its credibility as a normative actor and limiting the effectiveness of its civil socie-

[249] K Mouna, 'The Role of Civil Society in Morocco: Towards Democracy or Autocracy?' (European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme 2018).

[250] A Teti and others, *Democratisation Against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

ty engagement. As border externalisation strategies deepen across North and West Africa,[251] these tensions are likely to intensify – raising the stakes for civil society actors operating in authoritarian contexts and compounding the democratic trade-offs of EU external action.

At the same time, the EU's reluctance to engage non-EU and non-state actors as genuine political agents compounds these shortcomings in its external approach. As Scott and others argue, 'the EU's actual ability to shape a Mediterranean neighbourhood according to its values and specific needs is clearly restricted partly because it has ignored the political significance and impact of non-EU and non-state agency'.[252] Rather than creating inclusive platforms for cooperation, the EU often channels funding and influence through international NGOs or compliant local actors, marginalising more critical or grassroots organisations. This approach not only reflects a lack of reflexivity but also reveals a deeper instrumental logic: when civil society engagement is primarily deployed to advance migration control, securitisation and geopolitical stability, it ceases to be a space for democratic transformation and becomes instead a vehicle for policy enforcement. If the EU is to meaningfully support democratisation in contexts like Morocco, it must first acknowledge and address these structural imbalances.

This thesis therefore raises questions about the EU's credibility as a normative power. When security and stability goals systematically override commitments to democracy and human rights, EU action risks reproducing the very forms of authoritarianism it claims to counter.[253] By partnering with repressive regimes and favouring apolitical civil society actors, the EU undermines the possibility of empowering genuinely transformative democratic forces. These practices contribute not only to the shrinking of civic space, but to the instrumentalisation of civil society itself as a vehicle for external policy interests.

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[251] RM Soriano-Miras, 'La posición geopolítica marroquí como frontera vertical de la Unión Europea' (2017) 12(1) CienciaUAT 52.

[252] JW Scott and others, 'Between Crises and Borders: Interventions on Mediterranean Neighbourhood and the Salience of Spatial Imaginaries' (2017) 63 Political Geography 174.

[253] S Haddadi, 'Political Securitisation and Democratisation in the Maghreb' (Working Paper AY0403-23, University of California 2004); F Cavatorta, S Kritzinger and R Chari, 'EU External Policy-Making and The Case of Morocco: "Realistically" Dealing with Authoritarianism?' (2008) 13(3) European Foreign Affairs Review 357; Teti and others (n 250).

Despite the limitations of this study – including the small number of interviews, the gender imbalance among participants and the sensitive political context in which the research was conducted – it has captured underrepresented perspectives that are crucial to understanding the democratic costs of EU securitisation. The findings suggest that EU engagement may be reinforcing a form of 'civic containment', in which civil society is tolerated only when it aligns with migration control agendas, and excluded when it challenges the prevailing order.

Such a reassessment would require deeper reflection on the foundations of the EU's external action. Is the promotion of 'universal values' genuinely inclusive – or does it replicate Eurocentric and postcolonial hierarchies that silence Southern voices? While this thesis has not explored the colonial underpinnings of EU-Morocco relations in depth, it is clear that these legacies continue to influence how civil society is defined, valued and engaged. Future research should explore this further, alongside other underexamined areas such as gender dynamics, Islamic NGOs and the EU's role in shaping migration narratives in the broader MENA region.

Ultimately, what this study has shown is that the EU's credibility as a normative actor is not judged by its declarations, but by how its policies are felt and interpreted on the ground. If it wishes to live up to its stated values, the EU must become more attentive to the contradictions of its external action, more responsive to local agency and more willing to reflect critically on the power dynamics it sustains. This includes revisiting the deeply Eurocentric and historically colonial assumptions embedded in its conceptualisation of democracy – assumptions that often privilege institutional reform and procedural norms while neglecting socioeconomic justice, grassroots mobilisation and region-specific understandings of democratic participation. A more inclusive and pluralistic vision of democracy, grounded in local priorities and lived experiences, is essential if the EU's engagement is to become truly transformative rather than merely transactional. Without such reflexivity, the EU risks not only undermining its normative claims but actively eroding the democratic aspirations it claims to support – revealing a project less grounded in shared values than in strategic interests and increasingly questioned by those who experience its effects firsthand.

