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Enacting democracy promotion: Tunisian civil society and the European Union

Thesis submitted by Ragnar WEILANDT

in fulfilment of the requirements of the PhD Degree in Political and Social Sciences (“Docteur en Sciences Politiques et Sociales”) at the Université libre de Bruxelles and the PhD Degree in Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick

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RAGNAR WEILANDT

Brussels

September 2019

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own and has been solely the result of my own work. References of secondary sources are made within the text using the style manual of the American Political Science Association. Primary sources such as interviews, observations, speeches, news items or policy documents are referenced in footnotes. A list of all interviews conducted is annexed to the thesis. The thesis was written in L^AT_EX and consists of 79,483 words. Its copyright rests with me. Quotations from it are permitted, provided that they are referenced following common academic practice. The thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent. I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe upon the rights of any third party. Parts of this work have appeared as journal articles, policy paper or commentary. These publications are listed hereafter:

- Weilandt, Ragnar (2019). “Divisions within Post-2011 Tunisia’s Secular Civil Society.” *Democratization* 26(6): 959–74. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1576034.
- Weilandt, Ragnar (2018). “Socio-Economic Challenges to Tunisia’s Democratic Transition.” *European View* 17(2): 210–17. doi: 10.1177/1781685818805681.
- Weilandt, Ragnar (2018). “The Unintended Impacts of EU Democratic Assistance on Tunisian Civil Society.” In *Tunisia’s Fragile Democracy: Decentralization, Institution-Building and the Development of Marginalized Regions. Perspectives from the Region and Europe*, eds. Dina Fakoussa and Laura Lale Kabis-Kechrid. Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations, 146–53. <http://bit.ly/2XYUKU5>.

- Weilandt, Ragnar (2016). “Shattered Tunisian Economy Puts Political Transition at Risk.” *Your Middle East*, 27 January. <http://bit.ly/2Cmm2qB>.
- Weilandt, Ragnar (2016). “The West and Arab Democracy: Time for a Marshall Plan for Tunisia?” *European Geostrategy* 8(4). <http://bit.ly/2Y0Ww7e>.
- Weilandt, Ragnar (2015). ““There Might Be Another Revolution.”” *Politico Europe*, 14 October. <https://politi.co/2CmnbzA>.

Furthermore, a version of chapter eight will be published under the title “EU Democracy Projection in Tunisia: The Case of Civil Society Consultations” in a special issue of *Mediterranean Politics* that is scheduled to appear in 2020. Drawing upon the research conducted for this thesis as well as elements of several of its chapters, a paper titled “Acceptance in principle, contestation in practice: EU norms and their discontents in Tunisia” is expected to be part of special issue of *Democratization* in 2020. A further article on “Tunisian civil society’s perceptions of the EU” is, at the time of submission, under review in the *Journal for North African Studies*.

Abstract

This thesis is motivated and informed by three observations on the literature that studies EU democracy promotion. First of all, this literature tends to be methodologically Eurocentric in that it does not sufficiently consider the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of those who are at the receiving end of EU policy. Second, the EU and civil society as actors promoting democracy in transitioning countries are often framed as rather monolithic political entities and interaction between the two is often analysed under that premise. Third, and partly as a result of this, less attention is devoted to what individuals and groups engaged in democracy promotion actually do in practice as well as how their practices interact with each other. This motivates the overarching research question of this thesis: How do EU democracy promotion practices shape civil society in transitioning countries?

Using Tunisian civil society as a case study, the thesis has two main objectives: First, it aims at identifying, mapping and examining the practices appearing at the nexus of EU and civil society engagement in the context of democracy promotion. On that basis, it seeks to understand how these practices relate and react to each other. It does so by extensively drawing upon the accounts of Tunisian civil society activists interacting with the EU.

While scholars of democracy promotion tend to focus on either the formulation of policies or their impact, this thesis demonstrates the centrality of the practices employed in their context. It shows that in order to understand democracy promotion and its outcomes, we need to revisit the repertoires of practices of those enacting it within countries in transition. This includes both internal actors such as civil society as well as external actors such as the European Union, both of which can be conceived of as democracy promoters.

The thesis shows that the practices, through which the EU and Tunisian civil society promote democracy in Tunisia, are informed by the different backgrounds, interests, views and dispositions of those enacting them. However, they also constitute themselves in reaction

to the respective others' practices. The thesis' main finding is that EU practices contribute to producing and reproducing certain practices within Tunisian civil society and thus also certain types of civil society actors. In doing so, the EU has both a transformative effect on the nature of civil society in Tunisia and contributes to further widening existing divisions within it.

List of abbreviations

AFD	Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency)
AFTURD	Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (Tunisian Women's Association for Research on Development)
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANC	Assemblée Nationale Constituante (National Constituent Assembly)
ANTERO	Addressing the Needs on Teaching, Education and Research in EU Foreign Policy
ARP	Assemblée des Représentants du Peuple (Assembly of the Representatives of the People)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATFD	Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (Tunisian Women's Association for Democracy)
ATL MST Sida	Association Tunisienne de Lutte contre les MST et le Sida (Tunisian Association for the Fight against STDs and AIDS)
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEEC	Central and Eastern European countries

CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CGTT	Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (General confederation of Tunisian workers)
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNLT	Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie (National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia)
CPR	Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic)
CRLDHT	Comité pour le Respect des Libertés et des Droits de l'Homme en Tunisie (Committee for the Respect of Freedoms and Human Rights in Tunisia)
CSA	Civil Society Activist
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSP	Code du Statut Personnel (Code of Personal Status)
DCAF	Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
DG	Directorate General
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations
DGAP	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (German Council on Foreign Relations)
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Communities

EEAS	European External Action Service
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
EMHRN	Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (rebranded as EuroMed Rights in 2015)
EMAA	Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EPD	European Partnership for Democracy
EU	European Union
ERP	European Recovery Program (also known as “Marshall Plan”)
FDTL	Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés (Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties)
FIDH	Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme (International Federation for Human Rights)
FTDES	Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights)
GEM	Globalization, Europe, and Multilateralism programme
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation)
GONGO	Government-organized Non-Governmental Organisation

HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IR	International Relations
IPT	International Practice Theory
Lab'ess	Laboratoire de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire (Laboratory for a Social and Solidary Economy)
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Sciences
LTDH	Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (Tunisian Human Rights League)
MaMa	Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party in the Council of the European Union
MEDA	Mesures d'Accompagnement Financières et Techniques (Financial and technical accompanying measures)
Mercosur	Mercado Común del Sur (Southern Common Market)
MPC	Mediterranean Partner Country
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSF	National Salvation Front
OMC	Open Method of Coordination

ONAT	Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie (National Order of Tunisian Advocates)
OTT	Organisation Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian Labour Organisation)
P3A	Programme d'Appui à l'Accord d'Association (Association Agreement Support Programme)
PARJ	Programme d'Appui à la Réforme de la Justice en Tunisie (Judicial Reform Support Programme in Tunisia)
PASC	Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile (Civil Society Support Programme)
PaIS	Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick
PRAG	Procedures and Practical Guide
SPRING	Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UACES	University Association for Contemporary European Studies
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian General Labour Union)
ULB	Université libre de Bruxelles
UNAT	Union Nationale des Agriculteurs Tunisiens (National Union of Tunisian Farmers)

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFT	Union Nationale des Femmes de Tunisie (Tunisian National Women's Union)
UTICA	Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat (Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts)
VAT	Value Added Tax

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Almost a decade after the Arab uprisings, Tunisia is the last country whose hopes for a sustainable transition to democracy in the medium term seem justified. Domestic and foreign observers have identified its civil society as one of the factors that prevented the North African republic from following the unfortunate path of other countries in which long-term autocrats were ousted in early 2011. While the European Union (EU) initially reacted cautiously and hesitantly to the uprisings, it eventually stated its intention to more substantially support democratisation processes in its Southern neighbourhood. When other countries in the region started backsliding into authoritarian rule or descending into conflict, the EU devoted more and more attention and financial resources to Tunisia. In that context, it identified civil society as a key interlocutor and started to both provide material support to associations and to regularly consult with activists.

This thesis examines the development of Tunisian civil society and its interaction with the EU during the post-2011 transition. Drawing upon the “practice turn” in social studies, it argues that the practices through which the EU and its officials are enacting their democracy promotion agenda in Tunisia contribute to producing and reproducing a certain type of activists and associations, and thus play a constitutive role in shaping post-2011 Tunisian civil society. This introductory chapter starts off by stating and problematising the topic of this thesis before it elaborates its main research question and general argument. On that basis, it discusses the rationale of studying the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion. After outlining the thesis’ objectives as well as its

main conceptual, empirical and methodological contribution, the chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis' structure.

1.1 Puzzle, research question and main argument

As the following chapter will explain in greater depth and detail, my research is motivated and informed by three main observations on the literature examining relations between the EU and external actors in third countries in the context of democratic transitions. First of all, such studies tend to be methodologically Eurocentric in that they do not sufficiently draw upon the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of those who are at the receiving end of EU policy. The second observation is that both the EU and civil society as actors promoting democracy in transitioning countries are often framed as monolithic political entities, and that interaction between the two is often analysed under that premise. The individuals and groups involved on both sides, as well as what they actually do in practice when enacting the agendas of the various bodies, organisations or services on whose behalf they act, remain understudied. Third, there is little research on the effects of these individuals' and groups' ways of doing things. Debates on civil society tend to focus on conceptualizing what it actually is and on examining whether or not there is a link between its presence and the presence of or movement towards the adoption of principles of democracy and respect for human rights. Meanwhile, the literature on EU democracy promotion focuses on explaining how its policies are made (e.g. Del Biondo 2015) as well as on their substance (e.g. Orbie and Wetzel 2015) and impact or lack thereof (e.g. Pace 2009; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008).

In contrast, the day-to-day interaction between EU officials and their interlocutors in transitioning states' civil society tends to be treated as a black box. My main objective is to open this black box and to examine the nuts and bolts of how democracy promotion is enacted on the ground. This approach is inspired by the "practice turn" in social theory (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001) as well as the recent introduction of its ideas and terminology to the study of international relations (Adler and Pouliot 2011a; Bueger 2014; Neumann 2002) as well as of the European Union (Adler-Nissen 2016; McNamara 2015) and its external relations (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Lequesne 2015). The main idea is that practice approaches help us to overcome the constraining dichotomies of consequentialism

and appropriateness as well as structure and agency without overpromising a grand theory of the social world that transcends them. Instead, they conceive of the social world as a complex and messy system whose multitude of interlinked dynamics cannot be reduced to all-encompassing explanatory frameworks that identify linear hierarchical relationships and causal links between a few variables. Instead of trying to provide such definite explanations of causes and effects in the social world, practice approaches give us a conceptual toolset that helps to interpret and understand it. They tell us that we need to identify and examine the practices of those EU officials and activists enacting democracy promotion in order to understand what democracy promotion actually is in a given context. Moreover, they tell us that the practices through which these officials and activists promote democracy are not only informed and constituted by their own various constraints, interests, backgrounds and dispositions but also in reaction to the respective others' practices. This motivates the overarching research question of this thesis: How do EU democracy promotion practices shape civil society in transitioning countries?

Using Tunisian civil society and its practices as a case study, the thesis has therefore two main objectives: First of all, it seeks to identify, map and examine the practices that appear at the nexus of EU and civil society engagement in the context of democracy promotion in Tunisia. Hence, it examines both the practices and internal trajectories of Tunisian civil society as well as the practices occurring when activists and associations interact with the EU. On that basis, it then seeks to understand how these practices relate and react to each other. With both sides' practices constantly interacting with each other, both sides are affected by the respective other. While this is acknowledged throughout the thesis, the main focus will be on how the practices of the EU and its officials implementing them shape Tunisian civil society.

The interactions between Tunisian civil society and the EU take shape through two main repertoires of practices: First of all, the EU provides substantial financial assistance to Tunisian associations. Second, it regularly invites activists to consultation meetings to give them the opportunity to comment on and discuss EU-Tunisian relations as well as Tunisian domestic affairs. Both of these types of interaction might be conceived of as practices that consist of a variety of components which may, in turn, also be conceived of as practices. For example, financial assistance involves the definition of funding priorities and application processes whereas consultation meetings require EU officials to draft an agenda, send out

invitations and execute the consultation. The main argument I put forward is that the EU's practices affect the practices of Tunisian civil society and thus the nature of civil society in Tunisia more generally.

1.2 Rationale of studying the nexus of Tunisian civil society and the EU

Over the past decades, the European Union has started to emerge as an actor in international affairs. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty gave it a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam created the position of the High Representative for CFSP, the 2007 Lisbon Treaty created the European External Action Service (EEAS) and enhanced the High Representative's role. But although the EU gradually developed a set of almost state-like foreign policy institutions and instruments, only limited resources have been made available for a genuine EU foreign policy and member states continue to jealously guard classic foreign policy competences. As a result, EU external action remains limited in scope. The EU has major powers when it comes to trade, development and enlargement policy, but its role in high-level diplomacy or security and defence remains limited due to the need for unanimity and member states' inability to achieve it. Geographically, the EU has been more of a regional than a global power (Maull 2005; Raik 2006), with EU engagement directed at its immediate neighbourhood being most substantial in scope and impact. Notably, the EU's enlargement policies have contributed to transforming the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; K. E. Smith 2004). In the context of the increased EU engagement towards the East following the end of the Cold War, France, Spain and Italy started to upload their interests in the EU's Southern neighbourhood onto the European level. This led to the 1995 Barcelona conference and the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), which aimed at creating a common area of peace and stability, a zone of shared prosperity and the rapprochement between peoples from both of shores of the Mediterranean. In 2003, this regional approach was complemented by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) that put a stronger focus on bilateral relations between the EU and individual partner states. In 2007, the EMP was relaunched as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

Key to the EU's agenda on the Southern neighbourhood was the promotion of eco-

conomic reform towards market economy and institutional reforms towards human rights, democracy and good governance. And yet, ever since the Barcelona conference set up its ambitious objective of a regional transformation, numerous researchers and analysts have observed that economic reforms were largely prioritized over institutional reforms, and that both were increasingly trumped by the EU's security interests following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (Joffé 2007; Malmvig 2004; Youngs 2006). As Hollis (2012, 94) put it

EU policies have actually betrayed the professed European values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law rather than exporting them. And they have prioritized European prosperity and stability at the expense of both in the Arab world.

In late 2010 and early 2011 Tunisians and Egyptians took to the streets to protest against their leaders, eventually ousting long-term dictators Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, and inspiring people across the region to challenge their oppressive regimes as well. These Arab uprisings caught the EU entirely off guard. Despite its longstanding rhetorical commitment to promote democracy and human rights in the region, EU policy does not appear to have encouraged or enabled, let alone caused the peoples' uprisings against their oppressive regimes (Colombo and Voltolini 2014; Perthes 2011; Schumacher 2011). In light of the limited success of its previous approach, the EU and its members pledged to review their policies and to assist the transitioning countries in order to foster their democratic transformation. However, before the EU could make major changes to its approach, the post-2011 optimism of achieving change across the region had already disappeared. General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's military coup in 2013 crashed hopes one might have had about the political transition in Egypt. Moreover, various local, domestic, regional and international factors and developments have transformed Syria, Libya and Yemen¹ into battlegrounds. These developments have not only raised major humanitarian concerns but also directly affected the EU in an unprecedented way. In addition to terrorizing people in the territory it temporarily held, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seduced around five

¹In case of Libya, the EU member states France and Italy have contributed to fuelling the conflict through their support for different sides.

thousand EU nationals² into joining its ranks and inspired a new wave of terrorist attacks on EU territory. Moreover, the conflicts in the EU's Southern neighbourhood contributed to an increase in migration³ across the Mediterranean. In the context of both these migration movements and the new series of terrorist attacks, several EU member states have seen a substantial rise or further consolidation of far-right activism and anti-establishment parties that challenge the very foundation of the EU's institutional set-up. Hence, the EU is facing increasing pressure to rethink its previous activities in and policies towards its Southern neighbourhood, while at the same time having less political room for manoeuvre.

The EU's failure to see the 2011 uprisings coming and react adequately, as well as the various challenges it has been facing in the region since, create a strong rationale to study the EU's past and current approaches towards West Asia and North Africa. However, it also creates a rationale to study the region and the EU's democracy promotion efforts towards it in a different way. While the uprisings caught the EU off guard, most scholars studying West Asia and North Africa did not see it coming either. Indeed, with just a few exceptions (Bradley 2008; Todd and Courbage 2007), the vast majority of experts following the region were focusing on explaining Arab regimes' "authoritarian stability" until the day they started to tumble (Gause 2011). In fact, trying to identify the reasons for this failure has inspired a literature in its own right (Beck 2014; Goodwin 2011). In the case of the community of researchers studying EU democracy promotion, the limited attention devoted to the EU's interlocutors is at least part of the problem.

As indicated above, such studies often focused on the EU's various tools and decision-making procedures or looked for correlation between various types of EU action towards partner countries and political change within them. However, they were also empirically and methodologically Eurocentric, in that they were often primarily informed by EU documents or interviews with EU officials and policymakers in the European institutions in Brussels. This thesis seeks to help overcome this bias and thus follows calls to "decentre" the study of International Relations (Acharya and Buzan 2010; Morozov 2013; Nayak and Selbin 2010) and European foreign policy (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018; Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013).

²The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*. 15.12.2015, <http://bit.ly/33ZzAEX> (accessed on 25.8.2019).

³Following the International Organization for Migration's definition of a migrant as "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons." See IOM. *Who is a migrant?* <http://bit.ly/2HpwL69> (accessed on 25.8.2019).

Rather than putting emphasis on the European side of Euro-Mediterranean interaction, this thesis is thus driven and informed by the perspectives and experiences of those who are at the receiving end of EU democracy promotion policy.

In the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations, the politics of democracy promotion in Tunisia is a particularly interesting case to examine. Even before events in Tunisia kick-started the Arab uprisings, and thus the major transformation the region has seen since, Tunisia was a regional exception on various levels. While it was arguably as oppressive as other authoritarian states in the region, Tunisia stood out in terms of its human development indicators as well as its progressive policy on gender equality. Tunisia's 1956 Code of Personal Status (Code du Statut Personnel, abbreviated as CSP) substantially reduced gender inequality before the law, making Tunisian legislation not only far more progressive than much of the Islamic world but also more progressive than various European countries at the time.⁴ Moreover, compared to other Arab countries, Tunisia's path to independence also occurred in a relatively peaceful way and the republic created in 1956 kept cordial relations with its former colonizer as well the Europe and the Western world more generally.

These good relations extended beyond the political realm. Many members of the Tunisian middle and upper class have studied in France and other European countries, and continue to send their children to study there. Others went to Europe to find work or to escape the oppressive regime. Tunisia had a population of around eleven million in 2012⁵ and more than one million Tunisians were living in the EU, compared to around 150,000 in other Arab countries and less than 40,000 in the rest of the world.⁶ In fact, even most of the Islamist Ennahda party's leaders who left their country went into exile in Europe. At the same time, Tunisia remained attractive for European corporations due to its well-educated population and its rather low wage levels. Some French corporations continued to profit from tax breaks and kept extremely cheap concessions to exploit natural resources.⁷ Tunisia also became an attractive destination for European tourists enjoying its beaches or the vast cultural heritage left behind by various civilisations that occupied the territory over the past

⁴BBC Witness History. *When Tunisia led on women's rights*. 27.7.2019, <https://bbc.in/2GOctDh> (accessed on 29.7.2019).

⁵Institut National de la Statistique. *Tunisie en chiffres 2012*. Tunis, 5.11.2014, <http://bit.ly/2GSLVqk> (accessed on 14.7.2019).

⁶Office des Tunisiens à l'Etranger. *Répartition de la Communauté tunisienne à l'étranger (2012)*. Tunis, 15.5.2013, <http://bit.ly/33lgCs0> (accessed on 14.7.2019).

⁷Mohammed Samih Beji Okkez. *Cotusal: Exploitation française de l'or blanc tunisien*, Nawaat, 16.3.2018, <http://bit.ly/2YPwhMA> (accessed on 17.7.2019).

millennia. It even became a hot spot for Western movie productions, including “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” or “Star Wars,” whose protagonist’s home planet was named after Tataouine, the Tunisian governorate where parts of the franchise were shot.

More recently, Tunisia stands out not only as the place where the Arab uprisings started but also as the only country where they appear to have succeeded. On 17 December 2010, Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the impoverished central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid to protest against what he saw as unfair and humiliating treatment by a female police officer and the municipal authorities. While the details of what happened on that day remain disputed, the story that circulated immediately after the event caused an outcry across Tunisia. Together with the revelation of the extent of the Ben Ali regime’s corruption through the publication of a large set of US diplomatic cables by the Wikileaks platform in late November 2010 and fuelled by substantial social media activism, the death of Bouazizi triggered a major uprising resulting in the flight of Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia. In the following years, Tunisia succeeded in electing a constituent assembly, drafting a new constitution as well as holding relatively free and fair democratic legislative and presidential elections. With most other Arab countries having become less free and more autocratic since 2011⁸ and some being embroiled in civil wars, Tunisia is often seen as “as a rare source of hope in the region.”⁹

And yet, while Tunisia is generally singled out by European and international actors as the one country in the region that has the potential to meet their expectations in terms of democracy and the rule of law, the transition that these actors foresaw for it is far from secured. Based on interviews and informal conversations with numerous Tunisians, I sensed a certain pride in the political transformation since 2011.¹⁰ Many are proud of having brought down Ben Ali and his corrupt and repressive regime. “Tunisia, first democracy of the Arab World”¹¹ read a graffiti on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the Tunisian equivalent of Paris’ Champs-Élysées, in 2015. However, the post-2011 political system has so far failed to meet the high expectations that it had raised within the population. Unemployment has

⁸Bertelsmann Transformation Index. *Transformation Atlas*. Gütersloh, <http://bit.ly/2GRBjSC> (accessed on 18.3.2015).

⁹Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2014. Middle East and North Africa*. Washington, <http://bit.ly/2EZA3ha> (accessed on 18.3.2015).

¹⁰Numerous interviews and informal chats with Tunisians from different walks of life between 2015 and 2019.

¹¹Fieldwork notes made on 6.5.2015.

risen, public services from garbage collection to transportation have deteriorated, and going out at night has become more dangerous.¹² A sizable part of the population feels that things were better before 2011. The share of the population that feels the country is moving in the wrong direction has almost doubled since.¹³ Even though the Ben Ali regime is discredited, an increasing number of Tunisians perceive it to be a lesser evil compared to the current system. As one person quipped: “Ben Ali and his family were stealing. We know that. But at least it was just a few people. Now everybody is stealing.”¹⁴

Others think that the problems before 2011 were not so much due to the system of governance but rather due to the massive corruption of the Ben Ali regime. Particularly the former first lady Leila Ben Ali and her extended family are often blamed for what went wrong in the country. Following this logic, it was sufficient to remove the top of the regime whereas transforming the nature of the political system was less crucial or even undesirable.¹⁵ Such notions might encourage those within the political elites who prefer rather authoritarian leadership. Meanwhile, substantial parts of the pre-2011 administration are still in place and the ruling Nidaa Tunes party includes various figures with links to the old regime (Boubekeur 2016). Moreover, their ongoing political exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation has made a part of Tunisia’s youth vulnerable to extremist ideas (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015, 8 ff). In fact, a remarkable number of young Tunisians joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Tunisia itself has experienced various acts of terrorism.¹⁶ Together with the deterioration of the situation in neighbouring Libya, this led to an increasing perception of insecurity in Tunisia. This further helped those political forces that advocate the prioritization of security over democracy and human rights, and seek to reinstate some of the former regime’s security apparatus’ practices.¹⁷

Domestic and international observers consider and frame Tunisia’s strong civil society as one of the factors keeping the regressive elements within the security services as well as

¹²International Crisis Group. *Tunisie: dépasser les querelles pour restaurer la confiance*, 2.8.2018, <http://bit.ly/2XReyJb> (accessed on 5.3.2019); Various interviews and numerous informal conversations between March 2015 and September 2019.

¹³International Republican Institute. *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians*. Washington, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2R2OZ4A> (accessed on 3.7.2018).

¹⁴Informal chat with a Tunisian man, held in Tunis in April 2019.

¹⁵Numerous interviews and informal chats with Tunisians from different walks of life between 2015 and 2019.

¹⁶Kevin Sullivan. *Tunisia, after igniting Arab Spring, sends the most fighters to Islamic State in Syria*. Washington Post, 28.10.2014, <https://wapo.st/2BPP2WS> (accessed on 23.4.2015).

¹⁷International Crisis Group. *Endiguer la dérive autoritaire en Tunisie*. 11.1.2018, <http://bit.ly/30ITSzT> (on accessed on 5.3.2019).

administration, politics and business in check. More generally, it has widely been argued that civil society engagement was a key reason for the country's relatively successful transition process so far (Landolt and Kubicek 2013). In fact, a major crisis triggered by the assassination of two left-wing politicians and a general dissatisfaction with the Islamist-led government in 2013 was averted through a "National Dialogue" set up and moderated by four Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in October 2013. The dialogue was initiated by the Tunisian General Trade Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), which teamed up with the Tunisian employers' organisation (Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat, UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme, LTDH) and the National Order of Tunisian Advocates (Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie, ONAT). This "Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet" has been credited with a major role in saving the transition process, a role for which it was awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. Hence, while it has often been argued that the pre-2011 support of Tunisian CSOs was in practice often helping the ruling regime (Burgat 2009), Tunisian CSOs have now become potential allies for external actors interested in supporting democracy and good governance (Dennison et al. 2011). Accordingly, the European Union has vowed to put more emphasis on assisting civil society and has introduced new tools and upgraded existing ones.

All this makes the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society a particularly interesting case to study. And yet, Tunisia and the rest of the Maghreb seem to receive less academic and popular attention in non-French speaking European countries than other parts of the Arab world (Joffé 1996; Willis 2012, 1ff). The uprisings and the ousting of the Ben Ali regime temporarily gave the country more prominence. But even in January 2011, there was a sense within Tunisian civil society that international interest faded once the protests had spread over to Egypt and started to challenge the Mubarak regime. As one activist complained – albeit with a hint of irony:

When we got rid of Ben Ali, we felt we were the centre of the universe. We were so proud. Everyone was looking at us. And then two days after Ben Ali was gone all the reporters left. They stopped caring for us, everyone went to Tahrir Square.¹⁸

¹⁸Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (65).

The relative lack of interest in Tunisia may be explained by several factors. On a practical level, the language barrier may have been a factor discouraging researchers from the non-francophone academic community.¹⁹ But more generally, before Tunisia evolved as the only example of a relatively successful transition in the post-2011 Arab world, few countries other than France and Italy deemed it particularly relevant to their interests. Most Western countries devoted comparably little attention to Tunisia as long as it maintained its pro-Western orientation, guaranteed the safety of foreign tourists and looked like a rampart against political Islam. While its record on human rights violations was on par with those of other dictatorships in the region, the Ben Ali regime was also less openly coercive and succeeded in presenting itself as more responsible and fairly liberal. In contrast to neighbouring Algeria and Libya, it did not have major natural resources either. Second, due to the British colonial rule in Egypt, the Levant and the Gulf as well as the close relationship between the US and Israel, the Anglo-Saxon world has historically been more interested in the Fertile Crescent and the Arab peninsula. With the English-language universities dominating academia, this may have contributed to the comparably limited attention devoted to Tunisia. Whatever the reasons, it is one of the objectives of this thesis to contribute to closing the gap on Tunisia and Tunisian civil society in the anglophone academic literature.

1.3 Objective, contribution and structure of the thesis

To sum up, my thesis has two main objectives: First of all, it identifies, maps and examines the practices appearing at the nexus of EU and civil society engagement in the context of democracy promotion. On that basis, it studies how these practices relate to and interact with one another. In particular, it seeks to understand how practices occurring at the nexus between the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion shape the latter. The thesis' main argument is that EU practices contribute to producing and reproducing certain practices within Tunisian civil society, and thus also certain types of civil society actors. As a result, the EU has both a constitutive and a transformative effect on the nature of civil society.

¹⁹Although learning English is becoming increasingly common and popular within Tunisia's youth, it remains quite challenging to conduct research without speaking either French or the Tunisian Arabic dialect. Meanwhile, the Tunisian dialect differs quite significantly from Modern Standard Arabic or the more widely spoken and studied Egyptian and Levantine dialects. Hence, even Arabic speaking researchers may face difficulties in Tunisia and the Maghreb more generally if they do not speak French.

In showing this, the thesis aims at making a contribution on the conceptual, empirical and methodological level. Appraising interaction between the EU and civil society through the practice lens, the thesis contributes to filling the gap in the literature on democracy promotion identified above by studying the effects of how it is actually done. Empirically, it provides an in-depth account of the structure and internal trajectories of post-2011 Tunisian civil society as well as a mapping of the practices enacted by Tunisian activists and EU officials in the context of democracy promotion. Methodologically, it employs an outside-in approach that draws upon and is guided by the perspectives of those who are on the receiving end of EU democracy promotion. It does so by strongly drawing upon the accounts of Tunisian civil society activists.

Following this introduction, the second chapter provides a review of the literature on democratisation as well as on the roles of EU and civil society in contributing to it. In doing so, it illustrates the above-mentioned gaps with regards to the EU's interaction with civil society as well as the implementation of democracy promotion more generally. This lays the basis for chapter three, which provides the conceptual framework of the thesis. Combining insights from the literatures on development and democracy promotion studies with a practice approach, the chapter conceptualises the links between the EU's practices and the changing nature of Tunisian civil society. Chapter four provides some methodological considerations and illustrates how the data for the thesis was gathered and analysed. Chapter five sets the scene for the empirical analysis by providing necessary background information on the Tunisian transition as well as the emergence of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Moreover, it discusses the evolution of EU-Tunisian relations as well as their governance. In doing so, it also touches upon Tunisian civil society's perceptions of the EU and its engagement in Tunisia. Hence, while it serves as a background chapter, it is driven by this thesis' overarching approach of providing an outside-in perspective and also includes and is informed by original empirical material.

The three chapters that follow constitute the empirical part of the thesis. Chapter six delves into the state of civil society in Tunisia, studying activists' and associations' roles before, during and after the 2011 uprising. Based on the various different practices through which civil society engagement is enacted, the chapter identifies various fissures within Tunisian civil society and provides an understanding of their origins and impact. Chapter seven and eight then study the two practices of EU financial assistance for and EU consul-

tations with Tunisian civil society. This involves mapping and analysing these practices and their various components. On that basis, the chapters illustrate how these practices affect the EU's relations with Tunisian civil society as well as how they influence the structure of Tunisian civil society more generally. Chapter nine concludes by summarizing the thesis' findings, elaborating on the main implications and putting them in the context of the existing literature. Moreover, it reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the conceptual and methodological approach taken and makes several recommendations for how the research agenda in this field may be taken forward.

Chapter 2

Democracy promotion, civil society and the EU

Over the past decades, a growing body of research has studied how and why democracy is or is not adopted by non-democratic states. This chapter starts by discussing democratisation both from the perspective of Comparative Politics and International Relations (IR). In doing so, it showcases that both disciplines tend to implicitly assume that transitioning countries should and ultimately will move towards liberal democracy. Moreover, and partly informed by this assumption, they have produced one-size-fits-all approaches that seek to explain political change in a variety of rather different states and regions with the same framework. Not only do studies conducted as part of both research programmes often insufficiently take local context into account, their approaches actually discourage doing so a priori. Hence, the following discussion of the literature they have produced shows why and how democratisation studies would benefit from a more de-centred analysis. Since this thesis focuses on the European Union and civil society, the chapter then reviews the literature on both actors in the context of democracy promotion. It shows that many studies conceive of both of them as rather monolithic actors. When it comes to civil society, the literature does not sufficiently appraise the various fissures within it. Meanwhile, studies of the EU as a democracy promoter tend not to take the role of individual EU officials into account. Moreover, the chapter shows that the existing research does not sufficiently study the interaction between both sides and what individuals actually do in the context of that interaction.

Making the case for an alternative approach, the chapter thus lays the groundwork for the conceptual chapter which suggests looking at them through a practice lens.

2.1 Explaining democratisation

2.1.1 Approaches from Comparative Politics

Inspired by and trying to explain the spread of democracy over the past century, political scientists strive to understand the factors and processes that drive countries' transformation towards more democratic forms of government. As will be discussed in this section, modernisation theory and transitology have emerged as the two main strands of theory in Comparative Politics. Both originated in the United States and were informed by the behavioralist turn in the American social sciences. Hence, they both tried to find general theories explaining democratisation processes across the world and independent of local context. The first strand comprises approaches inspired by modernisation theory that focus on the link between economic and political development. In his seminal article on economic development and political legitimacy, Lipset (1959, 80) argued that

the factors of industrialization, urbanization, wealth, and education, are so closely interrelated as to form one common factor. And the factors subsumed under economic development carry with it the political correlate of democracy.

Lipset understood this correlation as a relationship in which democracy is a linear positive function of economic growth. This notion was echoed by Rostow (1971), who argued that the prospects for democracy brighten once a “traditional society” starts moving up the ladder in his model of “stages of economic growth” (Rostow 1959). Debates on whether, to what extent and how economic development and democracy are linked through a causal probabilistic relationship have been raging since and the initial hypotheses have been revised and further specified. Notably, income per capita has been defined as a key determinant of democracy. As Diamond (1992, 109) put it, “the more well-to-do the people of a country, on average, the more likely they will favour, achieve, and maintain a democratic system for their country.” Scholars empirically testing various iterations of the hypothesis through analyses of global cross-sections of nations have largely confirmed that there is a link and often interpreted it as a causal one (Apter 1965; G. Marks and Diamond 1992; Organski

1965). While few contest the correlation, the question of causality has generated substantial debate. Notably, some scholars have detected improvements in per capita income resulting from the enhancement of democratic institutions as opposed to vice versa (Rodrik 1999). Others have argued that both per capita income and transitions to and from democratic regimes may depend on confounding variables (Acemoglu et al. 2008). Controlling for omitted variable bias, Acemoglu et al. (2009, 1043) suggest

that events during critical historical junctures can lead to divergent political-economic development paths, some leading to prosperity and democracy, others to relative poverty and non-democracy.

Furthermore, there are significant individual outliers. Looking back in history, Germany modernized already in the 19th century but only genuinely democratised after the second world war (Lepsius 1969). Modernisation theory is also challenged by economically less developed states with well-functioning democracies such as Costa Rica and Botswana (Doorenspleet and Kopecký 2008), economically highly-developed autocracies such as the Gulf monarchies (Hinnebusch 2006) or rapidly developing autocracies such as China (Hall and Ames 1999). In fact, the Chinese government seems to be becoming more authoritarian as it modernizes and advances technologically (Ang 2018).

Hence, newer and more nuanced studies following the general argument tend to acknowledge that modernisation does not automatically lead to democratisation. Instead, they often argue that it causes social and cultural changes that make democratisation more likely to occur (Inglehart and Welzel 2009). Other findings suggest that economic development is not making transitions to democracy more probable but that it increases the stability and sustainability of existing democratic regimes (Przeworski et al. 2000; Przeworski and Limongi 1997). While this more modest hypothesis tends to be accepted even by opponents of modernisation theory, it may be challenged by the recent “populist surge” (Mudde 2016) across the West. Studies identifying economic inequality and perceived or actual economic insecurity as drivers of populism (Mughan, Bean, and McAllister 2003) acknowledge a link between democracy and economic development, but raise questions about the use of average economic indicators in this context. However, the cultural backlash thesis (Norris and Inglehart 2019), which understands support for populist parties as a reaction against progressive cultural change, points in an entirely different direction.

It should be noted that modernisation theory as a research agenda on political development emerged in a very specific context that may help to explain its focus on and understanding of economic development. The agenda was driven by scholars in the United States in the historical context of the victory over the fascist axis powers in World War II, the process of de-colonialization and the Cold War. As Guilhot (2002, 232) points out, these experiences had contributed to

raising deep suspicions about the potential effects of mass participation in the political process. In particular, it was feared that the eruption of mass politics in ‘traditional’ societies would have disruptive and destabilizing effects rather than leading towards a universal model of constitutional democracy.

It was of particular concern to the United States that the states that had just gained independence, often after a considerable struggle against Western colonisers and at times with Soviet support, would not fall under Soviet influence. The European Recovery Program (ERP), commonly known as the Marshall Plan, had been designed to keep Western Europe in the Western bloc. In a similar vein, the US began to use foreign aid and development assistance as a tool to achieve its foreign policy objective of ensuring that newly independent countries remained in or joined the Western bloc. To that end, they were incentivised through financial assistance to become “Western” – not just in terms of strategic alignment but also, for the sake of anchoring their alignment, to integrate themselves into the Western-led economic and political order. In that context, modernisation as understood by modernisation theorists became essentially synonymous with westernisation (Shils 1966, 10). Moreover, it implicitly suggested that the adoption of Western economic principles was a prerequisite of democratisation. Against that background, it is not surprising that modernisation theory eventually also started to serve as an excuse for American support of non-democratic regimes as long as they were sufficiently committed to the American idea of economic modernisation and to remaining allied to the US.

Disenchantment with such notions contributed to laying the intellectual foundation for transitology as an alternative approach towards explaining how democracies emerge (Guilhot 2005, 128ff). Transitology emerged to explain what Huntington (1991) called the “third wave of democratization”. According to Huntington, the first wave of democracy occurred in the early 19th century with various states granting universal suffrage to white

males. Preceded by a “reverse wave” in the first half of the 20th century, a second wave followed the end of the second world war. After another reverse wave, the 1974 ouster of the Portuguese fascist dictatorship became the starting point for “democracy’s third wave.” Ultimately including democratic transitions in parts of Latin America, the Asia Pacific region, sub-Saharan Africa as well as Southern and Eastern Europe, this wave did not only substantially increase the number of states becoming a or transitioning towards democracy, but also drastically increased the geographic scope. To study these developments, the Wilson Center¹ organised a set of conferences on “Transitions from Authoritarian Rule” that evolved into the eponymous four-book series by O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986) that is widely considered as the foundational work on transitology.

Modernisation theory had focused on, and arguably overemphasised (Martz 1991), the structural conditions that are favouring or indeed constituting a prerequisite for democracy, such as economic development, a well-functioning administration or a liberal society. In contrast, transitology argues that democracy can also emerge in less hospitable settings. If crises of authoritarian rule create a space for reconfiguring political institutions, then emerging political elites can use that opportunity to craft new rules (Di Palma 1990). Focusing on shorter time frames, transitology sees democratisation as a three-step process starting with a period of liberalisation that enables and is followed by a political transition to democracy and a consolidation period in which the new institutional set-up is cemented (Schneider and Schmitter 2004). Each step is made possible through the agency of committed domestic actors. Meanwhile, the success of democratisation strongly depends on the ability and willingness of a country’s old and new elites to compromise. Following the transitologist line of thinking, four key actors are shaping the transition. There are hard-liners and reformers within the authoritarian regime and radicals and moderates in the opposition (Przeworski 1991, 69ff). If the reformers within the regime and moderates within the opposition manage to form an alliance and agree upon a common set of rules, then they might succeed in creating a “pacted transition”. The exact rules depend on the context, but they are likely to include at least an agreement to share power, some level of amnesty for the crimes committed under the past regime as well as a commitment not to resort to violence (Schmitter 2018, 37).

¹An American foreign policy think tank established by US Congress as a presidential memorial and part of the Smithsonian institution.

Downplaying long-term trajectories and separating political action from economic circumstances, transition theory purports that democratisation is not overly dependent on structural context and may therefore, in principle, occur in almost any societal, cultural and socio-economic setting. Transitology thus replaced modernisation theory's pessimist view on what is required for a country's democratisation with "theoretical optimism" (Di Palma 1990, 3). While it is less deterministic and does acknowledge the possibility of back-sliding to some extent, it believes that there is ultimately just movement in one direction: towards more democracy. Or, to be more precise, towards liberal democracy (Carothers 2002). Transitology does not consider the adoption of a liberal economic order as a precondition for democratisation. However, it implicitly assumes that a transition towards a liberal economic order will not only coincide with a political transition but is also necessary for democracy to become sustainable. Hence, transitology is almost as Western-centric as modernisation theory and certainly displays the same "self-confidence of ethnocentric achievement" that Mazrui (1968, 82) attributed to it. Even though most transitologists may have been more nuanced than those who predicted the "universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989, 3) and referred to it as an "end of history" that would inevitably occur at some point (Fukuyama 1989, 1992), they were ultimately driven by a similar line of thinking.

Moreover, just like modernisation theory, transitology draws upon behaviouralist approaches and thus tilts towards universal theories that it tests through statistical cross-country analysis. Hence, it does not sufficiently acknowledge the relevance of history, culture and an understanding of local context. Modernisation theory was challenged by Latin America studies, which observed gaps between the theory and empirical evidence on the ground. But even though area studies contributed to the rise of transitology, the field itself eventually received with similar criticism. Students of the post-Soviet space started to challenge its hypotheses, which had been mainly informed by the Latin American and Southern European experience and were now imposed on studies of the former states of the Eastern bloc. In response, scholars of Soviet, Communist and Slavic studies increasingly pointed their new competitors to the differences between both contexts (Bunce 1995). Notably, Russian studies scholar Stephen Cohen called for his discipline "to liberate itself from 'comparative' political theories that know little or nothing about Russia" and for "bringing Russia back into Russian studies" instead (Cohen 1999, 50).

2.1.2 Approaches from International Relations

Modernisation theory and transitology did not negate the international dimension of democratisation. However, grounded in Comparative Politics, they did not put influences from abroad at the centre of their analysis. In fact, the founders of the transitology research programme largely shrugged it off, with Schmitter (1986, 5) arguing that

one of the firmest conclusions that emerged from our working group was that transitions from authoritarian rule and immediate prospects for political democracy were largely to be explained in terms of national forces and calculations; external actors tended to play an indirect and usually marginal role, with the obvious exception of those instances in which a foreign occupying power was present.