This dissonance between EU discourse and its impact on the ground does not have to be inevitable. As some civil society actors interviewed in this study noted, there remains space – however limited – for more equitable cooperation, built on genuine dialogue, local ownership and mutual respect. A reorientation of EU engagement that listens to and integrates bottom-up perspectives could begin to restore trust and strengthen civic space. As Jiménez Bautista argues, democratisation is not a linear or externally engineered process, but one shaped by local struggles, everyday practices and shifting alliances.[254] If the EU is willing to embrace a more humble, reflexive and plural approach to democracy – one that acknowledges and addresses its colonial and Eurocentric legacies – then its external action could still contribute meaningfully to democratic transformation. Reclaiming this potential will require not only policy reform, but a deeper political and ethical commitment to decentring European interests and foregrounding the agency of those most affected.

[254] F Jiménez Bautista, 'Estudios para la paz' (2022) 6 Revista de Cultura de Paz 7.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Marginalisation of Islamist actors and the case of Jama'at al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality Group)

The EU's liberal-democratic approach tends to marginalise Islamist organisations, portraying them as inherently authoritarian and thus outside the scope of 'acceptable' civil society actors. However, this assumption that all Islamic CSOs are inherently undemocratic due to a shared Islamic ethos is misleading for two reasons: first, it presupposes that Islam is incompatible with democracy *a priori*; and second, it assumes that all Islamist associations share the same outlook on how society should be organised. This is not the case, as Islamist groups vary both in ideology and methods from one another, due to confessional differences, leadership style and external constraints.[255]

In relation to this, the argument that Islam is incompatible with democracy, based on culturalist and orientalist approaches – eg Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis – and on the idea that Arabs do not want a democratic government because it is incompatible with Arab culture or Islam as a religion, is also challenged by the findings of a study about the political and socioeconomic attitudes and values of the citizens of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia using public opinion poll data collected since 2011.[256] When asked about if they considered democracy the best system of government despite its faults, 80% of interview-

[255] F Cavatorta, 'Civil Society, Islamism and Democratisation: The Case of Morocco' (2006) 44 Journal of Modern African Studies 203.

[256] Mainly on Arab Barometer IV (ABIV) carried out in 2016 and the Arab Transformations Survey (AT) carried in 2014, supplemented by ABIII (2013), the Afro Barometer (AfB 2015), the Gallup World Poll (GWP 2006–15) and the World Values Survey (WVS6 2011–14); Arab Barometer, Gallup World Poll and Afrobarometer surveys, as reported in A Teti and others, Democratisation Against Democracy: How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East (Palgrave Macmillan 2020); M Beck, 'Assessing the Role of the EU in Democratic Development in the MENA Region' in A Teti and others (eds), *Democratisation Against Democracy : How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Springer 2020) 139.

ees in Morocco agreed (90% in Jordan, 78% in Tunisia and 61% in Egypt), and, when given a description of what is meant by a democracy, 77% of Moroccans agreed that it is the system of government which they approve.[257] Finally, only 9% of people in Morocco think that Islam and democracy are incompatible.[258]

A telling example of the EU's marginalisation of relevant Islamist civil society actors is Jama'at al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality Group), an influential Islamist CSO in Morocco. As Cavatorta explains, the organisation seeks the radical transformation of Morocco's social, political and cultural systems through an Islamic moral and spiritual framework rather than Western liberal modernity.[259] While it does not participate in formal political institutions – viewing such participation as a form of regime legitimation – it has consistently rejected violence and supports procedural democratic principles, including regular elections and the accountability of public officials. This case illustrates that Islamist actors can play a role in democratic debates and civic mobilisation, even when they operate outside institutional frameworks. Yet organisations like Jama'at al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan are rarely acknowledged within international civil society frameworks – particularly those funded or legitimised by the EU – which reinforces narrow, secular-liberal definitions of democratic legitimacy and contributes to the marginalisation of plural democratic imaginaries in Morocco.

The EU's limited engagement with Islamist movements in Morocco can be traced, on the one hand, to their significant mobilising capacity within society, and on the other, to their often-vocal criticism of EU policy priorities.[260] As Cavatorta and Durac observe, this selective approach tends to reinforce ideological divides between secular and Islamist actors, inadvertently contributing to political polarisation rather than fostering pluralism.[261]

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[257] Beck (n 256).

[258] ibid.

[259] F Cavatorta, 'Neither Participation nor Revolution: The Strategy of the Moroccan Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan' (2007) 12 Mediterranean Politics 381.