Acknowledging the West's role in the transition of the post-Soviet space led transitologists to revisit this sweeping dismissal of the international dimension (Pevehouse 2002; Whitehead 2001). Meanwhile, International Relations (IR) scholars started to devote more attention to this dimension in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's implosion. Western states and organisations had engaged in supporting democracy and human rights abroad before the end of the Cold War. However, despite having gone through a brief idealist phase during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, America's post-1945 foreign policy was primarily driven by concerns about stability and security. With the notable exception of Japan and Germany, the US did not put major emphasis on promoting democracy abroad during the cold war – even though its public diplomacy suggested otherwise. In fact, as Smith (2012, 139) pointed out, the US consistently found itself in “the uncomfortable position of actively supporting authoritarian regimes, and this in the name of fostering a liberal democratic world order.” The gap between rhetoric and policy is illustrated by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's reaction to hearing that his ambassador to Chile David Popper had raised human rights issues with officials of the Chilean junta that had overthrown the Allende government shortly before. “Tell Popper to cut out the political science lectures,”² he scrambled in the margin of the diplomatic cable that reported the ambassador's concerns.

²Seymour M. Hersh. *Kissinger Said to Rebuke U.S. Ambassador to Chile*. The New York Times, 27.9.1974. <https://nyti.ms/314aOkF> (accessed on 29.4.2019).

During the Carter presidency, US policy slowly started to catch up with its own rhetoric. Following the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Greece, Portugal and Spain, the US as well as Western European governments and the European Communities (EC) started to get involved in supporting their transitions. The aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain saw the sudden (re-)emergence of multiple sovereign states that had previously been part of or controlled by the Soviet Union and were now open towards changing their political and economic systems. The West responded with a plethora of policies encouraging and assisting such change. Notably, the European Union and its member states reacted by using the process of enlargement to transform and ultimately incorporate twelve formerly communist states.³ Academic interest in these developments contributed to a more prominent interest in the study of democracy promotion as a subdiscipline of IR.

Over the past two decades, this literature has identified various social mechanisms and underlying theories of social behaviour that explain processes of external democratisation. Drawing upon Börzel and Risse (2009, 9), the literature might be structured by differentiating between five mechanisms. To begin with, coercion describes a process where an external actor legally or physically imposes democratic principles on the recipient state who has no choice but to acquiesce. Conditionality describes a process in which the democracy promoter manipulates the utility calculations of the recipients. Being offered positive or negative incentives to democratise, the recipient state decides on whether or not to comply based on the rewards or the punishments its government expects as a consequence. The mechanism of persuasion describes the promotion of democracy through external actors' reasoning and the recipients' potential acceptance of these reasons as legitimate. While these three modes involve external actor intending to promote democracy, the last two do not require intentionality. Socialisation involves the promotion of ideas through the promoter's provision of a model that the recipient may accept based on identity change or internalization of the ideas behind it. Finally, emulation describes a process where the recipient decides to adopt certain aspects of the external actors' model. This may happen for normative or instrumental reasons. The following section looks into the debates on either of these mechanisms and links them to debates on the role of civil society in democratisation processes.

³Eastern Germany in 1990; Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; Bulgaria and Rumania in 2007; and Croatia in 2013.

The first mechanism is based on the idea that external actors can impose democracy on non-democratic states by means of physical coercion. Post-1945 Japan and Germany might be seen as successful examples of such democratisation by coercion (Montgomery 1957). However, beyond these two examples, research has found that externally imposed democracies tend to be less stable and durable (Gates and Strand 2007), which might be explained by mismatches between the domestic realities and the imposed institutions or the demise of informal institutions. Moreover, it might be explained by democratisation not being the main goal of the external intervention. Most research on the invasion of Iraq – the most recent major case of a coerced regime change framed as an effort of democracy promotion – tends to understand it as primarily motivated by interests other than the installation a well-working democracy (Cockburn 2007). Moreover, coerced democratisation may also fail due to a lack of commitment. A special issue of *Democratization* edited by Grimm and Merkel (2008) developed criteria deciding upon success and failure of “democracy through war.” It found that the intervening actors’ early withdrawal before democracy and its institutions are firmly rooted made their failure more likely.

Not having relevant military capabilities at its disposal, the European Union lacks the ability to engage in democracy promotion by coercion. However, a type of legal coercion might be observed in some Balkan countries, most notably Bosnia and to a lesser degree to Kosovo and Macedonia (Noutcheva 2012, 25). Making use of the far-reaching executive powers of the EU’s Special Representative in Bosnia (Merlingen 2009), the Union did impose certain reforms on the deeply divided country in what Juncos (2011) refers to as “Europeanization by decree.” However, most of the EU’s direct influence on these countries is better described by its application of conditionality. While coercion leaves the democratizing country no choice but to transform according to the external actors’ preferences, conditionality involves the linkage between perceived benefits for the targeted state if it is willing to implement democratic reforms or disadvantages in case its government refuses to reform (Kubicek 2003). In international relations, conditionality refers to the attachments of conditions to the provision of benefits such as loans, development assistance or market access. Key to the strategies of World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF) whose financial assistance is usually linked to economic reform (Dreher 2009), conditionality was increasingly applied by the EU in the context of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) accession to the EU. Based on the success of the CEECs’ transformation, the

EU then went on to use conditionality more prominently towards non-member candidates as well.

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) argue that the impact of conditionality depends on four factors. These factors also explain the wide consensus that the tool worked relatively well during EU enlargement but did not live up to expectations in other contexts (Kelley 2004; K. E. Smith 2005; Youngs 2009). To begin with, conditionality depends on the determinacy with which the EU maintains what compliance with its conditions constitutes. This is complicated by the EU's limited actorness in foreign policy making. The pre-2004 EU member states were relatively aligned in their preferences when it came to EU enlargement towards the CEECs. However, today different members have different interests in different parts of the EU's wider neighbourhood (Behr 2008) and beyond. As a result, the EU's determinacy suffers from incoherence between them. This is occasionally complemented by incoherence between actors within the EU's institutional set-up (Cardwell 2011, 237). Second, the incentive to comply depends on the expected size and speed of rewards. However, the powerful carrot of membership that had made conditionality such a powerful tool is missing in much of the enlarged EU's interaction with third states from its neighbourhood (Lehne 2014). Moreover, the EU faces increasing competition from other actors such as China, Russia or the Gulf states who might offer higher rewards with less strings attached and thus undermine EU influence (Freyburg and Richter 2015). Third, the credibility of EU's threats to withhold rewards or impose sanctions influences the potential impact of conditionality. This also relates to the EU's capability to withhold rewards or to impose those sanctions, for example, due to the costs it might entail. EU interests competing with democratisation, such as access to natural resources or cooperation on security and migration, weaken the credibility of threats to withdraw financial assistance (Pridham 2007). Finally, domestic veto players and adoption costs also play a role. For example, after the Arab uprisings, domestic elites in the countries affected delayed and opposed reforms undermining their position in society (Pace and Cavatorta 2012). The most prominent case was the Egyptian counterrevolution that rendered any EU action within the country redundant (Pinfari 2013). Moreover, external actors opposing EU democracy promotion might inflict costs on the target countries (Tolstrup 2009), as Russia's invasion and ongoing occupation of parts of Georgia and Ukraine or its pressure on Armenia show.

While EU conditionality is directed at governments, it also affects other actors. In offer-

ing incentives to the ruling elites to change the status quo, the positions of reform-oriented domestic actors are strengthened. The EU's rewards and sanctions regime may increase the bargaining power of those advocating change vis-à-vis those opposing it (Knill and Lehmkuhl 1999, 3). This also relates to civil society organisations (CSO) whose demands echo the EU's conditions, such as respect for human rights, good governance or democratic accountability (Parau 2009). On a more fundamental level, EU conditions might ensure activists' personal safety as they discourage the regime from cracking down on them. In what Keck and Sikkink (1999) refer to as the "boomerang effect," activists within authoritarian states might even reach out directly to foreign democracy promoting actors such as states, international NGOs or indeed the EU to ask them to put pressure on their respective governments. The combined pressure from above and below might then contribute to change. Engraining human rights into the 1975 Helsinki Accords enabled civil society activists in the former Eastern bloc to refer to a legally binding document signed by governmental authorities. While this did not at all mean that these rights were granted as a result, it did give civil society a reason to address the authorities and increased its moral power (Thomas 1999). Trying to replicate this "Helsinki effect," the EU's pressure on Arab countries in the 1995 Barcelona conference to formally commit themselves to respecting human rights has arguably had a similar effect (J. Marks 1996). However, conditionality may also work against civil society. While conditionality is widely understood as a tool targeting governments, similar mechanisms might affect associations that seek or are highly dependent on foreign funding. Funding for civil society might have direct or indirect strings attached as well. In order to obtain it, associations' objectives as well as their norms and values might have to be, at least to some extent, in line with those of the EU. Adherence to the EU's objectives, norms and values would then indirectly amount to an EU condition. Hence, conditionality should be studied beyond the intergovernmental level.

Based on Habermas' (1984) "Theory of Communicative Action," Börzel and Risse (2012) suggest a "logic of arguing," which assumes that a foreign actors' intentional promotion of democratic institutional set-ups might also be conducted through communication. This means that external actors persuade domestic actors of the superiority of democratic institutional set-ups through reasoning. In doing so, states or international organisations such as the EU "teach" other states and their representatives new norms, values and interests (Finnemore 1996). Other scholars emphasize the role of non-governmental actors such as

epistemic communities (Haas 1992) or transnational civil society (Price 2003; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). In that context, particularly EuroMed Rights (formerly known as Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, abbreviated as EMHRN) has been found to persuade civil society actors to adopt some European norms and values. EuroMed Rights is a network of CSOs based and operating in countries on both shores of the Mediterranean. While it is not directly linked to the EU or its member states, EuroMed Rights' creation was inspired by the 1995 Barcelona declaration and promotes the human rights and democracy norms ingrained in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (Van Hüllen 2008; Jünemann 2002). Moreover, persuasion processes might be expected in the context of direct interaction between EU and civil society activists in target countries of EU democracy promotion. However, so far little research has been devoted to such effects.

Coercion, conditionality and to some extent persuasion involve states following their rational interests in their interaction with foreign actors actively trying to promote democracy. However, a country's domestic development might also be indirectly affected by global political, social and economic trends without an external actor actively trying to induce change. Analysing the international dimensions of democratisation, Whitehead (2001) identifies contagion as an effect where countries bordering democratic neighbours replicate these neighbours' institutional set-up. While Whitehead focuses on the transmission of information across borders, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) suggest that social interaction between external actors and their domestic interlocutors might cause attitude change as well and offer a "social learning model" grounded in constructivism. Drawing upon studies of international socialisation (Checkel 2001), the model assumes that democratic change might be driven by what March and Olsen have coined the "logic of appropriateness" (1984). This means that complex learnings redefine the interests and identities of relevant actors within a state and encourage their engagement for a different institutional set-up.

Transmission of information or interaction across borders might lead to views of the respective other system that are "cognitively more complex and affectively more favourable than those which had prevailed prior to the interaction" (Pollack 1998, 2). Moreover, visits to states with democratic systems might lead to more positive attitudes towards democratic norms and values (Atkinson 2010). Even mediated contact through media coverage can lead to more positive attitudes towards democratic governance (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). In this context, transnational civil society networks such as EuroMed Rights or staff

turnover between international and local civil society organisations have an effect. Moreover, similar to the mechanism of persuasion, direct interaction between EU officials and civil society might also lead to socialisation processes. Yet, at the same time, the socialisation into European norms and values does not necessarily lead to engagement for such norms and values. In fact, it can lead to resistance to EU democracy promotion among civil society and other liberal-minded elites. For example, liberal civil society activists might feel that they have the choice between an authoritarian system that guarantees a certain degree of civil liberalism or democratically elected illiberal Islamist regimes (Youngs 2015). While the existing literature on EU democracy promotion touches on such questions in passing, little systematic research has taken them as main starting point.

Finally, external states might also emulate the EU's model of democratic governance. Such mechanisms can draw upon both a rationalist and a constructivist logic. For example, the external state can make a rational, performance-based decision and decide to opt for solutions used by the EU that it deems more effective. Alternatively, the state might choose to imitate a European model based on the desire to become more like European states. In contrast to persuasion, this does not require active EU engagement. Within the EU, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) might be considered to be a practice of managed policy emulation through benchmarking and "best-practices" for states keen on remaining competitive in global competition (Hodson and Maher 2001). Meanwhile, for reasons relating to both performance and recognition, many enlargement candidates opted to emulate European norms even in sectors in which no reforms were required by the European Commission (Börzel and Risse 2009). Externally, the most prominent example of emulation is the adaption of the EU's model of regional integration by other regions. Regional organisations like the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur, abbreviated as Mercosur) were partly inspired by and modelled on the EU. And while the EU encourages such efforts, it is not always actively trying to convince states to integrate or involved in helping them to do so (Farrell 2009).

In the context of civil society, associations might choose to emulate other associations abroad that are more successful at winning grants. Hence, as Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech (2012) argue, we might expect emulation processes to contribute to some CSOs becoming more like professionalised foreign NGOs and thus dominating civil society due to their

better access to funding. This might then increase existing divisions within civil society (Youngs 2015). However, civil society might also be attracted by the normative model the EU offers and decide to advocate for its implementation in their own country (Manners 2006). However, while the existing literature hypothesizes that such mechanisms might be at work, limited empirical research has been conducted that might help to test whether they actually are.

These five different mechanisms of external democratisation are not necessarily always clear cut. For example, the EU's twinning projects that bring together civil servants from EU member states and neighbourhood states or enlargement candidates in order to jointly work on sectorial reforms are arguably a case of emulation through lesson-drawing. After all, the recipient state makes a conscious and voluntary decision to emulate a sectorial policy solution from an EU member state. However, as Freyburg (2010, 2011) has suggested, such twinning projects may also lead to socialisation effects as the interaction occurring in their context may influence how participating civil servants in the recipient states think about the norms and values of the states of their European colleagues. Moreover, European participants might try to persuade their colleagues of the superiority of European policy solutions over the course of a twinning project. However, such persuasion processes may very well go both ways, with European officials learning from and being influenced by their counterparts as well (Lavenex 2004).

To sum up, democratisation theories based on Comparative Politics focus on structure and agency in the domestic context of a democratising country. In contrast, IR looks at the structure of the international system as well as the agency of external actors as potential factors determining outcomes. While modernisation theory and transitology were driven by rational choice theory, IR also brought in constructivism to explain change. However, just like Comparative Politics, IR approaches remain somewhat Western-centric. Driven by the study of EU enlargement as well as the EU's attempts to replicate its successes among those states in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhood that do not have an enlargement perspective, they were often very much focused on how and whether the EU can succeed in promoting its own model abroad. Moreover, as will be shown in the next section, these studies put major emphasis on the European side while relegating the recipients of EU democracy promotion into a passive role. To better understand this dynamic, the next sec-

tion will discuss the literature on the EU as a democracy promoter as well as that on civil society as one of its key interlocutors in partner countries.

2.2 The EU and civil society as agents of democratisation

The Western- or Eurocentrism of the “democracy promotion” literature starts with its understanding of the term itself. A “democracy promoter” is a (usually Western) state or organisation that is foreign to the (usually non-Western) transitioning state in which it promotes democracy. This conception reduces domestic actors within that state to a secondary, if not entirely passive role. Hence, while I use the term in my thesis, I have a different understanding: For me, any individual, state or organisation that actively and intentionally promotes democracy in a given country is a democracy promoter – no matter whether native or foreign to that country. Hence, activists and associations from civil society as well as reform-oriented elites in government, military or administration may be also conceived of as democracy promoters. Since this thesis sets out to study the EU, civil society and their interaction in the context of democracy promotion, the following section discusses the existing literature on these two particular democracy promoters and identifies its current gaps.

2.2.1 The EU as a foreign democracy promoter

This section looks at the EU as a democracy promoter. It starts by examining what exactly the EU engages for when it promotes democracy. It argues that while the EU tends to promote liberal principles, the model it promotes is not entirely coherent – which is partly due to the EU’s inbuilt lack of institutional cohesion. Moving towards impact, it looks at the explanations the literature provides for the lack of success that it has attributed to the EU’s post-enlargement efforts at democracy promotion. Based on a discussion of the corresponding research, it argues that measuring impact is at times rather futile as political change or lack thereof is likely to be caused by various factors that might work in favour or against what the EU is doing. On that basis, it suggests that we should rather focus on whether what the EU is doing could work in principle and put more attention to what the EU actually does in practice on the ground.

EU democracy promotion dates back to the 1980s, when the European Communities encouraged and supported the democratic transitions in Greece, Spain and Portugal in the context of its Southern enlargement. However, it took until the 1993 formulation of the Copenhagen criteria for democracy to become a formal condition for accession to the EU, with the heads of states and government declaring that

Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.⁴

Based on the enlargement process, the EU's increased engagement in promoting democracy in states without a membership perspective continued to link a liberal democratic model based on elections and individual political rights with liberal economic reforms (Huber 2013). However, beyond that, the EU's democracy promotion agenda has been described as rather "fuzzy" (Kurki 2015) in comparison to that of other international actors such as the United States, international financial institutions or non-governmental organisations. While the EU is quite precise when it comes to its technical prescriptions, it does not have a coherent overarching ideological model of what kind of democracy it promotes. This might be explained by its very nature and the fact that it includes member states with quite different models (Orbie and Wetzel 2015). At the same time, however, the EU is regularly criticised for focusing too much on liberal economic reform. Hout (2010) refers to EU democracy promotion as "neoliberal in nature and favouring a technocratic approach to governance reform." Similarly, Youngs and Pishchikova (2013) characterise the EU as a rather technocratic, rules-exporting actor that supports better governance which is assumed to enable or lead to incremental democratisation. Such notions are reminiscent of modernisation theory's assumption that economic development is a pre-condition for democracy. And indeed, drawing upon Scharpf's (1999) distinction between input and output legitimacy, a comparative study by Wetzel and Orbie (2015) concludes that EU democracy promotion tends to be output-oriented. This involves policy being directed at enabling citizens in target

⁴European Council. *Conclusions of the Presidency*. Copenhagen, 22.6.1993, <http://bit.ly/31eG8gr> (accessed on 21.3.2019).

countries to profit from better policy delivered by their governments rather than enabling them to influence policy themselves. The EU thus tends to prioritise socio-economic development and “state administrative capacity” over the goal of enabling fair elections and other forms political participation. Examining EU democracy promotion in Tunisia and Egypt, Reynaert (2015) argues that its main objective before 2011 has been economic liberalization and the creation of the conditions enabling such reforms. The EU has focused on supporting good governance as well as security and stability – which it framed as necessary conditions for democracy. This focus on output legitimacy in its external affairs (Damro 2012) is not surprising considering that the EU’s internal configuration has been characterised as regulatory, output-oriented system (Majone 1994, 1998) as well. However, this orientation leads to accusations that the EU is promoting some sort of “low level democracy” (Gills and Rocamora 1992) that primarily benefits the affluent transnational business elites (W. I. Robinson 1996).

The EU’s understanding of what democracy promotion entails can also be understood through the literature’s distinction between political and the developmental approaches to democracy promotion (Carothers 2009). The former primarily focuses on elections and sees democratisation as a struggle of democratically-minded actors to gain the upper hand over non-democrats. The latter has a broader conception of democracy that encompasses a wider range of political and socio-economic developments and sees democratisation as a slow and iterative process of change. According to Carothers (2009), the EU is less of a political and more of a developmental actor in comparison to the US. Analysing the EU as a democracy promoter in sub-Saharan Africa, Del Biondo (2011) finds that EU efforts for administrative reform tend to be geared towards making governments more efficient at implementing development programmes rather than making them more democratic. Similarly, EU capacity building is not necessarily only geared towards democratisation but also towards making EU development cooperation more participatory and thus more effective. Following a similar logic, various scholars argue that the EU as an actor prefers to cooperate with non-democratic regimes towards achieving its goals rather than confronting them too much (Youngs 2015).

In addition to trying to pinpoint what the EU is promoting, a significant body of literature has been devoted to examining the impact of what the EU does and the explanation of variation between different country cases, different sectors and over time. The general no-

tion is that democracy promotion in the context of the EU's Eastern enlargement has been rather successful. However, the record in those potential enlargement candidates whose accession is rather unlikely to occur in the short to medium term – most notably the Western Balkans (Rupnik 2011) and Turkey – has been less consistent. Particularly in Turkey, a long period of fairly successful EU-prompted reform has been reversed over the past decade (Szymanski 2012). Meanwhile, the results of EU democracy promotion beyond membership candidates have been rather mixed, with the Arab uprisings illustrating its lack of impact. Despite the EU's rhetoric of supporting democratic reform in its Southern neighbourhood, it was the people that eventually took to the streets to call for the principles the EU had been talking about a lot but apparently not been pushing for sufficiently.

The EU's not overly impressive track record in promoting democracy beyond its own borders might lead us to four conclusions. The first one is that external democracy promotion does not and cannot work as a matter of principle. The argument might be made that real democracy cannot be imposed on a country but only emerge out of domestic developments. While external actors could choose to support such developments, their support is either irrelevant or might even undermine them. However, the forced democratisation of both Japan and Germany after the second world war as well as the transition of Eastern Europe suggest otherwise. Even if we say that foreign actors were not the only or most relevant actor to influence these transitions, it is rather hard to support the claim that they did not play a role at all. It might be argued though, that these cases were so very particular that no other form of external democracy promotion is comparable to it.

If we assume that democracy promotion is possible in principle, and that includes the most minimal definition of merely supporting a process that is driven by domestic actors, then a second explanation would be that the EU did not really promote democracy in the first place. If the EU is understood as self-interested and egoist actor, this would preclude notions of it being benevolent in its external policies (Hyde-Price 2006). Such notions correspond well with various arguments relating to the EU's struggle to balance security concerns and democracy promotion ideals. As Malmvig (2004, 3ff) points, out pre-2011 EU foreign policy towards the Southern neighbourhood was of “a somewhat schizophrenic character” due to the simultaneous presence of two conflicting and mutually incompatible security discourses within it. On the one hand, the “liberal reform discourse” emphasized Mediterranean states’ need to reform with regard to democratic governance and human

rights. However, at the same time the “cooperative security discourse” focused on threats that both the EU and its Mediterranean partners were facing. In combatting these threats, the Union emphasized its partners’ sovereignty to deal with them as they saw fit and ignored that this usually involved rather limited concern for European norms and values.

While Malmvig detected the presence of both discourses, other scholarship on the EU’s pre-2011 engagement with the Southern Mediterranean emphasized the dominance of the EU’s concerns about stability over its self-declared role as a “force for good” (Barbé and Johansson-Nogués 2008). Powel (2009) argued that the EU refrained from demanding political reform in Tunisia prior to 2011 because the Ben Ali system made sure there was no political space for anti-Western extremism to emerge. According to Cavatorta and Durac (2009), this prioritisation of security over democracy has profound negative implications in the target countries. With the EU’s democratic discourses not being followed up by actual engagement for democracy, they give false hope to local activists. Moreover, calling for democracy, praising baby steps towards it while ignoring major violations of human rights and democratic principles risks bringing the concept of democracy into disrepute, and thus helping those who rejected it in the first place. Moreover, it reduces the EU’s credibility as a supporter of democracy and human rights among those who have sympathies for Western-style democracy. In doing so, the EU risks losing its ability to work with those local actors most sympathetic to it and thus most helpful when it comes to achieving its objectives.

This relates to another way of interpreting the lack of results of EU democracy promotion. Maybe democracy promotion does work in principle and the EU has indeed promoted democracy, but simply has not been very good at it. For example, the EU’s use of conditionality involves choices by relevant actors in partner countries to be informed by these conditions and rewards. The effectiveness of democracy promotion therefore depends on the determinacy of the conditions, the size and speed of the rewards, the credibility of the external actors’ threat to withhold rewards as well as the adoption costs of complying with the conditions and the role of potential veto players (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). As indicated, the EU tends to be inconsistent with regards to its policy both over time and across countries. Security interests ranging from the fight against terrorism to the control of refugee movements as well as economic interests such as access to natural resources or markets competed with and often trumped EU democracy promotion. Informed by concerns about potential repercussions on its own interests in these domains, the EU therefore

rarely ever used negative conditionality to sanction bad behaviour. Moreover, the incentives offered to the Southern neighbourhood were limited in comparison to what had been offered to the CEECs. The enlargement candidates moved towards a major and credible reward – accession to the EU. In the light of the lack of strong incentives and sanctions, the political elites in the Southern Mediterranean had a less of an interest in accepting the high adaption costs of democratisation, which involved giving up on privileges that the regimes provided them with through corruption, nepotism or membership of elitist state actors such as the military or the security services. The interest in maintaining the status quo was also informed by the fear of democratic elections leading to either chaos or Islamist rule. This concern did only affect preferences of the countries' elites but also those of liberal and progressive parts of society.

This suggests that the EU would need to show more consistency in its action and to offer more rewards for good behaviour. Arguably, however, its institutional shape and the Eurosceptic political climate within the member states in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings made this rather difficult. Moreover, with EU external action being dominated by the European Council, grand designs and coherent policy are difficult to achieve as policy is more likely to be shaped by lowest common denominator decisions.⁵ An ongoing debate in this regard deals with the geographic priorities of EU external policy. For many years, Germany and others have promoted more engagement toward the Eastern neighbourhood whereas the EU's Mediterranean members were in favour of more engagement towards the Arab world. As a result, an informal compromise emerged that activities in the East would be matched by activities in the South. With German enthusiasm for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and further enlargements having waned in recent years, the Southern member states have less bargaining power in advocating for the allocation of relevant means to the South. Moreover, with EU enlargement being frozen and many of the target countries of EU democracy promotion not being eligible anyway, no major non-financial reward is in sight. At the same time, the EU's multiple crises have quite generally undermined the EU member states' ability and willingness to provide major funding.

Another argument used to explain the lack of the EU's impact in promoting democracy

⁵The European Council, which consists of the EU's Heads of States and Government, tends to seek unanimity in its decisions.

is its lack of flexibility in engaging with different kinds of states. As Börzel and Risse (2004, 28) observe

The EU follows one single cultural script that it uses to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the globe. (...) “One size fits all” appears to be the mantra of EU democracy promotion. If the programmes vary at all, it concerns their budgetary allocations.

Such criticism was directed in particular at the EU’s policy towards the Southern neighbourhood. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced specifically to go beyond the “one size fits all” logic of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Instead, it introduced more differentiation between countries through a “regatta approach” akin to that of the Eastern enlargement. However, by putting both the Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood into the same policy framework, it also fell into the trap of not sufficiently accounting for the very different local contexts.

However, while we may criticise the way the EU does things, it needs to be acknowledged that there may be other factors influencing democratisation – as the Comparative Politics literature discussed above has shown. Even if changes towards more democratic governance do occur, the question is to what extent they can be linked to previous EU policies. At the same time, other factors might counter EU democracy promotion policy. Whatever does happen may have been caused or influenced by the activities of internal or other external actors, or indeed by regional or global trends. Hence, impact is not necessarily the most relevant variable when examining foreign policy. Highly suitable EU policies might not have any impact due to factors outside of the its control. Meanwhile, non-ideal policies might end up having a major impact if overall conditions are favourable. Rather than measuring impact, it thus seems advisable to examine whether the EU’s policies and their implementation are adequate. This would require in-depth empirical assessments of what the EU is actually doing on the ground.

2.2.2 Civil society as a domestic democracy promoter

While there are differences regarding the extent to which the EU can influence transitions in different third states, there are also different actors within third states whose action matters. The EU might engage directly with governments and nudge them towards democratic

reform. It might also engage in functional cooperation with civil servants working on different levels of the administration in order to resolve rather sectorial technical problems. As the example of twinning projects indicates, persuasion, socialisation or emulation mechanisms might then lead to impacts that go beyond the sectorial solution. Finally, the EU might engage with and empower reform-oriented actors that are not in executive positions but might influence decision-makers from the bottom-up. This includes, most notably, civil society.

Whether civil society, civil servants or different types of governments – the recipient side tends to be neglected when it comes to the study of EU democracy promotion. If EU democracy promotion is understood as having a demand and a supply side, then the literature clearly focuses on the latter and neglects the former. This thesis focuses on civil society as an interlocutor of the EU. Hence, before the next section delves into the interaction between the two, the following one discusses the literature on civil society more generally. It starts with a discussion on what civil society has been conceived of. As civil society had a rather limited impact in the Arab world before 2011, the section then looks at explanations why that was the case.

Just like democracy, civil society might be seen as an “essentially contested concept.” Broadly, we might distinguish between a conceptualisation that sees civil society as a sphere of interaction and one that conceives of it as a set of particular actors that engage in active citizenship. The former argument has its origins in 18th century Europe. Habermas (1962) sees civil society through the notion of a “bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit” (German for “public sphere”) that emerged at the time and was embodied by literary salons and coffee houses as well as the increasing production and availability of books, newspapers and journals. Of course, this conceptualisation of civil society is not only captive to the Western context of its origin but also excluded much of Western society based on socio-economic class and educational background. Moreover, as Viennese writer Vicki Baum (1962, 228) quipped in her memoirs, “I don’t remember having ever seen a ladies’ room in the coffee house.” Linked to the idea of civil society as a public sphere is Almond and Verba’s (1989, 6) notion of civic culture which they defined as “a pluralistic culture based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permitted change but moderated it”. Such notions understand civil society as an arena for deliberation about norms and values that constitute the fundamental fabric of a democratic society.

Such conceptualisations of civil society emphasize its existence as a prerequisite to having and conducive to maintaining a democratic order. In other words, civil society's contribution to democracy is a passive one. In order to conceptualise civil society as a democracy promoter, we are thus better served with the second notion, which focuses on concrete forms of "active citizenship" (Kaldor 2003, 8). This involves peoples' self-organisation outside formal politics for the sake of influencing it both indirectly by contributing to a democratic culture but also directly through pressuring political circles. Civil society is then understood as voluntary non-profit engagement that either performs various vital functions following a logic of civic solidarity or actively tries to advocate for certain causes. For Taylor (1990, 1) civil society is therefore

a web of autonomous associations independent of the state, which binds citizens together in matters of common concern, and by their existence or actions could have an effect on public policy.

Such notions may be traced back to Tocqueville's 19th-century study on the United States, which linked the success of the American democratic order to its associational life. For Tocqueville, the practice of American citizens' participation in nonstate "civil associations" is a key factor that contributes to ensuring democracy, equality, and freedom and preventing the emergence of tyranny. Such ideas were prominent both in modernisation theory and transitology. Drawing upon Tocqueville, Lipset (1959, 84) emphasize that

such organizations serve a number of functions necessary to democracy: they are a source of countervailing power, inhibiting the state or any single major source of private power from dominating all political resources; they are a source of new opinions; they can be the means of communicating ideas, particularly opposition ideas, to a large section of the citizenry; they serve to train men in the skills of politics; and they help increase the level of interest and participation in politics.

Meanwhile, transitology attributed civil society a direct role both in bringing on change by mobilizing for large scale non-violent protest against oppressive regimes, but also as part of the opposition forces negotiating pacted transitions. The so-called "coloured revolutions" of the late 1990s and early 2000s were used to illustrate the role civil society can play in

mobilizing against a regime. They also showed how civil society in one country and setting can inspire and actively support movements elsewhere. Notably, Serbia's Otpor! (Serbian for "Resistance!") movement that brought down the regime of Slobodan Milošević not only inspired but actively promoted its tactics of non-violent struggle to support activists engaging for democracy during the coloured revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Lebanon. However, these cases also showed how civil society may very well be shut out from the ensuing transition process. Moreover, they showed the risks of civil society receiving support from external actors, which can be used to delegitimize activists and their causes and may give rise to conspiracy theories about foreign meddling.

Transitology attributes major relevance to civil society, understanding it as a factor that enables, enhances or indeed enforces democracy where it does not exist (Diamond 1994) and to maintain and strengthen it where it does (Putnam 1994). Based on the role that civil society played during the transformation of the CEECs, high hopes were attached to the potential role civil society might play in other regions. In this spirit, Laith Kubba (2000, 84 ff) proclaimed "the awakening of civil society" in Arab countries and forecasted a new era in which the region's autocratic regimes would be increasingly "forced to retreat before a vibrant civil society." However, the widely shared expectation of increased civil society engagement facilitating democratic change was challenged by political realities. Things did not end up moving as smoothly in the post-Soviet space after all and even less so in the Arab world of the 1990s and 2000s. While a range of liberal economic reforms were implemented during that time, political change was often limited to window-dressing for the sake of being respected by international partners in general and Western donors in particular. In spite of increased civil society engagement in various Arab countries, authoritarian regimes proved to be stable until the 2011 popular uprisings.

The limited impact of civil society in the West Asia, North Africa and elsewhere may lead us to similar conclusions as the ones on the EU's track record discussed above. A first explanation would be that civil society cannot promote democracy in principle. This might be linked to the restrictive environment in which it operates. If the regime is sufficiently oppressive, it will remove all room for manoeuvre for the type of civil society activism that dares to challenge its rule. Civil society may be rendered entirely powerless if regimes do not have an incentive to give activists some space, for example in order to maintain good relations with foreign states who insist on this. Engaging for democratic change would then

require more clandestine and subversive forms of activism that arguably do not correspond with most understandings of civil society.

The second explanation is that civil society does not actually engage for democracy. In contrast with the main tenets of the transition paradigm that dominated Western scholarship in the 1990s, civil society in the Arab world did not necessarily always see democratisation as a priority. In fact, the transition to democracy is not even always necessarily among its main objectives. This argument is most prominently made with regards to the increased presence of Islamists in various Arab countries' civil societies (Berman 2003). However, similar arguments might be made for secular civil society as well. Liberal and progressive ideas on gender equality and minority protection but also on issues such as how criminals should be punished do not necessarily have popular majorities. Hence, progressive secular civil society activists might prefer relatively social-liberal authoritarian rule to instability or a democracy that is dominated by Islamist forces. Another explanation is based on the idea that Arab regimes managed to appropriate and contain civil society and hence to limit its capacity to challenge authoritarian rule. This is achieved through what has been referred to as an "enhanced authoritarianism" that blends a variety of tools including regulation, co-optation and repression of independent organisations while at the same time creating a range of regime-controlled associations that are furthering the autocratic systems' objectives (Heydemann 2007, 5f).

A third explanation is that civil society can promote democracy in principle and is actually trying to but does not do so in a way that actually makes much of a difference. This may relate to both what activists are trying to achieve and how. Quite generally, civil society in the Middle East is sometimes a bit elitist and its views do not necessarily reflect the main concerns of the general public. If civil society is too progressive in its objectives, it may be isolated within society and thus lack a constituency. Moreover, the rise in external funding has changed civil society, which is increasingly dominated by professionally-run NGOs delivering projects paid for by foreign and international donors. With agendas often influenced or even set by non-domestic actors, they are not necessarily well-informed. Moreover, in a process referred to as "NGOization," associations have at times developed a service-delivery approach that involves them merely implementing donors' projects. This leads to what may be conceptualised as "Briefcase NGOs" (Dicklitch 1998, 8), which are organisations whose leadership and staff tend to be highly skilled, urban and possibly for-

eign. While such organisations often have rather limited contact with the communities they claim to represent, they have what it needs to get access to donors, that is, the ability to draft project proposals, to manage large budgets and projects as well as to communicate and socialize on the expat parquet. Donors appreciating those organisations' capacities might either not be aware of or consciously overlook their lack of contact with the broader society – and thus their ability to change it.

However, just as with the EU and its engagement as a foreign democracy promoter, judging civil society for its lack of impact is not necessarily helpful or fair. As with external democracy promotion, the success and failure of civil society in bringing on change is difficult to measure. First of all, there is the above-mentioned fact that civil society is not as monolithic as it is often portrayed. Rather, it involves a plethora of organisations doing different things in different ways. It will be very hard to trace general changes in society and political set-up back to individual civil society activists. And again, there are numerous other internal and external actors whose influence plays a role as well. Hence, rather than measuring impact, it seems advisable to examine what civil society is doing in a given context in order to see whether what they are doing is adequate and may have an impact in theory.

2.2.3 Interaction between civil society and the EU

The literature theorising the mechanisms of EU democracy promotion primarily focuses on intergovernmental relations, understood as interaction between politicians and government officials from the EU and the recipient states. However, as indicated above, some of these mechanisms might be considered relevant for EU politicians' and officials' interaction with civil society in the EU's target countries. And yet, rather limited research has been conducted in this direction. Moreover, the existing literature tends to focus on the supply side of EU democracy promotion. Actors, objectives and tools of EU democracy promotion are examined in depth. How the EU interacts with those on the receiving side, how EU objectives resonate with recipients and how adequate the EU's tools are in order to achieve its declared objectives tends to be only covered superficially. Instead, much of the existing research focuses on the corresponding programmes designed in Brussels, often extensively describing and examining which kind of funding is allocated to which kind of instrument

or sectorial priority as well as why. Their impact is then either assessed through measurable indicators that are actually rather difficult to link to actual progress in democratisation. Or it is assessed through observable progress towards more democracy that is, however, difficult to causally link to EU policy. Hence, there is a case to be made for more directly examining the interactions between civil society and the EU as it occurs and is implemented on the ground. Previous sections have already hinted that EU funding for civil society and consultations between the two are the main types of interactions. Before this chapter concludes, existing debates on those two interactions will be briefly sketched out.

If we follow its official rhetoric, then EU funding for civil society is used to support bottom-up engagement for democracy. However, in light of the above-mentioned constraints, both relating to the EU trying to balance its interests as well as those of civil society under authoritarian rule, there are potential limits to what the EU can support. This may involve the EU preferring to support NGOs that are working on non-controversial issues. The EU may even opt for supporting NGOs that are de-facto government-organized or government-linked (Hornát 2016). Moreover, the EU may choose to work with NGOs that are not fulfilling what one expects them to see as their core role, that is representing the interests of society at large and advocating for democratic reform on their behalf (Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech 2012). Broadly speaking, the EU may opt for an interpretation of civil society that sees activists and associations as actors complementing rather than confronting the state.

This goes hand in hand with debates on whether the EU follows a developmental rather than a political approach and fosters the process of civil society organisations becoming a service provider that executes EU projects. In that sense, EU capacity building also may not necessarily reflect the EU's wish to make civil society a more vocal actor in advocating for democratic change but rather to make it a more efficient implementer of EU projects (Wetzel and Orbie 2012). Effectively, many CSOs having been built from scratch in response to the preferences of external democracy promoters like the EU (Mandel 2002). It has also been argued that democracy promotion thus often enabled the creation of elitist CSOs that were rather detached from other societal groups (Henderson 2002). Such considerations go hand in hand with those on the role of conditionality in EU democracy promotion. The conditions the EU is directly or indirectly attaching to civil society funding might be

expected to shape the civil society landscape. This might refer to norms and values or ideas and priorities, but also to practices.

Such notions lead Kurki (2011) to argue that the EU promotes “neoliberal governmentality,” which involves the EU promoting rights-based CSOs, but only those who are promoting what the EU sees as the right type of norms. And while this includes certain widely acknowledged principles of democracy and human rights, it also carries the norms of Western economic models. Moreover, it encourages CSOs to be service providers in areas where it deems civil society engagement more beneficial than state engagement. In that sense, the EU may then encourage a liberal societal model in which private entities take over functions that might be handled by the state, for example in the field of welfare provision. However, a reverse argument is made as well. The EU is also regularly accused of focusing too much on progressive civic rights that are primarily of concern to a liberal elite. This is particularly relevant since it was rather the lack of socio-economic rights of people in Arab countries that drove them to the streets in 2011 (Wolf and Lefèvre 2012).

Moreover, if civil society engages in advocacy, and if the EU is a relevant actor willing and able to influence the government, then civil society has an incentive to lobby the EU as well. At the same time, the EU might be interested in getting civil society’s views and perspectives on certain issues. In fact, there is already a substantial literature on the inclusion of NGOs and individual citizens’ in the EU’s domestic policymaking process, for example through the European Citizens Initiative (Garcia and Del Río Villar 2012; Greenwood 2012, 2018) or public consultations (Kies 2013) such as the 2018 consultation on the future of daylight saving time.⁶ Particularly in the field of trade, the EU has substantially increased the extent to which it involves non-state actors such as NGOs, trade unions as well as businesses and industry associations. As Hannah (2016, 2) points out, the EU “stands out among major trading powers for its significant and dramatic response to new demands for access and participation.” However, increased involvement and access does not necessarily involve that NGOs are able to shift policy outcomes in their favour (Dür and de Bièvre 2007).

Overlapping with research on lobbying, research on civil society involvement has looked into reasons for its success and failure in influencing EU policy. It identified resources (Eis-

⁶European Commission. *Summertime Consultation: 84% want Europe to stop changing the clock*. Brussels, 31.8.2018, <http://bit.ly/2LVamBR> (accessed on 12.7.2019).

ing 2007; Klüver 2010; Ruzza 2004) and the ability to provide information that the EU Commission can work with (Broscheid and Coen 2003) as factors increasing its willingness to engage with civil society. Moreover, the EU tries to legitimize its policy through civil society consultation (Greenwood 2007). However, while we might expect similar motivations to be at work when it comes to civil society in third states, the EU's non-financial interaction with associations in non-EU states has so far received rather limited attention. Hence, this is another gap whose closure this thesis seeks to contribute to.

2.3 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed how Comparative Politics and International Relations understand democratic transitions and the role that the EU and civil society may play in them. It has shown that these literatures tend to provide one-size-fits-all theoretical frameworks that seek to explain democratisation without sufficiently considering the local contexts that make countries' transitions and trajectories fundamentally different. Moreover, it has shown that both civil society and the EU are often seen and studied as rather monolithic actors, without sufficiently accounting for both sides internal complexities. This is partly due to the fact that insufficient attention is devoted to what those individuals involved on both sides actually do when enacting their respective activities and agendas. More generally, while there is a substantial body of literature studying EU interaction with third-country governments and administrations in the context of democracy promotion, less research is devoted to the nuts and bolts of EU interaction with civil society in non-EU states. Particularly little attention has been paid to the EU's non-financial interaction with activists and associations.

These gaps showcase the importance of a closer examination of the direct interactions between representatives of the EU and civil society activists in the context of EU democracy promotions. In particular, there is limited research on the practices employed by the EU as a democracy promoter as well as the practices of those civil society activists targeted by EU officials. Hence, empirically examining the interactions between EU representatives and civil society representatives could enhance the existing literature on EU democracy promotion and help in moving it beyond the current state of the art.

Chapter 3

Conceptualising Tunisian civil society's interaction with the EU

Having established that the existing research on democracy promotion would benefit from studying the EU's practices, those of civil society in transitioning states as well as the interaction between them, the following chapter provides the conceptual tools for such an analysis. It starts by discussing both civil society and the EU as agents of change in the Tunisian democratic transition. In doing so, it shows why and how examining what these agents actually do benefits our understanding of what constitutes democracy promotion in the given local context of Tunisia. Inspired by ideas from public administration studies and drawing upon the “practice turn” in social theory, international relations and European studies, the chapter then explains how we can study these two agents and their interactions through the lens of their practices. It uses these insights to identify and outline civil society engagement, EU funding for civil society as well as consultations between civil society and the EU as the three key repertoires of interlinked and interacting practices that occur at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society. The chapter shows that the practices through which the EU and Tunisian civil society promote democracy in Tunisia are not only informed and constituted by the different constraints, interests, backgrounds and dispositions of those enacting them but also in reaction to the respective others' practices. In doing so, it shows how examining these reactions can help us understand how EU practices shape the practices of activists and associations, and thus contribute to constituting what Tunisian civil society actually is.

3.1 The EU, civil society and the promotion of democracy

As discussed in the literature review, the research on democratisation incorporates a wide range of ways in which agents can influence democratic transitions. For example, they may indirectly and unintentionally exert influence through various forms of norm diffusion such as emulation or mimicry that involve governments or societies developing preferences for democratic principles due to those principles' perceived ethical or practical superiority. Such effects may be based on what has been described as the normative (Manners 2002) or soft power (Nye 2008) of democratic countries or a regional organisation such as the EU. They might be facilitated by the increased media and communication channels as well as individuals' travelling that leads to an increasing exchange in ideas. However, such processes can occur without anyone taking any action aimed at facilitating them and may thus be understood as "passive democracy promotion" (Burnell 2006, 3 ff).

In contrast, I will limit my analysis to the practices that occur when actors seek to promote democracy by actively and intentionally trying to exert influence on a state or society. These actors – both individual activists and associations – will be referred to as democracy promoters. Contrary to the term's common use for actors seeking to spread and consolidate democracy in foreign countries, my definition includes all those who do. Hence, a democracy promoter can have different organisational forms and various origins. It can be native to the country in question or have external origins, but it may also be regional or global in nature. It may be governmental or non-governmental, relatively strictly or rather loosely organised and rooted within the elites or have grassroots origins. Different democracy promoters may also combine several of these characteristics, and at the same time, the various different democracy promoters and their activities are interlinked, interacting and mutually influencing each other. Domestic elites may try to impose democratic reforms on state and society – either on their own accord or because they are influenced by external actors. External influence may occur through all kinds of foreign policy tools ranging from the use of superior economic or military power to propaganda or persuasion in political negotiations but also through global civil society or international public opinion. However, external democracy promoters may also try to achieve change by supporting local democracy promoters such as domestic civil society. These domestic actors may try to directly influence the elites or seek to transform and mobilize society for democracy and thus create momen-

tum for reforms. In doing so, they may be influenced and supported by external actors, for example through external funding or foreign intervention on their behalf if their rights are infringed upon. At the same time, they can also directly influence external actors' policy on their own governments and thus contribute to top-down reform. Examples for such influence include providing them with information, persuading them of a preferred line of action or referring them to legal or rhetoric commitments that were made in international treaties, declarations or speeches. They may also make use of their international links to foreign and international NGOs, media or parliamentarians. To sum up, the promotion of democracy is a diverse sector made up of a variety of interacting and interactive actors and activities.

At the same time, democracy is one of those essentially contested concepts that "inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie 1956, 169). Both the actors promoting democracy as well as those on the receiving end of such promotion may differ greatly on how they think about democracy and what it means to them. Democracy promoters' efforts are thus inevitably mediated by their own dispositions as well as the specific trajectories of the respective local context, which makes it rather difficult to clearly define what democracy promotion actually is. We may therefore understand it as a field with fuzzy borders that is constituted by the entirety of actors and activities that conceive of themselves as contributing to the spreading and strengthening of democratic principles in a given local political context. In other words, democracy promotion is what democracy promoters make of it. In order to understand what democracy promotion is, we must therefore study those who are enacting it on the ground and pay particular attention to what they actually do while enacting it.

Who the most relevant democracy promoters are differs from country to country and context to context. As discussed in previous chapters, civil society may be conceived of as a particularly relevant domestic democracy promoter in the case of Tunisia, which is why I have chosen it as key object of analysis in this thesis. Moreover, I have chosen to study the EU as it is both the main external actor seeking to influence Tunisia's post-2011 transition as well as a key interlocutor to Tunisian civil society. This chapter thus commences by conceptualizing both Tunisian civil society and the EU as agents of democratic change. On that basis, the next sections discuss how to best study what they actually do when enacting

democracy promotion as well as how their ways of doing things react to each other and jointly constitute the field of democracy promotion in the Tunisian context.

3.1.1 Civil society as an agent of change

The following section discusses what types of actors, which type of activities as well as which areas of engagement I mean when I talk about civil society as an agent of democratic change. In other words, it discusses my own definition of civil society, which subset of civil society I will be looking at in the context of this thesis as well as why. Civil society is widely understood as the realm of associational life that is distinct from family and clan affiliations as well as the state and the market (Hawthorne 2004, 5). It thus encompasses a wide range of different forms of organisations engaging in a wide range of different sectors pursuing a wide range of different goals. Organisational forms may range from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to less structured forms of mobilisation such as grassroots movements. However, even though this already leaves room for a lot of interpretation, I would argue that participation in some sort of formal or informal organisation is not necessarily required for being part of civil society. Rather, I would also include individuals that may be considered as the key actors of the public sphere. For example, a blogger, an academic or a musician who has a certain level of societal relevance should in my view be counted as part of civil society as well.

Hence, when I refer to civil society, I mean both civil society organisations (CSO) as well as what I will refer to as civil society activists (CSA). In doing so, I draw upon the notion of “politically relevant elites” which Perthes (2004, 5 ff) understands as a set of domestic individuals, groups or networks that can play a role in shaping political discourses and influence decision-making through their relevance in society rather than their proximity to or membership of the ruling circles. Borrowing from this concept, I understand civil society activists as individual persons who have a certain level of societal relevance, defined as potential impact on others, due to their position in society or the audiences they are able to influence. For example, prominent journalists or academics may be interviewed by the media or consulted by government officials and politicians and thus either be able to influence a public discourse or the way decision-makers think. In practice, there are overlaps

between civil society organisations and civil society activists as many individuals who are working for or engaging in CSOs would also meet the definition of CSA.

Categorizing civil society into CSO and CSA allows me to account for the different dimensions of my research. Which category I use depends on which aspect of civil society is studied. For example, in the context of financial assistance for civil society, it makes sense to look at civil society through the prism of CSOs, which will also be referred to as associations. After all, donors' funding is usually directed towards organisations rather than individual activists. Meanwhile, if civil society is consulted by domestic or foreign authorities or organisations, it is in practice an individual person that is invited and spoken to. In the context of the afore-mentioned relevant elites shaping the public sphere, they may or may not be part of organisations. However, even activists that work for or engage in civil society organisations do not necessarily always represent them in the context of their activism as they are not necessarily expected to or do not necessarily see it as their task to speak on behalf of their organisation but rather to speak their own minds. After all, an individual engaging in or working for an organisation does not necessarily agree with everything this organisation says or does. In particular, we might expect this to be the case when it comes to more professional forms of civil society engagement, most notably when paid NGO workers depend on their salaries. Moreover, activists might be double-hatted. Particularly voluntary civil society engagement of individual activists is often split up between different organisations and causes. Hence, civil society activists might represent different organisations in different contexts. Meanwhile, professionals NGO workers might work in one CSO and volunteer in one or several others. They might also change jobs switching from one organisation to another. Hence, if it is the personality of a civil society activists that matters, it is more useful to look at civil society through the prism of CSAs. This is, for example, the case when it comes to their communication with external actors.

Another dimension when it comes to the type of actors is their origin. Civil society associations may have foreign or domestic roots and they might be acting on more of a local or national as well as more of a regional or even global basis. The distinction is not always clear cut, as local branches of international organisations may very well be staffed with local activists or local activists may engage there. At the same time, there may be foreigners engaging in or working for local organisations. Depending on the legal situation in the country, they may have the same or a different status.

The second question is what type of activities associations and activists pursue. Broadly speaking, one might differentiate between advocacy and the provision of services (Yaziji and Doh 2009, 5), although it should be noted that many do both. Advocacy means that they are trying to influence decisions that are made in politics, business or other realms of public life. This might occur through lobbying, which means that they are directly approaching decision-makers with the goal of changing their decisions. It can also be done through more indirect means, for example by changing public opinion through campaigns or influence on the media in order to create pressure on decision-makers.

However, civil society organisations might also provide public services to citizens that indirectly contribute to democratic transitions by advancing socio-economic rights. This might be due to the state's inability or its unwillingness to provide these services. For example, the state might not provide family planning and sexual health services in rather conservative political and social contexts if they are too much of a taboo. However, it might also be due to the conviction that certain welfare services are better provided by non-state actors. Following that line of thinking, it is not the government's task to provide certain services to begin with. It may also be informed by ideas from "new public management," which suggest that autonomous or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations may be better suited to take over the provision of certain welfare services (M. Robinson and White 1998). This latter notion is particularly prominent in the field of development assistance, as donors tend to place more trust in NGOs than in governments due to the latter's perceived or actual problems with corruption and incompetence (M. Robinson 1997).

In my thesis, I look at both civil society engagement in the field of advocacy and service provision if it is linked to democracy promotion as defined above. While this is largely the case with advocacy, it gets a bit trickier when it comes to service provision. Some services might be directly linked to democracy promotion, for example when it comes to the provision of legal advice to or other forms of support for victims of oppression through the authorities. In contrast, the services that a sports club provides to its members are not deemed relevant.

A question arising in this context is on whose behalf civil society advocates or to whom they provide services (Yaziji and Doh 2009, 5). They can either do so for society at large or for a sub-section of it. Alternatively, they can do so on behalf of their membership if they have one. In the case of service provision, this is fairly unproblematic unless the

services provided are controversial within society. After all, no-one is obliged to make use of these services. However, similar to the issues discussed in the context of democracy promotion, legitimacy issues may also arise when it comes to advocacy. Advocating on behalf of a membership involves having a mandate, but the changes lobbied for may affect non-members as well. Meanwhile, civil society organisations' and activists' advocacy on behalf of society or a subset of society lacks a mandate as it is only based on the assumption of what society or a subset of it want. It may also be based on what civil society activists think society should want, or in other words, on what they deem as desirable and normatively "good." However, this may be based on premises or ethical ideas that are not shared by those on behalf of whom civil society activists claim to advocate. As in the context of democracy promotion, the ethical questions arising around the legitimacy of civil society's advocacy efforts will not be discussed here. However, it remains important to keep their existence in mind as they may have practical impacts, for example by creating tensions within civil society or between parts of civil society and the state or parts of the population.

Finally, the question arises which areas of engagement are to be included. One might argue that too broad a definition renders civil society a rather ambiguous analytical tool. Yet at the same time, too much specification as for what civil society is and what it is not is a challenging endeavour. For instance, one of the contentious questions is whether business organisations should be included. On the one hand, their agendas are likely to be influenced by the for-profit goals of the members they represent. At the same time, however, they might also engage for similar ends as NGOs if that is in their interest, for example when it comes to the fight against corruption and for better governance. Moreover, the exclusion of business-sponsored entities weakens the case for including trade unions and professional associations. While business organisations are representing monetary interests of their members, one of the key functions of trade unions is to represent the monetary interests of theirs. A similar argument might be made for professional associations. Hence, the question of whether or not to include them is controversial both among scholars and practitioners (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2009).

The exclusion of trade unions, professional associations and employers' organisations may make sense in certain settings. In the context of Tunisia, however, such narrow definitions would exclude up to three of the organisations that formed the before-mentioned National Dialogue Quartet: The Tunisian General Trade Union who initiated the National

Dialogue in the first place, the Tunisian Bar Association that was not only a member of the quartet but also one of the first organisations to lend its support to the uprising against the Ben Ali regime, as well as the Tunisian Employers' Organisation. Thus, it seems more appropriate to let local societal and political context rather than grand definitions guide what counts as civil society and what does not.

A final question is whether religious actors and associations should be considered as part of civil society. I am inclined to include them in a general understanding of civil society. However, as the EU's interactions with civil society mainly occur through engagement with secular actors and associations, this thesis is going to focus on those. This does not mean, however, that I am taking over the EU's definition of what constitutes civil society. In fact, the EU's own implicit and explicit definitions of civil society are among the practices that I am examining. As will be shown in chapters seven and eight, these practices are among those that have a transformative effect on the practices of secular civil society actors and associations. For the sake of simplicity, however, the prefix "secular" is not going to be repeated throughout the thesis. Hence, when I refer to civil society throughout the upcoming chapters, what I actually mean is "secular civil society."

As these various debates on what is part of it indicate, civil society is far from a monolithic political force. As Robinson and White (1998, 229) put it

Actual civil societies are complex associational universes encompassing a variety of organizational forms and institutional motivations. They contain repression as well as democracy, conflict as well as cooperation, vice as well as virtue; they can be motivated by sectional greed as well as social interest.

With civil society comprising a diverse range of different types of actors with different interests, views and approaches, we might assume that they also pursue diverse ways of promoting democracy. Following its argument that it is the entirety of ways of promoting democracy that constitutes what democracy promotion actually is in a given local context, the thesis seeks to unpack what civil society actually does. Meanwhile, the second main objective of this thesis is to understand how local civil society engagement is influenced by the EU and what it is doing in the Tunisian context. Hence, before discussing how the enacting of democracy promotion can best be conceptualized, the following paragraphs

will discuss the EU as an agent of democratic change and an interlocutor of Tunisian civil society.

3.1.2 EU democracy promotion

When it comes to the EU's role as an agent of democratic change, the literature broadly differentiates between conditionality and democracy assistance as its two main tools. According to that line of thinking, conditionality is often understood as negative democracy promotion, which means that it is a tool used to make states do what they would otherwise not do in order to avoid repercussions or to gain rewards. In other words, the EU uses a carrot and stick approach in its interaction with the target country's government, which would then be incentivised to comply with the EU's political preferences to get the carrot and avoid the stick. Such approaches separate conditionality from "democracy assistance," which is understood as the provision of "practical, technical, financial and other support in the form of democracy programmes and projects that are invariably grant-supported" (Burnell 2006). Such assistance is largely focusing on empowering certain local actors such as civil society to promote democracy themselves.

However, I do see both approaches guided by what is essentially the same logic. Even the EU's democracy assistance does not really come without conditions. In order to obtain it, the recipient actor will usually have to subscribe to a certain idea of democracy and its programme or project will have to be in line with that idea. And even if there are no such strings attached, this does not mean that the assistance is given without an underlying objective. This is even the case when it seems rather counterintuitive. Let's say the EU supports a non-governmental actor that is highly critical of its political objectives. In fact, this is something that happens regularly in the context of EU democracy promotion, as the EU often supports civil society activists that oppose its agenda in the field of trade liberalisation and migration. It also happens within the EU, where various of those organisations most fundamentally opposed to key EU projects such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) or the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) are recipients of substantial EU funding (Bauer 2016, 2).

While this may appear contradictory at first glance, it does serve a purpose. The EU's intention is to create or maintain a political ecosystem where governmental power is held in

check by non-governmental actors representing a wide range of interests that are considered legitimate. These include both corporate interests as well as civil society activists, which are also referred to as “the good lobby” (Alemanno 2017). In light of the fact that civil society has usually less financial resources at its disposal, the EU provides it with substantial and relatively unconditional financial support to ensure a slightly more level playing field. Hence, by supporting civil society in the target country, the EU seeks to establish a political system in which civil society plays a role as opposed to a possible alternative system where the role of civil society is marginal. Hence, even support for civil society that comes without any direct strings attached is still not entirely unconditional. It always promotes a certain type of democratic system that the EU deems to be the right one, as opposed to alternative democratic systems that might emerge without its involvement.

What precisely the intention of the EU is when promoting democracy abroad and how it goes about working towards fulfilling it depends on its own decision-making process. Indirectly, it is likely to be informed by other factors such as public debates or civil society activism. What it does not depend on – or at least not primarily depend on – is the decision-making process of the target country. The target country's preferences might very well be considered within the democracy promoter's decision-making process, but it is the EU's own process that ultimately counts. Hence, external democracy promotion is essentially about making choices for a third country that are not necessarily legitimized in a democratic way by the target country's own population. This can be due to the fact that the target country has not yet a system in place that allows for the expression of the peoples' democratic will. However, it can also be due to the fact that the external actor consciously overrides the will of the people – whether it has been expressed in a democratic way or not. This is notably happening in countries in which normative systems based on conservative, nationalist or religious views prevail that are contradicting the normative system of the democracy promoter. For example, the EU's engagement for the abolition of the death penalty or the advancement of family planning in the United States is likely to go against the will of a majority of US Americans. Similarly, by engaging for LGBT rights and gender equality in Russia or Pakistan, a democracy promoter is likely to go against the will of the majority of these countries' citizens.

Hence, EU democracy promotion always contains a certain element of arguably undemocratic paternalism towards the countries that are targeted. It is always based on the

assumption that the EU knows better what the right form of governance for the target country is than the country itself. This raises ethical questions relating to the legitimacy of external democracy promotion. Arguments defending the EU's approach might use what some consider the universality of human rights and democracy, whereas opponents might in turn dismiss such concepts as distinctively Western. It might be noted in that context that various democratic systems were created in a similarly undemocratic way as democratic institutions were often set-up by individuals or groups who enjoyed little or no democratic legitimacy. Examples include the founding fathers of the United States, a small elitist group who drafted the US constitution, or the US military forces, whose presence in Germany strongly influenced the creation of the German Basic Law (which also serves as a reminder that democracy can at times be successfully promoted or established through military force). While ethical questions arising around the legitimacy of democracy promotion will not be discussed here, it is still important to keep in mind that they exist as they might have practical implications. For example, from the EU's point of view, being perceived as illegitimate and paternalistic within the target country is a factor that might undermine its ability to pursue its agenda. Similarly, if the EU and its agenda is deemed paternalistic and illegitimate, negative attitudes towards the EU might rub off on those within civil society who are interacting with it.

Having established that democracy promotion involves measures that are taken intentionally, it needs to be determined what kind of measures these may be. Traditionally, external democracy promotion is seen as the attempt to build institutions that ensure democratic processes, human rights, rule of law and good governance. Nowadays, the scope goes beyond that and the definition also includes the support for the creation of a strong civil society that contributes to the establishment of democratic governance and defends it once it exists. However, for a democratic system to become sustainable, it also needs to be accepted by the population living under its auspices. People who experience a transition to democracy in their country are more likely to support its establishment and sustaining it if it succeeds at improving their living situation or if they see a perspective of it doing so (Geddes 1999; Helliwell 1994; Przeworski and Limongi 1997). A better living situation might manifest itself through better treatment by the state and its authorities, a better protection from threats to personal safety such as crime, terrorism or disasters and an improvement in the material living standards. At the same time, if the introduction of democracy leads to or coincides

with a deterioration in one or several of these fields for a substantially large part of the population, people might deem the new democratic system inferior to the previous authoritarian system or other less democratic systems (Londregan and Poole 1990, 1996). As will be discussed in chapter five, this has been a challenge in those states that have experienced a democratic opening in 2011, notably also including Tunisia. In fact, the restoration of pre-2011 practices or even systems of governance are often linked to their actual or perceived superiority when it comes to ensuring the safety and well-being of citizens. This happened most notably in Egypt where public discontent with the post-2011 developments helped and was instrumentalised by the Egyptian Armed Forces to restore the pre-2011 order (or, to be more precise, an even less free and more oppressive system of government). However, even though to a substantially lesser extent, it also applies to Tunisia where a range of pre-2011 practices have been reinstated and challenge the transition process while at the same time not being overly controversial within the Tunisian population.

Hence, my understanding of EU democracy promotion is a rather comprehensive one. It also incorporates measures and tools that are geared towards advancing socio-economic rights in target countries. This might happen in various ways, such as enabling the provision of welfare services, helping the workforce to develop skills or generally providing support for economic growth. It may also incorporate measures for the advancement of human security from mistreatment through the state or non-state actors. In other words, I understand democratic transitions as inextricably linked with at least a certain degree of socio-economic transition. The key idea is that if the new democratic system is capable of delivering a better quality of life for its citizens, it is more likely to survive. In its efforts to support the Tunisian democratic transition in such a comprehensive way, the EU has identified civil society as a key partner and thus regularly interacts with activists and associations. As indicated above, these interactions mainly revolve around EU funding for or consultations with civil society.

While the EU uses financial assistance to the Tunisian government as an incentive for reform, it also provides funding to civil society to engage for such reforms, to help implementing them or to empower other actors, such as ordinary citizen, to do so. Such financial assistance for civil society is aiming to ensure local ownership in the transition process. The idea is that programmes and activities should at least be anchored in and at best also be initiated by local actors rather than external ones. There are two ways of looking at this. Either it is seen as the normatively right thing to do, since change within a country should

be spearheaded by its own citizens rather than by external actors. However, opting for local ownership can also be seen as a rational decision on behalf of the EU. Arguably, it is a way to make activities more sustainable as they are not seen as externally imposed and as local actors may be better-suited for implementing them (Scheye and Peake 2005, 240).

Local ownership involves local actors initiating and executing programmes. This might mean that these actors do what they themselves deem necessary. However, it might also mean that they consciously or unconsciously initiate and execute programmes that the democracy promoter deems necessary. As a donor cited in a study by Helleiner (2000, 85) quipped, “ownership exists when recipients do what we want them to do but they do so voluntarily.” Moreover, as Kurki (2018, 430) questions, “how locally owned can a project be if it is to sit within particular technical, and implicitly liberal, management frames?” One might expect a certain degree of pluralism within civil society, with some actors’ agendas being in line with those of foreign donors. These civil society organisations might individually be doing what they deem right and necessary. However, at the same time, they might get funding by virtue of being who they are, what they stand for and what they want to do. Meanwhile, other civil society organisations with other preferences that are further away from the external actor’s agenda might be more likely to come away empty-handed. This is enhanced by what might be seen as a certain degree of opportunism within civil society. Working for a CSO that receives foreign funding is a very attractive career choice (Roy 2004). Organisations and their paid employees might be expected to have a self-preservation instinct, try to secure their CSO’s survival and thus to project their jobs (Meyer 1995). This might also include them shifting their agenda in a way that increases the likelihood of securing external funding.

Hence, individual CSOs receiving funding might still do their own thing, but their empowerment through external actors means that in the greater scheme of things civil society at large may increasingly start to follow these external actors’ agendas. Thus, rather than local ownership guaranteeing what the term suggests, external actors can follow their own agenda through it. External actors might thus end up empowering those local actors who are likely to follow the same path as the external actor desires or the ones who are most opportunistic. If the external actor does so intentionally, this might be considered what Kohler-Koch (2010) refers to as “astroturfing,” a pun on the AstroTurf brand of synthetic grass. This would suggest that external actors are essentially creating or strengthening actors

on the ground that look like and pretend to be grassroots movements or local civil society but are in line with what the external actor prefers to see emerging. However, one might argue that there are limits to such intentional efforts. To begin with, there is often a certain degree of donor pluralism. While the EU is the biggest donor in the context of Tunisia, civil society funding comes from a wide range of different institutions, governments or foundations. Moreover, as Bush points out (2015, 31 f) there is an asymmetry on information between the EU and civil society which the latter can use to do things it is not supposed to do. For example, associations might channel working time billed to the respective project towards other projects or refining the funded projects' scope and focus, with the donor having little control over such behaviour due to its lack of information. At the same time, in what Riddell and Robinson (1995) have called the "reverse agenda," local civil society activists might use their information advantage to manipulate what the donor wants them to do.

This relates to another aspect of civil society's interaction with the EU. As established in the previous section, civil society organisations are mainly engaged in two types of activities. They are providing services for groups of people or society at large and they are advocating for certain causes, on behalf of a group or society at large. If they advocate on behalf of society, it is usually under the questionable assumption that they know the interests of society. In cases in which it is quite clear that their objectives are not shared within large parts of society, they are advocating on behalf of what they feel society should believe in. Financially supporting such activities represents a first main area in which civil society might have interaction with representatives of the external actors with a democracy promotion agenda. A second type of interactions may occur in the context of such actors' efforts to include civil society activists in its own decision-making processes.

As discussed above, civil society and other interest groups try to use various means to influence decisions, such as lobbying decision-makers or influencing public opinion and thus putting pressure on decision-makers. This might occur in the domestic context, but activists may also try to lobby external actors. In line with what Keck and Sikkink (1998) have referred to as "boomerang pattern", civil society activists may raise complaints about their government's failure to comply with democracy and human rights standards with external actors such as international organisations, national governments and parliaments or public opinion abroad. Such appeals may then bounce back to their governments. As their

government may have an interest in maintaining the external actors' goodwill, civil society's channels abroad can thus become a factor that their government needs to consider.

However, communication channels with domestic civil society may also be sought for and created by external actors. This may happen informally, through various interactions occurring in settings in which representatives of both sides get together as well as links that occur otherwise, i.e. on a private level through friendships or just by reaching out to someone. However, it is also possible that external decision-makers themselves encourage civil society activists' inputs through different forms of structured interaction. As with the financial assistance provided to civil society, there are two ways of looking at the question why external actors consult with civil society. External actors like the EU might deem the inclusion of civil society as the right thing to do. The idea would then be that local voices should play a role when it comes to the external actor's process of making policy decisions that will affect the respective country. However, consultations might also be driven by rationalist considerations on behalf of the external actor, as they might deem civil society as a valuable source of information or as a channel through which relevant stakeholders in the target country may be influenced.

Civil society activists might be considered a valuable source of information on developments on the ground in the target country. While they do have an agenda, their inputs may provide a counterweight to other actors the EU interacts with that have an agenda as well. Particularly if a foreign actor mainly interacts with governmental actors and gets most of its information from them, non-governmental actors might be a valuable complement to complete the picture. Thus, such interaction may provide the EU with inputs that help to define areas in which action should be taken, to choose what kind of action may work and to design well-suited policies. It could also come in handy when policy is implemented in order to find out about problems and get insights on how to potentially deal with them as well as to get feedback on previous policies. This may be particularly relevant in the context of the EU's policy of financial assistance for civil society. Another option is that the external actor tries to use consultations to influence civil society. This is particularly likely to occur in the implementation phase of an individual policy, where such efforts may support putting them into practice on the ground. However, external actors may also try to use consultations to try to improve attitudes that civil society activists have towards them more

generally. Either way, their attempts might occur in different ways that range between the mere provision of information to civil society activists and their direct manipulation.

Critics of Western funding for civil society organisations in third countries argue that donors instrumentalise or try to instrumentalise civil society in target countries for their own objectives. When they see undesirable outcomes, they thus find their origins in the respective donors' agenda. While I share some of their concerns regarding such policies' impacts, my argument is that outcomes are not always primarily due to the donors' agenda, but also due to the way they are implemented. The EU's various tools and measures relating to the support for democratic transitions in third countries are largely conceived in its institutions in Brussels and implemented by its delegations in the respective third states. However, as in other institutions, political authority in the EU is not centred at the top but distributed within the hierarchy as both those who design policy and those "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010) who implement it on the ground are shaping outcomes. As discussed in the literature review, the vast body of existing literature on the EU's democracy promotion in its Southern neighbourhood tends to pay little attention to questions of implementation. While it looks at how the democracy promotion policies are made (i.e. Del Biondo, 2015), describes their substance (i.e. Orbie and Wetzel, 2015) and examines their impact or lack thereof (i.e. Pace, 2009), the day to day interaction between EU officials and their interlocutors in states on the receiving end of these policies tend to be treated as a black box. This thesis seeks to open this black box and to examine the nuts and bolts of how the EU's efforts of promoting democracy work in practice. As discussed above, it sees democracy promotion as constituted by the entirety of ways of in which key actors, and in the context of Tunisia notably the EU and civil society, go about promoting democracy. Just as it seeks to unpack what civil society activists do, it also aims at unpacking what those officials enacting the EU's agenda do. In doing so, it is particularly interested in what happens on the ground when both sides interact. In other words, the thesis seeks to study what happens when democracy promotion is actually "done".

3.2 "Doing" democracy promotion

Scholars in the field of public administration studies have been highlighting the importance of implementation of policy as well as those who are implementing it for decades (Lipsky

1980; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). However, their approach is based on the idea that those “street-level bureaucrats” are working under non-ideal circumstances, for example, because they have too limited time and resources. Hence, they are driven by a utilitarian logic and develop rational coping strategies to deal with the challenges they are facing in their daily work. In light of the complexities of the EU’s institutional setup, such concerns are likely to influence EU officials as well. However, as the next section points out, while their action is likely to be informed by practical concerns, we might also expect them to be both consciously and unconsciously influenced by their norms and values.

As March and Olson (1998) pointed out, individuals might be driven by either a “logic of consequences” or a “logic of appropriateness.” A social agent might either be understood as a “homo-economicus” whose actions are informed by the consequences they will entail or that he expects them to entail. Or he may adhere to the concept of a homo sociologicus whose actions are informed by the rules, norms and identities that have emerged in his social environment. Theories of social behaviour tend to prioritize one logic over the other when constructing explanatory frameworks. However, as the following section shows this dichotomy is problematic when studying those individuals involved in democracy promotion as they are likely to be strongly influenced by both rational and normative considerations. As will be discussed below, studying them through the lens of the practices they employ helps to overcome this dichotomy as well as other challenges of examining what happens when democracy promotion is enacted on the ground.

3.2.1 Added value of using a practice approach

Engagement for a transition to or a strengthening of democracy is an inherently normative endeavour. One might assume that contributing to the creation of what is assumed to be a better system is a key motivation for local civil society activists’ engagement. And while the vast array of literature conceptualizing the EU as a normative, ethical or distinctive actor (Duchêne 1972; Mannern 2002, 2008; Telo 2006) is rightly seen as overly Eurocentric and too much driven by the EU’s self-characterisation as a “force for good” (Fioramonti and Poletti 2008; Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2011), this does not mean that this constant self-characterisation is entirely without effect on the individuals working for the EU. Indeed, both the selection bias determining what kind of people want to work for the European

institutions in the first place as well as their further socialization within them (Rush and Giddings 2011; Scully 2005) might be expected to lead to a workforce that displays a certain degree of idealism. In fact, many EU officials involved in democracy promotion in the broadest sense have previously worked for or engaged in NGOs themselves.¹ They are also likely to be shaped by a socialisation that may differ depending on whether they are from the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), locally hired staff or seconded experts from member states, in which case it may also matter from which member states they are.

And yet, individuals involved in democracy promotion may also be motivated by rational considerations. If a local civil society activist expects a democratic order to enhance stability, security and socio-economic opportunities in his country, then one might very well conceive of him as “homo-economicus.” Moreover, as indicated above, the choice to work for both international and domestic professional NGOs engaging for democracy and human rights might be an attractive career path – both as an experience as well as in terms of remuneration and perks coming with it. Similarly, working for the EU or other democracy promoting actors is an attractive career choice that promises a good salary, a prestigious job title and interesting work, at times in places that combine good weather with low living expenses. Within their respective organisations, the work of activists, officials and diplomats may also be motivated by factors relating to their career advancement.

A way to avoid the dichotomy between the constructivist “logic of appropriateness” and the rationalist “logic of consequence” might be found in the “logic of practice.” Following that line of thinking, both logics are inadequate, or at the very least overly simplistic when it comes to explaining human action. Key to this thought is the notion that “neither instrumental rationality nor adherence to social norms is innate to the agent’s character” (Pouliot 2013). Instead, individuals’ actions are informed by a range of dispositions that they develop over time. These dispositions are affected by their experiences and knowledge, but also emerge in response to the objective conditions they encounter in their daily life. As Bueger (2016, 409) put it,

the primacy of practice implies that explanations for social and political order

¹Various interviews with EU officials based in Brussels and Tunis.

are not sought in the intersubjective coordination of (interest-driven or norm-following) individuals, but in shared understandings.

A second advantage of studying social phenomena through the lens of practice is that it avoids the dualism of structure and agency. Individuals involved in democracy promotion might be expected to be influenced by both. Officials enacting EU policy are constrained by their job description, hierarchy, institutional competences (or lack thereof), availability of financial resources and political guidance. And yet, as studies of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) have aptly shown, those officials who implement policy on the ground also play a role in shaping it. Even though civil society organisations are rather different in nature from institutions like the EU, activists face structural constraints as well. Professional NGO-workers are affected in particular, but ultimately those volunteering in civil society are not free from structural constraints either. Even activists operating in less formalised structures are ultimately constrained by state and society, particularly when they engage for issues that are either controversial within their respective society or touch upon the interests of powerful elites. For example, Tunisian activists engaging against corruption or police violence may be subjected to repression from the state or discredited by media whose owners see their own interests endangered. Meanwhile, activists engaging for LGBT rights are constrained by the widespread homophobia within Tunisian society and activists engaging for gender equality may face religious actors’ opposition. And yet, activists’ agency clearly matters. Even when activists officially act on behalf of an organisation, for example by attending a consultation or speaking to the media, it is ultimately up to them what they say or do. The increasing availability of social media channels to directly engage with audiences further strengthens the role of individuals.

Practice approaches help to overcome the structure-agency dualism in that they acknowledge that both sides have a point, but argue that “practices are socially *preformed* and individually *performed*” (Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger 2014, 168) and thus reproduce the social order by continuously mediating between structure and agency. In other words, the entirety of individual agents’ performances are creating, recreating and adapting structures which are, in turn, shaping individual agents’ performances. As Ornter (1984, 159) puts it,

The modern versions of practice theory appear unique in accepting [...] that

society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction.

In the context of democracy promotion, the reality of institutional, organisational and societal settings in which individual EU officials and activists are enacting policies, projects and advocacy represents a structure that constrains them. At the same time, it is the entirety of their continuous enacting of policies, projects and advocacy that is shaping this structure.

3.2.2 Practice as a way of thinking

The promise of overcoming the constraints of the dichotomies of consequentialism and appropriateness as well as of structure and agency has increasingly attracted scholars to choose “practice” as unit of analysis in the social sciences. However, the fact that many scholars refer to “theories of practice” (Røpke 2009; Schatzki 2011; Warde 2005) rather than “practice theory” already indicates a key characteristic of the approaches that put practices at the centre of social inquiry. They are rather diverse and there is no such thing as one unified practice theory. As Schatzki (2001, 10) points out, scholars from a variety of different disciplinary backgrounds have laid the groundwork for the study of practices, ranging from philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953), Dreyfus (1995) and Taylor (1985), to social theorists such as Bourdieu (1972, 1977), Giddens (1979, 1984), Foucault (1976, 1980) and Lyotard (1979, 1988), to theorists of science and technology studies such as Rouse (1996, 2007) and Pickering (1995). On that basis, the “practice turn in contemporary theory” (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001) has influenced numerous disciplines of social inquiry focusing on all kinds of different aspects of social life. Practice approaches have spread into fields such as organisational and management studies (Nicolini 2013; Tengblad 2012), public health studies (Delormier, Frohlich, and Potvin 2009; Frohlich, Corin, and Potvin 2001; Williams 2003), consumption (Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger 2014; Warde 2005, 2014) or the sociological dimension of sustainability (Shove 2010). Notably, it has also inspired scholars to study everyday social activities such as walking (Harries and Rettie 2016), cycling (Spotswood et al. 2015) or commuting (Cass and Faulconbridge 2016).

Over the past two decades, the conceptual apparatus developed in these various disciplines has increasingly found its way into the study of international relations and diplomacy. Building on the practice turn in social theory, Neumann (2002, 629) proposed to correct

what he saw as an “overly sharp linguistic turn” in IR that unduly excluded the analysis of non-textual elements by “bringing practice back in.” His call was followed by an increasing number of scholars (Adler-Nissen 2008; Adler 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011b; Bigo 2011; Gadinger and Bueger 2007; Katzenstein 2010; Koivisto and Dunne 2010; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Leander 2010; Mitzen 2006; Pouliot 2008, 2010; Pouliot and Cornut 2015; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2009) who laid the groundwork for an International Practice Theory (IPT) (Bueger 2014). Ringmar (2014, 2) cautioned that “there is nothing truly new about this research [since] practices of one kind or another are what scholars of international relations always have studied.” However, although Bueger and Gadinger (2014, 5) acknowledged that previous theoretical approaches had indeed identified practices as a relevant unit of analysis, they noted that

In these earlier proposals, ‘practice’ however did not have center stage. It was primarily a supporting concept and remained only weakly conceptualized. In practice theory this is quite different. Here the concept of practice is promoted from a supporting role to the lead.

Following the practice turn in IR, practice-based approaches also increasingly found their way into the realm of European studies. Scholars became increasingly interested in studying the everyday practices of European integration (Adler-Nissen 2016; Georgakakis and Weisbein 2010; McNamara 2015) and EU external action (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Bueger 2016; Lequesne 2015). As practice approaches were brought into these various disciplines and started to challenge existing conceptualizations within them, they also became ever more diverse. “Given this multiplicity of impulses, issues and oppositions, it is not surprising that there is no unified practice approach,” Schatzki (2001, 2) noted. As Adler and Pouliot (2011b, 4) point out “there is no such thing as the theory of practice but a variety of theories focused on practices.”

However, it is not just that there is no such thing as a unified practice theory, it is also the nature of practice “theories” that needs to be highlighted. Even though the identification of practices as the constitutive element of the social world helps to bridge academic dichotomies such as those of structure and agency or constructivism and rationalism, the theories of practice neither deliver nor promise grand, all-encompassing explanatory frameworks. Rather, as Schatzki (1996, 12) points out, they largely

present pluralistic and flexible pictures of the constitution of social life that generally oppose hypostatized unities, root order in local contexts, and/or successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities.

In other words, they accept the social world for what it is: A complex and messy system that involves so many dynamics that attempts to find grand theories identifying linear hierarchical relationships and causal links between a limited numbers of variables are at great risk of overpromising comprehension of causes and effects, and of providing simplistic or even misleading explanations. Rather than providing definite explanations of the world, theories of practice thus rather help to interpret and understand it. As Wagennar (2004) has pointed out, we often know rather little of the everyday activity of those who are doing the things we seek to study. Thus, a key objective of practice approaches is to take gathering such knowledge as a starting point of social inquiry (Freeman, Biggs, and Helms 2007, 130).

Hence, one might go even further than saying that there is no unified practice theory and question whether the various approaches to studying social action through the lens of practice actually do constitute theories at all. Alternatively, they can be conceived of as ways of thinking about the social world and a “modus operandi” of empirical research (Schmidt 2017). Reviewing the work of early generations of scholars that used practice as a unit of analysis, Ortner (1984, 127) argued “that a new key theoretical orientation is emerging, which may be labelled ‘practice’ [that] is neither a theory nor a method in itself, but rather [...] a symbol, in the name of which a variety of methods are being developed.” While a range of scholars use the term “practice theory,” some follow “an understanding of practice theory which mainly appreciates it as an empirical project of describing and deciphering practices” (Bueger 2016) – a notion that this thesis subscribes to as well. Rather than using the term “practice theory”, it will thus refer to “practice approaches” (Ortner 1984), “practice-based studies” (Gherardi and Strati 2012) or “praxiography” (Bueger 2014) as ways to look at and study the social world “through the practice lens” (Corradi and Gherardi 2010).

3.2.3 Conceptualizing practices

Looking at democracy promotion through the practice lens tells us that we need to identify and understand the practices it involves. But while the existing literature has quite forcefully

made the point that practices matter, it does not agree on what practices actually are. Hence, the following sections will demarcate and conceptualise what is meant by “practices” in the context of this thesis.

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between two notions of practice that convey fundamentally different meanings. While the English and the French language (“pratique”) use the same term for both notions, the German languages makes a helpful distinction by using the terms “Praxis” and “Praktik” (Reckwitz 2002, 249). Practice in the sense of Praxis refers to human beings doing something as opposed merely thinking or talking about it. Notably, it is the proverbial opposite of “theory” that people refer to when they question or ridicule ideas that they deem unfit for application “in the real world.” However, while Praxis is the meaning most often ascribed to the term practice in colloquial speech, it is Praktik that we refer to when using it in the context of theories of practice. An example of a context in which practice as Praktik occurs in common language is when we refer to “questionable” or “best practices”. A “questionable practice” is a way of doing things that either breaks norms, rules and regulations or only complies with the letter of a law or a principle but not with its spirit and is thus deemed as improper. Meanwhile, “best practices” are ways of doing things that are considered as superior to others. For example, in the 2018 General Election Lebanese authorities adopted the internationally widely accepted “best practice” of providing voters with ballot papers that included the names of all lists and their members.² In previous elections, voters had been asked to write the name of their preferred candidate on a blank sheet of paper or to bring “prepared ballots,”³ a practice that undermines confidentiality, allowed for fraudulent counting and might thus be seen as a “questionable practice.”

These two examples give a first rough idea of what practice means in the context of practice approaches. First of all, they are more than mere action. Rather, they are routines of action performed by multiple practitioners who are using and engaging with material artefacts and drawing upon background knowledge. Crucially, practices are temporally and spatially dispersed, and it is constant repetition and reproduction that keeps them in existence but potentially also allows for gradual change over time. Similar considerations prompt

²An-Nahar. *Lebanon's draft new election law explained*, 3.6.2017, <http://bit.ly/2YELPmb> (accessed on 18.6.2019).

³International Foundation for Electoral Systems. *Lebanon's 2009 Parliamentary Elections: The Lebanese Electoral System*, Arlington, 2.3.2009, <http://bit.ly/2ZsKhNt> (accessed on 21.7.2019).