[260] B Dimitrovova, 'Reshaping Civil Society in Morocco: Boundary Setting, Integration, and Consolidation' (CEPS Working Document No 323, December 2009) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604037> accessed 9 March 2025.

[261] F Cavatorta and V Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (Routledge 2011).

This is particularly significant considering that Islamist and secular visions are not necessarily incompatible. As discussed earlier, groups such as al-Adl engage in charitable and political activities, including anti-corruption efforts and human rights advocacy. Meanwhile, secular and leftist liberal groups are generally smaller, urban-based and rooted in a French-educated elite.[262] Excluding Islamist organisations from substantial political dialogue and funding opportunities risks sidelining the views and needs of a large portion of Moroccan society.

Although EU officials point to some engagement with Islamist groups – often in the form of interfaith initiatives or service-based cooperation – civil society actors note that these encounters are largely instrumental and do not contribute meaningfully to democratic pluralism.[263] The result is a missed opportunity to support inclusive, locally grounded visions of democracy that go beyond ideological binaries.

As highlighted by IDEA International, 'the EU needs to acknowledge and understand that the term "Islamism" encompasses many different players; and that their different ideologies and approaches are dynamic – developing over time in response to changed contexts'.[264] A more effective approach would involve diversifying the EU's engagement strategies to reflect this ideological variation – developing tailored, multi-pronged dialogues with different actors rather than relying on exclusion. As IDEA further argues, 'Islamist parties are political actors in the same way as other ideologies and are accepted as such by regional electorates', and excluding them only reinforces narratives used by authoritarian regimes to delegitimise dissent.[265]

This gap was particularly evident after the Arab uprisings, when the EU missed the opportunity to respond to widespread grassroots calls for reform. In prioritising regional stability and strategic interests, the EU remained closely aligned with existing regimes. As one Moroccan human rights activist put it, 'We saw

[262] Cavatorta and Durac (n 261).
[263] D Huber and MC Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice and Human Rights Back In' (MedReset Working Papers No 11, May 2018).
[264] International IDEA, *Democracy in Development* (International IDEA 2009).
[265] ibid.

that Europe did not budge. Europe supports our oppressive regimes because it wants to protect its interests; it considers the stability of these regimes as more important than democracy'.[266]

[266] K Mouna, 'Civil Society Versus the State: The Case of Morocco' (2020) 25 (Special Issue) European Foreign Affairs Review 67.

Appendix B: The case of Ennasir

A telling example of the regime's divide-and-rule strategy is the case of Ennasir, described by Cavatorta and Durac.[267] Founded in 2004 to support Islamist prisoners, the organisation was quickly targeted by the state, which labelled the individuals it defended as 'terrorists' seeking to overthrow the monarchy.[268] As a result, Ennasir faced heavy surveillance, administrative disruption and a complete cut in funding. Fearing political repercussions, other human rights organisations distanced themselves from Ennasir, avoiding any public support. Between 2004 and 2006, Ennasir operated in isolation from the broader human rights community. Only when the threat to the regime appeared to subside, and the extent of human rights violations became too severe to ignore, did secular organisations begin to recognise and engage with Ennasir's work.[269]

This case illustrates how the regime uses repression and isolation to weaken solidarity within civil society, effectively discouraging coordination among actors who might otherwise advocate for democratic reform.[270]

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[267] F Cavatorta and V Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (Routledge 2011).

[268] ibid. A clarification is necessary here: Ennasir is not synonymous with Salafiya Jihadia – an extremist movement which called for the overthrow of all un-Islamic governments and uses violence to achieve its ends – but rather an association with the intention of defending the human rights of the 1,000 Salafiya Jihadia detainees and their families, as well as of those imprisoned who weren't members, despite being accused and jailed for being so. This took place following the attacks in Casablanca in May 2003, where Moroccan authorities launched a severe crackdown on Islamists, targeting Salafiya Jihadia in particular. Its members, leading theologians and sheikhs, were incarcerated, irrespective of their actual involvement in organizing acts of violence and terrorism against the regime. Scores of suspected Islamists were arrested, and, for a time, Morocco was plunged back into something like the dark years of Hassan II when torture and show trials were the order of the day.

[269] Cavatorta and Durac (n 267).

[270] ibid.

Appendix C: Interview Questionnaire

The following questionnaire is reproduced in French, its original language, in order to maintain the accuracy and intended meaning of the questions.

QUESTIONS INTRODUCTIVES

— Pour commencer, pourriez-vous me parler un peu de votre rôle au sein de l'organisation?

— Comment décririez-vous les grandes lignes du travail que vous menez ici à Nador?

— Pouvez-vous me parler brièvement de l'histoire et des principales activités de votre organisation dans la région de Nador?

— Quelles sont les priorités actuelles de votre organisation?

— Comment définiriez-vous votre rôle ou mission principale dans le paysage associatif marocain? Par rapport aux autres associations actives à Nador, comment décririez-vous votre place ou votre manière de fonctionner?

— Avez-vous vu évoluer la société civile dans la région ces dernières années?

SECTION 1: RELATION AVEC LES BAILLEURS INTERNATIONAUX/L'UNION EUROPÉENNE

- Est-ce que votre organisation a déjà bénéficié d'un financement ou d'un appui de l'Union européenne ou de programmes financés par elle?
    - Si oui, comment décririez-vous ce processus de demande et de gestion? Y a-t-il eu des difficultés particulières, par exemple d'ordre administratif, linguistique ou technique?
    - Si non, es ce qu'il y a une / des raison(s) spécifique(s) pourquoi pas?
- Dans votre expérience ou observation, certains types d'organisations (par exemple urbaines, institutionnalisées, ou alignées avec certaines priorités) ont-elles plus facilement accès aux fonds ou à la reconnaissance (par acteurs internationales) que d'autres?
    - À votre avis, quels critères semblent compter le plus dans la sélection des ONG partenaires de l'UE au Maroc?
- Les processus de consultation ou de partenariat avec les bailleurs européens vous paraissent-ils inclusifs?
    - En avez-vous personnellement fait partie?

SECTION 2: PERCEPTIONS SUR L'AGENDA DE L'UNION EUROPÉENNE

- Avant d'entrer dans les détails, que signifie pour vous la notion de 'sécuritisation' dans le contexte de la coopération entre l'Union européenne et le Maroc?
- Avez-vous observé un impact concret de cette approche sécuritaire sur votre travail ou vos activités dans la région?

— Quelle perception avez-vous de la stratégie de l'Union européenne à l'égard de la société civile au Maroc ces dernières années?

— Pensez-vous que les priorités actuelles de l'UE (par exemple migration, sécurité, coopération économique) vont de pair avec le soutien à une démocratisation réelle du pays?

— En tant qu'organisation active sur le terrain, sentez-vous que l'agenda européen reflète ou comprend les besoins et aspirations réelles des acteurs associatifs locaux?

— Est-ce que vous observez une tension entre les logiques de stabilisation/sécurité et celles de promotion des droits ou de la participation citoyenne?

SECTION 3: CADRE LÉGAL ET ENVIRONNEMENT LOCAL

— Comment évalueriez-vous l'environnement légal actuel pour le travail des associations indépendantes à Nador et plus largement au Maroc?

— Observez-vous des évolutions (positives ou négatives) dans la liberté d'expression, l'accès aux financements, ou la possibilité de mener un travail de plaidoyer?

— Avez-vous identifié des obstacles spécifiques (administratifs, politiques, sociaux) dans votre activité quotidienne ou dans vos interactions avec les pouvoirs publics?

SECTION 4: COOPÉRATION AVEC LES INSTITUTIONS PUBLIQUES

— Est-ce que vous êtes impliqués dans des mécanismes de dialogue ou de consultation avec les autorités locales ou nationales? Si oui, comment cela se déroule-t-il?

    — Diriez-vous que la société civile a un rôle reconnu et influent dans l'élaboration ou le suivi des politiques publiques dans votre région?

— Quels types de collaborations vous semblent les plus utiles pour renforcer l'impact de la société civile locale?

— Dans votre expérience, les espaces de concertation avec les autorités locales / nationales permettent-ils une participation équitable de différentes organisations de la société civile, ou avez-vous le sentiment que certains types d'acteurs sont plus souvent sollicités ou valorisés que d'autres?

Appendix D: Revisitation of the ENP, analysis of specific programmes

The 2011 Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity highlighted the importance of civil society and pledged support for its role in promoting democracy and human rights. However, it offered no clear definition of democracy, focusing instead on institutional reforms and anti-corruption, while treating socio-economic grievances as separate development issues rather than democratic rights.[271]

Similarly, the New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood, also published in 2011, promised to engage civil society more directly through new instruments such as the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy.[272] Yet its understanding of civil society remained constrained by a liberal framework, relying on governance indicators and excluding more radical or Islamist voices.[273]

Subsequent reviews continued along this trajectory. The 2012 Delivering on a New European Neighbourhood Policy claimed progress in civil society engagement but lacked any critical reflection on state–civil society relations or a broader conceptualisation of democracy.[274] The 2013 Working Towards a Stronger Partnership report began to express doubts about the EU's ability to foster political transformation in the Southern Mediterranean, while still

[271] European Commission, 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy' COM(2011) 303 final; A Teti and others, *Democratisation Against Democracy : How EU Foreign Policy Fails the Middle East* (Springer 2020).