Schatzki (2001) to offer a minimalist definition that conceptualises practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding”. And to account for their temporal and spatial dispersal, he provides a distinction between two notions of practice: Practices as entities and practices as performances. The former refers to “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996). In other words, the entities exist across time and space independent of whether or not they are currently enacted. Meanwhile, practice as performance refers to their specific enactment through which they are produced and reproduced and either remain relatively constant or gradually change.

As indicated above, scholars using practices as unit of analysis differ greatly when it comes to their precise definitions of what practices actually are. Drawing upon different thinkers but broadly remaining in line with Schatzki's definition, the following paragraphs further unpack the conceptual elements, many of which are interlinked, that define what I mean by practices in the context of this thesis.

To begin with, we must differentiate practice from action and behaviour, concepts that are often used interchangeably in everyday language but are not the same. As Adler and Pouliot (2011b, 5) point out, we can “conceive of these notions as a gradation: actions are a specific type of behaviour, and practices are a particular kind of action.” Behaviours are merely deeds that are performed, whereas action is meaningful behaviour, that is deeds that serve a purpose on the subjective and intersubjective level. For example, running aimlessly through the streets is behaviour whereas going for a run to improve ones' fitness is action. Meanwhile, practices are more than just action. Whereas action is specific and located in time and space, practices are patterned classes of action that are not limited to one specific enactment (Adler and Pouliot 2011b, 5). Hence, the most simple definition of practices conceives of them as “ways of doing things” (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016, 402) as opposed to just “doing things” or “ways of doing and thinking” (Gross 2009, 359) as opposed to mere “doing and thinking,” with thinking essentially being a sub-category of doing. In other words, action is a constitutive element of practice, but it is their regularly repeated performance through which practices exist. As Nicolini (2017, 21) put it, practices have a history and

to say that saying and doing must have a history to become a practice means

that practices have inherently a *duree*, that is, they last in time by virtue of being re-performed. Put differently, practices are durable regimes of performance.

If a practice ceases to be performed, it also ceases to exist. However, as will be discussed below, their recurring performance does not mean that practices remain constant. Meanwhile, another aspect of practice is that they are embodied performances. Writing an email or a grant application and holding a consultation or a negotiation are performances of the human body. As Reckwitz (2002, 251) puts it, “a practice can be understood as the regular, skilful ‘performance’ of (human) bodies.” What that essentially means is that they are enacted by someone, that there are practitioners who do things. However, it is not just bodies that internalise practices, but also material objects and artefacts. And while practices are routinized bodily performances, they are also sets of mental activities. In fact, “practices are merely the bodily manifestations of what has already happened in the brain” (Hopf 2010, 546). As Adler and Pouliot (2011b) specify, practices are “competent performances,” which involves that they embody, enact and reify both explicit and implicit background knowledge. Explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be codified into documents, manuals or procedures. Meanwhile implicit or “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1966) is knowledge that cannot be codified and thus not transferred as easily, such as language skills, leadership or emotional intelligence.

By saying that practices are patterned and spatially and temporarily dispersed, we implicitly say that they are performed by and thus that their existence relies upon a constituency of multiple practitioners. As Nicolini (2017, 21f) puts it

Saying that practices have a social constituency means that practices are always such for a social group that legitimates them and performs them on a regular basis so that practice is kept in existence. The corollary of this is that when a practice is not performed and the people who used to perform it have all gone, the practice disappears and only traces survive.

Practices are thus inherently linked to their constituencies or “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). They do not exist without a community of practice enacting them, but they are also the source of this community’s existence. Within such a constituency, its practices are “organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki

2001, 11). It is thus not just practitioners' individual knowledge that matters, but rather means that the practitioners develop a common practical consciousness on how things are done. Based on this consciousness, they consciously and subconsciously create habits, routines, traditions and knowledge that enable and cause the reproduction of their ways of doing things.

One might argue that those practitioners involved in the sector of democracy promotion are a community of practice that develop shared practical understandings. However, it is equally true to state that there is a plethora of communities of practice within that sector, many of whom have fuzzy boundaries and overlap with each other. One might argue that civil society is a community of practice, but in light of differences between civil society environments between countries as well as differing approaches to activism even within one country's civil society, there are different communities of practice existing within civil society.

Their potential overlaps relate to another characteristic of practices: They are constantly reproducing themselves, but as Warde (2005, 141) points out they "also contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment." Hence, practices are "dynamic and continuously rearranging" (Bueger 2014, 391) themselves, and thus gradually changing over time. Such change may originate from within their constituencies but may also occur in reaction to other practices. Warde (2014, 295) has argued that

most people much of the time do not have control over the circumstances in which they find themselves, nor do they consider as sensible alternative courses of action. Actually, change in behaviour is likely to occur as often as a result of endogenous change in social circumstances; the situations in which people find themselves are neither constant nor recurrent.

This endogenous change of the situations practitioners find themselves in may very well relate to other practices and those enacting them. Different practices are interconnected and thus constantly interact with and react to one another. For example, the practice of civil society engagement for human rights interacts with the practice of police repression. Police practices may change in reaction to the human rights activists' practices, but being directly faced with repressive practices these activists' practices may change as well.

To sum up, practices are constituencies' embodied, competent and constantly reproducing performances that weave together discursive and material aspects of the social world based on shared understandings. Hence the three aspects of democracy promotion that are studied in this thesis, that is civil society engagement, EU consultations with civil society as well as EU funding for civil society, can be conceived of as practices from the broader field of democracy promotion. They are competent performances, enacted by communities of practitioners with substantial expertise and repeated on a regular basis. The ways in which civil society provides services and engages in advocacy and the ways the EU and Tunisian civil society interact in consultation meetings or when EU funding is distributed do not stay constant, but change tends to occur either gradually over time or in reaction to other practices. Both consultations and funding mechanisms draw upon explicit knowledge such as on procedures or databases used to notify potential participants or applicants. Even more crucial is both sides' implicit knowledge such as the ability to understand, communicate with and indeed get along with their respective interlocutors. As will be discussed in the following section, each of these global practices are composed of various other practices. Moreover, these practices constantly react to each other and, in doing so, gradually change as well.

3.3 Practices at the nexus of Tunisian civil society and the EU

Schatzki makes a distinction between two categories of practices that he labels integrative and dispersed. When talking about practices, he generally refers to the integrative type. He distinguishes these "more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life" (1996, 98) from those that "are considerably simpler than their integrative kin" and only "center of around a single type of action" (2010, 88). He names these latter ones dispersed as they exist in all kinds of different sectors of social life and pertain to various integrative practices while retaining more or less the same shape in these sectors and as part of these integrative practices. For example, the practice of writing may be conceived of as a dispersive practice whereas writing emails is an integrative practice of whom writing is just one element.

This thesis is only interested in integrative practices and they are what is meant when the term practice is used. However, Schatzki's distinction between the two types does serve

as a reminder that practices can be composed of other practices. And while a dispersed practice may pertain to integrative practices, integrative practices may also be part of other integrative practices. Indeed, the very same integrative practice may be part of different other integrative practices as well. For example, the drafting of emails is likely to occur as part of numerous other practices. In other words, practices exist in different levels of aggregation and thus, as Adler and Pouliot (2011b, 8) point out, can and should be appraised through these different levels of aggregation. As has been indicated above and will be further elaborated below, this thesis focuses on the nexus of the EU and civil society in Tunisia and in that context, on civil society engagement, EU funding for civil society and consultations between Tunisian civil society and the EU as key field of activity. As will be shown in the next sections, these three fields of activity can be conceived of and examined as aggregated practices of democracy promotion that, in turn, consist of various other practices in their own right.

3.3.1 Civil society engagement in Tunisia

As discussed above, the competing definitions of civil society and civil society engagement are either too narrow to make sense in different local contexts or too broad to be of analytical value. Looking at it from a practice point of view allows us to conceive of civil society engagement as what activists make of it. In that sense, it cannot and does not have to be clearly demarcated. Rather, it is by definition constituted by what the various communities of activists with their different backgrounds and perspectives make of it.

The practice of civil society engagement in Tunisia is constituted by groups of activists who have, to some extent, a shared understanding that revolves around the importance of non-state engagement for the transition to and the maintenance of a sustainable democratic system. However, among those who have this shared understanding, there may be various other, more detailed and differing notions of what civil society engagement is as well as what civil society activists should engage for and how. Different activists may draw upon different experiences, have different political or religious orientations and belong to different generations or social classes. The variety of their backgrounds and dispositions may be expected to lead to a variety of practices. University professors from Tunis may do things differently than trade unionists working in the phosphate mines of Gafsa. A young Tunisian digital

native who studied in France may employ different repertoires of practices than someone who grew up before the information age and never left Tunisia. Differences may also relate to the extent to which and way in which activists organise themselves. Notably, professional NGOs and associations based on membership and volunteering might be expected to employ different sets of practices.

Depending on what they advocate for or against, which type of services they provide and in which political environment they operate, activists may also be affected by different structural factors. These factors include legislation and widely spread norms and values but also the practices of those other actors they are interacting with, such as state authorities or religious actors. For example, in a relatively secular police state such as Tunisia under Ben Ali, a human rights activist who defends Islamist victims of police violence will resort to different practices than a human rights activist engaging for gender equality. Meanwhile, an actual or perceived increase in influence of conservative Islamist parties will influence the practices of those advocating progressive social norms or providing services linked to sexual health or family planning. More generally, one might expect that civil society practices react and adapt to changing governmental and societal practices in the context of political or social transitions.

We might also expect different civil society activists' and associations' practices to react to each other. This might occur, for example, in the context of direct interaction between different groups of practitioners with different shared understandings who work in the same field and either cooperate or compete with each other. However, it may also occur indirectly, for example, when mere observation of others' practices inspires changes to own practices. Moreover, past ways of doings may inform current ways of thinking. For example, how activists' practices adapted to governmental oppression before the Tunisian transition might be expected to influence their post-2011 standing among other activists.

Finally, civil society practices may interact with and react to foreign actors' practices. As will be shown in the next two sections, officials in the EU delegation in Tunisia enact two aggregated practices that are of particular relevance to Tunisian civil society. The EU practices of financial assistance for and consultations with Tunisian civil society are by definition interacting with practices occurring in the context of civil society engagement and might be expected to influence them. The following two sections discuss why and how this may occur

as well as why it makes sense to study them and the reactions they provoke in Tunisian civil society.

3.3.2 EU financial assistance for Tunisian civil society

While EU financial assistance for Tunisian civil society is a practice of interaction between two constituencies, it is one that puts EU officials in the driving seat and Tunisian civil society in a rather passive role. We might expect the practices of those EU officials enacting it to be influenced by both structural aspects of the organisation they work for as well as their own individual agency. Structural aspects may, for example, relate to the “accountability dilemmas” (De Renzio 2016) of donors that have to prioritize internal, domestic concerns over those of the countries towards whom their action is directed. Governments of democracy promoting states are accountable to their voters and taxpayers, and entities that receive funding from states are accountable to them and subject to their scrutiny. While this affects the above-mentioned objectives through political decision-making, it also affects practices. Indeed, they have led to the definition of widely accepted “best practices” in development assistance, which include “low overheads” and “transparency” (Easterly and Pfütze 2008). In a nutshell, there is a certain pressure not to waste taxpayers’ money and to be able to in great detail account for where it went and what it was used for, which in turn, also helps to make sure it is not wasted. This incentivizes donors to employ practices that ensure that these objectives are met or more likely to be met. Meanwhile the agency of those officials implementing policy matters as well. Individuals working in a political context in which these two best practices have to be held up have an incentive to adapt their practices accordingly. Moreover, they are likely to be affected by their own dispositions, competences and experiences.

These structural and individual factors contribute to a set of practices, that also influence each other. This may happen on various levels linked to the different aspects and stages of financial assistance to civil society. A first level relates to the type of funding that is awarded. Financial assistance can be directed at helping civil society organisations in maintaining their day-to-day operations, which involves covering the running cost of whatever activity they are engaging in. However, it can also be project-based which means that organisations have to develop work packages, deliverables as well as various milestones to be conducted in a

defined period and apply to donors in order to procure the funding to get these activities up and running. With transparency as a key best practice held up by the EU, one might expect that it has more of an incentive to go for project-based funding, as this makes it easier to trace the work that is being done. Moreover, the defined time-frame of projects allow for impact assessment upon their completion.

The second level relates to the amount of funding that is being awarded to individual civil society organisations. On the democracy promoters' side, the expenses for staff in charge of administration are the key driver of the overall overhead costs. With low overhead costs being a major target for the EU, it has an incentive to limit the amount of staff working on the distribution of financial assistance. However, the less staff are in charge of the processes through which the distribution financial assistance is implemented, the less working hours per euro awarded are available. This creates a practical need to award larger sums of funding to a smaller number of organisations. In light of the EU's transparency objectives, the practice of awarding relatively large sums of money then in turn creates a need to put in place a range of practices that ensure that selected organisation are capable of handling them.

This starts with the EU's definition of the criteria that determine which organisations are formally eligible for financial assistance. These formal criteria may be enhanced by informal criteria of those individual EU officials who implement the application procedure. The more substantial the funding is, the more likely it is for them to put procedures in place that ensure the beneficiary organisation is able and trustworthy enough to implement the corresponding projects. Hence, they might look for organisations with an established track record of implementing projects of a similar scale and thus proven that they have skills and experience in advanced project management. Moreover, they are likely to look for more structured associations than grassroots movements and to prefer professionals over volunteers.

A further set of practice revolves around the distribution of information to potential applicants, both with regards to the existence of funding programmes as well as procedural issues on how to obtain grants. The first question is how information is distributed and who is more likely or less likely to receive it as a result of the channels that are chosen. For example, information may be distributed via email or post. In that case, the question arises who is included in the donor's mail and email distribution list and how organisations get onto

it. It may also be distributed via social media, which raises the question of whether some subsets of civil society are more likely to obtain information in that way than others. If the EU organises information sessions about its funding programmes during which potential applicants may pose questions, the question is both who is invited and who is able to attend. This in turn relates to when and where such meetings take place. Finally, which language and what level of technical jargon is used in such meetings matters.

The language question is also relevant when it comes to the actual application procedure as languages other than the native tongue spoken in the target country may exclude those who are not proficient in them. Similarly, the use of technical legal jargon in the application form may exclude those lacking the respective formation. Overall, a key aspect of the application procedure is its scope, which is, in turn, influenced by the amount of funding awarded. We might expect that higher amounts go hand in hand with more extensive application procedures as applicants will have to demonstrate their eligibility and their ability to manage large projects and budgets. They will also have to develop and present sophisticated and in-depth project plan.

A final set of practices relates to the actual execution of projects. In the case of more substantial funding, the EU is likely to expect recipients to comply with vigorous reporting standards. They will have to provide regular and detailed reporting on the work that is being done and account in great detail for how the budget was used, including the provision for receipts for all expenses. This requires a further set of skills as well of an understanding and acknowledgement that such potentially quite burdensome administrative procedures are necessary.

As indicated above, different practices respond and react to one another. For example, the practice of distributing larger amounts of financial assistance may influence the eligibility criteria or the complexity of the application procedure and the reporting in the context of implementing the projects. More importantly, however, the practices of civil society may change in reaction to EU practices. For example, professionally organised CSOs are more likely to obtain EU grants, which not only empowers them but also incentivises less professionalised associations to change their practices and thus, over time, changes the structure of civil society.

3.3.3 Consultations between Tunisian civil society and the EU

As in the case of financial assistance, we might expect practices occurring in the context of consultations between Tunisian civil society and the EU to be influenced by both structural issues as well as the agency of the individuals enacting them. However, with consultations essentially being an act of communication between individuals, we might expect individual agency to be more relevant here. Moreover, even though formal consultations are initiated and set up by EU officials and thus put Tunisian civil society in a passive role, it is a slightly more equal form of interaction. There are two key sets of practices that matter in this regard, the first one relating to EU officials' practices that determine what kind of civil society activists are more likely to participate in consultations and the second one linked to their execution.

The question of who participates to some extent echoes factors that have already been discussed in the section on practices determining who finds out about financial assistance for civil society. First of all, in order to participate in a consultation, civil society activists (CSAs) need to be invited. The EU might follow a practice of publishing an open call for CSAs to register for a consultation, in which case any CSA could attend in theory. In practice, however, attendance will still be influenced by other practices. To begin with, it would depend on where and how such open calls are published. This may include publishing them on the website, and then raising attention via social media. Potential participants may also be invited through emails, personal calls or letters. Different channels of communication may be more or less likely to reach different subsets of civil society. For example, social media may reach the older generation of activists less effectively than young digital natives. If different channels are used, some subsets of civil society might get them earlier than others. If there is only limited space and participation is capped after a certain number of registrations, then those who learn about it later may be less likely to participate. In case of personal invitations, the question is who is on the respective distribution lists and how to get on them.

The question who is directly targeted is even more relevant in closed consultations. In such cases, not being on the EU delegation's distribution list directly involves exclusion. Officials organising the consultation may follow different practices of choosing who to include. They may consult public lists or internal databases of relevant individuals if they exist.

Otherwise, they may create their own ones. In that case, they may do so in more or less structured ways. They may conduct systematic research to make sure every relevant civil society activist is included and then randomly selecting a number of them or finding a way to select the most relevant ones for the respective subject. They may also choose less structured ways of doing so, for example by drawing upon people that have been included in previous events or who work for organisations that they already interacted with, for example in the context of the provision of financial assistance. They may also include those having a public profile or a personal connection to relevant EU officials in private capacity, as diplomatic and civil society elite circles may sometimes overlap. On top of that, they might also use a snowballing technique where people known to them are asked for further names.

Further practices relate to the location and the timing. The choice of the location is likely to influence who can take part as those with a longer commute are less likely to be able to come. This also depends on activists' financial means, the costs for transportation and whether the EU delegation covers expenses. It also matters on what part of the day meetings are scheduled, and whether they coincide with working hours. If it does, then those activists with day jobs that are not linked to their engagement may not be able to attend. If meetings are scheduled outside working hours, this may decrease the incentive of professional activists to attend.

Moreover, attending a consultation is not the same as participating. Even in a meeting, there are still various ways in which activists may be excluded from being involved. Should they feel that way, they may stay away next time. A first thing that is important in this context is what kind of language is used. First of all, this relates to which language is used. Choosing or not choosing the local language, or which one in case there are several, may make a difference and determine who can participate and how well. The choice of an international lingua franca such as English or French may exclude those not speaking it. In that case, the availability or non-availability of interpretation may make a difference.

This matters not just on a practical but also on a symbolic level. Using the democracy promoter's language may be perceived as a form of arrogance as it expects the recipient to adapt. This may be even stronger if language is a contentious issue in the target country, for example, due to a history of colonialization that led to a European language having become dominant. In that case, there may be a desire in society or even an actual policy of replacing that European language by the local ones in education, media and public life. If

the local population speaks several languages, there may also be efforts to erase those spoken by minorities at the cost of the dominant ones. Hence, the decision which language is used may carry historical and social baggage. Having said that, the use of a foreign language may also be entirely uncontroversial or even preferable for the recipients.

A second aspect linked to language relates to its different levels of complexity with regards to terminology and structure. Even when activists are proficient in the language, they may still not be proficient in the jargon or technical terms that are used. This also plays on the practical and the symbolical level. Complicated language may prevent meetings from achieving what they aim to achieve if they undermine communication. However, attendees may also perceive such language as deliberately exclusive or arrogant.

A second set of practices relates to the execution of the consultations. This starts with actions that occur before the actual meeting. For example, the question arises whether those who have agreed to attend may suggest agenda items before or during the meeting rather than having to accept a pre-set agenda. The seating arrangement may matter as well. For example, a classroom-style arrangement with those representing the democracy promoter sitting or standing higher than the attendees or an oppositional negotiation-style arrangement may come across differently than a roundtable. During the consultation, the way the discussion is conducted and the comportment of individual EU officials may make a difference. Notably, it is likely to matter whether they come across as patronising and paternalistic or whether they appear willing to listen and manage to create an atmosphere of discussing on eye-level.

Practices occurring in the context of consultations with civil society may have an effect on both the EU's relations with civil society as well as on civil society more generally. Just like when it comes to financial assistance, the EU may include some and excludes others through the way it implements consultations. This means that some civil society activists end up having more access to and influence on key decision-makers from abroad than others. Through the boomerang effect, this may also grant them more influence on national politics. By and large, the EU's practices thus empower some CSAs at the cost of others. Moreover, the fact that the EU's inclusion of some and exclusion of others creates insiders and outsiders in the target country's civil society may lead to divisions within it or deepen existing ones. For example, those included may be seen and derided as pandering or selling out to the EU by those who are not.

To the extent that consultations are a source of information, the EU's practices also influence whose perspectives it gets. For example, the EU may end up receiving its information from a subset of civil society that says what it feels the democracy promoter wants to hear, or only gives one side of the story. The EU might thus even find itself in a feedback loop where the same civil society that it funds and that therefore may have an incentive to talk after its mouth is supposed to give critical feedback.

3.4 Conclusions

This chapter has provided the main conceptual tools to identify, map and examine the practices appearing at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion. After defining and demarcating the EU and civil society as democracy promoters, it has shown how we can conceive of democracy promotion as the entirety of practices of those actors moving in its field and thus shows why need to study what these actors are doing in order to understand what democracy promotion actually is in the given context of the Tunisian transition. On that basis, it has laid out why we might expect EU practices to contribute to producing and reproducing certain practices within Tunisian civil society and thus also certain types of civil society activists and organisations. In doing so, it shows why it might be expected that the EU has both a transformative effect on the nature of civil society in Tunisia and contributes to further widening existing divisions within it.

The chapter that follows considers the main methodological issues that relate to the approach taken in the thesis. Chapter five then provides contextual information on EU-Tunisia relations, with chapters six, seven and eight providing the empirical analysis of the practices of democracy promotion outlined above.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The key finding of this thesis is that practices enacted in the context of democracy promotion matter. It is not just what is done, but also how it is done that influences outcomes. As discussed in the previous chapter, the thesis suggests that practices of interaction between Tunisian civil society and the EU can contribute to changing the structure of Tunisian civil society. To study this, I had to identify and map the practices that occur at the nexus between the two. This chapter will discuss how I gathered and analysed the corresponding data. I will start with some considerations on different methodological approaches and the basic premises underpinning them. On that basis, I argue that my puzzle is best studied through an approach that draws upon qualitative data and interpretivist analysis. The chapter will then discuss the concrete methods I have used to collect and examine my data. Finally, it reflects on how considerations about ethics and security influenced my research process.

4.1 Methodological approach

What kind of data should be used in the social sciences as well as which methods should be chosen to gather and examine it divides the academic community. The positivist camp seeks to study the social world in ways similar to how the hard sciences study natural phenomena. They seek to find underlying regularities and causal relationships in what is usually quantitative data. On that basis, they aim to develop and prove universally valid law-like generalisations that explain and predict social phenomena. In contrast, interpretivists maintain that there is a fundamental difference between the natural and the social world. Hence,

they argue that social phenomena cannot be explained and predicted through law-like generalisations and deem developing and testing hypotheses about causal relationships between variables as too simplistic. Instead, they generate knowledge by understanding and interpreting the social world, usually drawing upon qualitative data. This does not mean that the knowledge they generate cannot help to explain and predict social phenomena at all. However, the notion that such explanations or predictions could be strong and universal is rejected.

In what has been referred to as the “paradigm wars” (Gage 2008), purists on both sides have dismissed the respective other approach as flawed. Positivist researchers have been criticised for an alleged tendency “to bend, re-shape, and distort the empirical social world to fit the model they use to investigate it” (Filstead 1970, 3). Meanwhile, interpretivism and qualitative research have been dismissed for lacking objectivity and generalizability. A less extreme view referred to as paradigm détente maintains that while both approaches are incompatible, the validity or superiority of either cannot be proven or disproven. Following this view, social scientists can and should choose the methods that they deem most appropriate for their respective research projects. Going even further, the notion of paradigm relativism sees the range of different methods merely as a toolbox from which those tools best suited to for any given research puzzle should be chosen or combined in the most appropriate way (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). Following this latter notion, I avoided getting embroiled in ontological and epistemological battles and rather chose my approach and my methods based on pragmatic considerations.

The first issue to be addressed is whether or not the concepts studied can be operationalized in a quantifiable way and whether doing so makes sense in the context of the research question. As constantly rearranging and reproducing patterns and due to their different levels of aggregation, practices are rather difficult to quantify. While they are reacting to each other, it is not necessarily the number of times a particular practice is experienced that is decisive for what constitutes the reaction. Similarly, the structure of civil society and its development cannot be quantified in ways that provide added value. Changing numbers of associations or employees in the non-profit sector are helpful background information but tell us very little of substance about the state of civil society. Instead, understanding it requires an in-depth description of the subtleties and complexities that shape the practices of associational life. Moreover, my research is ultimately rather explorative and inductive in na-

ture. And as Aberbach, Chesney and Rockman (1975, 4) point out, “the more exploratory one’s concerns and the less precisely stated one’s expectations, the greater the need to choose less constraining interview instruments in order to increase the ability to capture the richness, subtlety, and the nuance of the responses.”

While the use of qualitative data usually entails an interpretivist approach, this link is not a given. However, guided by my research puzzle, an interpretivist epistemology seems most appropriate. Social interaction cannot always be reduced to variables linked to each other in a probabilistic relationship. In line with Weber’s social action theory, I deem an empathetic understanding of the practices at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society as key to comprehend how they relate to each other and jointly constitute the field of democracy promotion. In order to analyse the EU’s practices and their influence on Tunisian civil society, I follow an interpretivist approach that is grounded in the idea of “thick description” (Geertz 1973). Following Denzin (1989), I go beyond the mere description of the EU’s practices and how they are received by Tunisian civil society. Rather, I consider and include relevant context and details on the individuals involved on both sides as well as their social relations, interactions, biographical background and the EU’s historical relations with Tunisian civil society. Moreover, as suggested by Ponterotto (2006), I present the reader with an adequate voice of the subjects of my study, that is EU officials and more importantly Tunisian civil society activists. This involves the inclusion of quotes and excerpts of dialogue as well as, where relevant, further background information on the setting and context in which certain interviews or observations took place.

Having established that I follow an interpretivist methodology drawing upon qualitative data, the following section will now explain the choice of methods I used to gather this data.

4.2 Data collection methods

“Fieldwork continues to be the most productive and exciting part of what we do,” democratisation scholar Phillippe C. Schmitter said in an interview with his colleague Gerardo Munck in 2002 (Schmitter and Munck 2007, 327). Being very much in agreement on both counts, my research is strongly informed by qualitative, empirical insights gathered during extensive fieldwork. With the EU being a key object of my studies, I seized upon the opportunity of being based in Brussels to regularly seek direct access to people and information relevant

for my research. Having said that, the core of my data was gathered in Tunisia. I was based in downtown Tunis from late March to early October 2015. Moreover, I spent a further two-week trip in the context of and funded through policy work that I conducted for the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in October 2018. In the context of that work, I also attended two three-day workshops with various Tunisian civil society activists in Berlin in August 2019 and April 2019 that enabled me to discuss my findings and conduct several further interviews. I conducted a final one-week research trip to Tunis in April 2019.

As Pouliot (2013, 48) points out, “practices are the raw data of social science, and as such they form the empirical entry point to empirical analysis.” Hence, the researcher’s challenge is to get access to that raw data. The ideal method would be to directly observe the relevant actors applying their practices. Making use of participant observation, the practices would then be “seen” in action. However, unless the researcher is constantly embedded in the organisation or social group that employs the practices to be analysed, their identification will require the use of proxies. While practices cannot always be “seen,” they might still be “talked about” by those implementing or experiencing them. Moreover, they might be “read.” That means that the researcher can draw upon documents that inform about practices.

My analysis draws on all three of these ways of obtaining relevant data. To begin with, I conducted interviews in Tunisia, Brussels and Berlin. Moreover, I corresponded with activists and officials via email and Facebook. Furthermore, I observed EU consultations with Tunisian civil society at the EU delegation. I also observed conferences that brought together Tunisian civil society and the diplomatic community and frequented cafes and bars that were known to be informal meeting points for them. Finally, I drew upon a range of relevant documents, such as correspondence between representatives of the EU and Tunisian civil society or forms for funding applications.

In doing so, I gathered a substantial amount of textual data in the form of documents, transcripts and fieldwork notes. I chose the qualitative software package NVivo to store, organize and examine this data. On the most basic level, I used NVivo for transcribing my interviews and maintaining an overview of my data. Moreover, I used it to inductively categorize units of text from my various sources by coding them to what NVivo refers to as “nodes.” For example, if a young Tunisian activist elaborated on cooperation with older

activists and associations, I would code this to the parent node “Tunisian civil society” and the first-level child node “Generational issues.” When EU officials or activists described an actual consultation meeting between EU representatives and Tunisian activists, I would code this to the parent node “Consultations” and the child node “Execution.”

This initial mapping helped me to get a first overview of the practices that appear at the nexus of EU and civil society engagement in the context of democracy promotion in Tunisia. Hence, it laid the basis for both the overall structure of my thesis’ empirical part and became the starting point for each of my three empirical chapters. It allowed me to identify activists’ and associations’ practices before, during and after the 2011 uprising as well as the various fissures between different subsections of it. This became the basis for chapter six on civil society engagement in Tunisia. Moreover, it helped me to map and understand the practices of interaction between Tunisian civil society and the EU in the context of financial assistance and consultations, which will be discussed in chapters seven and eight.

My research for this thesis was an iterative process. The examination of my data did not occur exclusively after the process of gathering all of it. Rather, gathering and examination occurred in parallel and informed each other. The analysis helped to identify additional documents, further events and settings to be observed as well as new interviewees and new questions to ask them. Insights based on these additional materials would then feed back into the analysis. This circular research process helped me to first narrow down the focus of my analysis to the practices that would eventually become the main object of my study. It also allowed me to get an increasingly more complete picture of them over time. The circular research process extended into the early drafting process. Whenever I identified gaps or saw the need for further triangulation while drafting my empirical chapters, this would provide the basis for further interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Having established the overall approach to gathering and analysing my data, the following sections will now elaborate on my use of these three methods in greater detail.

4.2.1 Interviews

While my research draws upon multiple sources, the core of my empirical insights is based on 103 interviews with Tunisian activists, politicians and government officials as well as EU

officials. A list of these interviews is included in the annex. Most of them were conducted in Tunis, some in Brussels and Berlin. Moreover, I was in correspondence with relevant sources via email or Facebook. This also involved follow-up communication in the aftermath of interviews or meetings that I observed. On some occasions, such communications also served the purpose of obtaining documents. I mainly interviewed representatives of Tunisian civil society, of the EU institutions as well as various experts. In Brussels, interviewed desk officers working on Tunisia and the Maghreb at the European External Action Services and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). In Tunis, I spoke to representatives of the EU delegation's political section and its cooperation section. All interviewees from the EU were identified either through networking and personal contacts or the EU Whoiswho database.¹

In line with my overall outside-in approach, the core of my data was gathered through interviews with Tunisian civil society activists. Both prior and during my fieldwork in Tunisia, I mapped key civil society actors and associations in Tunisia drawing upon existing research, reports from NGOs and international organisations, news reporting and databases. Moreover, I obtained a range of lists of civil society organisations who were either funded or invited for consultations and other events by the European delegation. In selecting interviewees, I employed what might be characterised as a very basic purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is informed by the researchers' definition of criteria that determine what kind of interviewees are included in the sample. Based on background reading and preliminary interviews, I tried to ensure a certain level of pluralism along three dimensions of civil society. First of all, I made sure to include both CSO that advocate as well as CSOs who offer services to either their members or society at large. Reflecting the generational changes in Tunisian civil society that occurred after the 2010/2011 uprising, I included both the older and established associations and activists as well as newly emerging ones. Most importantly, the sample encompassed the variety of different causes that associations engage for. As these categories overlap, the selection was at times an art rather than a science and often also determined by practical concerns. Generally, the selection of interviewees was also strongly dependent on whether the contact details I found or were provided with were still up to date, whether calls and emails were returned and whether interviewees were willing and able to meet for an interview. In addition, I followed a snowballing strategy

¹European Union. *EU Whoiswho*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2Rsv6mA> (accessed on 10.10.2014).

by using each interview to get recommendations for and contact details of further potential interviewees. This would increase the pool of potential interviewees from which I could choose those with the required attributes. At times, I also used interviews to get the telephone numbers of individuals that I had already identified but not yet been able to reach. Moreover, I actively networked by attending events and places that were likely to attract potentially relevant interviewees. Hence, my sampling strategy was a constant iterative process, yet always with the objective of obtaining a broad selection somewhat representative of secular civil society at large.

In parallel, I conducted some interviews with Tunisia- and Brussels-based experts in order to collect or factcheck information. These experts included employees working in foundations, NGOs and networks with relevant activities in Tunisia, such as the European Partnership for Democracy or EuroMed Rights. Beyond my interviews, I used various formal and informal occasions to chat with Tunisians from all walks of life as well as foreign diplomats, consultants, fellow researchers and journalists. In general, both Brussels and Tunisia proved to be very rewarding environments for my research. EU civil servants in Brussels and Tunis as well as Tunisian civil society activists, civil servants and politicians were quite accessible to and open in interviews during my research.

The literature on interview techniques usually distinguishes between structured, semi-structured and unstructured or open interviews (Edwards and Holland 2013; Leech 2002). Using the first approach involves directing exactly the same, very precise questions in exactly the same order at all interviewees. Using a coding scheme, the answers might then even be examined quantitatively. However, this was not really an option given the inductive and circular approach of my thesis. Meanwhile, entirely open and unstructured interviews are at risk of not encompassing all themes that need to be explored and can be difficult to analyse. They do, however, serve well in the early stages of a research project in order to obtain background knowledge and non-publicly available facts. Hence, I conducted several such rather open, explorative interviews with relevant officials from the European institutions and experts from think tanks and NGOs in Brussels prior to my fieldwork in Tunisia. Similarly, I conducted several such interviews to obtain relevant facts and background information as well as to fill gaps over the course of my research.

However, both for my interviews with Tunis-based EU officials as well as for the interviews conducted with Tunisian activists – which accounted for the majority of my interviews

– I resorted to semi-structured interviews in order to find a compromise between openness and comparability. This meant that most interviews covered a similar set of themes. Questions and prompts were prepared in advance for each of these themes. However, at the same time, the interviews were conducted in a rather conversational way. While most pre-determined questions were asked, they were not necessarily always be phrased in exactly the same way and order. Moreover, depending on the course the interview took, a range of further questions was added. The choice for a rather conversational style was also informed by practical concerns. As Aberbach and Rockman (2002) point out, elites might not like being constrained to a fixed set of questions and it is useful to give them a certain degree of freedom in order get a comprehensive understanding of their views. Moreover, a fixed set of questions might give respondents the impression of being “grilled,” which might trigger a defensive reaction. A conversational style is more likely to make respondents feel comfortable thus enables franker and more open discussions. I generally scheduled sufficient time for unexpected avenues that would often arise during interviews. While the themes inquired during the interviews remained largely the same, the questions and the interviewing strategies were constantly refined based on experiences made over the course of the research process.

I was not sufficiently proficient in Arabic to conduct interviews and both financially unable, but also in principle rather reluctant, to work with “local fixers”² during my research. However, with French being spoken widely across Tunisia and almost universally among the people I sought to interview, choosing Tunisia as case study meant that there was no major language barrier. Most of the interviews were thus conducted in English or French, depending on the interviewee’s preference. A few interviews were conducted in German. Interviews with EU officials both in Tunis and Brussels were largely conducted in English. As English is less widely and less fluently spoken in Tunisia, interviews with Tunisian activists were largely conducted in French. In that context, the fact that French is not my first language may have constituted an advantage. In spite of the French language’s omnipresence in Tunisian daily life and the fact that it is widely spoken, it remains a second language

²I generally take issue with the way “local fixers” are often used in academic research and journalism. For a more detailed discussion on why it is problematic, see Priyanka Borpujari. *The Problem with ‘Fixers’*. Columbia Journalism Review, <http://bit.ly/2MC54KZ> (accessed on 5.7. 2019). More generally, I believe that publications resulting from research that involves cooperation with partners should list them as co-authors. Since a PhD thesis cannot be co-authored, working with such partners is thus, in my view, not an option.

rather than a maternal one even for much of the elites. Hence, I think that speaking to a non-native French speaker put some of my interviewees at greater ease. Moreover, some Tunisians – particularly on the political far left – have reservations towards researchers (and citizens more generally) from the former colonising power.³ Generally, the shared history ranging from French rule to French support for the Ben Ali regime as well as contemporary political and economic relations between France and Tunisia may create a dynamic that a non-French researcher avoids.

If interviewees permitted, which was usually the case, I recorded the interviews. Depending on how much of the often rather long interviews was relevant, I transcribed them either completely or partially. Otherwise, I would take extensive notes. On a few occasions, when interviews were conducted in a particularly informal setting, I took notes afterwards. At times, I switched off the recording during the interview to allow for more frank comments that interviewees would be happy to share but reluctant to have recorded. I also asked additional questions after having switched off the recording at the end of an interview. Sometimes this would lead to some further interesting comments. If possible, I also recorded my own first thoughts on the respective interview immediately after leaving the interviewee. This enabled a more efficient analysis afterwards. Moreover, I took notes on the overall conditions of the interview including time, place and location but also the overall atmosphere in my research diary as soon as possible after the interview. Where relevant, such context is mentioned within the empirical chapters.

4.2.2 Participant observation

The insights gathered through interviews were complemented by observations of interaction between representatives of the EU and its delegation and representatives of Tunisian civil society as well as by observation of gatherings of representatives of Tunisian civil society. Such observation occurred both in formal and informal contexts, with these contexts determining the type of observation and type of observer I was. Spradley (1980, 58ff) outlines five levels of degrees of involvement ranging from non-participatory observation (level one) to complete participation (level five). In formal context such as EU consultations with or information sessions for civil society my participation remained passive (level 2), meaning that

³In fact, some far left activists refuse to speak French for ideological reasons as it is still seen as imposed on Tunisia by the former colonial power.

I only observed during the meetings but would engage in small talk or have brief individual conversations before and afterwards. In other formal meetings, I was a full participant (level five). This notably included three workshops in Berlin and Tunis in summer and autumn 2018 as well as spring 2019 that included various Tunisian civil society activists as participants. In this context, I had the opportunity to present some results from my research and to receive feedback, but also gathered several further insights relevant to my research both during the formal and the informal parts of the respective workshops. Moreover, I attended various conferences and presentations organised by NGOs, think tanks and institutions in both Brussels and Tunis, some open to the general public and others with a limited set of invitees. Finally, I spent time in places known to be frequented by people of interest to my research. Notably, this included Villa 78, a bar in central Tunis that – among other things – served as an after-work meeting point for a subsection of Tunisian civil society.⁴

At this point it needs to be noted, that the line between doing research and socialising in a group of people who work on or are otherwise involved in activities relevant to one's research is sometimes rather thin. Obviously, when being surrounded by activists or European diplomats on private occasions, conversation would often touch or even focus upon topics relevant to my research. At times, such conversations led to actual interviews at a later stage. In any case, it should be noted that the emersion in corresponding social settings – as well as other social settings in Tunisia – did also serve to get a deeper understanding of Tunisian society and civil society that is reflected within this thesis – even if it cannot always be traced back to specific footnotes.

Participant observation and interviews were often linked. The insights gathered during observations were used to further specify the sample of interviewees as well as to further refine the questions these interviewees were asked. On a more practical level, invitations to events worth attending and observing were at times given in the context of interviews. At the same time, observation or attendance of events often led to follow-up interviews linked to the respective meeting or served as a networking opportunity. Particularly for the purpose of getting interviews with more senior – both in rank and age – officials, activists and politicians, a brief introduction during such occasions would help to obtain telephone

⁴Villa 78 was closed and has been reopened as “Villa Les Palmes,” which has a similar concept but is operated by someone else. It has ceased to be the above-mentioned meeting point following the change of ownership.

numbers and the promise to meet at a later stage. For example, I obtained the contact details of a former minister and senior member of the Islamist Ennahda party and arranged a meeting with him while observing a protest against terrorism in downtown Tunis that he took part in.

4.2.3 Document analysis

My interviews and observations were complemented by the analysis of a range of documents. This included official EU documents such as speeches, brochures, websites, reports, minutes of meeting, email communication or attendance lists of events. Some of these documents were publicly available – others were provided by officials or staff. Moreover, I made use of various other primary sources, such as reports, minutes or communications from various other entities such as NGOs, think tanks or national authorities – again partly publicly available and partly provided via their staff. Finally, I drew upon a substantial body of academic research as well a wide range of news reporting, mostly in French and English, and to a lesser extent in Italian and German. I used these documents both to corroborate and triangulate information I received during interviews but also to complement it. Notably, I strongly drew upon documents when unpacking the practices occurring in the context of the EU's financial assistance for civil society. Practices from this repertoire are closely determined by and linked to procedures and definitions that are described in EU documents. At the same time, it occurred to me during my interviews that some activists' views on the EU's practices seemed to be biased by their own lack of success in obtaining grants. Hence, I made sure to corroborate information provided in such interviews and, more generally, reflected on potential biases in the respective chapter.

4.3 Ethics and security

While conducting the research for this thesis, I considered its implications for all those I interacted with during my fieldwork, for the wider community of Tunisian civil society and EU staff as well as for myself. Bearing in mind the University of Warwick's "Research Code of Practice,"⁵ the Warwick Politics and International Studies' (PAIS) "Guidelines

⁵University of Warwick. *Research Code of Practice*. Coventry, <http://bit.ly/2Vr2Dgm> (accessed on 21.2.2016).

for the ethical conduct of research”⁶ as well as the “Code de déontologie et d’intégrité en matière de recherche” of the Université libre de Bruxelles,⁷ I continuously assessed all ethical implications. An early, quite significant decision based on such consideration was to change my case study from Egypt to Tunisia. More generally, my previous experiences in and with Egypt increased my awareness of researchers’ responsibilities⁸ when looking into potentially sensitive social and political issues. Hence, they also informed my approach to conducting fieldwork in Tunisia.

The country offered at the time and continues to offer an entirely different and much less restrictive environment with far more space and security for both activists and researchers. However, the case of Egypt served as a reminder of how rapidly and how substantially the political situation in a transitioning country can change. If it does, political views that did not entail major risks for activists at the time they were expressed may quite suddenly endanger them. It is worth noting in this context that the Tunisian government and its security apparatus have already returned to some authoritarian habits that were hoped to be a thing of the past. Other such habits had never entirely disappeared to begin with. Moreover, despite the formal media freedom, reforms of the state media are slow and the private media with the biggest audiences tend to be controlled by members of the old elites. Hence, they can still pose a danger to activists pushing for change and reform, particularly of the kind that affects the interests and privileges of the old elites. Tunisia had also experienced two high-profile assassinations of far-left politicians by radical Islamists in 2013, which is worth remembering in light of the fact that secular civil society in the country tends to be liberal and left-leaning. Furthermore, I had to consider that I was making inquiries about the EU among activists that included staff of associations that had been recipients of EU funding or that were hoping to get EU funding at some point.

These considerations encouraged me to keep the names of the Tunisians activists I interviewed for this thesis largely anonymous. I discussed how I could use information and direct quotes before the interviews. However, I often announced from the start that I would not

⁶University of Warwick. *PAIS guidelines for the ethical conduct of research*. Coventry, <http://bit.ly/2BMaKLd> (accessed on 21.2.2016).

⁷Université libre de Bruxelles. *Code de déontologie et d’intégrité en matière de recherche*. Brussels, 18.3.2013, <http://bit.ly/2rZ7Mid> (accessed on 23.12.2018).

⁸For a discussion of researchers’ responsibility in authoritarian states see Hisham A. Hellyer. *Western researchers must stop putting local experts at risk*. The Globe and Mail, 26.7.2018, <https://tgam.ca/30JqmtQ> (accessed on 5.7.2019).

use the respective interviewees' name in order to enable a more open conversation. I also decided to also anonymize some interviewees even if I had received the permission to quote them by name. I made some exceptions in cases where the public profile of an interviewee granted them a certain level of protection, where the person in question had already said similar or similarly "controversial" things in public or where the person very explicitly said that they wanted to be quoted by name.

The moral obligation to put interviewees' security first led me to take several precautions on the technical level as well. Interviews were recorded with password-protected smart-phones that were set up in a way that all data could be remotely deleted and would be automatically erased after ten failed passcode attempts. All data gathered for my research as well as all work in progress and all drafts were saved on a password-protected laptop with an encrypted hard disk drive. In case of theft, it could have been remotely locked and erased. All data was also constantly synchronized via Sync, an end-to-end encrypted zero-knowledge cloud storage service. Finally, I made regular backups on a password-protected and encrypted external hard disk drive. My operating system was protected by a firewall and anti-virus software and the internet connection on all my devices was protected through a virtual private network.

My main research stay in Tunisia coincided with a period in which the country faced an increased terrorist threat level. The Bardo National Museum attack with 24 casualties occurred shortly before my fieldwork began and the attack on the Riu Imperial Marhaba Hotel close to Sousse with 39 casualties happened during my stay. To ensure my own security, I discussed my field trip to Tunisia with my supervisors at the University of Warwick and the Université libre de Bruxelles as well as several academic contacts with research experience in Tunisia. I also discussed it with the University of Warwick's insurance department to ensure I was covered for health and other emergencies as well as the research ethics officer at the University of Warwick's Politics and International Studies department. Upon arrival in Tunis, I registered as an expatriate at the German embassy to make them aware of my presence. I also built a local network of Tunisian and non-Tunisian contacts. When traveling or conducting interviews in areas I was not familiar with, I kept trusted contacts up to date with regards to my movements. In line with my expectations, I experienced Tunisia as a very safe and rewarding environment for my research.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed my methodological approach, the basic philosophical position informing it as well as the specific methods I used for gathering and analyzing my data. Contrasting the basic premises of positivism and interpretivism, I explain why I subscribe to the notion of a pragmatic “paradigm relativism” that sees different methodologies and methods as a toolbox from which to choose what is most appropriate for a given research puzzle. On that basis, the chapter showed why interpretivism and qualitative methods are most appropriate in light of the thesis’ practice approach as well as its explorative and inductive nature. I then explain how I approached the analysis of my data and why as well as how I used interviews, participant observation and document analysis as key data collection methods. The remainder of this thesis presents the results of my research. The following chapter will set the scene for the empirical part of my thesis. Although its main purpose is to provide the necessary background information about Tunisia and its relations with the EU, it is strongly informed by my fieldwork. On that basis, chapters six, seven and eight providing the empirical analysis of the practices occurring at the nexus of Tunisian civil society engagement and EU democracy promotion.

Chapter 5

Tunisia and its relations with the EU

Since the popular uprisings in late 2011 that led to the ousting of the Ben Ali regime in early 2011, Tunisia has undergone significant transformations and so have the North African republic's relations with the European Union. The objective of this chapter is to provide the background knowledge and context that is necessary to understand this thesis' analysis of the practices that are enacted in the context of EU democracy promotion in Tunisia. To that end, the chapter starts by putting the Tunisian transition into its historical context, discussing the country's exceptionalism in the region and outlining the key challenges it is facing. It then moves to put EU-Tunisian relations in the broader context of the structures of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation that have emerged since the 1995 Barcelona conference. On that basis, it then discusses the history, structures and issues that have been shaping EU-Tunisian relations before and since the 2011 uprising. In line with the thesis' ambition to provide an outside-in perspective on EU-Tunisian relations, the chapter concludes with some insights on Tunisian civil society's perspectives of the EU as well as their country's relations with it.

5.1 The Tunisian transition in context

5.1.1 Historical background

While the territory that constitutes Tunisia today has been ruled by various foreign powers, the origins of modern Tunisia are closely linked to the establishment of the French protectorate in 1881. Although French rule lasted for a comparably short period, its effect

has arguably been as profound as the arrival of the Arabs and Islam (Willis 2012, 18). The French presence had a major impact on the country's development, notably in public administration and education – but also with regards to infrastructure, industry or public health. As Perkins (2014, 31) put it, “Tunisia's modernization and its dependence went forward hand in hand.” In contrast to neighbouring Algeria, which had been occupied 51 years earlier and whose coastal region became an integral part of metropolitan France in 1848, Tunisia's independence in 1956 came about in a rather peaceful way. This was mainly due to different interests on the French side, but also informed by Tunisia's nationalist movement's more conciliatory approach which, in turn, was informed by the situation that was unfolding in neighbouring Algeria from 1954 onwards. Led by Habib Bourguiba, who would later assume the presidency, the movement pursued a strategy of gradual independence and promised the French amicable relations once Tunisians were granted their own state. Despite a very short-lived unification of Libya and Tunisia as “Arab Islamic Republic” (Deeb 1989) and some efforts to “arabize” the country's education and administration (Sirles 2009), post-independence Tunisia did indeed largely keep the state structures that France had imposed upon it. Moreover, despite temporary rifts over the war in Algeria, Tunisia remained closely allied to its former coloniser in political, economic and cultural terms (Alexander 2010, 89ff).

Bourguiba remained in power until 1987, when he was removed and replaced by his prime minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on medical grounds in a bloodless “constitutional coup” (Ware 1988), with active support by Italy's military intelligence service. Ben Ali's presidency started with a short-lived period of liberalisation and a commitment to a more democratic form of government. However, rather than meeting the hopes and expectations this opening raised, Ben Ali's rule quickly became even more restrictive than that of his predecessor – not only for those engaging for democracy and human rights but also those deploring graft and corruption (Alexander 1997; Jebnoun 2013). While the regime remained committed to secular and liberal values that made it look progressive in the eyes of many Western observers, Tunisia became increasingly authoritarian, corrupt and inefficient (Beau and Tuquoi 2011). In the 2000s, a dysfunctional administration and economy combined with demographic changes created major hardships for an ever-growing number of Tunisians. The country's youth as well as people living in the interior regions were hit particularly hard.

While many Tunisians were frustrated with the system and its inefficiency and brutality, major misgivings were directed at the extended ruling family. Particular scorn was directed at Ben Ali's wife Leïla Ben Ali, née Trabelsi, and her family, which had managed to amass major riches over time and engaged in quite audacious forms of graft and corruption (Beau and Graciet 2009). The atmosphere became increasingly explosive in late 2000s and Tunisian anger was further fuelled by the leak of a large number of US diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks in 2010. While Western attention was focused on other aspects of "Cablegate," the leaked diplomatic telegrams' detailed description of the extent and audacity of Tunisia's ruling families' corruption and nepotism touched a nerve within the country. While much of what they said was widely suspected within the population, seeing it documented in black and white increased public anger. A new generation of Tunisian cyber-activists fuelled this anger by translating the relevant cables, publishing them online as "TunisLeaks"¹ and spreading them through blogs and social media channels.

On 17 December 2010 and in the context of this increasing public anger, a young Tunisian named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. His self-immolation in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia's impoverished inland region came in response to what he perceived as unfair treatment by the public authorities. It should be noted that there are two rather different versions of what happened. The common narrative frames the event as a one-sided aggression against Bouazizi by the female municipal inspector Fayda Hamdi, who allegedly harassed and humiliated him by confiscating his cart, taking away his weighing scale and slapping him. However, the "slap that sparked a revolution"² as The Observer put it did, in all likelihood, never happen. Just as many, if not most Tunisian street vendors Bouazizi lacked a sales permit and the inspector later insisted that she was just doing her job and had already told him to leave on the previous day. Several bystanders confirmed that Hamdi did not slap him, and that it had rather been him who attacked her physically and insulted her using sexist language.³ What is not disputed is that Bouazizi did not succeed in retrieving his cart from the police station and that he went to the local governors' office to complain. Having been ignored, he dosed himself with petrol and threatened to burn himself. Ac-

¹Nawaat. *TuniLeaks, les documents dévoilés par Wikileaks concernant la Tunisie: Quelques réactions à chaud*. Tunis, 28.11.2010. <http://bit.ly/2KEayns> (accessed on 9.3.2015).

²Elisabeth Day. *The slap that sparked a revolution*. The Observer, 15. <http://bit.ly/2WrZ4Wq> (accessed on 15.10.2014).

³Christophe Ayad. *La révolution de la gifle*. Libération, 11.6.2011, <http://bit.ly/2XHK9Jj> (accessed on 15.10.2014).

according to a friend he shouted, “how do you expect me to make a living?”⁴ before setting himself alight. Bouazizi survived his self-immolation but died of his injuries on 4 January 2011.

While this was neither the first nor the last self-emulation in Tunisia, it proved to be a catalyst. Within hours there were protest in Sidi Bouzid, within days these protests spread across the country, and within weeks the 23-year rule of Ben Ali and the 53 years of autocratic rule in Tunisia came to an end. On 14 January 2011 Ben Ali fled the country and in the following weeks and months the protests would spread beyond Tunisia, ultimately leading to the demise of long-ruling autocrats in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Elsewhere regimes reacted with either brute force, concessions or a combination of the two to quell the protests. Coined by foreign reporters and pundits who projected previous Western experiences with revolutions in other contexts (Abusharif 2014), the Tunisian uprising became known internationally as the “Yasmin revolution” and the Arab uprisings as “Arab Spring.”⁵ Neither term was or is as widely used in the Arab World as it was in the West and many Tunisians react rather irritated to their use.⁶ Both due to the normative positive judgement implicit in either term⁷ and its Western origin, I will refrain from using them. Instead, the events that occurred in winter 2010/2011 will be referred to as the Arab uprisings or the Tunisian uprising.

On 23 October 2011, Tunisians elected a National Constituent Assembly (Assemblée Nationale Constituante, ANC), which was charged with rewriting the country’s constitution. This first democratic election was won by the formerly banned Islamic Ennahda party which managed to get 41 per cent of the total vote and entered a coalition with two secular social democratic parties, the Congress for the Republic (Congrès pour la République, abbreviated as CPR, also referred to as El Mottamar) and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés, abbreviated as FDTL but largely referred to as Ettakatol). This so-called Troika alliance formed a government led

⁴CBS News. *How a slap sparked Tunisia’s revolution*. 22.2.2011. 60 Minutes, <https://cbsn.ws/2IvpMIL> (accessed on 15.10.2014)

⁵Europe 1, *D’où vient la ‘révolution du jasmin’?* 17.1.2011, <http://bit.ly/2K80a86> (accessed on 25.12.2018); Joshua Keating, *Who first used the term Arab Spring?* Foreign Policy, 4.11.2011, <http://bit.ly/2IvqFkz> (accessed on 25.12.2018).

⁶Various interviews and informal conversations with Tunisians between 2015 and 2019.

⁷Which arguably ceased to be appropriate quite quickly in light of ensuing events in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

by Ennahda Secretary General Hamadi Jebali. CPR founder and long-term leader Moncef Marzouki was elected interim President of Tunisia in December 2011.

The process of drafting of a new Tunisian constitution began on 13 February 2012 and was supposed to be completed within a year. However, by the time the deadline had passed, only limited progress had been made. Frustrated by the lack of progress as well as a widely shared feeling that the high expectation that the end of the Ben Ali regime had raised were not met, Tunisians became increasingly disenchanted with the government in general and Ennahda in particular. Among secularists, fears were raised by Ennahda's proposal of constitutional provisions codifying Islam as the official religion of the state or considering women as "complementary" rather than equal to men. Tensions between Ennahda and opposition parties were also based on fears of that Ennahda might be hiding its true agenda and allegations that the party was not sufficiently dealing with Islamist extremist threats. Distrust and disenchantment were further fuelled by the assassination of two high-profile secular far-left politicians by what seemed to be jihadist perpetrators. Chokri Belaid, the leader of the Democratic Patriots' Movement was killed on 6 February 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi, leader of the People's Movement and member of the ANC was murdered on 25 July 2013. Following Brahmi's death, both parties merged into the new National Salvation Front (NSF), and organised major protest to force the government's resignation. These developments coincided with a major crisis in Egypt, where a grassroots campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood-led government that was secretly supported, if not instigated by army and security forces⁸ led to major public protests. On 3 July 2013 army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi used these protests as a pretext for a military coup that ended the country's brief democratic experiment.

In contrast, and maybe partly encouraged by the developments in Egypt, four major Tunisian civil society organisations started to get involved to mediate between government and opposition – and both sides were ultimately willing to compromise and to end the political stalemate. This so-called "National Dialogue" – which will be further discussed in the following chapter – led to the establishment of a technocratic government and bipartisan negotiations on the new constitution chaired by the four civil society organisations. The new

⁸ Asma Alsharif, Yasmine Saleh. *Special Report: The real force behind Egypt's 'revolution of the state.'* Reuters, 10.10.2013, <https://reut.rs/2F6sMuj> (accessed on 14.9.2017); Sheera Frenkel, Maged Atef. *How Egypt's Rebel Movement Helped Parve The Way For A Sisi Presidency.* BuzzFeed News, <http://bit.ly/2WKhXsP> (accessed on 14.9.2017).

constitution was ratified on 24 January 2014 with 200 votes in favour, twelve votes against and four abstentions. It divides the executive power between president and prime minister and provides for a decentralised government committed to transparency, gender equality and freedom of belief. It recognised Islam as state religion and includes minor limits to free speech by prohibiting insults against Islam. In October 2014, parliamentary elections for the newly created Assembly of the Representatives of the People (*Assemblée des Représentants du Peuple*, abbreviated as ARP) were won by Nidaa Tounes, a newly created secular party bringing together various political ideas and ideologies kept together by their rejection of political Islam. The party was founded by Béji Caïd Essebsi, who had served as foreign minister under Habib Bourguiba. Essebsi became Tunisia's first directly and democratically elected president on 21 December 2014 at the age of 88. He remained in office until his death on 25 July 2019. From 2015 until the conclusion of the work on this thesis in August 2018, Tunisia has de-facto been governed by a grand coalition between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda.

5.1.2 Tunisian exceptionalism

Even before people took to the streets to oust Ben Ali, Tunisia and Tunisian society were considered as something of a regional exception, or an “Arab anomaly” as Masri (2017) put it. In comparison to many states in its Arab neighbourhood, Tunisia went further in embracing liberal and secular values, has a well-educated middle class, a comparably moderate Islamist party and a military that was and remains fairly absent from domestic politics. Moreover, as will be discussed in the next section and be a recurring theme across this thesis, Tunisia has a tradition of strong civil society activism. These differences may have been among the reasons that Tunisia's post-2011 development took a path so different from those other states affected by the Arab uprisings.

To begin with, Tunisia has been one of the most progressive states in the Arab world. Most prominently, Bourguiba's 1957 Code of Personal Status (*Code du Statut Personnel*, abbreviated as CSP) advanced formal women's rights to an extent that made the country's legislation far more progressive than the rest of the Arab world (Tobich 2008, 89ff) and indeed, at least on paper, more progressive than various Western countries. There remained and remains a gap between formal law and its acceptance and indeed application by society,

particularly in the inland regions of Tunisia that tend to be more socially conservative than the urban northern regions (Salem 2010). And yet, overall Tunisia tends to be more progressive than much of the rest of the Arab world. According to Masri (2017, XXVII), this is rooted in the country's "remarkable culture of reform, which dates back to the nineteenth century and is rooted in a progressive and adaptive brand of Islam." France's occupation may have left a strong mark on the country's evolution, but its exceptionalism predates it. Independent Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba built on both legacies. He often found harsh words for and took harsh action against what he perceived as religious backwardness, for example when referring to the hijab as an "odious rag" (Boulby 1988, 593) and banning it from public offices, schools and universities (M. Marks 2013, 228). And yet, Bourguiba made an effort to legitimize his reform agenda by drawing upon liberal Tunisian interpretations of the Koran from the 19th century and empowering moderate and progressive members of Tunisia's Islamic establishment (Perkins 2014, 140 f).

Although the Ennahda party sought to revoke some of Tunisia's liberal laws, its political line tends to be much less conservative than that of other major Islamists movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Palestinian Hamas (Cavatorta and Merone 2015). Its spiritual leader Rashid Ghannouchi even expressed public support for the CSP while in exile in London before the 2011 uprisings (Wolf 2017, 98). Following popular dissent with moves towards an increased role of religion in Tunisia, the Ennahda party began to embrace a more liberal agenda and made major concessions, such as supporting the non-inclusion of a reference to Sharia law in the new constitution (Wolf 2017, 139). In addition to being more moderate, Ennahda has also proven to be far more willing to compromise and accommodated those concerned about its electoral success. Despite obtaining more votes than the following eight parties combined in the first free elections and its continuing success at the polls since, Ennahda refrained from running its own candidates in the presidential elections until 2019. Moreover, the party's grand coalition with Nidaa Tounes involved its politicians and activists working with the some of the same political forces that were either directly involved in or at least in favour of persecuting its members for decades. In July 2015, I interviewed Abdelkarim Harouni, who was one of their ministers from 2011 to 2014. Harouni had been imprisoned for 16 years, several of which he spent in solitary

confinement. He was tortured and continued to be harassed after he was released in 2007.⁹ I asked him how he felt about working with those political forces that were responsible for his ordeals. “Before the revolution, there was always a police car behind me. When I became a minister, there was always a police car in front of me,” he joked. “What is the point of seeking revenge? It doesn’t help anyone. The best way to annoy them is by being part of the political process.”¹⁰

A further issue that makes Tunisia stand out is its fairly well-educated population. While French influence certainly influenced post-colonial Tunisia’s education system, it was also shaped by Bourguiba’s personal priorities. Other post-colonial North African post-independence leaders such as Libya’s Gaddafi, Egypt’s Nasser or Algeria’s Boumédiène had rather limited exposure to academic education and were strongly formed by religious training or military schools and experiences instead. In contrast, Bourguiba went through a secular and civilian education and was a product of the most prestigious academic institutions that both Tunisia and France had to offer. Whereas other Arab leaders focused on strengthening their armed forces, Bourguiba sustained very high levels of education spending during his tenure. Although Ben Ali presided over a decline of schools and universities, the Tunisian education system remained good by regional standards (Masri 2017, 244 ff).

Pre-2010 discourses on the middle class may have been at times exaggerated and statistics reported to international organisations often put Tunisia in a better light than they actually were (Gherib 2011). However, the comparable strength by regional standards of Tunisia’s middle class is a further factor that set the country on a trajectory different from the rest of the region. Together with its fairly good education, Tunisia’s middle class is one of the reason why some found the fact that the Ben Ali regime survived so long rather surprising. As Willis put it, the “Tunisian paradox” of how “such a sophisticated, comparatively well-educated and open-minded population [could] put up with such an unsophisticated, thuggish and oppressive regime”¹¹ has perplexed students of the Maghreb ever since Ben Ali took over.

In contrast to many other countries in the region, Tunisia’s military has not played a

⁹Human Rights Watch. *Repression of Former Political Prisoners in Tunisia*. New York, March 2010, <http://bit.ly/2CGNqQO> (accessed on 27.12.2018).

¹⁰Interview with Abdelkrim Harouni, held in Tunis in July 2015 (45).

¹¹Michael Willis. *Opening of the conference on ‘The Tunisian Revolution: Origins, Course and Aftermath.’* 16.5.2014, St. Anthony’s College, University of Oxford, <http://bit.ly/2l43cYB> (accessed on 23.9.2015).

major role in the country's politics, society and economy either. This was partly due to Bourguiba's understanding of Tunisia as a civilian state and his aversion to "the militarization of society that has occurred in most other Arab states" (Wright 1982, 22). Under Ben Ali, whose mistrust and fear of the armed forces bordered paranoia, the military was sidelined even further and increasingly balanced by a substantially upgraded security apparatus (Grewal 2016:3ff). Ben Ali's police state was key to his regime's oppression of any form of dissent. However, the balance and competition between security and military meant that it was always much less likely for either to be able to hijack the democratic transition and follow Egypt's path back into authoritarian rule. In contrast to Egypt, where an almighty military controls not only the country's politics but also its economy and large parts of its media (Springborg 2017), neither police nor military or indeed any other actor was sufficiently powerful to shape post-2011 developments without compromising. More importantly, all political forces were actually willing to compromise.

5.1.3 The role of civil society

Finally, Tunisia stands out due to its strong and active civil society. In fact, the Tunisian Human Rights League (Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, LTDH) which was established in 1977 is widely considered to be the oldest independent human rights organisation in the Arab world (Alexander 2016, 43). With two women's rights organisations having been among the strongest independent associations under the Ben Ali regime, Tunisian civil society also stands out due to its strong feminist component (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014). Moreover, there is the Tunisian General Trade Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT) as well as various large corporatist associations organizing different societal groups such as the Tunisian employers' organisation (Union Tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat, UTICA) or the Tunisian National Women's Union (Union Nationale des Femmes de Tunisie, UNFT). These associations were linked to and often used by the pre-2011 regimes. And yet they did, over time, have different degrees of room to manoeuvre and did, at times, wield a certain degree of influence on policy.

Following the ouster of Ben Ali, some of these organisations used their existing structures to engage in the transition and took their large membership with them on that path. Moreover, due to changes in the political and legal climate with regard to civil society en-

gement, the aftermath of the uprising saw a major rise in new associations. Popular and academic discourses thus regularly frame civil society as a key factor that prevented Tunisia from following the path of other states affected by the Arab uprisings (Deane 2013; Kéfi 2015). Most prominently, its CSOs played an important role in resolving the major political crisis in 2013 through a civil society-led “National Dialogue.” As indicated above, this dialogue was initiated by the UGTT, who joined forces with UTICA as well as the LTDH and the National Order of Tunisian Advocates (Ordre National Des Avocats De Tunisie, ONAT). Mediating between government and opposition and organizing a large-scale consultation process with civil society, the quartet facilitated the creation of a technocratic government as well as the development and adoption of a progressive constitution. In December 2015, this “National Dialogue Quartet” was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for what the Norwegian Nobel Committee saw as the establishment of an “alternative, peaceful political process at a time when the country was on the brink of civil war.” It explicitly stated that the Prize was “awarded to this Quartet, not to the four individual organizations as such” and made several references to the importance of civil society more generally.¹²

5.1.4 Challenges to the transition

Pointing to these various actors and factors that have helped Tunisia to succeed so far is not to say that post-2010 Tunisia did not and does not face major obstacles.¹³ Although the country has the most democratic and liberal political system in the region now,¹⁴ its political transition remains a highly fragile process. Notably, crucial parts of the new constitution, such as the creation of a constitutional court, have yet to be implemented. Although police violence was a major factor driving the Tunisian uprising, abusive behaviour from the security services ranging from harassment to torture is having a comeback. The rise of insufficiently regulated police unions pressuring judges and politicians prevents the sanctioning of officials’ misdemeanours and felonies, and obstructs more serious security sector reform

¹²Norwegian Nobel Committee. *The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015*. Oslo, 10.10.2015, <http://bit.ly/2Rb7jaX> (accessed on 15.10.2015).

¹³A previous version of this section has been published as Weilandt, R. (2018). *Socio-economic challenges to Tunisia’s democratic transition*. European View, 17(2), 210–217.

¹⁴Economist Intelligence Unit. *The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2017*. London, <http://bit.ly/2EYdRTt> (accessed on 12.6.2018); and Freedom House. *Freedom in The World 2018: Democracy in Crisis*. Washington, <http://bit.ly/2CFrYfd> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

(Grewal 2018). Meanwhile, the political spectrum is fragmented, and Tunisian parties are not yet overly institutionalised and face questions about their internal democratic processes.

Most crucially, however, major social and economic grievances remain. The end of the Ben Ali era and the transition to democracy have raised high expectations within the population. But the new democratic system has not only failed to satisfy peoples' hopes for improved living standards. Rather, it has presided over their further decline. Tunisians' discontent with their living conditions and the new democratic system's perceived inability to deliver is a fundamental threat to the transition. Since 2011, various protests – and indeed self-emulations reminiscent of the one that triggered the original uprising – have shaken the country.¹⁵ Economic growth is slow, in 2017 unemployment was at 15 per cent nation-wide and reached up to 28 per cent in some regions. Across the country, a third of the country's university graduates are without a job.¹⁶ While both the minimum wage and the average public-sector salaries have risen in recent years, the increases remain substantially below the increases in basic food prices. Inflation is projected to reach 7 per cent in 2018, drastically decreasing peoples' purchasing power.¹⁷ Today's minimum wage buys around 20 per cent less food than it did in 2010. As a result of austerity measures introduced to obtain a \$2.9 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Tunisians have to cope with frozen or reduced salaries and social welfare services as well as rising prices for basic goods including food, energy and fuels.

While the situation is unsatisfactory across the country, it is disastrous in those parts of Tunisia where the 2010/2011 uprisings originated. While some parts of Tunisia's northern coastal regions remind of Southern Europe, the country's South-Eastern interior regions fare poorly on almost all socio-economic indicators. Overall poverty is 10 times higher in the cities of Kairouan (34.9 per cent) and Kef (34.2 per cent) than in the city of Tunis (3.5 per cent). On average, 88 per cent of the Tunisian population has access to drinkable tap water. While it is almost 100 per cent in the affluent parts of the country, it is only half of the population of Sidi Bouzid, one of the poorest governorates and the place where the self-immolation of fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010 sparked the popular

¹⁵Max Gallien. *Tunisia Protests: Another Heavy Dose of Austerity*. Middle East Eye, 11.1.2018, <http://bit.ly/2CHJmzP> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

¹⁶Bertelsmann Stiftung. *Transformation Index 2018 – Tunisia*. Gütersloh, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2ApGQwv> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

¹⁷Statista. *Tunisia: Inflation Rate from 2012 to 2022 (Compared to the Previous Year)*. Hamburg, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2ToBmJJ> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

uprising. Less than 20 per cent of households in Sidi Bouzid are connected to the sewage system, compared to a national average of 58 per cent and between 80 to 90 per cent in greater Tunis. While there are 84 medical specialists per 100,000 inhabitants in Tunis, there are just 11 in Sidi Bouzid and just seven in Tataouine, the Southern town in which parts of the original Star Wars franchise were shot (Magouri et al. 2018). These disparities are deeply enshrined and strengthen each other. The lack of education and infrastructure combined with a deteriorating security situation make it hard to attract investment or tourists to the interior regions. And while recent efforts to politically decentralise the country are made to reverse these trends, it will take a long time to make up for decades of neglect.

A second major division runs between generations. Large parts of Tunisia's youth feel excluded from the country's political and economic opportunities. In 2017, youth unemployment stood at 35.4 per cent.¹⁸ While the situation was bad before the revolution, it has deteriorated since. Moreover, with formal politics dominated by the old generation, those who were crucial in initiating the uprising and thus enabling the change that has occurred since, are also shut out of shaping its future. This has led to major disenchantment with politics among young people, which was reflected by their very low electoral participation, with only a third of 18-34 year-olds having voted in the 2014 parliamentary elections (Yerkes 2017, 11).

The dire socio-economic conditions and the lack of a perspective for young Tunisians has even more immediate and substantially negative consequences as it seems to make some of them receptive to the simplistic messages of radical Islamism. This helps to explain one of the most puzzling developments in the country. Despite Tunisia being one of the most liberal countries in the Arab world and the region's only democratic success story, it became one of the most fertile recruiting grounds of the Islamic State. Tunisia became not only a major exporter of jihadists but also the target of terrorist attacks committed by local radicalised youths (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015). The student who killed 38 tourists in Sousse in 2015 was reported to have had a girlfriend and was a local breakdancing celebrity. He drank

¹⁸Statista. *Tunisia: Youth Unemployment Rate from 2007 to 2017*. Hamburg, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2RrvLVi> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

alcohol and was a passionate Real Madrid supporter.¹⁹ Young Tunisians men like him are not becoming Islamist terrorists by default.

The dire socio-economic situation, regional inequality and the youth's exclusion poses a major risk to the democratic transition. Contrary to what many Western observers believed at the time, the 2011 Arab uprisings were not primarily, let alone exclusively about replacing an autocratic system of government with liberal democracy. When they started to take the street in late 2010, protestors called for "bread, freedom and dignity."²⁰ They were fed up with the Ben Ali regime that failed to deliver either, while at the same time shamelessly and audaciously openly plundering the state's coffers for their own benefit. Peoples' anger was not primarily directed against autocracy. It was first and foremost directed against one particular autocrat and his extended family.

This is not to say that there is no support for democratic forms of government. According to a 2014 poll by the ArabTrans project, 77,7 per cent of Tunisian respondents deem democracy preferable to its alternatives.²¹ However, the respondents' idea of democracy is closely related to socio-economic rights. The risks of Tunisian democracy not delivering on those rights is illustrated by a 2017 poll conducted for the International Republican Institute (IRI).²² 68 per cent of respondents described the current economic situation in Tunisia as very bad, a further 21 per cent as somewhat bad. 61 per cent felt the incumbent government was doing a bad or very bad job at creating jobs. 83 per cent felt that the country was heading in the wrong direction. And while there is wide support for democracy in principle, 41 per cent said that economic prosperity was "definitely more important" to them and a further 21 per cent deemed it "somewhat more important." Hence, if the new democratic system does not deliver, this could be exploited by political forces pushing for a more authoritarian form of government.

At the same time, some of the social reforms that the democratic system produced are not backed by domestic majorities. For example, around two-thirds of respondents of the

¹⁹Christina Lamb, Richard Kerbaj. *There Was No Reason to Suspect Him: They Chose Someone Clean*. The Times, 5.7.2015, <http://bit.ly/2Rp29rR> (accessed on 12.6.2018); and Robert Mendick. *New Footage Discovered Showing Tunisia Beach Attack Gunman Seifeddine Rezgui Breakdancing at Family Wedding*. The Telegraph, 26.6.2015, <http://bit.ly/2Qd6EB1> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

²⁰The Economist. *Tunisia Needs Help If It Is to Remain a Model for the Arab World*. The Economist, 18.1.2018, <https://econ.st/2CFLb0f> (accessed on 12.6.2018).

²¹Andrea Teti. *What Do 'the People' Want? Arab Voices in a Troubled World. The Arab Transformations Project (ArabTrans)*. Aberdeen, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rYVarf> (accessed on 23.6.2018).

²²International Republican Institute. *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians*. Washington, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2R2OZ4A> (accessed on 3.7.2018).

IRI poll expressed strong opposition against the repealing of a law that banned Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslim men. Moreover, two-thirds opposed a law that guarantees that sons and daughters to receive equal inheritance. These reforms were met with applause from the Western world and contribute to the image of Tunisia as a success story. However, such reforms may help to discredit democracy among more socially conservative parts of society. Meanwhile, more socially liberal and secular parts of Tunisian society may feel threatened by the Islamists and their ability to delay or prevent progressive reforms as democracy grants them considerably more influence than they had under the secular autocracy. Hence, there is potential for very different factions to work towards undermining democracy if a majority of the people were to start losing faith in its ability to deliver the socio-economic improvement they expect.

For the democratic transition to succeed, the Tunisian government will thus need to tackle the dire socio-economic situation and work towards overcoming the country's major inequalities. As I have argued elsewhere (Weilandt 2018a), this might require both deregulation as well as major economic interventions by the state. Structural reforms are necessary to reduce bureaucracy that primarily serves to uphold the old ruling cliques' grip on business and that provided the basis for the country's endemic corruption. The government needs to create a level playing field to support new Tunisian businesses and attract foreign investors. Moreover, Tunisia will have to gradually slim down its over-bloated public sector, which currently constitutes a financially and socially unsustainable system of political patronage. Public sector employment provides every fifth job and costs almost half of the country's budget,²³ and thus uses financial means that are urgently needed elsewhere.

Having said that, the reduction of the public sector has to come gradually and should take regional and demographic differences into consideration. Moreover, they have to be accompanied by major investments, particularly in the country's marginalised regions. Creating a level playing field would be a pre-condition for sustainable economic growth, but it is far from sufficient to overcome regional disparities that have grown over decades. The asymmetry between the affluent coastal north and the interior regions dates back to colonial times and was reproduced after independence as public and private investments remained concentrated to the coastal regions. The neglect of the interior regions was and remains a political choice which has led to a downward spiral that has cemented the division. In

²³IMF. *Remarks on Tunisia*. Washington, 16.4.2018, <http://bit.ly/2TkheYP> (accessed on 27.6.2018).

order to make up for the lack of infrastructure, education or security that the interior regions, Tunisia will need to attract investments and to produce competitive local businesses. Creating a genuinely level playing field and ending the interior regions' downward spiral might therefore require substantial positive discrimination. It might require major state investments in infrastructure and improvement of basic health, education and welfare services. Recent efforts at political decentralization may help in this regard, but more local government is not sufficient. While it might be able to better address local needs, it will both need to develop the administrative capacity and be equipped with the necessary financial means to address them.

This dire situation has two implications for the EU's democracy promotion policies and its interaction with civil society. In light of its budgetary constraints, the Tunisian government lacks the necessary room for manoeuvre for the investments necessary to revive the Tunisian economy in a way that benefits its marginalised regions. Hence it relies on substantial external support. As will be discussed in the following sections the EU's institutions and member states are Tunisia's biggest donor. The United States, which at least rhetorically commits to similar objectives as the EU when it comes to promoting democracy, is a major donor as well. However, Western actors promoting democracy and human rights – or at least claiming to do so – are increasingly facing other actors that promote alternative models and agendas. This both happens to a lesser extent and resonates less in Tunisia than some other parts of West Asia and North Africa. However, with the Gulf states increasingly asserting themselves in North Africa, financial assistance from and bilateral commercial relations with the Gulf states is becoming an increasingly relevant feature in Tunisia's external relations (Wolf 2019). A second implication relates to the priorities of both the EU and domestic actors: The dire economic situation means that democracy and human rights, and thus also those actors standing up for it, do not necessarily have the highest priority – both for Tunisian society at large as well as for external actors. In that sense, we see a repetition of a line of thinking that was, prior to 2011, prominent both in Tunisian society as well as in Europe: The notion that ultimately economic development is more important than democracy and human rights, and that perceived notions about those two sides being at least in the short term in competition with each other. And that in this competition democracy and human rights are ultimately of secondary relevance. In other words, there is a risk of a return to the EU's pre-2011 approach towards Tunisia.

5.2 The emergence of Euro-Mediterranean relations

Various EU member states have strong historical links to individual states in the Southern Mediterranean due to their colonial past. As an integral part of metropolitan France, Algeria was even part of the European Communities for the brief period between 1 January 1958 when the Treaty of Rome came into force and Algerian independence in 1962. However, even though there were some initiatives to increase Euro-Arab cooperation before (Gomez 2003), it took until the 1990s for the EU to get serious about developing a common approach towards its Southern neighbourhood. With Greece, Portugal and Spain joining in the 1980s, the EC got a new Mediterranean dimension and even direct land borders with Turkey in the East and Morocco in the West.²⁴ Both Turkey and Morocco even applied for membership of the European Communities in 1987, further increasing the pressure to engage with the Southern neighbourhood.

Driven by Spanish and French political entrepreneurship (Barbé 1996; Gillespie 1997), the newly created EU, its member states and twelve Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs)²⁵ from its Southern neighbourhood convened for a summit in 1995. The summit concluded with the signature of the Barcelona declaration that set in motion the so-called Barcelona process, also known as Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Its ambition was to turn the Mediterranean basin into “an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity,” an objective that would require “a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion of greater understanding between cultures.”²⁶ To that end and to some extent copying the 1973 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) (Barbé 1996, 26), the Barcelona declaration established three main objectives of the partnership, referred to as “baskets.” Creating a common area of peace and stability through reinforced political and security dialogue (“Political and security basket”), creating a zone of shared prosperity through economic and financial cooperation, the gradual establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area until 2010 and increased intra-regional cooperation between the Mediterranean countries

²⁴Spain has a direct land border with Morocco due to its enclaves Ceuta and Melilla.

²⁵These twelve states were Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

²⁶*Barcelona declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference*, Barcelona, 28.11.1995, <http://bit.ly/2CHpLQj> (accessed on 24.12.2018).

(“Economic and financial basket”) as well as increasing interaction and partnership between people and civil society from both shores through social, cultural and human exchanges (“Social, Cultural and Human Basket”).

To implement the objectives of the Barcelona process and provide a framework for political cooperation, the EU, its member states and the MPCs adopted Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements (EMAA). These agreements are governed through an Association Council organized at the ministerial level that makes high-level decisions. An Association Committee, consisting of sub-committees and working groups composed of senior officials from the EU and the MPC implement these decisions. Each EMAA also includes an essential element clause that – in theory – made the agreement conditional on all signatories’ adherence to democratic principles and fundamental rights. In practice, the suspension of an EMAA was hard to achieve though due to the requirement of unanimity in the Council of the European Union (Flaesch-Mougín 2000, 83). Moreover, despite its verbal commitment to democracy and human rights, the EU ultimately regularly prioritized stability and security (Pace 2009). Despite obvious violations of democratic principles and fundamental rights in partner countries in the Southern neighbourhood, no EMAA has been suspended yet.²⁷

In the context of the EU’s Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007, the EU increasingly saw a need to develop a more ambitious policy towards the new neighbourhood in the East. Meanwhile, there was a certain level of dissatisfaction with the Barcelona process which was perceived as too slow in and unable to meet the ambitious expectations it had raised (Danneußer 2006, 190). At the same time, European Commission felt that “enlargement has unarguably been the Union’s most successful foreign policy instrument.”²⁸ Hence, the idea was to try to replicate the positive experience of the central and eastern European countries’ transformation to democracy and market economy with those countries’ in the EU’s neighbourhood that did not have medium-term, or indeed any, membership perspective (Kelley 2006). As a result, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was born with the stated objective to “share the benefits of enlargement with neighbouring countries in strengthening

²⁷No agreement was negotiated with Libya and a draft EMAA negotiated with Syria in 2008 was never ratified. EU-Syrian cooperation based on the 1978 Cooperation Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Syrian Arab Republic was suspended in May 2011.

²⁸European Commission. *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*. Brussels, 1.4.2003, <http://bit.ly/2LEPdc6> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

stability, security and well-being for all.”²⁹ Initially conceived for some of the new Eastern neighbours to avoid new dividing lines on the European continent (O’Connell 2008, 116), it was expanded to the Southern neighbourhood upon the insistence on Southern European governments. In contrast to the EMP’s regional and multilateral logic, the ENP followed the same, rather bilateral logic as the EU’s enlargement procedure. The idea was to incentivise partner countries to reform their political and economic systems, gradually take over parts of the EU’s body of legislation and thus integrate their economies with the EU’s single market. European Commission President Romano Prodi promised that the EU would be willing to share “everything but institutions” with its neighbours – not excluding “the possibility of developing new structures with our neighbours at a later stage.” His objective in establishing the ENP was to see the emergence of a “ring of friends surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours.”³⁰

The extent to which the ENP was modelled on the EU’s enlargement policy was also informed by practical concerns and institutional development. With the by far biggest enlargement of the EU being completed in 2004, neither the personnel of the Directorate General (DG) responsible nor the Commissioner at its helm were used at full capacity anymore. Meanwhile, the DG for external relations (which was incorporated into the EEAS after the Lisbon Treaty) was quite busy. Hence, the ENP was put in the same DG as enlargement and thus designed and implemented by those officials who had previously developed and implemented the accession procedure (Maurer 2007, 4).

Under the framework of the ENP, the EU negotiates Action Plans with partner countries which outline concrete objectives for political, social or economic reforms and offers financial support and other incentives in exchange for significant progress towards them. Hence, the EU tries to replicate the enlargement’s “carrot and stick strategy” (Allen 1991, 4) and “regatta approach” (J. Smith 2005, 127), with more reforms being rewarded with more market access and more financial assistance and countries being free to set their own speed of reform. However, the biggest carrot the EU can offer, that is full membership, was obviously not on the table. Moreover, by comparison with the quite substantial financial

²⁹European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the Council on the Commission proposals for action plans under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)*. Brussels, 9.12.2004, <http://bit.ly/2ZqMTLd> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

³⁰Romano Prodi. *A Wider Europe – A Proximity Policy as the key to stability*. Brussels, 6.12.2002, <http://bit.ly/2Rp4TFF> (accessed on: 24.12.2018).

support given to enlargement candidates, considerably less funding was made available for the MPCs. As Smith (2005, 772) put it, “the ENP requires much of the neighbours, and offers only vague incentives in return.”