[272] European Commission, 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' COM(2011) 200 final.

[273] Teti and others (n 271).

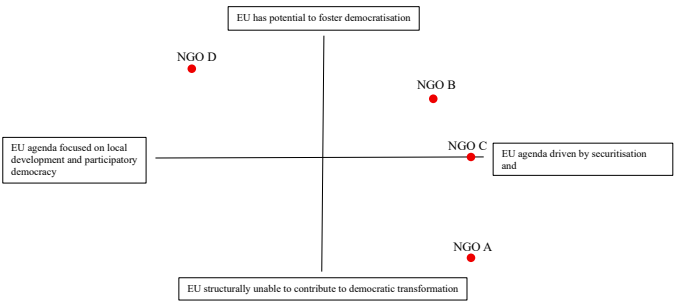
[274] European Commission, 'Delivering on a New European Neighbourhood Policy' JOIN(2012) 14 final; Teti and others (n 271).

reaffirming the value of civil society.[275] In 2014, Neighbourhood at the Crossroads promoted regular consultation with civil society but stopped short of redefining democracy or challenging authoritarian partners.[276]

Neighbourhood' JOIN(2013) 4 final; Teti and others (n 271).

[276] TA Börzel and others, 'European Neighbourhood Policy at the Crossroads: Evaluating the Past to Shape the Future' (MAXCAP Working Paper No 12, March 2015); Teti and others (n 271).

Appendix E: Melilla and Nador on a map



Source: Google Maps (2025)

Appendix F: Graph on civil society perceptions on the consequences of EU external action on democratisation and securitisation in Nador

Figure 1: Civil society perceptions on the consequences of EU external action on democratisation and securitisation in Nador

This graph maps the perspectives of each NGO interviewed across two dimensions: (1) their view of the EU's current agenda (X axis), and (2) their assessment of its long-term potential to contribute to democratisation in Morocco (Y axis).

To visualise the range of perspectives among the organisations interviewed, the following graph situates each NGO along two axes. The horizontal axis represents their perception of the EU's current role in Morocco: from a view that sees the EU promoting participatory, bottom-up development (left), to a view that sees the EU as advancing a securitised migration agenda that sidelines local needs and weakens civic space (right). The vertical axis captures their assessment of the EU's long-term potential to support democratisation: from optimism that structural change is possible (top), to deep scepticism that the EU can play any con-

structive role under current conditions (bottom). The position of each NGO reflects their discourse as expressed in the interviews and summarised in the accompanying table.

A more detailed explanation of each positioning is included in the table below:

	X Axis: Perception on EU Agenda	Y Axis: Perception on EU's Potential for Democratisation
NGO A	Sees the EU's migration agenda as fully securitised and disconnected from local needs. Believes NGOs are instrumentalised to implement European border policies, with no regard for migrants' rights or civil society priorities.	Completely sceptical. Views the EU as structurally aligned with authoritarian interests and incapable of meaningful reform. Believes current dynamics reflect a far-right logic of control.
NGO B	Critical of EU priorities, particularly the lack of communication and unequal access to funding. Acknowledges selectivity in partnership, but does not reject the EU's presence outright.	Cautiously optimistic. Believes reform is possible through improved communication and more inclusive partnerships.
NGO C	Shares NGO A's view of securitisation and policy misalignment but engages less deeply with institutional critique. Describes EU efforts as superficial and ineffective.	Sceptical and disengaged. Shows little interest in future EU-civil society cooperation, and no interest at all in its relevance to democratic progress.

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-Exceptional knowledge of the academic literature and excellent capacity for critical analysis;
-Clarity of structure, language and argumentation of a publishable standard with minimum revisions

The present thesis - ***The Security – Democracy Trade-Off? EU Policies and Civic Space in Morocco*** written by **Itziar Murillas García** and supervised by Harlan Koff, Université du Luxembourg - was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA), coordinated by Global Campus Europe.

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