In trying to replicate the outcomes of enlargement, the EU also drew upon on operational experiences made in that context. For example, a key tool to achieving reforms in accession candidate countries and upgrading their administrative capacities were so-called twinning projects. These projects involve public administration officials from EU member states jointly working with officials from the beneficiary country to support the implementation of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. With the establishment of the ENP, this tool was also made available to some countries of the EU’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.³¹ Other instruments were taken over from the EU’s development assistance toolbox.

The first financial instrument underpinning Barcelona process and ENP were the EU’s MEDA I and MEDA II programmes,³² which provided €16 billion to projects for bilateral or regional cooperation between 1995 and 2006. In 2007, MEDA was merged with the TACIS programme that supported the transition to market economy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to form the new European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which was replaced by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) in 2014. Distribution of funding is to some extent conditional on partner states compliance with social and institutional reforms but also – even though this is not officially acknowledged – potentially also with EU interests. Rather than a normative power, one might thus conceive of the EU as “a realist actor in normative clothes” (Seeberg 2009, 81).

In 2008, the EMP was relaunched as Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) with the ambition to revitalise the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue set up twelve years earlier in Barcelona. In his Toulon speech³³ during the 2007 election campaign for the French presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy proposed a political union of all states bordering the Mediterranean. Packaged in rhetoric about the historical relevance of the region as the origin of civilisation, “Sarkozy’s Grand Design” (Nash 2007, 475) was primarily directed at domestic audiences. It was supposed to attract those deploring the waning relevance of France as an international actor

³¹European Commission. *Twinning*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2Th1BBx> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

³²Originally, MEDA stood for *Mesures d’accompagnement financières et techniques* (Accompanying financial and technical measures).

³³Nicolas Sarkozy. *Déclaration de M. Nicolas Sarkozy sur son souhait de voir se réunifier l’espace méditerranéen pour le remettre au cœur de la civilisation occidentale et de la mondialisation*. Toulon, 7.2.2007. <http://bit.ly/2XJybhX> (accessed 17.3.2019).

and proposing to counter it through an implicitly French-led Mediterranean Union that would enable France to reclaim its role as a dominant power in “its backyard.” However, the exclusion of the EU and those member states not bordering the Mediterranean was not received well. Following his election, Sarkozy agreed to make it an EU project instead. Acknowledging that its own previous ambitious objectives in the context of the Barcelona process had not been met and that genuine regional cooperation was hard to achieve, the EU decided to make it less of grand political project and more of a tool for pragmatic co-operation. In that context, it was also watered down from a “Mediterranean Union” to a “Union for the Mediterranean.”

As its Secretary-General Nasser Kamel put it, the Union for the Mediterranean strives to be “not a project of union, but a union of projects.”³⁴ In other words, it aims at promoting and supporting projects set up by smaller groups of willing states. These projects would then focus on solving important but less politically sensitive issues affecting. However, choosing this more pragmatic path did not prevent cooperation and institutional development from being hampered by politically highly symbolic questions, such as how to refer to the Palestinian occupied territories.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 left the EU’s Mediterranean policy in tatters. In spite of the EU’s continuous rhetoric on promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the region, EU policy does not appear to have encouraged or enabled, let alone caused peoples’ uprisings against the region’s oppressive regimes. Meanwhile, the reaction of the EU and member states with interests in the region remained hesitant at best. French foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie vacationed in Tunisia over Christmas and New Years’ Eve as the protests were underway and took a flight on the private jet of Aziz Miled, a Tunisian businessman closely linked to the Ben Ali clan. Two days before Ben Ali fled the country, she announced in the French National Assembly that France was offering to share the French security forces’ know-how on crowd control with Tunisian authorities. On the same day, her ministry authorised shipments of tear gas canisters and bullet-proof vests to the regime,³⁵ although ultimately no such shipments were made as they were blocked on the

³⁴Giulia Magri. *Union of the Mediterranean: ‘We are not a project of union, but a union of projects’*. Malta Independent, <http://bit.ly/2XJXUXT> (accessed on 14.06.2019).

³⁵Brian Love. *France okayed tear gas as Tunisia revolt peaked*. Reuters, 1.2.2011, <https://reut.rs/2CHcIyk> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

orders of President Sarkozy on the day Ben Ali's left Tunisia.³⁶ Meanwhile, Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had embraced Muammar Gaddafi over the years preceding the uprisings in order to secure Italian access to oil as well as Libyan investments in Italy's struggling economy. Pressed by journalists on whether he had been in touch with Gaddafi since the beginning of the Libyan uprising, Berlusconi stated that he did not want to "disturb" him.³⁷

The EU and its top diplomatic personnel remained rather silent and ambiguous, employing what seemed like a "wait and see" strategy. On the day on which Ben Ali would depart, High Representative Ashton and ENP Commissioner Füle just issued a 71-word statement, urging "all parties to show restraint" and emphasizing that "dialogue is key."³⁸ EU member states reacted with a cacophony of voices, with several members and a small group of members making statements on the situation and bringing in ideas on future relations with the Southern neighbourhood. Even though leaders in Egypt and Tunisia were already gone, and despite the increasing violence in Libya, it took until 28 February for member states to finally agree to sanction Gaddafi's regime with an arms embargo as well as visa bans for and freezing the assets of those responsible for the violent crackdown on the protests.

Acknowledging the limited success of its previous policies, the EU pledged to review its activities and to assist the transitioning countries in order to foster the democratic transformation. ENP Commissioner Füle promised to "show humility about the past"³⁹ and High Representative Catherine Ashton promised to "acknowledge past mistakes and listen without imposing."⁴⁰ In March 2011, the EEAS and the European Commission proposed a "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" that re-iterated the "more for more" incentive of more reforms being awarded by more cooperation and support. To be more precise, the EU promised what HR Ashton coined the

³⁶Gregory Viscusi. *France Blocked Delivery of Riot-Control Equipment to Tunisia*, Bloomberg, 19.1.2011, <https://bloom.bg/2EY7sJ6> (accessed 22.12.2018).

³⁷Deepa Babington. *Berlusconi under fire for not "disturbing" Gaddafi*. Reuters, 20.2.2011, <https://reut.rs/2EZJqwx> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

³⁸Catherine Ashton, Štefan Füle. *Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the events on Tunisia*. Brussels, 14.1.2011, <http://bit.ly/2EXAnfl> (accessed on 4.6.2016).

³⁹Štefan Füle. *Speech on the Recent Events in North Africa*. Brussels, 28.02.2011, <http://bit.ly/2CzWVBe> (accessed on 27.10.2014).

⁴⁰Catherine Ashton. *Address to the European Parliament on the United Nations General Assembly, the Middle East Peace Process and the Arab spring*. Strasbourg, 27.09.2011, <http://bit.ly/2BR2UQP> (accessed on 27.10.2014).

“three Ms:” Money, mobility, and market access. These promises were followed up with the establishment of the SPRING programme (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) to support southern Neighbourhood countries in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. In addition to more financial assistance, reforms were also set to be rewarded by easier legal migration to Europe and the negotiation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) going far beyond the previous EMAs.

5.3 EU-Tunisian relations before and after the uprisings

5.3.1 Historical background

In the context of the EU’s programmes and frameworks directed at the Southern Mediterranean neighbourhood, Tunisia was one of the countries most interested in making use of the opportunities offered by the EU. Tunisia was the first MPC to ratify an Association Agreement with the EU and has been and continues to be one of the biggest beneficiaries when it comes to both technical and financial assistance. In light of its secular nature and its willingness to engage politically and economically with Europe, the Ben Ali regime was held in relatively high regard in Brussels, with Tunisia being seen as the EU’s “bon élève” (Hibou 1999), that is its “good student,” in the region. While heading the International Monetary Fund (IMF), French politician Dominique Strauss-Khan saw in Ben Ali’s Tunisia the “best model to be followed by many emerging countries.”⁴¹

The sympathies for and relatively amicable relations with the Ben Ali regime were illustrated by Europe’s hesitant reaction in the early stages of the Tunisian uprising, including the conduct of French foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie discussed above. While public outrage ultimately forced Alliot-Marie to resign, her conduct was a logical continuation of decades of French and European policy. In fact, according to former Italian spy chief Fulvio Martini, Ben Ali’s constitutional coup against Bourguiba had been orchestrated by Italy’s prime minister and Socialist heavyweight Bettino Craxi as well as foreign minister and Christian Democracy heavyweight Giulio Andreotti.⁴² Following the Tangentopoli corruption scandal in 1994, Craxi fled to Tunisia to evade justice where he lived under Ben Ali’s

⁴¹Le Figaro. *DSK et Ben Ali bons amis*. 22.11.2008, <http://bit.ly/31vG7pr> (accessed on 15.5.2019).

⁴²Vincenzo Nigro. *Tunisia, il golpe italiano*. La Repubblica, 11.10.1999, <http://bit.ly/2GOXkUB> (accessed on 22.12.2018).

protection until his death in 2000.⁴³ The French presidents François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy were both politically and rhetorically very supportive of the Ben Ali regime,⁴⁴ drawing particular attention to Tunisia's economic development. When confronted with the regime's human rights violations, former French president Jacques Chirac stated that "the first human rights are to eat, to be taken care of, to receive an education and to have shelter" and that "it must be recognized that Tunisia is far ahead of many countries"⁴⁵ in this regard.

Marc Pierini, a French diplomat and head of the EU delegation in Tunis from 2002 to 2006 was more vocal in reminding the regime of its obligations with regards to human rights and democracy. He also made an effort to support Tunisian civil society and did not shy away from openly criticizing the regime, even doing so on Tunisian TV. Older Tunisian activists still remember him as an example of the kind of positive role the EU could play and, in their views, to some extent did play in the past – in contrast to its member states. However, several civil society activists expressed disappointment that following Pierini's departure, the EU became far less invested in supporting them.⁴⁶ To mend relations with the Ben Ali regime that had suffered during his tenure, Brussels instructed Pierini's successor to become less intrusive and to be as "non-committal as possible" (Michalak 2013, 121).

5.3.2 Key issues in EU-Tunisian relations

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, cooperation with Tunisia became a priority for the EU. Attention and support increased further once it emerged as the only country that continued to develop positively when other transitions failed. A sense of urgency to ensure at least one successful transition as well as the fact that Egypt and other Arab countries became less willing to engage with the EU – and notably to accept its conditions on democratic reforms attached to EU engagement – led to further increases in both EU financial and personnel resources being devoted to Tunisia. Indeed, according to one EU official, the

⁴³Ben Ali's Tunisia conveniently never negotiated an extradition treaty with Italy and Craxi built a large villa in Hammamet, one of the country's most popular tourist destinations, while still in office.

⁴⁴La Depeche. *Les déclarations des dirigeants français sur la Tunisie depuis 20 ans*. 21.1.2011, <http://bit.ly/2TgXjKw> (22.12.2018).

⁴⁵José Garçon. *Droits de l'homme en Tunisie: Chirac blanchit Ben Ali*. Libération. 5.12.2003. <http://bit.ly/31wdSXX> (accessed on 15.5.2019).

⁴⁶Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in May (32), July (48) and September 2015 (80).

country is sometimes internally referred to as a “pilot for the region”⁴⁷ – a chance to create a success story that might inspire people and elites in other parts of the Arab world.

Changes to EU policy followed the “three Ms.”⁴⁸ For starters, the EU substantially upgraded its financial support. Between 2011 and 2017, the EU provided €2.4 billion to Tunisia, of which €1.6 billion came in grants and €800 million in macro-financial assistance. An allocation between €504 million and €616 million under the ENI is foreseen for the period from 2017 to 2020.⁴⁹ In addition, Tunisia got access to other financing instruments. In terms of increased market access, the EU asymmetrically liberalised trade in some sectors and offered Tunisia the negotiation of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) that would go far beyond existing trade arrangements. Overall, the EU has little to gain or lose through changes to its trade relationship with Tunisia as it accounts for less than one per cent of its trade volume. Hence, some of its officials maintain that the EU’s main objective in enhancing EU-Tunisian trade is to contribute to stabilising the country economically.⁵⁰ As almost 80 per cent of its exports go to the EU and more than 50 per cent of its import come from there, the stakes are much higher for Tunisia. As an upper-middle-income country, Tunisia does not benefit from the “everything but arms” regime through which the EU grants complete access to its markets to all less developed countries. Negotiations to further liberalise trade came to a halt in 2010 and have started again when negotiations for the DCFTA began in 2015. In the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks and the subsequent fall in tourism revenues, the EU unilaterally increased quotas for tariff-free olive oil imports from Tunisia to the EU. However, these increases faced substantial opposition from Southern European member states who are Tunisia’s main competitor in this sector. As a result, unilateral liberalisation on behalf of the EU remained limited in scope and the Southern European opposition to it cast a shadow over the EU’s ability to liberalise trade in agricultural products in the context of the DCFTA.

Even before negotiations for DCFTA began in 2015, it was controversially discussed within Tunisia. Scepticism was and continues to be driven by both ideological opposition and a self-preservation drive of economic elites seeking to maintain a status quo favourable

⁴⁷Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (18).

⁴⁸Money, mobility and market access, as discussed in the previous section.

⁴⁹European Commission. *Tunisia*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2SzWZ9y> (accessed 24.12.2018).

⁵⁰Interviews with EU officials from the EU delegation and the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5 and 6) and in Tunis in April (9) and May 2015 (13).

to their interests. However, it was also driven by pragmatic concerns in parts of the business community, the trade unions and civil society. To begin with, there is a sentiment that the Tunisian economy is not ready for further trade liberalisation with the EU, let alone the inclusion in its common market. Due to Tunisia's lack of competitiveness, entire business sectors are seen to be at risk of being pushed out of business by EU competitors. It should be mentioned in this context that the DCFTA is supposed to protect the Tunisian economy as it is going to be asymmetric and progressive, with the EU opening its own market immediately while Tunisia does so progressively and will have the right to secure exceptions in sensitive and fragile sectors. However, previous experiences with the Ben Ali regime granting major tax breaks to European corporations or selling concessions for the extraction of raw materials under value have reduced trust in European intentions. Trust is further undermined by the EU's subsidy regime. Notably, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) risks continuing to distort the level playing field in the economic sector in which Tunisian businesses would be most competitive on the EU's markets. Southern European producers' reaction to minor increases in quotas for olive oil and European farmers' protests whenever the future of CAP is debated give a taste of the political capital that the EU would need to invest in order to create an actual level playing field in this sector. Finally, the lack of freedom of movement between the EU and Tunisia potentially impedes on Tunisian businesses' ability to offer goods and services on EU markets. As one civil society activist put it, "if a Tunisian business wins a contract, it might not be able to deliver because its employees might not manage to obtain a visa to enter the EU."⁵¹

Increased mobility for Tunisians had been one of the key promises made in 2011 and it did lead to the EU-Tunisian mobility partnership that was finalised in 2014. However, many Tunisians feel that there is a major gap between the promises that the EU made and what it eventually delivered. The "mobility partnership" the EU negotiated with Tunisia in early 2014 has come as a major disappointment to Tunisians who were hoping that obtaining a visa would get easier. "They made it easier for rich people. But rich people could get a visa quite easily before as well"⁵² says one activist. In the eyes of one employee of a CSO, it would have been much more honest to have named the agreement "immobility partnership."⁵³

⁵¹Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (26).

⁵²Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (21).

⁵³Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (20).

5.3.3 Governance of EU-Tunisian relations

The ways in which EU-Tunisian relations were governed remained largely unchanged in the aftermath of the uprisings. As indicated above, the Euro Mediterranean Association Agreement (EMAA) between the EU and Tunisia was concluded in 1995 and is in effect since 1998. The EMAA set up an EU Tunisia Association Council which is constituted by an annual meeting on the ministerial level. In these meetings, Action Plans are developed that set the partner countries' short to medium term reform agenda for the next three to five years. These Action Plans reflect both sides' interests as well as the partner countries' needs and capabilities.⁵⁴ The Association Council is complemented with an Association Committee composed of senior officials from both sides who are charged with the implementation of the Agreement as well as the objectives set out in the Action Plans. Under the authority of the Association Committee, ten sub-committees working on specific policy areas have been established. These subcommittee meetings are usually held once per year in the EU delegation in Tunisia. During these meetings, usually Tunis-based EU officials with technical expertise in the respective field and their counterparts from the Tunisian government jointly develop "operational clauses" that define the concrete actions to be taken and objectives to be achieved. Hence, the EU delegation is the main source of interaction with Tunisian interlocutors. As such, its officials are also influencing how these interlocutors view the EU.

Just like other EU delegations, the Tunisian delegation is organised in different sections, including a political section and a cooperation section. The political section is linked to the EEAS and engages in high-level political dialogue with the Tunisian government. Meanwhile, the cooperation section organises the EU Commission's projects and programmes directed at state institutions and non-state actors such as the private sector or civil society. Cooperation between the political section and the cooperation section is not always easy as both are grounded in different administrative cultures. Cooperation section staff tend to have previously been working for the EU Commission and are experts rather than diplomats. Meanwhile, political section staff tend to be from the EEAS, the Council or seconded from national foreign services. In the words of one official, "both think that they understand what is going on – cooperation because they give out the money and interact with people

⁵⁴European Commission. *EU/Tunisia Action Plan*. Brussels, 18.8.2015, <http://bit.ly/2GOYf7v> (accessed 12.6.2015).

on the ground and political because they do the analysis.”⁵⁵ While the heads of section are meeting regularly, interaction on the operational level appears to be insufficient at times. A new official from the political section who was working on a document that was supposed to be drafted together with the cooperation section indicated that it was hard to set up joint meetings. Eventually, her superior told her that in order to set up a meeting including representatives from both sections, she would need to go via Brussels.⁵⁶ Since there is also sometimes insufficient interaction between both sections on an informal level, officials do not always know what is going on in the respective other section, and at times only find out by chance rather than through formal channels and procedures.⁵⁷ This can lead to incoherencies in the EU delegation’s interaction with others, that further contribute to existing confusion about the EU’s structural complexities among the EU’s Tunisian interlocutors.

5.3.4 Tunisian civil society’s perspectives on the EU

As part of its democracy promotion agenda towards Tunisia, the EU has vowed to put more emphasis on assisting civil society and has introduced corresponding tools and upgraded existing ones. In addition to providing more financial support, the EU also made more of an effort to consult civil society. Notably, sub-committee meetings are preceded by an EU consultation with civil society organisations that are given the chance to provide their perspective on the respective issues to be discussed. In Tunisia, these consultations are held in a slightly different setting. Rather than just bringing the EU and Tunisian civil society together, they are also including representatives of the Tunisian government – giving activists the chance to address them directly and confront them on their obligations in the presence of EU officials. As will be discussed in chapters seven and eight, the practices employed in the context of these consultations have an effect on the structure and nature of Tunisian civil society as well as activists’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the EU.⁵⁸

Contrasting with what research has found out about other Arab countries (Springborg 2007, 184), third countries more generally (Lucarelli 2007, 260; Poletti 2007, 275; Stivachtis 2012, 71) and indeed some of the EU’s own members (Baglioni and Hurrelmann

⁵⁵ Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (18).

⁵⁶ Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (18).

⁵⁷ Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (10).

⁵⁸ Various interviews with Tunisian activists held in Tunis between March and September 2015, in October 2018 and in April 2019.

2016, 114), Tunisian civil society activists tend to have a fairly good knowledge of the European Union, including its institutional set-up as well as the main political issues the EU was facing at the time of the interviews. Generally speaking, the older generation of activists tends to be better informed about and more interested in the EU than the generation that emerged during and after the 2011 uprisings. Asked for the sources of their knowledge, most civil society activists cited Tunisia's bonds with Europe in general and France in particular. Among the older generation of activists, many have also experienced stays in EU member states, for instance during their studies, while visiting family members, working abroad or being exiled. Among the younger generation of activists, some lived abroad and decided to return to Tunisia after the uprising to get involved in the countries' transition. In fact, Tunisian civil society activists said that they have permanent residence permits for France or even hold citizenship. Tunisia also has a quite significant EU-based expat community, which is reflected by the fact that 15 of Tunisia's 217 members of parliament are elected in European constituencies.⁵⁹ Moreover, activists cited French and other European media as key sources of information for both international and Tunisian developments. Finally, many activists mentioned that they had been invited to Brussels and other parts of Europe at some point. Older activists frequently mentioned the Barcelona Process and the ensuing increased interaction with both EU institutions as well as with European civil society.

Contrasting with their relatively good general knowledge of the EU, civil society's understanding of its concrete activities in and policies towards Tunisia is often rather vague. There is a broad sentiment that the EU is very active in supporting the Tunisian transition and that Tunisia enjoys close relations with it. However, few respondents were able to name concrete projects and programmes supported by or executed by the EU unless they related directly to their own work. The lack of detailed knowledge might be partly explained by the fact that much of both the EU's projects implemented in Tunisia and its intergovernmental interaction with the Tunisian government are of a highly technical nature and thus not very salient. However, various activists explicitly mentioned what they felt was a rather insufficient EU communication strategy. This is partly acknowledged by officials working

⁵⁹Union interparlementaire. *Tunisie - Majlis Nawwab ash-Sha'ab*. <http://bit.ly/2MPwles> (accessed on 12.4.2019).

at the EU delegation who confirmed that their communications are non-ideal, citing a lack of staff and resources for such purposes.⁶⁰

At the same time, there seems to be a general sentiment among activists that the EU's member states are ultimately crucial for EU decision-making. As one activist puts it "the EU is what its members make of it."⁶¹ This may be partly due to Tunisia's close historical, political, cultural and societal ties with individual EU members, particularly France, whose influence is omnipresent in Tunisia's coastal urban north. The French embassy is a landmark building located prominently at the Western end of Avenue Bourguiba. Its size and location remain a powerful symbol of the influence it yielded in the past. A further landmark building hosting the Institut Français in downtown Tunis was inaugurated in 2015 and received significant media coverage. Meanwhile, other individual member states have also increased their engagement and their visibility in Tunisia. For instance, all German political foundations ("Stiftungen") are now represented in Tunis, with the Social-Democrats aligned Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Tunis office being the foundation's largest office outside of Germany.⁶² At the same time, the EU's activities are often either not very visible or not clearly attributed to the EU. For example, many EU-funded projects are executed by actors from specific member states, for example, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) or the French Agence française de développement (AFD). Such projects are then often associated with the member state in question rather than with the EU. At the same time, the EU is often associated with controversial decisions that individual members bear responsibility for. Notably, various interviewees mentioned the conduct of former French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie or the Franco-British led invasion of Libya when asked about their view of the EU's role in North Africa. Similarly, they mentioned that European states and companies gladly did business with pre-2011 Tunisia that benefited the Ben Ali regime and the countries' elites but where detrimental to the Tunisians population's interests.

And yet, at the same time, the EU still tends to be seen more favourably than its member states or other relevant players such as the United States, China, Russia or the Gulf States. Most activists see the EU as both benevolent and self-interested in its relations with

⁶⁰Interviews with officials from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April (9) and June 2015 (40).

⁶¹Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (58).

⁶²Interview with a member of staff of the Tunis office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, held in Tunis in April 2015 (8).

Tunisia as well as with external partners in general. While it is widely assumed that the EU's self-interests ultimately trump its benevolent ambitions, these ambitions are still given some credit. One activist described the EU as "as benevolent as possible, as self-interested as necessary."⁶³ At the same time, various activists emphasized that they considered the primacy of self-interest as normal and legitimate in international relations. In fact, these activists seem to have what might be referred to as a rather realist view on how international relations works and indeed of how it should work. Hence, rather than criticising the EU for wanting to safeguard its interests, they would rather criticise it for allegedly unwillingly and unknowingly undermining its own medium to long term interests through non-ideal policies in Tunisia. A general notion was that the EU fails to understand the extent to which a well-governed, stable and fairly affluent Tunisia is in its own interest, particularly in light of the refugee crisis as well as the chaos and the increasing activities of the Islamic State in Libya. As Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, the president of Doustourna network of civil society organisations, put it: "It is in their interest to help. We are right next to Italy. Whether migration or terrorism – our problems are the EU's problems." At the same time, the EU is accused of not sufficiently understanding how urgently Tunisia needs external support to remain stable. "They don't get the emergency of the situation,"⁶⁴ Mbarek continued.

One of the key tenets of Manners (2002, 2008) "Normative Power Europe" concept is the attractiveness of the EU's norms and values. And in fact, the notion of Europe and Tunisia sharing the same civic norms and values is indeed widely spread in Tunisian civil society and beyond. However, while some activists explicitly understand them as "European," other categorically reject this label and declare them to be "universal" instead. This also translates into discourses on whether it is legitimate for the EU to use its power to pressure the Tunisian government to reform. The imposition of what is seen as "neoliberal" policy in the context of the DCFTA is widely rejected among activists. Some activists express that such policies could work in principle, but insist that they would have to be preceded by a more substantial support and preparation that raises Tunisian businesses to a level that enables them to compete in European markets. In contrast, there is far more sympathy for the EU to use aid conditionality to pressure the Tunisian government to implement legislative changes in accordance to European or, as some put it, universal civic norms and values.

⁶³Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (58).

⁶⁴Interview with Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, president of Doustourna, held in Tunis in June 2015 (44).

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter set out to provide background on the Tunisian transition and its various challenges, and to put it in the context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and EU-Tunisian relations. One of the key takeaways is that the Tunisian transition to democracy has the potential to succeed, but still faces major challenges on various levels. Its success will not just require support for the construction of its democratic institution as well as all those domestic actors pushing for it, but also support for its socio-economic transition. EU support may be crucial to its success but also bears risks. Europe had been advocating human rights and democracy as well as liberal economic reform in its Southern neighbourhood for decades. Despite its oppressive regime, the EU actually saw Ben Ali's Tunisia as its "bon élève" and was caught completely off guard when the Tunisian people took to the streets to demand what the EU had been talking about but not sufficiently acting upon for almost two decades. With security, migration management and progressive social reforms being among the EU's main concerns and trade liberalization and liberal reform of the Tunisian economy continuing to be its primary prescription, there is a risk that it will repeat past mistakes. If the DCFTA only leads to freer, but not to fairer trade between Tunisia and its Northern neighbours, it could worsen the country's socio-economic crisis.

It is important to keep this in mind when discussing Tunisian civil society and its interaction with the EU. While a substantial part of it is economically rather left-wing and hence rather sceptical of the DCFTA, the nature of its activism involves that it tends to be mainly focused on civic rights and democratic reform. At the same time, it tends to be a vanguard for very progressive social reforms that are nowhere near having a majority within the country. With its own focus on human rights and democracy, the EU further encourages civil society's ambitious objectives in that regard. Hence, there is a risk that those Tunisians who both reject progressive social reform and at the same time suffer from socio-economic hardship might become disenchanted with the democratic transition that has coincided with both. This group of Tunisians doing so is quite substantial, and particularly big in the country's marginalized and more conservative interior regions.

This chapter has explained and discussed the tools and structures through which EU-Tunisian relations are governed in general. On that basis, the thesis will now move towards its key point of its analysis, that is the practices at the nexus of Tunisian civil society and

the EU in the context of democracy promotion. The following chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the practices that structure Tunisian civil society and its trajectories of change. Chapters seven and eight will then study the practices of interaction between the EU and Tunisian civil society, and elaborate on their impact on the latter. Based on that, the above-mentioned concerns will be further addressed and elaborated in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 6

Civil society engagement in Tunisia

The last chapter provided an extensive overview of the historical background of Tunisia, its democratic transition as well as the EU's activities in and practices of supporting this transition. On that basis, the following three chapters are going to map and discuss the various practices that occur at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion. This first empirical chapter¹ will delve deeper into civil society engagement in Tunisia as well as the practices that are enacted in its context. As pointed out in the previous chapter, civil society is often seen as a key factor in the Tunisian transitions' relative success, with the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet's mediation during the 2013 crisis cited as case in point. However, such discourses attributing major relevance to civil society in the Tunisian transition process sometimes create the impression of it being a somewhat monolithic political force. However, as discussed in chapter three, civil society often comprises a diverse range of different types of actors with different interests, views on and approaches towards activism. These differences, and the different practices that have emerged as a result, may lead to tensions, divisions and conflicts between activists and organisations. As will be discussed in this chapter, this is the case in Tunisia. A first fault-line is the origin of CSOs, with divisions existing between national NGOs as well as international and foreign ones. Secondly, there are differences between organisations on whether they rate ideals or pragmatic concerns higher. In a context in which external actors make large amounts of funding available for civil society, further tensions relate to whether organisations are independent and self-determined or whether their agendas are influenced

¹A version of this chapter has been published as Weilandt, Ragnar. 2019. *Divisions within Post-2011 Tunisia's Secular Civil Society*. Democratization 26(6): 959–74.

by donors' objectives or perceived to be. A fourth fault-line relates to the difference between professional and voluntary engagement. While similar tensions have been observed in the literature, today's civil society in Tunisia adds a dimension of division that has not yet received major attention – the faultline between different generations of activists.

Research on civil society engagement and democratisation mainly focuses on whether, to what extent and how the former influences the latter. However, despite hopes that autocratic regimes in the Arab world would be increasingly “forced to retreat before a vibrant civil society” (Kubba 2000, 85), they proved to be stable until the 2011 popular uprisings. Meanwhile, it has been questioned that civil society in the region, understood in the classic sense of being the realm of associational life, played a major role in enabling or facilitating, let alone causing these uprisings (Abd El Wahab 2012; Cavatorta and Durac 2011, 181). At the same time, the uprising itself has strongly influenced Tunisian civil society and its practices. In addition to and to a certain extent transcending the fault lines indicated above, a major division can now be observed between the pre- and the post-revolutionary generation of civil society activists and organisations. The National Dialogue may be credited with a crucial role in saving the Tunisian transition at one of its most critical junctures. However, as will be discussed in this chapter, it has been criticized for not sufficiently including the new generation that played a crucial role in making this transition possible in the first place and for not sufficiently addressing this generation's challenges.

While young people played a major role in bringing down the Ben Ali regime, post-2011 Tunisia is largely dominated by older generations. The country's first freely elected president Béji Caïd Essebsi won the presidential vote in late 2014 at the rather advanced age of 88 years. Large parts of the governmental and administrative elite belong to a generation that has little in common with the under-25-year-olds that make up for around 40 per cent of the Tunisian population.² This dominance of the old generation might be seen as one of the reasons for the youth's limited participation in the parliamentary elections (Yerkes 2017). It might also be understood as a factor that draws many young Tunisians to civil society as an alternative to party political engagement (Honwana 2011).

But although young people are increasingly engaging in civil society, many feel that their structural exclusion extends into this realm. In fact, there is a generational gap in post-2011

²Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook: Tunisia*. Washington, 3.12.2018, <http://bit.ly/2SkD1je> (accessed on 26.12.2018).

Tunisian civil society between those activists that have been engaging before 2011 and those who started to get active during and after the 2010/2011 uprising. This split is best symbolised by the relations between Tunisian Human Rights League (Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme, LTDH) and Al Bawsala, an NGO that monitors the Tunisian parliament and provides citizens with access to information about political decision-making processes. These two organisations might be considered as among the most relevant representatives of each generation. In 2015, while much of the research for this thesis was conducted, both organisations were based in the same building in downtown Tunis' Avenue Habib Bourguiba. In order to meet, activists of either organisation only had to go one floor up or down. Yet, activists from both the LTDH and Al Bawsala said that their interaction remained rather limited,³ just like interaction between both generations has been more generally.

This chapter sets out to examine why this is the case. To that end, it starts by exploring the situation of Tunisian civil society under the Ben Ali regime. It shows how the oppressive practices of the regime's security apparatus led to the emergence of different sets of practices through which activists and associations navigated the restrictive political context. It then moves towards civil society's role in the uprisings that brought down Ben Ali in 2010/2011. On that basis, it then explores and maps the post-2011 fault lines existing between the various factions of Tunisian civil society and traces how they related to past and present practices of activists and associations, Tunisian authorities as well as various actors.

6.1 Before the uprising: Manoeuvring authoritarian constraints

Since the foundation of the Tunisian Republic, civil society has played a prominent albeit slightly ambivalent role in the country's politics and society. On the one hand, associational engagement and citizens' mobilisation was explicitly encouraged by Habib Bourguiba, the founding father and first president of the Tunisian Republic. Bourguiba aimed at channelling such engagement towards his "civilizational" project of modernisation and national development. At the same time, however, he made civil society subject to tight state control and thus strongly curtailed its autonomy as well as its ability to contest his regime. Bourguiba's strategy involved the organisation of the countries' major political and social forces

³Interviews with senior members of Al Bawsala and LTDH, Tunis, July (46), August (50) and September 2015 (78, 80).

into monopolistic corporatist associations geared towards mobilising Tunisians to support his agenda (Bellin 1995, 126). For example, the founders of the Tunisian National Women's Union (Union Nationale des Femmes de Tunisie, UNFT) were linked to the ruling Neo Dustur party and aimed at educating Tunisian women about the rights that Bourguiba's progressive "Personal Status Code" laws gave them (Perkins 2014, 142). Similarly, the UTICA and the National Union of Tunisian Farmers (Union Nationale des Agriculteurs Tunisiens, UNAT), which had been found prior to independence, became a tool to advance the national economy (Perkins 2014, 150). Bourguiba also subordinated the UGTT, which had been created in 1946 as a trade union but also played a key role in the struggle for independence and enjoyed substantial prestige within the population as a result (Yousfi 2015, 34f). While these organisations' leadership was usually chosen or manipulated by the regime, the nature of their activities involved that their interests diverged at times from those of the regime. Hence, they were forced into a balancing act between pursuing their members' objectives and those of the government. In the rare cases in which organisations or their leaders became too potent or too disobedient, the regime reacted swiftly. This happened most notably on the "Black Thursday" in 1978, when a general strike led to a crackdown on the UGTT and a purge of its leadership (Vandewalle 1988).

Over time, these corporatist organisations were complemented by government-sponsored non-governmental organisations (GONGO). This practice involved state-linked actors masquerading as civil society to influence the population according to the regime's interests while pretending towards foreign partners and donors that the political system allowed for civil society engagement (Martin 2015, 803). According to one study,⁴ Tunisia had 9969 associations in January 2011, although a significant part of them existed primarily on paper. However, according to various Tunisian activists, a handful of those CSOs that existed before 2011 may be considered as genuinely independent associations promoting democracy and human rights. Notably, these CSOs included the LTDH, the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (CNLT), the Tunisian Women's Association for Democracy (ATFD) and the Tunisian Women's Association for Research on Development (AFTURD), as well as the local branch of Amnesty International.⁵ Prior to the 2011 uprising, these genuinely

⁴Foundation for the Future. *Study on Civil Society Organisations in Tunisia*. Amman, 1.1.2013, <http://bit.ly/2QPr2gK> (accessed on 30.7.2017).

⁵Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in June (42), July (46, 48, 49) and September 2015 (75).

independent associations and their activists were regularly subjected to the regime's practices of intimidation, harassment and persecution. This occurred both directly through the political police forces, but also indirectly with the regime using its control over the public and parts of the private sector against activists. In some cases, members of independent organisations and their family members were intimidated by their employers. At times, they would not be able to book venues for their activities or would get their reservations cancelled shortly before events. Their activities would be either ignored or smeared by a media landscape directly or indirectly controlled by the regime. Some activists would be jailed or forced to operate underground or from exile.⁶ Despite a brief period of liberalisation following Ben Ali's 1987 "constitutional coup" against Bourguiba, these authoritarian practices remained a defining element in shaping Tunisian civil society until the 2011 uprising.

In order to avoid arrest as an individual activist and to ensure their associations' continued existence, civil society resorted to different practices to manoeuvre the restrictive environment while at the same time trying to maintain autonomy and influence. These practices emerged in reaction to response to government practices but were also the result of personal dispositions and experiences of those. As will be discussed later in this chapter, they laid some of the grounds for some of the competing practices that emerged within civil society after the 2011 uprisings.

6.1.1 Moderation

The first practice involved a certain level of moderation. In light of the pressures exerted by the regime, CSOs experienced internal debates between those activists insisting on maximalist demands and those preferring a pragmatic approach that involved a certain degree of restraint. Borrowing from the terminology used to describe the two main party wings within the German Greens, these factions might be described as "realos" and "fundis" (Doherty 1992). A notable example is the LTDH, which is the oldest human rights organisation in the Arab world and was, to some extent, also an umbrella organisation that encompassed the activists of various other independent Tunisian CSOs. In the early 1990s, the very existence of the LTDH was at stake as the government had threatened not to renew its accreditation unless it scaled back its demands and became less aggressive in its campaign-

⁶Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in July (48), August (52) and September 2015 (80).

ing.⁷ However, internal trajectories pointed in a different direction as the brief period of openness following Ben Ali's ouster of President Bourguiba in 1987 had raised hopes and activists got bolder.

A faction around the activist Moncef Marzouki⁸ favoured sticking to their principles and rejected too much moderation. Another faction emphasized that the survival of the LTDH was crucial. This logic related to short- and medium-term as well as to long-term concerns. A significant part of the organisation's work involved supporting people affected by the oppressive regime, for instance by providing legal and administrative assistance for political prisoners or victims of police violence. Permanently losing the official accreditation would have jeopardized such practices. Hence the latter, more pragmatist faction won the internal debate, turning the LTDH into what one activist criticised as a "toothless organisation."⁹ However, as other activists pointed out, the survival of the organisation provided for a certain degree of continuity. Notably, its continued existence enabled its involvement in the National Dialogue around twenty years later.¹⁰

Organisations like the LTDH both advocated human rights and provided services to any individual whose human rights have been violated, for example by providing them with legal and administrative assistance. Many other independent Tunisian CSOs specialised in and limited their activities to the provision of services. This was often less controversial and thus less dangerous while still potentially having a profound impact. However, it should be noted that even service provision was and still is at times quite controversial. For example, a prominent service-providing organisations is the Association Tunisienne de Lutte contre les MST et le Sida (ATL MST Sida) which was found by a group of doctors in 1990 in order to deal with the emergence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. While this organisation is apolitical, its promotion of sexual health in the general public and the explicit policy of supporting homosexuals as well as both legal and illegal sex workers brought and still brings it in conflict with authorities and parts of the general public.

⁷Interview with a senior member of the LTDH and the FIDH, held in Tunis in July 2015 (48).

⁸As noted in chapter five, Marzouki would later, in December 2011, be elected interim President of Tunisia.

⁹Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (66).

¹⁰Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in August (50, 52) and September 2015 (80).

6.1.2 Division of labour

The moderation practice goes hand in hand with a practice that might be referred to as division of labour. As a result of the forced moderation of the LTDH, members of its “fundi” faction around Marzouki created the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie, CNLT). The CNLT did not manage to get legal status but defied its interdiction and became more daring in its activism. Notably, it highlighted the abuse of suspected Islamists and started to publish the names of officials it accused of being complicit in the Tunisian authorities’ torture practices. As a result, CNLT activists fell victim to prosecution and harassment including violent attacks by plainclothes police.¹¹

The split between “realos” and “fundis” was preceded by a certain degree of infighting. However, while this was not necessarily envisaged, the split led to a de-facto division of labour between both organisations. The LTDH continued to help people on the ground but remained moderate enough to ensure its accreditation and thus its survival. Meanwhile, the CNLT activists, who remained part of the same social circle, were able to become bolder in their activism without jeopardizing the LTDH’s work or endangering its legal status. This division of labour enabled the community of Tunisian human rights activist to pursue similar ends using different yet complementary means.¹² A second example for a division of labour was the Tunisian Women’s Association for Democracy (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, ATFD) and the Tunisian Women’s Association for Research on Development (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement, AFTURD), two influential independent associations engaging for both gender equality as well as democracy and human rights more generally prior to the uprising. While they had the same agenda and major overlaps in their membership, they differed in their practices. As an organisation, the ATFD was more radical in its demands and subversive in its activities. Staffed with a range of prominent academics, AFTURD framed itself as a neutral source of expertise instead.¹³

¹¹Human Rights Watch. Tunisia: *A Lawsuit Against the Human Rights League, an assault on all rights activists*. New York, 29.4.2001, <http://bit.ly/2QXqbLe> (accessed on 3.4.2018).

¹²Interviews with senior members of the LTDH and the FIDH, held in Tunis in July (48), August (52) and September 2015 (80).

¹³Interview with a senior member of AFTURD, held in Tunis in August 2015 (54).

6.1.3 Membership backing

A third practice aimed at maintaining political influence within the constraints of dictatorship was to draw upon a membership base that was either large or elitist. This included most prominently the UGTT, which was established in 1946 by several of those who were actively involved in the struggle for independence. This gave them a certain degree of legitimacy, but more importantly, its power was and continues to be based on the fact that it represented up to 750,000 members in a country of around 11 million citizens.¹⁴

The UGTT's role in Tunisian politics and society varied over time. Prior to 2011, it was the only relatively independent organisation capable of mobilizing large numbers of people for political causes. Depending on its leadership as well as the political climate, the organisation was sometimes closer aligned to the regime and sometimes more critical of it. However, even at times of stronger co-optation by the regime it usually continued to wield a certain degree of influence within Tunisian politics. Moreover, the regime's co-optation of the UGTT's executive did not always extend to its local branches. Another prominent force daring to contest the regime was the Tunisian Bar Association ONAT. This was partly due to the fact that many activists engaging for democracy and human rights were lawyers. Moreover, as one representative of ONAT pointed out, their profession was likely to bring them into conflict with parts of the country's elites, whose respect for the rule of law was often rather limited.¹⁵ While drawing upon a much smaller membership base, the prestige of lawyers as well as the importance of their role in society enabled them to punch above their weight.

6.1.4 International links

A final practice to navigate authoritarian constraints was to obtain foreign support. While formally registered as Tunisian associations, local offices of organisations such as Amnesty International were protected by their status as a part of influential global NGOs. Meanwhile, foreign development agencies and political foundations were protected through their proximity to their respective national governments and could extend some of their autonomy to their local partners. They did not formally limit Tunisian authorities' ability to crackdown

¹⁴Frida Dahmani. *L'UGTT fait de la résistance*, Jeune Afrique, 25.12.2012, <http://bit.ly/2Qc4SjH> (accessed on 22.01.2018).

¹⁵Interview with a senior member of ONAT, held in Tunis in September 2015 (81).

on civil society, but such international links increased the political costs of doing so and thus became a factor the authorities had to consider. Moreover, in the 1995 Barcelona declaration, the EU's partner countries in the Southern Mediterranean neighbourhood formally committed themselves to respecting human rights. On the Northern shores, the declaration was signed by the EU's institutions and its member states, and thus provided Tunisian activists with a range of potential European addressees for complaints about the Ben Ali regime's conduct as well as a legal document to base them on.

With the notable exception of the European Parliament, the declaration's European signatories did not become overly concerned about Tunisian human rights violations and continued to have rather amicable relations with the Ben Ali regime. However, in line with what Keck and Sikkink (1998, 12) have referred to as "boomerang pattern," Tunisian activists could now raise the regime's failure to comply with the declaration's human rights provisions with the EU's institutions or national governments and parliaments from where their appeals could then bounce back to the Tunisian authorities. As the Ben Ali regime had an interest in maintaining the EU's goodwill, civil society's practice of using channels to the North did become a factor the Tunisian authorities had to consider in their actions and thus affected their practices.

Moreover, the Barcelona declaration's "Social, Cultural and Human basket" provided for increased interaction between European and Arab civil society. Most prominently, this inspired the foundation of Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)¹⁶ whose pre-2011 membership included the LTDH and the ATFD. These networks as well as increased EU funding further added to individual Tunisian civil society organisations' room for manoeuvre.

6.2 During the uprising: Civil society on the sidelines

However, despite their ability to manoeuvre within the restrictions imposed by the regime and their willingness to contest it, even the few genuinely independent Tunisian CSOs largely remained on the sidelines during the Tunisian popular uprising that led to the downfall of Ben Ali. Local branches of the UGTT were involved in the mobilisations from the very beginning. Its Sidi Bouzid branch engaged in the initial protests following the self-

¹⁶As indicated in chapter two, the EMHRN was renamed "EuroMed Rights" in 2015.

immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and contributed to their spread (Yousfi 2015, 70). On 28 December, the UGTT section in the Tunisian phosphate mining town Gafsa, which had already experienced major yet unsuccessful protests in 2008 and early 2010, organized an anti-government rally (Alianak 2014, 37). However, the UGTT's national leadership was very hesitant when it came to choosing sides. On 27 December 2010, six trade unions that were all part of the UGTT staged an anti-government demonstration in front of the UGTT's main seat in Tunis to express their solidarity with the protests in Sidi Bouzid and to affirm its political goals. However, the UGTT's national leadership denounced all protests and called for a "rational" dialogue between the protesters and the government instead.¹⁷ The national executive bureau of the UGTT issued its first explicit statement in support of the protests on 4 January 2011. Only on 11 January, three days before Ben Ali left the country, did the UGTT finally allow its regional unions to call for a general strike.

The Tunisian Bar Association ONAT was much less ambiguous. On 28 December 2010, Tunisian lawyers staged a protest in front of the government's palace. In response to the police violence against protesters in general and its own members in particular, ONAT staged a general strike on 6 January 2011 that was followed by 95 per cent of Tunisia's 8,000 lawyers.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the members and volunteers of independent CSOs such as the LTDH or the ATFD joined the protests at different stages but were arguably not among its driving forces.¹⁹ In fact, they were as surprised as the regime (Cavatorta 2012, 76f) and initially insecure what to make of this sudden and major public unrest. Instead, an entirely new set of practices of less organised forms of activism facilitated the uprisings. Notably, bloggers and cyber-activists using the tools of the digital age took the centre stage (Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2012). In May 2010, six young Tunisians organised a protest called "Tunisie en Blanc" (Tunisia in White) against internet censorship. Using social media, they asked people to wear white shirts and either protest in front of the Ministry of Technology or simply have a coffee in Avenue Bourguiba. The demonstration was not a major success, but a valuable experience on how to use the internet for campaigns and protests (Chomiak and Entelis 2011, 15). In late 2010, a crowd-sourced blog called Nawaat pub-

¹⁷BBC Monitoring. *Divisions in Tunisia's main union over role in social protests*. BBC Monitoring, 30.12.2010.

¹⁸Al Jazeera English. *Thousands of Tunisia lawyers strike*. Al Jazeera English, 6.1.2011, <http://bit.ly/2F7FZSH> (accessed on 18.1.2018).

¹⁹Interviews with activists from both organisations, held in Tunis in June (34) and September 2015 (80).

lished a range of Tunisia-related US diplomatic cables, and translated and disseminated them through websites and social media.²⁰ These cables, which had previously been published by WikiLeaks, included extensive analyses of the regime's corruption and nepotism. Once the uprising started, Nawaat also began to provide photos and videos of as well as reporting about the protests and helped to connect Tunisian activists with each other as well as with the international community. Such activities helped to further fuel the uprising, as did the imprisonment of individual bloggers and artists such as the rapper Hamada Ben Amor, known as "El Général," whose song "Rais Lebled"²¹ (which translates as head of state) openly attacked the Ben Ali regime and became one of the hymns of the uprising.

6.3 After the uprising: A divided civil society

In reaction to the changing governmental practices in the aftermath of the Ben Ali regime's collapse, Tunisia experienced a substantial rise in the number of civil society organisations. While many newly created associations only existed on paper, there has been an increase of civil society engagement with regards to both quantity and quality (Martin 2015, 803). Increased engagement could be observed among those actors already active under the Ben Ali regime, most prominently the four organisations that organised the 2013 National Dialogue. The ensuing dialogue on Tunisia's new constitution involved the consultation of a further 300 civil society organisations.

Their engagement was complemented by those of Tunisians who had not been active prior to the uprising (Martin 2015, 803). Particularly the young generation that was politicised in the run-up to and during the protests began to use the democratic opening to get involved in the political transition. At times, their engagement started with the wish to do something rather than concrete ideas. "When we began, we just had the idea to establish a CSO to engage the youth in this process," says a co-founder of transparency and anti-corruption watchdog "I-Watch."²² Other CSOs, such as the afore-mentioned Al Bawsala, were created by young Tunisians living abroad who chose to return.

The increase in civil society engagement was motivated by activists' hope to have the op-

²⁰Nawaat. *TuniLeaks, les documents dévoilés par Wikileaks concernant la Tunisie: Quelques réactions à chaud*. Tunis, 28.11.2010. <http://bit.ly/2KEayns> (accessed on 9.3.2015).

²¹El Général. *Rais Lebled*. <http://bit.ly/2QVxjY1> (accessed on 21.5.2016).

²²Interview with a co-founder of I-Watch, held in Tunis in May 2015 (23).

portunity to contribute to shaping post-Ben Ali Tunisia. It was also facilitated by changing governmental practices including a new, less restrictive law on the organisation of associations.²³ Moreover, Tunisian civil society was influenced and its practices reacted to the practices of foreign actors getting increasingly involved after 2011. Quickly becoming the last “Arab Spring” state in which hope for a sustainable transition remained justified, Tunisia started to benefit from the EU’s and other Western actors’ interest in supporting its transition. Moreover, it profited from the fact that it soon emerged as one of the very few Arab countries whose financial support remained politically desirable and feasible in practice. As a result, Tunisian activists and associations as well as foreign and international ones active in Tunisia became major beneficiaries of the practice of civil society funding.

However, this sudden increase in civil society engagement and the rather different backgrounds and past and present ways of doing things led to a range of divisions within post-2011 Tunisian civil society. The remainder of this chapter will map and analyse these divisions, examine their origins and explore how they relate to the role that different parts of civil society had played before and during the uprisings as well as their past and present practices.

6.3.1 Origin of civil society organisations

A first division relates to the origin of civil society organisations. While the number of Tunisian CSOs has increased, so has the engagement of foreign and international NGOs in Tunisia. Formally there is no difference between local and foreign CSOs as they all have to register as Tunisian organisations and adhere to the country’s association law. Furthermore, foreign and international CSOs often employ a range of Tunisian employees and local organisations sometimes have foreign staff. Nonetheless, there are tensions between organisations that are of Tunisian origin and those who are not. Some Tunisian civil society activists question international organisations’ motives and see them as foreign agents with hidden agendas. Others recognize these organisations’ past and present engagement for democracy, human rights and development, but feel that Tunisia’s transition should primarily be driven by Tunisian actors. Moreover, there are conflicts due to the fact that there

²³République Tunisienne. *Décret-loi n° 2011-88 du 24 septembre 2011, portant organisation des associations*. Tunis, 30.9.2011, <http://bit.ly/2AikHjz> (accessed on 20.7.2016).

is competition between them and that national organisations perceive this competition as unfair.²⁴

This is particularly evident when it comes to the practice of financial assistance for civil society. Donors tend to prefer awarding rather large amounts of project funding to keep their overhead costs low. Many grants range from several tens to hundreds of thousands of euros and require CSOs to partake in extensive and highly technical application procedures. Hence, such donors' practices gear their assistance towards professionalised NGOs whose staff work full-time rather than on a voluntary basis and who have substantial grant-writing and project management skills. However, many practices of local Tunisian civil society organisations, such as relying on volunteers, make it hard for them to compete as it means that they do not have the capacity to master complex applications and to manage large budgets.²⁵ As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the EU is a key donor. Its practices are thus especially relevant and arguably have a transformative effect on civil society practices.

To increase their chances to obtain large grants, local associations may team up with foreign ones. For example, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the EU encourages the practice of applying in consortiums of a foreign lead applicant and a Tunisian co-applicant. If the application is successful, the EU mainly deals with the lead applicant who, in turn, redistributes funding to the co-applicant. However, this practice involves further potential for conflict, for example, due to the de-facto hierarchy it creates as well as the often quite different wage levels between Tunisian and non-Tunisian civil society organisations.²⁶ Some activists also question the use and impact of specific large foreign-funded projects more generally, often due to what they feel is a lack of understanding of Tunisian society and its problems among some of the organisations implementing them.

Tensions also arise around the question which CSOs take the lead on important policy issues. Some Tunisian activists disapprove of foreign actors taking the first step and then asking them to follow and participate. Rather, they feel it should be Tunisians who come up with initiatives.²⁷ While external actors acknowledge this, they complain about what they see as a lack of proactiveness and initiative within Tunisian civil society. As a non-Tunisian

²⁴Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in May 2015 (14, 20, 27).

²⁵Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (14).

²⁶Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, held in Tunis in May 2015 (22).

²⁷Interview with Tunisian activists, held in Tunis in June (38, 41) and September 2015 (75, 80).

employee of an international NGO put it: “We always have that debate. But then make an offer, propose something. I started to think about something because there is a need, and if you are not going to do it, I will do it.”²⁸ A further challenge is that although many local organisations are highly effective when it comes to short-term mobilisation, they tend to struggle with long-term planning. As the same NGO worker puts it:

They are so good when it comes to reacting, you know, at one precise time, on one precise issue. They can mobilise, get people on the streets, for example about the complementarity in the constitution [a draft of the Tunisian constitution had stated that men and women should “complement each other within the household,” the formulation was changed to emphasize gender equality after major protests]. But when you cooperate on a long-term project as we did, after four months I called them, I emailed them, I sometimes felt maybe I am harassing them, and at the end some were just like, yeah, we do need someone to call us. But this is exhausting.²⁹

6.3.2 Professionalisation and foreign funding

The challenges of obtaining and managing large grants, and of taking the lead on important societal and political questions have led to two interlinked debates within local Tunisian civil society. First, there are different views on whether and to what extent engagement should continue to be primarily based on the practice of volunteerism. Second, there are differences in whether and to what extent civil society should accept foreign funding. Advocates of the professionalization of civil society and the acceptance of foreign funding argue that the ideal of volunteerism comes at the cost of quality and impact. As Amira Yahyaoui, the founder and former director of Al Bawsala put it:

You cannot say I advocate for women’s rights on Saturday and Sunday, but during the week I work. If you want to get Tunisian NGOs at the same level of international NGOs, you need to have people working full-time for you. So you have to pay them. I think that to build a country you can have support from outside, but you can’t build it from the outside. We need Tunisian NGOs as

²⁸Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, held in Tunis in July 2015 (47).

²⁹Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, held in Tunis in July 2015 (47).

professional as international NGOs. I wanted to get Tunisians, and I wanted to get good Tunisians. (..) And if you want them not to join international organisations instead, then you have to pay them well.³⁰

Critics of the practices of professionalization and foreign financial assistance point to what they see as undesirable side-effects that endanger the basic principles of civil society. Whether of Tunisian or non-Tunisian origin, professional NGOs receiving foreign funding can offer much better-paid jobs than the Tunisian public or private sector. Critics argue that these NGOs create a culture of careerism where activists are motivated by above-average wages and other perks coming with a job in the sector, rather than being primarily driven by the causes they engage for. Several activists discarded members of this group as “five-star activists.”³¹ Moreover, critics argue that the dependence on foreign funding is bound to directly or indirectly influence CSO’s work and leaves them vulnerable to donors’ changing funding priorities.

Finally, with funding priorities changing from year to year, they criticise that organisations become experts or pretend to become experts on whatever international donors decide to fund next. For example, civil society organisations specialised in election-observation that had received major funding in 2014 due to the parliamentary and presidential elections went on to venture out to apply for funding in other fields. “The order is often not that there are ideas that need money. There is money, and therefore one needs ideas,”³² an employee of one of these NGOs says.

While there is a certain polarisation between proponents and opponents of professionalization and foreign funding, a third faction within civil society is seeking for the middle ground. They welcome foreign financial assistance as long as it does not come with too many conditions attached. While they are open towards professionalization, they feel that associations need full-time employees that assist and complement volunteers rather than replacing them. As Mokhtar Trifi, a former president of the LTDH, puts it:

Professionalisation is good, but the role of the volunteers needs to be safeguarded. They have to come up with a strategy and make the decisions, but

³⁰Interview with Amira Yahyaoui, co-founder and former president of Al Bawsala, held in Tunis in September 2015 (78).

³¹Interviews with Tunisian activists, held in Tunis in June (44), August (65) and September 2015 (77).

³²Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (21).

it has to be implemented by someone else. They have their own jobs, so they need staff who are educated who put the strategy into action under the supervision of the elected volunteers. I am not for associations that only consist of professionals. But the actual work has to be done by professionals.³³

6.3.3 Priorities of civil society activism

A further debate within Tunisian civil society echoes the previously mentioned division between “realos” and “fundis” in the LTDH during the 1990s. The question is whether and to what extent priorities should be guided by ideals or pragmatic concerns. Some activists feel that the focus should be on demanding and promoting a perfect implementation of what they see as universal human rights. Others, while largely agreeing in principle, point at two practical problems. First, there are still major societal constraints as a substantial part of the Tunisian population sees civil society’s conception of universal human rights as a rather Western practice that should not necessarily be adopted. Calling for too progressive reforms too soon could therefore provoke a backlash as it might go beyond what the more conservative parts of society are willing to accept. Second, focusing mainly on human rights might come at the cost of focusing on those social and economic issues that are far more pressing for large parts of the Tunisian population. As the co-founder of a prominent CSO put it:

Many civil society organisations neglect social and economic rights. I mean the basis of the revolution is the call of Tunisians for more social and economic rights, access to jobs, access to health infrastructure, access to social security services, having a contract when they are working since 20 years, you know, this kind of thing. And the focus for the past three years has been on civil and political rights. Which are as important as social and economic rights, but there are lots of areas that are neglected. And this is a big mistake because we are not solving the deeper problems of the society.³⁴

A widely shared fear is that not tackling the major socio-economic challenges that Tunisia is facing might discredit the democratic transition. As Sana Ben Achour, a long-

³³Interview with Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH, held in Tunis in September 2015 (80).

³⁴Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (17).

time civil society activist who is now running a charity dedicated to Tunisian women put it:

The revolution in 2011 was progressive, it was about freedom and human rights. But if we continue like this, if we do not manage to fight poverty, if things are not getting better soon, then there might be another revolution. And this revolution is going to be regressive.³⁵

6.4 The generational gap in Tunisian civil society

The final fault line lies between the generation that started to engage in the years before as well as during and after the uprising against Ben Ali, and the generation that had already been active before. Following their self-description, the old generation will also be referred to as the “Historiques,” which translates as “the historic ones.” To begin with, tensions can be partly explained by the fact that representatives of both generations tend to feel entitled to lead post 2011-Tunisian civil society. The old generation’s claim to leadership is based on the fact that they have resisted the dictatorial regimes of Ben Ali and Bourguiba and that they have engaged for human rights and democracy at a time when activism entailed major risks to personnel security and well-being. At the same time, many within the new generation feel that they are the natural leaders as their generation made the transition possible. They feel that what they see as their revolution is hijacked by both individuals from politics and civil society who, in their view, contributed little to nothing to the ouster of the Ben Ali regime.

Such notions go hand in hand with a lack of respect for each other’s past and present achievements. Various younger activists expressed the notion that “there was no civil society before 2011.”³⁶ The old generation is then either completely ignored or conflated with the government-aligned NGOs that the Ben Ali regime had produced. This is partly based on the fact that the Historiques tried to balance the thin red line between advocating for human rights and at the same time avoiding being imprisoned and outlawed. Hence, they compromised in ways that delegitimised them in the eyes of some activists from the new generation. Following this line of thinking, it was the post-2011 generation who created

³⁵Interview with Sana Ben Achour, director of Beity, held in Tunis in July 2015 (49).

³⁶Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (20).

civil society in the first place, adding to their own sense of entitlement. Others acknowledge the role played by the *Historiques* prior to 2011 but are tired by constantly being reminded of it.³⁷ “I don’t care about the past”³⁸ or “We are tired of hearing all that. You did it, it’s ok. Now shut your mouth”³⁹ were notions expressed by individual young civil society activists in response to corresponding questions. Among those who acknowledge the old generation’s commitment, the costs it entailed and the achievements it yielded, some tend to belittle the contribution this generation is making in post-2011 Tunisia. “The *Historiques* did a good job before, but now they are largely useless,”⁴⁰ a representative of the new generation quipped.

At the same time, there is a certain arrogance and paternalism among the old generation towards the young one. Asked why the new generation was not sufficiently included in the National Dialogue process, representatives of the old generation said that there was no time as the country was on the brink. “Yes, of course, the youth is important,” a senior member of the LTDH stated. “But you have to understand, it was a very serious situation. We had to act fast.”⁴¹ The notion that various representatives of the old generation conveyed during the interviews was that while the youth should be included in principle, the “grown-ups” have to take matters in their hands when things get serious.⁴²

In cases of cooperation between both generations, tensions arise around rather banal issues such as the speaking order during conferences or whose name or logo comes first in publications.⁴³ This relates to a second cause of division. To begin with, problems emerge for purely generational reasons. Independent of the setting in which it occurs, cooperation between people in their 20s and people in their 60s and 70s might be expected to be prone to difficulties. The sometimes perceived, sometimes actual lack of respect for the respective other side does not help. However, the problems go deeper. Notably, both generations tend to use rather different practices of communication. The new generation works with Facebook and emails. Some activists of the old generation prefer to communicate by telephone, written correspondence and personal meetings. When new CSOs organise events,

³⁷Interview with a Tunisian staff member of an international NGO, held in Tunis in May 2015 (24).

³⁸Interview with a Tunisian activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (53).

³⁹Interview with a Tunisian staff member of an international NGO, held in Tunis in May 2015 (24).

⁴⁰Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in September 2015 (77).

⁴¹Interview with a senior member of the LTDH, held in Tunis in August 2015 (50).

⁴²Interviews with Tunisian activists, held in Tunis in May (25), August (50) and September 2015 (80).

⁴³Interviews with Tunisian activists, held in Tunis in June (34), July (47) and August 2015 (52, 55).

they send out invitations by email. However, activists of the old generation do not necessarily have email-addresses and if they do, they might not check and respond to their emails regularly. At the same time, they get the impression that they are intentionally excluded if they do not get notified of events and activities. Meanwhile, the new generation is often unwilling to make the extra effort that is necessary to include them. As one representative of the new generations puts it:

It is so difficult to contact them. You always need to call, they don't reply to emails. They say they will come but then they are not. Come on, we have lots of new organisations, I am sick of running after them.⁴⁴

One example was the Jamaity awards, an annual gala where civil society engagement is awarded with prizes in different categories. In its first edition, the young crew organising the event forgot some of the key actors of the old generation, which caused tensions in the aftermath.⁴⁵ A second problem relates to different styles of communication. Within the older generation, one sometimes hears complaints about the deterioration of the Tunisian education system under Ben Ali and how it “has ruined an entire generation.”⁴⁶ Many of the Historiques studied in France during the 1960s. They tend to use an abstract and at times rather pompous language that is seen as elitist and pretentious by the new generation. As one activist put it:

They [the old generation] were in France in May 1968 [during the Paris student uprisings], they have seen movies like “Z” by Costa Gavras. When I ask the young ones, why don't you join the Femmes Democrates [ATFD], they complain that their discourses are langue de bois.⁴⁷

A third cause of tension is based on the rather different ideas on what civil society engagement should look like. Under the Ben Ali regime, organisations understood their role as opposition to the regime. With Ben Ali gone and an actual political opposition in place,

⁴⁴Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (55).

⁴⁵Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (67).

⁴⁶Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (25).

⁴⁷Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (52). “Z” was a 1969 Algerian-French film from 1969 about the Greek military dictatorship. The film was a major public success and nominated for the Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Foreign Language Film. The term “langue de bois” literally means “wooden language” but is better translated as “waffling.”

this role has been taken over by others. The old generation of activist has the opportunity and is expected to make constructive propositions now rather than just opposing things. However, some of them struggle to adapt to this new context.⁴⁸ In contrast, many post-2011 organisations started with the ambition to use the new freedom to implement quite specific ideas and projects. For example, rather than merely advocating for more public integrity and accountability from the government, Al Bawsala enforces it by monitoring the activities of the Tunisian parliament and informing the public about what is discussed in its committees.

Moreover, both generations use different tools for their work. The post-2011 generation are digital natives who make extensive use of social media and other means of modern online communications. The day before former prime minister Mehdi Jomaa took office, the Tunisian anti-corruption watchdog I-Watch set up a “Jomaa Meter” – a website listing his promises and tracking whether he delivered on them. In contrast, parts of the old generation have a rather limited understanding and make only limited use of modern technology. For example, until shortly before my fieldwork in 2015, the LTDH did not even have an electronic list of its members. As one representative of the new generation quips:

The old generation has “communiqué de presse” approach. When you ask them what they have done in the past year, they proudly tell you that they issued 30 statements and organised 15 press conferences.⁴⁹

The final cause of tension between the two generations is their lack of trust towards each other. The Historiques consist of a small circle of a few hundred activists that are of advanced age and largely know each other personally. They are organised in a handful of organisations whose memberships overlap, with the LTDH serving as an umbrella organisation that includes almost everyone. For the new generation, it is difficult to get access to this circle. At the same time, the old generation is rather hesitant to open up. As one activist says:

It is not because they were worried that these people would take their place but

⁴⁸Interview with a co-founder of I-Watch, held in Tunis in May 2015 (23).

⁴⁹Interview with Amira Yahyaoui, co-founder and former president of Al Bawsala, held in Tunis in September 2015 (78).

because they didn't know them and what their agenda is. They were there for 30 years or more, they were all friends, 400 activists, they all knew each other.⁵⁰

This lack of trust towards newcomers stems from the Ben Ali period. Mokhtar Trifi, a former president of the LTDH, explains that:

In the past ten years, we could not open the LTDH to new members. Each time we did that, the party in power would try to infiltrate us. They even created a law that forced us to take everyone who wanted to join. We refused that.⁵¹

The fear of the past regime's practice of infiltrating civil society persists. Moreover, there are new worries about Islamists trying to do the same. And in light of the above-mentioned divisions how to do things, they are also partly hesitant and partly unable to include and work with the new generation. In turn, the new generation's exclusion contributes to existing scepticism and mistrust among them towards the old generation. This is further enhanced by what they see as the old generation's privileges. Due to their pre-2011 engagement and their role in the National Dialogue, the representatives of the old generation tend to have a better network within Tunisian political circles. For example, the Tunisian minister in charge of civil society from 2015 to 2016, Kamel Jendoubi, was a president of the Committee for the Respect of Freedoms and Human Rights (Comité pour le Respect des Libertés et des Droits de l'Homme en Tunisie, CRLDHT) and honorary president of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (previously EMHRN, now Euromed Rights) whose Tunisian members include the CRLDHT but also, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux, FTDES) as well as the LTDH and the ATFD. Hence various representatives of these organisations had personal ties to him that the younger generation lacked.

6.5 Conclusions

Post-2011 development of civil society has been shaped by the changing governmental practices of post-Ben Ali-Tunisia and the new opportunities it provided. These include not only a less restrictive political environment but also the increased availability of foreign funding

⁵⁰Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (25).

⁵¹Interview with Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH, held in Tunis in September 2015 (80).

and the growing engagement of international NGOs. However, the new opportunities and the emergence of a new generation of activists have also contributed to tensions across civil society. The increased freedom encourages some actors to pursue idealistically motivated maximalist goals that more pragmatic actors fear could undermine the transition. Increased involvement of non-Tunisian actors' entails tensions on the question how "Tunisian" Tunisian civil society should be. Increased foreign funding leads to tensions around the question of how independent associations should be. Both the availability of funding and the increased role of young people, whose professional opportunities are limited, lead to divisions on whether civil society should be professionalised or primarily be driven by volunteers.

Similar tensions have been observed elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond, notably in transitioning countries that benefit from substantial development aid from Western countries. The overarching faultline within Tunisian civil society, however, is a generational divide between the generation that was already active under the authoritarian regime and a new generation that emerged in the run-up to and after the ouster of Ben Ali. Tensions between these two generations are based on the fact that both feel entitled to claim the leadership of post 2011-Tunisian civil society and on the lack of mutual respect for and trust in each other. This is linked to rather different ideas on how to do things now as well as how things were done in the past. At times, the young generation is rather sceptical of the old generation's practices and vice versa. In fact, the generational divide also transcends some of the other divisions. For example, the old generation has traditionally been based on volunteerism and it is very sympathetic to the concept. However, as they tend to be part of the upper middle class, it is easier for them to insist on such practices than for the socio-economically marginalised younger generation. For similar reasons, the younger generation also tends to be more flexible with regards to the extent to which foreign-funded projects might be pre-defined by foreign donors.

This generational divide is both a risk and a lost opportunity. Large parts of the Historiques are at an advanced age. Unless they manage to include younger activists, they risk not having anyone to take over key organisations like the Tunisian Human Rights League. Moreover, both generations might potentially complement each other not only in terms of capability and clout, but also with regards to the addressees of their activities. While the older generation is able to connect with the governing elites, the younger ones might connect with the disenchanted youth. Hence, the generational divisions endanger the survival

of some of the most important Tunisian associations and reduce the potential impact civil society could have.

This raises questions about the role external actors' practices in causing or contributing to these changes to and divisions within Tunisian civil society. As will be discussed in the following two chapters, the EU does indeed play a role and its influence is strongly linked to the practices it employs in its interaction with Tunisian civil society. It has already been indicated in this chapter that the practices of donors are relevant for the evolution of civil society and its own practices. Previous chapters have identified the EU's consultations with Tunisian civil society as another key practice of interaction. Hence, the following two chapters will examine these two practices in greater depth.

Chapter 7

EU financial assistance for Tunisian civil society

The previous chapter has explored the practices, divisions and trajectories of contemporary Tunisian civil society. The thesis now moves to explore its interactions with the EU as well as how the practices employed in the context of this interaction contributes to shaping Tunisian civil society's practices, divisions and trajectories. As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, the existing literature on EU democracy promotion mainly focuses on how the EU's corresponding policies are made as well as on their substance and impact. The workings within the EU's institutional set-up and the day to day interaction between EU officials and their interlocutors tend to be treated as a black box. The main objective of this thesis is to open this black box and to examine the nuts and bolts of how EU democracy promotion works in practice. It has identified the EU's financial assistance for and its consultations with Tunisian civil society as the two key repertoires of practices occurring in that context. Studying them in greater detail, both chapters will reflect on the extent to which and the ways in which they contribute to producing and reproducing certain practices within civil society and thus play a constitutive role in shaping post-2011 Tunisian civil society. The first main repertoire of practices are the EU's funding instruments, and the following sections will deal with all practices occurring in their context.

External funding of Tunisian associations was regulated in Decree No. 88 (2011) which

regulates civil society.¹ Updating previous and rather restrictive legislation, this decree enables public subsidies as well as financial and material donations (Art. 34). Such funding may also come from foreign countries as long as these countries entertain diplomatic relations with Tunisia (Art. 35). While the EU and its member states have been key donors to Tunisia before, the aftermath of the Arab uprising has seen a substantial increase in financial means made available to the country. Having been identified as a strategic partner for the EU's democracy promotion agenda, civil society has been a key beneficiary of the increased funding. Since the EU is the largest external donor, the way in which it provides financial assistance to civil society might be expected to have an impact on Tunisia's civil society landscape. The distributing of funding involves both the European Commission in Brussels and the EU delegations in third countries. The latter's officials are involved both in the funding application procedures as well as in the administration of funded projects. In the Tunisian context, the EU states that its delegation was "responsible for over 70 projects worth €58.5 million."² Hence, Tunis-based EU officials' practices might be expected to have an impact as well.

As indicated in chapter three, practices "can be appraised through different levels of aggregation" (Adler and Pouliot 2011a, 9). Financial assistance is a practice that is constituted by various sub-practices which occur in the context of application procedures, the design of grants or the monitoring mechanisms when projects are implemented. As will be shown, several of these practices also relate to each other. For example, the amount of money awarded in one grant will affect the complexity of the application procedure for that grant. The following chapter discusses this in greater depth. It starts by looking at the existing types and institutional sources of EU funding. Following this, it examines the EU's objectives in funding civil society. It then moves to examine how the EU's practices inform the choice of organisations and projects that eventually benefit from EU financial assistance. Finally, it looks at the practices that occur when Tunisian activists implement EU-funded projects.

¹République Tunisienne. *Décret-loi n° 2011-88 du 24 septembre 2011, portant organisation des associations*. Tunis, 30.9.2011, <http://bit.ly/2AikHjz> (accessed on 20.7.2016).

²European Commission. *Tunisia*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2QbjQ9r> (accessed on 20.7.2016).

7.1 Types of EU funding for Tunisian civil society

The EU offers different types of non-repayable financial assistance to public and private entities in its partner countries in the Southern Neighbourhood. The biggest bulk of financial assistance to Tunisia is direct budget support. This means that direct financial transfers are made to the Tunisian treasury, usually coming with conditions on reforms towards more efficient and transparent public finances as well as on human rights and democracy attached, but leaving concrete spending decisions to the recipient.³ Civil society might be expected to benefit indirectly from budget support due to those EU conditions that relate to the protection of democratic and human rights, as well as due to the overall benefits such support has for the country. More directly, however, it benefits from two other types of funding. To begin with, there are contracts which the EU uses to purchase supplies in equipment or material, infrastructure and other engineering works or services. While supplies and works are not relevant for civil society, service contracts also cover sectors such as election observation or media capacity building⁴ that are within the competence and scope of the work of certain civil society organisations. The second and more common source of financial assistance are grants, of which there are two types. “Operating grants” cover the running expenditure of entities that are working in in the interest of the EU or towards an objective that relates to EU policy objectives. Meanwhile “grants for action” are awarded for specific and well-defined projects relating to EU policy objectives. In the context of Tunisian civil society, the EU only awards grants for action and, to a significantly lesser extent, service contracts.⁵

While all EU development assistance is managed by the European Commission, not all of its funding comes from the EU budget. Development aid to African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and to overseas countries and territories (OCTs) comes from the European Development Fund (EDF) which is financed through direct contributions from EU member states according to a contribution key. However, as the ACP group only includes sub-Saharan African states, financial assistance for North African states like

³European Commission. *Budget support*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2RmKDnS> (accessed 7.7.2017).

⁴European Commission. *Appels à propositions et appels d'offres. Technical Assistance: Media and freedom of expression in the framework of EU democracy support*. Brussels, 25.3.2015, <http://bit.ly/2AhJ1SC> (accessed on 7.7.2017).

⁵European Commission. *Appels à propositions et appels d'offres*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2CEyO14> (accessed on 7.7.2017).

Tunisia come from the regular EU budget. This financial assistance is distributed through different funding programmes. A key differentiation in all funding schemes is between state and non-state recipients. As non-state recipients are not quite clearly defined, they include a range of actors including but not limited to civil society. This distinction also means that it is not always quite clear which type of funding is available to whom. The same grants that are available for civil society might also be available to private sector entities. Hence, it is not possible to calculate precisely how much of the budget and how many grants are directed at civil society.

The two main types of financial assistance programmes are “global programmes” that are in principle open to applicants from all EU partner countries as well and “regional programmes” focusing on a specific region. The first global financing instrument is the EU’s Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) whose main goal is the reduction of poverty but which is also geared towards promoting democracy, good governance, rule of law and human rights in third states.⁶ The DCI includes geographic programmes that, among other things, also aim at supporting action on human rights, democracy and good governance. Moreover, it includes two thematic programmes, one of which is directed at “Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities,”⁷ previously referred to as Non-State Actors-Local Authorities (NSA-LA) during the 2007-2013 financial framework.⁸ The second global financial instrument is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) which has a much stronger focus on civil society, minorities and economic and social rights.⁹

The EU’s regional instruments relevant for Tunisia are those that were created in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Most notably, they include the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), created for the 2007-13 multiannual financial framework, and its successor, the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), created for 2014-20. While the ENPI was geared towards a rather wide range of issues relating to development, it did have a particular focus on civil society. For example, its

⁶European Commission. *Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI)*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2EWSHoN> (accessed on 23.7.2017).

⁷European Commission. *Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2GVq12q> (accessed 27.7.2017).

⁸European Commission. *Thematic programme NSA-LA*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2EYtrzg> (accessed 27.7.2017).

⁹European Commission. *European Instrument for Democracy & Human Rights (EIDHR)*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2EZvjb2> (accessed on 27.7.2017).

programmes included the two-year Neighbourhood civil society facility directed at both the Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood. As discussed in chapter five, in the aftermath of the Arab uprising the EU also created the two-year programme “Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING)” which was funded through the ENPI.¹⁰ This tool was used to fund both democracy promotion measures as well as economic and structural support for the countries affected by the uprisings. While significant parts were directly transferred to partner governments, large shares went to non-state actors. However, in light of the very different projects and non-state recipients, it is not always easy to determine which of these projects qualify as civil society projects. ENPI and ENI funding was also used to create a further project directed exclusively at Tunisian civil society: The €7 million Civil Society Support Programme (Programme d’Appui à la Société Civile, PASC) which aimed at setting up a nation-wide network of offices providing support for local civil society.

7.2 Objectives of EU funding for civil society

EU officials working on Tunisia in Brussels as well as in the delegation in Tunis see civil society as a key ally for the EU’s own development and democracy promotion agenda.¹¹ In providing financial assistance society, the EU follows two main objectives that are at times complementary and at times contradictory of each other. First of all, the EU sees civil society as a key driver of democratic change and thus a key factor on whether or not the Tunisian transition will be a success. Hence, it has expressed its commitment to contribute to building a civil society that balances state authorities and drives reform. In doing so, it wants to complement its top-down approach of democratisation through intergovernmental interaction and conditionality with a bottom-up approach. Rather than only trying to nudge decision-makers in government and administration towards reforming the country, it wants to create and strengthen Tunisian non-state actors that are demanding such change domestically. However, while the EU wants local civil society to take ownership of reform processes, its practices tend to make them take ownership of processes that the EU deems

¹⁰European Commission. *Action Fiche for the southern Neighbourhood region programme Support for partnership, reforms and inclusive growth (SPRING)*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2BY14QH> (accessed on 27.7.2017).

¹¹Interviews with EU officials from the EEAS, DG NEAR and the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5, 6) and in Tunis in April (9, 10) and May 2015 (13, 18).

necessary rather than truly leaving it to civil society to create and develop these processes themselves.

In the widest sense, the EU understands democracy promotion in Tunisia as everything that ensures a successful transition. As the EU sees socio-economic issues as a major challenge, its financial assistance is, at times, also geared towards enabling non-state actors to implement projects that border the tasks of the state, for example in the field of professional capacity building and skills development. This is partly informed by a certain mistrust in the abilities of the Tunisian administration, and the belief that smaller, independent and less bureaucratic entities can use EU funds in a more efficient and transparent way.¹² As a result, CSOs are sometimes awarded grants to execute projects that are strongly pre-defined by the EU. More generally, if it is not the projects themselves that are pre-defined, it is often the respective EU funding lines that set out an agenda to determine the priorities of what is to be done and how.¹³

In doing so, the EU's funding lines are thus rather fuzzy when it comes to defining democracy promotion and civil society. On the one hand, there is a strong focus on strengthening progressive civic and human rights. On the other hand, they also tend to include social and economic development and activities that might indirectly contribute to strengthening these rights, for example through job creation or improvements in education. Moreover, as mentioned above, many calls are open to a variety of non-state actors. The EU's de-facto definition of civil society in the context of financial assistance is thus rather broad, but a key attribute is whether or not actors are professional, have significant organisational capacities and are able to efficiently execute projects.

Hence, to some extent, the EU's effectiveness objective contradicts the self-declared objective of providing bottom-up support. Rather than helping the establishment of a critical civil society, it contributes to the proliferation of associations that understand themselves and excel as service providers that are willing and able to execute projects that might be predefined by the EU. The frequently used emphasis on "local ownership" is thus a bit misleading. EU-funded projects are indeed often "owned locally" in the sense that they are implemented by local actors (although many projects are executed by foreign actors as well).

¹²Interviews with officials from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May (13) and June 2015 (40).

¹³European Commission. Calls for Proposals and Tenders. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2VcuRev> (accessed on 13.2.2017).

However, these actors often have directly or indirectly accepted to follow the EU's agenda rather than developing and implementing their own ideas.

7.3 Inclusion and exclusion

Who benefits from the EU's financial engagement is partly driven by its objectives. However, the practices officials apply when awarding grants matter as well. With the EU being the largest single source of external civil society funding, the question of who receives it, and who does not, has an effect on the overall structure and composition of Tunisian civil society. EU funding practices influence which Tunisian organisations are enabled to expand and thrive and thus to play a more prominent role in the transition, but also which of them are not. In doing so, it affects the focus and orientation of Tunisian civil society as a whole as it incentivises local civil society actors to adapt their own practices. The EU's preference of some types of CSOs over others also affects internal dynamics in Tunisian civil society, as it creates tensions between those who benefit from the EU's priorities and those who do not. The following sections examine and discuss how different EU practices with regard to what kind of grants are made available as well as the workings of the award procedures influence who has a chance of receiving grants.

7.3.1 Eligibility criteria

The EU's definition of what constitutes civil society tends to be quite broad. Moreover, as mentioned above, various EU funding lines are open to a range of non-state actors that include but are not limited to civil society organisations. Thus, when it comes to the actors benefitting from the corresponding funding lines, it is rather difficult to draw a clear line between where "civil society" ends and where other types of entities start. In order to determine the eligibility, it is thus not primarily the EU's definition of civil society that matters, but rather the practical criteria determining what kind of actor is a potential beneficiary. As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, the main conditions are linked to where an organisation is from and what it is capable of.

The first criterion is the origin of an organisation. The EU does not usually distinguish between local civil society and transnational civil society. A project on human rights and democracy that is supposed to be executed in Tunisia could thus be executed by a wide range

of different organisations. It could be done by a Tunisian organisation with Tunisian staff. However, it could also be executed by a foreign or international civil society organisation that is based in Tunis. Whether or not such an organisation has Tunisian staff or Tunisian volunteers would be secondary. It might employ a significant number of Tunisians but might also be mainly staffed and led by foreigners. What usually matters, is that the organisation is registered in Tunisia and has capacities to act on the ground.

A second criterion is the civil society actors' organisational capability. According to the EU's Procedures and Practical Guide (PRAG)¹⁴ for grant applications, there are two types of evaluation criteria which are used to assess grant applications, and which are defined in an evaluation grid: Selection criteria that deal with the organisations applying for the grant and award criteria that deal with the project itself. Selection criteria deal with the capabilities of organisations. First of all, they are used to assess the lead applicant's financial capacity. This means that applicants need to show that they will be able to operate over the period in which the actions enabled by the grants are implemented. The assessment is based on documents submitted in the course of the application procedure. These might include the balance sheets and income statements, but also include an external audit report of the lead applicant. Such an audit involves organisations having to pay for an external auditor in order to obtain a report, an investment that only pays off if they actually get the grant.

Moreover, the EU assesses organisations' experience, competence and qualifications to implement the actions they are proposing in their grant application. However, according to the assessment of a range of civil society activists¹⁵ as well as an EU official working in the delegation,¹⁶ the EU primarily focuses on organisations' ability to manage a project and less on its experiences and expertise in the field of the call. As a result, it might be observed that organisations with EU funding tend to implement quite different projects. As one activist puts it, some organisations are just following trends. "One year they do election observation, the next year it is all about decentralisation. Just in line with the latest funding priorities of the EU and others."¹⁷

This focus on project management experience disadvantages newer, younger and smaller

¹⁴European Commission. *PRAG 6.5.3.2. Evaluation criteria: selection and award*. Brussels, 15.1.2016, <http://bit.ly/2rZHdcw> (accessed on 27.7.2017).

¹⁵Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in May (14) and June 2015 (33, 44).

¹⁶Fieldwork notes made while observing an information session for civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 22.4.2015.

¹⁷Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (14).

civil society organisations as well as those that primarily work based on voluntarism. Even if they have developed financial capacities and organisational capabilities, the lack of references such as previous projects executed successfully in the eyes of the EU makes it hard for them to prove it. Moreover, organisations that focus on a niche subject and refuse to follow the priorities that are set by the EU on whatever is funded in the respective year struggle to get grants.

7.3.2 Information

In the process of distributing financial assistance to civil society, the EU enacts a range of practices that affect which kind of organisations will eventually succeed in getting grants. First of all, potential applicants need to know about it. In order to learn about calls for funding applications, activists and organisations have to regularly check the EU's rather user-unfriendly tender system.¹⁸ Alternatively, they might learn about tenders by being informed directly. Relevant calls are usually communicated through the EU delegation's website, ideally also through their social media channels. Moreover, there are mailing lists and information sessions. However, the question is who is included in the respective mailing lists or invited and able to join information sessions. Much like the consultations discussed in the next chapter, it is usually a subset of civil society.

An employee of the EU delegation emphasised the necessity for such information to reach a wide audience but also acknowledged the limited reach the delegation has. Hence, he stated that the delegation increasingly relies on partners to distribute information:

The info is on the website, we have an obligation to inform as widely as possible to ensure equality on opportunity and access. So we rely on some platforms to share this information, for example. Jamaity has become sort of point of reference for civil society in Tunisia.¹⁹

As mentioned in chapter six, Jamaity is a Tunisian and Tunis-based CSO that runs a platform for Tunisian civil society. It has received funding from the European Commission, EuroMed Rights and the European Endowment for Democracy.²⁰ EU calls are republished

¹⁸European Commission. *Calls for Proposals and Tenders*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2VcuRev> (accessed on 13.2.2017).

¹⁹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in October 2018 (96).

²⁰Jamaity, *La plateforme de la société civile tunisienne*, Tunis, <http://bit.ly/2V9HCXn> (accessed on 20.11.2018).

on its website and social media channels, which then link back to the EU's tender platform where users interested in more information have to create an account and log in. While Jamaity adds another channel to the EU's efforts, it mainly reaches the younger generation of activists – just as its and the EU's use of social media generally tends to largely reach that generation. Generally, all information is only provided in French. As a result, awareness of the opportunities the EU offers seems to remain limited. In several interviews, activists indicated a general awareness that the EU provides funding, but did not know of any specific calls and opportunities nor how and where to find out more about them.²¹

7.3.3 Funding specifications

As indicated previously, the grants made available for Tunisian civil society are mainly “grants for action.” Hence, they fund projects that civil society may come up with in response to its funding lines and based on their priorities. This means that they lack a source of funding for the running costs of their ongoing work. Hence, CSOs will have to come up with “extra” activities to do in addition to their regular work. This means that they either need to have other sources of funding for their ongoing work, do it on the side or largely stop doing it and align their work with the EU's funding priorities. If they do not want to completely align, they have an incentive to apply a certain degree of creative accountancy to use EU funding for running costs for other work.²²

A second feature shaping who is able to secure funding are the amounts of the EU's grants. While the EU has major own resources to distribute, it has limited administrative resources to spend on their distribution. This is due to what Commission officials perceive as public pressures to be “efficient,” that is to only spend a small fraction of the means available for development assistance on its administration.²³ Hence, the application and selection procedures for grants as well as the monitoring of projects have to be implemented with rather limited staff resources. Hence, the EU mainly awards large sums for longer periods, as this reduces the amount of calls to be taken care of.

As a result, grants often usually range from €100,000 to €300,000 and projects are ex-

²¹ Interviews with activists, held in May (27) and August (64) 2015, October 2018 (93) and April 2019 (97).

²² Interview with the co-founder of a Tunisian civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (33).

²³ Interview with an official from the European Commission, held in Brussels in August 2017 (84).

pected to last between one and three years.²⁴ Even though most calls do not predetermine the total amount of a grant, the complexity of the application procedure and the amount of effort that has to be invested does not make sense for smaller and shorter projects. Hence, although this is not necessarily explicitly stated, grants can de-facto only be given to actors with a high degree of professionalism and organisational structures. It should be noted that there are other schemes such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) that offer smaller grants, with less bureaucratic strings attached to less organised and professionalised civil society actors. However, the EED is not an EU institution, it is an independent foundation that partly funded by the European Commission. While there is some interaction between the EED and the EU delegation in Tunis, EU institutions do not play a role in the choice of projects to be funded or in the distribution of funding.²⁵

Much in the spirit of the above-mentioned aspects, that are two further EU practices affecting what type of organisations stand a chance of securing funding. The first one is “non-retroactivity.” This means, that the grants may only fund activities that occur after the award. This contributes to the trend that projects supported by EU grants have to constitute something entirely new rather than continuing or building upon the work that CSOs do on a day-to-day basis. The second practice is “co-financing.” This means that EU grants usually do not cover the entire costs of the project that is proposed but only a certain rate of it. Hence, organisations have to be able to come up with a certain part of the project’s funding by themselves. For example, in the context of the EU SPRING programme, the “co-funding rate” had to be no more than 90 per cent, which means that at least 10 per cent of a project had to be covered by own means or third-party funding.

Another example is the 2013 funding line “Appui aux initiatives de la société civile qui contribuent à la transition démocratique et à la promotion des droits des femmes en Tunisie” financed through the EIHDR.²⁶ With an overall budget of €1 million, this was one of the most substantial sources of funding directed at Tunisian civil society exclusively. None of the projects that were awarded funding under this line was single-financed. In the context of the main 2015 EIHDR call directed at Tunisian civil society, which had a budget

²⁴European Commission. *Calls for Proposals and Tenders*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2VcuRev> (accessed on 13.2.2017).

²⁵Interview with the programme officer responsible for North Africa at the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), held in Brussels in March 2015 (4).

²⁶European Commission. *Appui aux initiatives de la société civile qui contribuent à la transition démocratique et à la promotion des droits des femmes en Tunisie*. Brussels, 22.3.2013.

of €2.4 million, different co-funding rates were demanded for Tunisian and non-Tunisian organisations. Non-Tunisian organisations were asked to fund 20 per cent of the budget unless they had a Tunisian co-applicant. Tunisian associations and consortiums including a Tunisian co-applicant were granted a co-funding rate of 95 per cent.²⁷ Hence, in order to apply for EU grants, Tunisian CSOs need to either have own means or they need to team up with other organisations. As will be discussed later, these organisations are often foreign actors.

7.3.4 Application procedures

A further set of practices discouraging or preventing certain civil society organisations from trying to obtain financial assistance from the EU is the application itself. During my interviews, various activists complained that they neither had the time nor the skill set to cope with the application procedure.²⁸ And even an activist with substantial working experience in a highly professionalised Tunisian NGO said – when prompted with the question about what the first thing was that came to his mind when thinking about the EU in general in the beginning of an interview – that “the funding procedure is very discouraging.”²⁹ The interviewee in question, as well as several others, also emphasized that the EU compares quite unfavourable with other donors when it comes to its procedures in the context of both grant applications as well as once a grant has been awarded. This is acknowledged by EU officials. As one official puts it “the application process is quite heavy.”³⁰ However, in light of the above-mentioned practice of handing out quite substantial sums of money, they see little choice but to apply a rigorous procedure to ensure recipients are able to use the funds as intended. “It’s the taxpayer’s money and we have to account for every euro we give,” one of them emphasized.³¹

The EU differentiates between open and closed calls. Closed calls mean that there are two stages. First of all, all applicants submit a concept note which serves as the basis for a pre-selection. Only those applicants short-listed are then invited to submit a full application. Hence, applicants that are unlikely to stand a chance at obtaining a grant are spared the ef-

²⁷European Commission. *Documents pour information: session d’information*. Tunis, 18.4.2013, <http://bit.ly/2LEvyJe> (accessed on 13.2.2017).

²⁸Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in May (12, 16, 19), June (36, 41) and August 2015 (53, 55).

²⁹Interview with an activist, held in Berlin in August 2018 (85).

³⁰Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (13).

³¹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (10).

fort of going through the entire procedure. However, the majority of funding for Tunisian civil society is distributed through open calls, which means that all interested organisations are required to submit the entire application from the very beginning. Hence, even if applicants feel that they are capable of delivering an application that corresponds with the EU's expectations, they have to consider whether they can afford to put the amount of work it takes into something that might not pay off in the end. As there is significant competition on each call, organisations with limited resources, have to carefully consider whether they should make the effort. As the co-founder of a very well organised and professional new NGO said:

We have never had any experience with the EU in terms of funding, because we don't have, to be honest, we don't have skills. We don't have staff that can write 45 pages for the EU, even the last one they wanted was 80 pages, which is very long, we don't have that skill.³²

Moreover, the experience of having gone through the entire procedure and failed to obtain the grant can be quite discouraging for activists and associations who are not used to applying on a regular basis. One activist expressed major disenchantment over what she had read, and probably misread, as very promising informal feedback from an EU official. Based on that experience, she said that the EU delegation had "wasted" her time and that she would not apply again.³³

The main applications for the aforementioned 2013 and 2015 EIDHR calls were around 90 pages long and included eight annexes. Everything had to be completed in French, a non-native language for most Tunisians. It required not only substantial writing skills, but also knowledge of project planning, risk management and detailed budgeting. In an information session for the 2015 EIDHR call that I observed in April 2015,³⁴ several Tunisian attendees expressed their concerns about the practice of requiring such elaborate project proposals, pointing to local CSOs' inability to comply and the fact that this gave a substantial advantage to foreign organisations. In response to these concerns, the EU official who chaired the

³²Interview with the co-founder of a Tunisian civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (33).

³³Interview with a Tunisian activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (15).

³⁴Fieldwork notes made while observing an information session for civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 22.4.2015.

session repeated the above-mentioned theme of having a responsibility towards the taxpayer. Moreover, he said that

We know that this procedure of obtaining funds is a challenge, but we want to challenge you, it is our objective that Tunisian NGOs can compete with international NGOs. And we believe in Tunisian civil society, we really think that you are capable of doing this.³⁵

His response led some attendees to silently laugh and shake their heads in disapproval. Two of those I managed to speak to afterwards indicated that their organisation would not try to apply for the grant as they did not believe they had a realistic chance. They also mentioned that it would take too much time and that they would rather use that time differently.³⁶ Moreover, one of them explicitly expressed concerns about the fact that the application had to be completed in French. Indeed, the language barrier was a recurring theme that was reiterated in several other interviews. Some, but not all of those who were concerned about the use of French felt that it was a hurdle for them. Those who felt comfortable using French said that it was a hurdle for some associations, and particularly for smaller, less professionalised ones as well as those based in the country's interior regions. And one activist from Tataouine did indeed phrase some concerns:

I don't think that one day we will be doing this, we never applied for direct funding from the EU because we know it is very complicated, and yeah generally it is in French, and we are not good in French to be honest. So ok, we do speak French, but not that French that is solid and good enough to for this.³⁷

However, this is not a universal sentiment. Other activists, mainly working for more professional and Tunis-based CSOs indicated that they actually preferred French applications and considered the use of French in the context of interacting with the EU as adequate. One suggested it was not realistic for the EU to offer the procedure in Arabic, stating that "it's Europe's money, we speak French, they speak French, we can't expect them to do it in

³⁵Fieldwork notes made while observing an information session for civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 22.4.2015.

³⁶Interview with two activists, held in Tunis in April 2015 (11).

³⁷Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in October 2018 (93).

Arabic, it doesn't work that way.”³⁸ Another activist, who had previously worked for Al Bawsala and is now a freelancer writing reports for international think tanks and NGOs said:

This is very technical language, project management, accounting and all that. I don't know all these specialist terms in Arabic. Do we even have words for all these things? I don't know.³⁹

7.3.5 Cooperation with partners organisations

The fact that obtaining a grant is so difficult has led to the emergence of the practice of co-applications. This means that local organisations jointly apply with other, often foreign partners who pose as the lead applicant. These are often non-Tunisian and highly professionalised NGOs with experience in writing applications for EU grants. While the local CSO will eventually be in charge of much of the actual work on the ground, they leave most of the administrative work both with regards to the application procedure and the compliance with EU rules to their partner. The EU then mainly deals with the lead applicant who redistributes its funding to the co-applicant. Such constellations occur even in project applications involving some of the most prestigious and professional organisations such as “I-Watch,” an anti-corruption watchdog. According to their founder, they did not feel that they were able to comply with the EU procedures. Hence they teamed up with “Advocates without borders,” an international NGO based in Brussels.⁴⁰ However, as will be discussed in the following section, cooperation between co-applicants can lead to tensions once they have won a project grant.

7.4 Execution of EU-funded Tunisian civil society projects

The practices determining what kind of associations are more likely to get EU funding have an influence on the structure of Tunisian civil society and activists' perceptions of the EU. However, those CSOs who are receiving grants from the EU may also be influenced by the practices in the context of the implementation of EU-funded projects. Hence, before

³⁸Interview with an activist, held in Berlin in August 2018 (87).

³⁹Interview with an activist, held in Berlin in August 2018 (86).

⁴⁰Interview with a co-founder of I-Watch, held in Tunis in May 2015 (23).

moving towards discussing the broader implications of the EU' practices, the chapter will now unpack those practices occurring when EU-funded Tunisian civil society projects are executed. In doing so, it also looks at how EU practices applied in the context of the award of grants relate to the practices in the context of projects' execution.

7.4.1 Co-operation

The first dimension brings us back to the aforementioned co-operation between civil society organisations in the context of consortiums of associations jointly being awarded project grants. With even professional Tunisian associations lacking the respective expertise to master the application procedure, such constellations are the norm rather than the exception. Ideally, the division of labour works as envisioned, with each component of the consortium contributing according to its strengths. The idea is that the partner organisation, particularly if non-Tunisian and non-Tunisia-based, supports the Tunisian association and makes up for its lack of expertise and experience in grant-writing, accounting and project management. However, in practice, this might not work out, which can have drastic implications for the Tunisian CSO. This is particularly problematic if the main applicant is not complying with its reporting obligations to the EU. For example, a project manager in a Tunisian CSO working with Italian and Spanish partners complained that the second tranche of EU funding for the project he was leading was substantially delayed. According to him, the work that the first tranche had paid for had been conducted and all relevant reporting had been provided to the main applicant. However, this organisation had not done its part. The project manager complained:

One of the reasons is that our partner organisations don't submit their paperwork in time. It seems like [the European partner organisation, name redacted] are not used to have such big projects. It's not professional at all. We are very professional. I am surprised to see this in a European country. (...) And now the team I am having, for four months, they are not really paid. We don't have money to pay the rent, I am not paid since four months.⁴¹

Such problems and their resolution are particularly difficult if the respective partner organisation is not based in Tunis. International cooperation is undermined by the logis-

⁴¹Interview with a project manager of a civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (29).

tics of consortiums as official communication and informal interaction are much harder. If challenges occur within a consortium, it is also much easier for either side to simply avoid and ignore each other. However, partner organisations being located in the same place can cause tensions as well. Proximity facilitates more regular interaction that potentially also extends beyond professional cooperation. Being part of the same social bubble is more likely to highlight the differences between people working for the same project but in two different organisations. Foreign organisations often pay higher salaries to their employees – whether Tunisian or non-Tunisian – than local organisations, even when their job description is similar. Moreover, such direct interaction can have the side effect of the de-facto hierarchy within a consortium being experienced more directly.⁴² This may then feed into the existing tensions between local and non-Tunisian organisations active in Tunisia that were discussed in the previous chapter.

7.4.2 Reporting and rules

A further, regular complaint among activist implementing EU-funded projects relates to reporting requirements and rules that are perceived as exaggerated and overly bureaucratic. This relates both to the time it costs to comply with them as well as the sentiment that it sometimes prevents them from doing things they could do if the EU was more flexible. One activist complained:

We are supposed to have about 80 per cent of the budget [from the EU], and the other 20 per cent we have to provide ourselves. So we found a Tunisian corporation that said ok, we are going to support you, but we want to have a video and T-Shirts where there is the brand name et cetera. I said to them [the EU]: Look, he is gonna give us two-thirds of the amount, so please tell us this is ok with your guidelines. I spent ages waiting. And finally the company said look, we are not gonna wait for ages.⁴³

The problem was that he was not sure his idea would have been in compliance with the “EU Communication and Visibility Requirements for EU External Actions”⁴⁴ which

⁴²Interview with a member of staff of an international NGO and a Tunisian activist, held in Tunis in May (22) and August 2015 (57).

⁴³Interview with a project manager of a civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (29).

⁴⁴European Commission. *Communication and Visibility Manual for EU External Actions of 2010*. Luxembourg, 1.1.2018, <http://bit.ly/2LHfian> (accessed on 29.12.2018).

sets out various requirements and guidelines that most beneficiaries of EU grants have to comply with. According to the activist in question, these guidelines are not practical and not in line with the realities on the ground:

Say, if I accepted to do this activity with this company, the EU would not accept the conditions of visibility and then he would consider it as non-eligible costs. So, on the one hand, we need fundraising, on the other hand, we are crippled, our hands are tied because of these guidelines. Because I think they have been drafted by people who are sitting in offices, they don't even know what does it mean to be an NGO, what does it mean civil society.⁴⁵

Further issues arise around the EU practice of declaring value-added tax (VAT) as non-eligible for EU funding. Generally, beneficiaries of EU grants have to apply for VAT exemptions. Should they not be able to reclaim the VAT, they have to prove that they cannot – in which case it might be declared as eligible.⁴⁶ In practice, this involves cumbersome interactions with the Tunisian fiscal authorities to get the necessary certificates.⁴⁷ In light of the fact that the EU is providing substantial direct budget assistance to Tunisia (and various other states), the fact that it aims to avoid the rather modest indirect contribution to these states' budget seems odd – particularly in light of the additional effort it creates for grant recipients in countries with less efficiently run public administrations.

More generally, various activists deemed reporting requirements mandating documentation of activities and providing receipts for all expenses, including rather small ones, as too demanding. Again, EU officials tend to be aware of these concerns but argue with the need to ensure that taxpayers' money is transparently and efficiently used. However, another argument being made is that transparency protects civil society. As one EU official said

Ensuring transparency on who is funded by the EU is very important because this could be used otherwise as an instrument to target civil society without

⁴⁵ Interview with a project manager of a civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (29).

⁴⁶ European Commission. *Frequently asked questions - Grants*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2EViiizl> (accessed on 23.10.2015).

⁴⁷ Interview with the accountant of a civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (28).

reason. If not even the EU is transparent, imagining what other donors are doing, therefore civil society needs to be more controlled.⁴⁸

Tunisian civil society activists tend to be in favour of transparency and accountability as well, which is an objective that many of them themselves advocate for towards the Tunisian government. However, there is a sentiment that the administrative burden put on them and others by the EU in the context of funded projects is undermining their work without necessarily yielding the desired results. They feel that the EU has neither the necessary local know-how nor the resources to conduct audits of the kind that would really detect embezzlement unless it is too obvious and excessive. Having made the case for a more pragmatic approach, an activist working for a pro-transparency NGO explains how activists can get around EU rules if they genuinely want to:

If I book a conference venue, I ask my cousin who works in the hotel to write a receipt for more than I pay. He will do it, no problem, and the EU will never know. They won't even be able to read the number [on the receipt] if I do it in Arabic. This happens all the time, it doesn't matter that the EU ask for receipts.⁴⁹

7.5 Implications of EU funding practices for Tunisian civil society

Tunisian civil society activists generally tend to acknowledge that the EU tries to support them. However, there are a range of concerns regarding whom it supports and how. To begin with, many criticise the selection of organisations that the EU chooses to support as it is seen as not representative of the entirety of Tunisian civil society, and even less of Tunisian society at large. They claim that the EU is focusing on a rather narrow set of civil society actors. According to these views, the EU does so both directly and indirectly. First of all, the EU is said to have its favourites, organisations that it knows well and has made good experiences with, making it particularly difficult for new actors to get access. Moreover, the EU is accused of sidelining those organisations whose representatives are most critical of its policies and inducing others to become less critical, for example when

⁴⁸Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in October 2018 (95).

⁴⁹Interview with the co-founder of a Tunisian civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (33).

it comes to controversial EU projects such as the planned Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Tunisia or its policies on migration. In that context, they also point to the fact that some organisations have started to execute strongly pre-defined projects, effectively reducing civil society to a service provider implementing the EU's agenda.

Perception is not necessarily always reality. Activists' and organisations' views may be shaped by their own inability to obtain an EU grant or by the workload that applications for such grants generate. Dissatisfaction with bureaucratic procedures is not exactly a rare phenomenon, and neither limited to Tunisian civil society nor exclusively directed at the EU's administrative procedures. Exaggerations of problems and challenges among interviewees cannot be excluded either. However, activists' concerns are grounded in real challenges. While it is not necessarily the EU's intention, its practices of awarding grants have a major impact on who is able to obtain them. Practically speaking, the vast majority of Tunisian CSOs are incapable of receiving EU funding as they lack the capacity to master the extensive and very technical application process and the organisational capacity and experience to manage EU grants. As a result, there is a perception among activists that large parts of the money available are going to organisations that are not strictly speaking Tunisian. Such feelings may not entirely reflect the fact that foreign or global organisations are often co-applicants whose involvement is limited and who enable local CSOs rather than taking their spot. Yet, these feelings do contribute to the existing tensions between civil society organisations with foreign roots and those seen as domestic that have been discussed in the previous chapter.

Moreover, the need to be a professional organisation or to become one is seen with scepticism. Civil society activists holding up the ideal of a civil society shaped by volunteering oppose the notion of professional organisations implementing projects that are already largely designed by officials in Brussels who they feel often do not understand the needs and realities on the ground. They feel that these officials' decisions are dependent on what is "fashionable"⁵⁰ in Brussels.⁵¹ As a result, organisations are becoming or pretending to become experts on whatever the EU's funding priorities are rather than developing their own ideas. For example, having received major funding and having built up organisational struc-

⁵⁰Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (12).

⁵¹Interviews with activists, held in Tunis in May 2015 (14, 17, 20, 21).

tures in 2014, several organisations that had focused on election observation ventured out to apply for funding in entirely unrelated fields a year later. They hence abandoned working in fields in which they had gathered experience and shifted to other fields in which they not only lacked expertise but which they also would not have considered crucially important.

Notably, the old generation of activists that, among other things, set up and led the Tunisian National Dialogue, struggles to get access to EU funding. At the same time, this generation tends to be rather critical towards professionalisation and those organisations and activists excelling at. Moreover, they see the EU as a cause of these developments. One activist therefore went as far as to argue that this development has “destroyed Tunisian civil society.”⁵² “The influx of funding has corrupted civil society. Activists got used to luxury, to hotels and travels,”⁵³ another one said. The dependence on EU funding and the focus on a few, professionally run organisations irritates activists. In particular, because they also tend to feel that much money is spend on organizing conferences and conducting studies rather than doing work on the ground. In addition to questioning the use and impact of various EU-funded or organised projects, they are also questioning the competence and integrity of some of the organisations implementing them. As one civil society activist put it:

You have all these conferences in expensive hotels and all these panels with always the same people. And they sit there and talk, and they agree on everything, and they congratulate each other how right they are. [...] If you are hungry, you can just go to the Africa Hotel in Avenue Bourguiba, there is always a conference, you always get something to eat. [...] It’s a waste of time to talk to people you agree with, we need to talk to the people we don’t agree with.⁵⁴

7.6 Conclusions

To sum up, the practice of EU financial assistance for Tunisian civil society and the various practices occurring in that context contribute to the proliferation of a certain type of civil society. The criteria of eligibility, the nature of the EU’s funding and the application

⁵²Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in August 2015 (65).

⁵³Interview with Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, president of Doustourna, held in Tunis in June 2015 (44).

⁵⁴Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in September 2015 (77).

procedures discourage or even prevent civil society organisations with a lesser degree of professionalization to obtain EU grants. Through its own practices, the EU favours civil society organisations that are willing to adapt to the EU's preferences rather than pursuing ideas developed on their own. Moreover, it favours those actors that have strong organisational capacities, grant writing skills and a good sense of what projects need to look like in order to be eventually chosen by the officials making decisions on EU funding. Hence, as a result of these practices, the EU contributes to changing the overall nature of Tunisian civil society. Moreover, it further contributes to the existing divisions within Tunisian civil society that have been discussed in the previous chapter. The following chapter will now examine the second aggregated practice of EU interaction with Tunisian civil society, that is its consultations regime. As will be shown, EU practices employed in the context of consultations also contribute to changing the structure of Tunisian civil society as well as to existing divisions within it, albeit in a slightly different way.

Chapter 8

Consultations between Tunisian civil society and the EU

Having established how the practices occurring in the context of EU financial assistance relate to those of Tunisian civil society, this chapter discusses its consultations with the EU delegation. Consulting civil society in the course of decision-making processes is engrained into the EU's legal and political set-up. Article 11(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)¹ states that “the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.” Article 15(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)² recognises such dialogue as an essential practice of good governance within the EU's domestic legislative process. In correspondence with these legal provisions, civil society's inclusion in the ordinary legislative procedure has become well-established and to some extent institutionalised. This is most prominently happening in the context of the European Commission's public consultations regime, which enables stakeholders to share their views and inputs in the process of drafting legislation. It should be noted though, that no distinction is made between civil society organisations and other interest groups. Moreover, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) which represents European civil society is invited to give opinions in the process of the European Commission's drafting of legislative proposals. The vast number of associations

¹European Union. *Treaty on European Union (consolidated version)*. Brussels, 26.10.2012, <http://bit.ly/2Q6AsiZ> (accessed on 27.6.2017).

²European Union. *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (consolidated version)*. Brussels, 26.10.2012, <http://bit.ly/2QS33xH> (accessed on 27.6.2017).

having a liaison office in Brussels also regularly interact with policy-makers on all levels and across all institutions. The European Parliament's rules of procedures even mandate the organisation of structured consultations with European civil society.³

Public consultations were also conducted in the context of EU activities that relate to its democracy promotion agenda. Examples include the 2015 consultation on the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy,⁴ the 2016 public consultation on the future of EU development policy⁵ or the 2017 consultation on the external financing instruments of the European Union.⁶ However, while these consultations are mainly targeted at non-state actors within the European Union, the EU is also increasingly consulting with civil society activists from the countries at which its external action is directed. As the EU's "eyes and ears"⁷ on the ground in third countries, EU delegations are instrumental in organising and facilitating such consultations.

Just like the practice of financial assistance, EU consultation meetings with civil society can be conceived of as aggregated practices that are composed of a range of other practices. To hold such meetings, EU officials will have to draft an agenda, invite guests and execute the consultation. Several of these sub-practices are composed of further sub-practices. For example, the practice of inviting activists to a consultation requires not only the actual drafting of an invitation but also the decision on who to invite. Moreover, such practices might be influenced by other practices. As will be discussed below, the practice of deciding which civil society activists to invite is linked to EU officials' various social and professional practices that influence which potential attendees they know of and consider for the consultations they organise.

In light of the puzzle put forward in this thesis, it appears conducive to study such lower levels of aggregation in the context of the practice of consultations. Yet, at the same time, it does not seem necessary or helpful to examine every practice that EU officials employ

³European Parliament. *Rules of procedure, 8th parliamentary term*. Strasbourg, 31.7.2018, <http://bit.ly/2VbdpHc> (accessed on 27.12.2018).

⁴European Commission. *Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy: the EU launches a consultation on the future of its relations with neighbouring countries*. Brussels, 4.3.2015, <http://bit.ly/2Q5vtPw> (accessed on 30.4.2016).

⁵European Commission. *European Commission launches open public consultation on the future of EU development policy*. Brussels, 1.6.2016, <http://bit.ly/2St9eoJ> (accessed 20.7.2017).

⁶European Commission. *Public Consultation on the External Financing Instruments of the European Union*. Brussels, <http://bit.ly/2LAnk4W> (accessed on 20.7.2017).

⁷Johannes Hahn. *Speech at opening of NEAR/DEVCO Cooperation Days*. Brussels, 29.02.2016, <http://bit.ly/2RhqBeC> (accessed on 30.4.2016).

but rather to focus on those that might be expected to have a relevant impact. Hence, the structure of this chapter will follow the process of the definition and execution of EU consultations with Tunisian civil society. It starts by identifying the different types of consultations that do occur between the EU and Tunisian civil society. In doing so, it mainly focuses on professional interaction that occurs in a relatively structured manner during meetings that are usually aimed at informing the Tunisian civil society about its policies and asking about it about its views. However, it also touches upon semi-private and private interaction between representatives of the EU and representatives of Tunisian civil society. On that basis, it then moves to examine the EU's objectives in consulting with Tunisian civil society. Looking at the EU's working definition of civil society as well as the practices of inviting civil society activists, it then examines who is attending consultation meetings and identifies the factors determining the selection of attendees. Finally, looking at the setting of the meetings and the conduct of those attending it, it examines the actual execution of the consultations.

8.1 Types of EU consultations with Tunisian civil society

Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, the EU committed itself to listening more carefully to local voices in the different states of its Southern neighbourhood. On 28 February, shortly after the fall of the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle emphasized the need to “show humility about the past.” Moreover, he stated that “we will not dictate outcomes, we will not impose solutions.” Instead, he promised that on-going support should be adapted “based on collective demands emanating not only from the interim leadership but also from opposition parties, civil society and youth.”⁸ In a similar spirit, High Representative Catherine Ashton emphasized that the EU's response to the Arab uprisings “is built on the need to acknowledge past mistakes and listen without imposing” during a speech to the European Parliament in September 2011. On her ongoing engagement with Arab partners, she stated that “we are working with them, not at them.”⁹

⁸Štefan Füle. *Speech on the Recent Events in North Africa*. Brussels, 28.02.2011, <http://bit.ly/2CzWVBe> (accessed on 27.10.2014).

⁹Catherine Ashton. *Address to the European Parliament on the United Nations General Assembly, the Middle East Peace Process and the Arab spring*. Strasbourg, 27.09.2011, <http://bit.ly/2BR2UQP> (accessed on 27.10.2014).

In the context of this new “listening mode” as Balfour (2012, 7) put it, the EU has also emphasised the importance of civil society and pledged that “it will consult civil society organisations more systematically in the preparation and monitoring of bilateral action plans and financial cooperation projects.”¹⁰ It has also pledged to include its representatives in matters relating to EU-Tunisian relations as well as to foster their inclusion into domestic Tunisian policy-making processes. To that end, it has created and institutionalised different new consultation formats.

As discussed in chapter five, the EU-Tunisia Association Agreement which entered into force in 1998, is setting the terms of intergovernmental cooperation between the EU and Tunisia. Similar to other states in the EU’s neighbourhood, the key cooperation mechanism are sectorial subcommittees that meet on what is usually an annual basis. During these subcommittee meetings, governmental representatives of both sides come together and jointly develop so-called operational clauses that commit both sides to certain political action. These subcommittee meeting are preceded by consultations with civil society representatives who are working on issues relevant to the policy field discussed in the respective subcommittee meeting. These consultation meetings are held within the EU delegation’s premises and are scheduled shortly before the subcommittee, usually on the same day. While the practice of consulting civil society before sub-committee meetings is applied in other countries as well, Tunisia is unique in that these consultations also include representatives of the Tunisian government. Hence, they are also referred to as tripartite consultations.

An additional series of tripartite consultation meetings was launched at the beginning of 2014 in the context of the EU-funded project “Mobilisation de la société civile dans le suivi des relations Tunisie-Union européenne.” This project was awarded to EuroMed Rights,¹¹ a civil society network consisting of civil society organisations from both shores of the Mediterranean. The organisation is headquartered in Copenhagen, and has offices in Brussels, Paris and Tunis. EuroMed Rights’ geographical mandate covers the EU and all countries bordering the Mediterranean in the South. The Tunis-based office was established in 2013 in response to the regional transitions and is in charge of overseeing the

¹⁰European Commission. *The EU’s response to the ‘Arab Spring’*. Brussels, 16.12.2011, <http://bit.ly/2LCXQUg> (accessed on 27.10.2014).

¹¹As indicated before, EuroMed Rights was called Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) until 2015.

organisations' projects and activities across North Africa. However, due to its location in Tunis as well as the fact that conditions to engage for human rights in the Tunisian post-revolutionary context compare quite favourably to those in other North African countries, the office has become particularly active in Tunisia.

Rather than focusing on EU-Tunisian relations, the consultations occurring in the context of the EuroMed Rights project were geared towards domestic Tunisian development. Funded by the EU and co-organised by the EU delegation and EuroMed Rights, four working groups were created to cover the following four themes that correspond with EuroMed Rights' overarching agenda: Gender equality and women's rights, social and economic rights, judicial reform as well as the rights of migrants and refugees. For each of these topics, EuroMed Rights created a working group with around 20 members. Between spring 2014 and summer 2015, these working groups met three times to discuss different predefined sub-topics and jointly developed policy recommendations for the Tunisian government. These policy recommendations were drafted by EuroMed Rights based on the meetings, presented as a report and discussed during a final conference in May 2015. In April 2016, a second phase was launched that aimed at continuing the consultation in the same format and the same thematic focus. This second phase is also financed by the European Union.¹²

In addition to these rather institutionalised and regular encounters, the EU consults with civil society on a range of other, less regular occasions. In fact, while the above-mentioned formal consultations were only introduced in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, substantial interaction between the EU delegation and Tunisian civil society is a fairly recent phenomenon as well. According to Mokhtar Trifi, the former president of the LTDH, such interactions only started with the appointment of Marc Pierini as head of the EU delegation to Tunisia in 2002 who put more emphasis on human rights and championed the inclusion of civil society:

Before Marc Pierini, there was practically no interaction between Tunisian civil society and the European Union. All relations were with Brussels or Strasbourg.

Or on the occasion of a visit of a EU representative to Tunisia.¹³

¹²EuroMed Rights. *Dialogue Tripartite Société Civile-Autorités Tunisiennes-Union Européenne*. Copenhagen, 6.5.2016, <http://bit.ly/2SnMB4K>, (accessed on 13.05.2017).

¹³Interview with Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH, held in Tunis in September 2015 (80).

These practices are still in place. Usually, whenever a senior EU official or a parliamentary delegation is invited to Tunisia, the visit also includes an encounter with civil society representatives which gives them the chance to talk to and hear the views of civil society. Moreover, Tunisian civil society representatives are invited to Brussels in order to meet with officials and policymakers. As Trifi explains:

In the eleven years that I have been president of the League, I have been invited to Brussels and Strasbourg several times. I was received by the different representatives of the EU, such as the president of the Parliament, the president of the Commission, different parliamentary groups, or by the Commissioners in Brussels. And the administration, that means Relex, the directorate for external relations. The purpose of this was to encourage the different actors of the EU to take the human rights dimension of their relations with Tunisia into consideration.¹⁴

Visits of civil society activists to Brussels also occur in the context of events such as the “Tunisian Week” in the European Parliament from 2 to 4 May 2017, which featured a series of workshops aimed at bringing MEPs and Tunisian MPs together to share “their experiences of parliamentary, legislative and representative good practice.”¹⁵ While it was primarily geared towards parliamentarians, it also featured a range of civil society activists.

These formal encounters are complemented by other, less formal exchange between representatives of the EU and Tunisian civil society. For example, conferences such as the one organised as the final event of the first phase of the above-mentioned EuroMed Rights project constitute a further and regular source of exchange. What is notable is that they tend to occur at rather up-scale locations. For example, the above-mentioned programme was kicked off in the four-star Golden Tulip Hotel¹⁶ while the closing event was hosted in the five-star Africa Hotel in downtown Tunis. Both hotels are popular choices for events in the context of interactions between the EU and Tunisian civil society. They are also popular with civil society organisation that have corresponding budgets, including international

¹⁴Interview with Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH, held in Tunis in September 2015 (80). The European Commission’s Directorate-General for the External Relations (DG RELEX) was responsible for EU external policy before being merged into the newly created European External Action Service in 2010.

¹⁵European Parliament. *Tunisian week: a stronger EU- Tunisia partnership*. Brussels, 4.5.2017, <http://bit.ly/2Q4KIbt> (accessed on 14.6.2017).

¹⁶Laura Baeza. *Conférence de lancement du projet ‘Mobilisation de la société civile dans le suivi des relations entre l’UE et la Tunisie.’* Tunis, 11.4.2014, <http://bit.ly/2BKto6t>, (accessed on 13.5.2017).

NGOs or local civil society organisations that are receiving international funding. As elaborated in chapter six, this contributes to what other, less professional and less well-funded civil society actors tend to refer to and criticise as “five-star activism,”¹⁷ a type of activism they feel is supported through EU practices.

Such conferences that include Tunisian civil society actors and EU officials blur the line between formal and informal interaction. In addition to the official programme, they leave much time for exchanges during the breaks or informal sessions that are geared towards such exchanges and towards networking more generally. Similarly, there are a range of encounters that occur on a more social level, such as receptions and parties hosted by the EU delegation or other events and meeting points of the diplomatic and expat communities. Interactions might even include purely private occasions, such as parties or cultural events that tend to bring together members of the well-educated upper-middle class in Tunis.

8.2 Objectives of EU consultations with Tunisian civil society

The increasing organisation of structured consultations with Tunisian civil society might be considered as a partial fulfilment of the EU’s promise to switch to “listening mode” when engaging with its Southern neighbourhood. However, consultations with civil society are not only acknowledged as the right thing to do for an EU that has been criticised for having too cordial a relationship with the previous regime. Rather, attaching more importance to the inclusion of civil society actors is also considered of practical interest for the EU. Based on several interviews conducted with officials from the EU delegation in Tunis and the Brussels-based officials working for the EEAS,¹⁸ I have identified three key EU objectives which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

8.2.1 Gathering information

The first of these objectives is the gathering of relevant information. Having failed to see the 2011 Arab uprisings coming was partly attributed to the fact that Western states have not sufficiently listened to local actors in the region – or at least not to the right ones. EU officials acknowledge this and seek a better understanding of post-2011 Tunisian society and

¹⁷Interviews with Tunisian activists, held in Tunis in June (44), August (65) and September 2015 (77).

¹⁸Interviews with several EU officials, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5, 6) and in Tunis in April (9, 10), May (13, 18) and June 2015 (40).

politics. The EU's delegation is supposed to be the EU's "eyes and ears" on the ground in Tunisia. As such, it is expected to gather intelligence and provide advice to Brussels-based officials and decision-makers. However, EU delegations only have limited staff and no intelligence-gathering capacities that would be comparable to those of EU member states. Hence, their understanding of the realities on the ground are at risk of being limited to their respective officials' reality of life and their daily experiences. These experiences tend to be quite detached from the realities that average Tunisians face. This is partly because EU officials tend to spend most of their time in the Tunisian capital. "We don't really have the time to travel a lot. I mean, I have been to Djerba, Kairouan and so on. But you know, that was private. For my work here we don't really travel. We go to Hammamet occasionally,"¹⁹ one EU official told me.

With regards to both affluence and attitude, there are substantial differences between the capital and the coastal north on the one hand, and Tunisia's rural inland regions on the other. The 2014 parliamentary elections illustrate the ideological split of the country. While the Northern governorates largely voted for the secular Nidaa Tounes party, a substantial majority in the Southern governorates opted for the Islamist Ennahda party.²⁰ This divide exists by and large also with regards to most socio-economic indicators, with the greater Tunis region generally being substantially above average.²¹ EU officials tend to live in the most affluent and socially liberal parts of greater Tunis such as La Marsa or Carthage where they are surrounded by a comparably advanced infrastructure and experience a life that is reminiscent of European standards. The same applies to their working environment, as the EU delegation to Tunisia is based in Berge du Lac, a modern business district that provides for an upper-class infrastructure and lifestyle.²²

Being first and foremost a diplomatic envoy, the EU delegation's officials' main interlocutor are senior representatives from the Tunisian government and the administration, which tend to come from middle and upper middle-class backgrounds. As EU delegations do not offer consular services, there is very limited direct interaction with ordinary Tunisians.

¹⁹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (10). Hammamet is a town that is around 70km South-East of Tunis and Tunisia's primary tourist and conference destination.

²⁰Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections. *Résultats finaux par circonscription pour les élections législatives*. Tunis, <http://bit.ly/2Vbwp8B> (accessed on 06.07.2017).

²¹Sigma Conseil. *Rapport Open Sigma 2017*. Tunis, <http://bit.ly/2Q4YMSe> (accessed on: 6.7.2017).

²²Except for the fact that no alcohol is served as the district's development had been enabled through funding from the Gulf states that came with conditions attached.

What alleviates the problem to some extent is that the delegation also employ Tunisian staff. While they tend to come from the middle-class as well, they usually have a better understanding of Tunisian society than their European colleagues. EU officials' ability to get a grasp of Tunisian society is also limited by the fact that they just stay for a few years. Hence, as the afore-mentioned official puts it:

Our life takes place in a bit of a bubble. I mean, the streets here are very good here, there are great restaurants. And then we go home to Marsa or Carthage and our friends are mainly expats. It's like in Brussels where you never talk to any Belgians. No, Brussels is worse... [laughter].²³

There is a certain awareness of this problem among EU officials in the delegation. Hence, they see consultations with Tunisian civil society activists as an important source of information for the EU delegation that helps officials to broaden their understanding. One EU official told me: "We need these meetings [with civil society] to know what's going on in the country."²⁴ This is echoed by the previous official:

We don't have the capabilities. These [civil society] associations really understand the people and we don't even speak Arabic. My colleague is learning Arabic, but it's like... very basic. Some people are super-motivated when they arrive but then there is a lot of work and it is too hot... [laughter].²⁵

This highlights another challenge that EU officials are facing when it comes to getting an understanding of Tunisian society. Even though French is spoken widely, it is not spoken universally. The question of whether and how well Tunisians speak French partly correlates with their socio-economic status in society. Hence, EU officials' professional or social interactions with Tunisians tend to be mainly with Tunisians from the upper middle class. One might expect this to give them a rather incomplete picture. Moreover, even among the upper and middle classes, Tunisian Arabic is the main *lingua franca*. Even though franco-phone media exist, most newspapers and almost all relevant radio and television channels

²³Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (10).

²⁴Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (13).

²⁵Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (10).

are in Arabic or Tunisian Arabic. Hence, as non-Arabic speakers, EU officials participating in Tunisian life and consuming Tunisian media are at risk of getting an idea of Tunisian society that is superficial or even misleading.

To sum up, EU officials in the delegation see consultations with Tunisian civil society as an opportunity to gather information. They see it as a way to broaden their horizon and to develop a better understanding of Tunisian affairs. They hope that this will help them avoid future misjudgements of the public mood and to design better-suited policies and programmes for Tunisia. As one EU official from the political section puts it:

When we talk to them [civil society], it helps us to understand what is going on the ground and how Tunisians think. We didn't understand that very well when Ben Ali was in power. We thought we did, but we didn't.²⁶

8.2.2 Increasing effectiveness

Linked to the notion of better information enabling better policy, a second motivation of holding regular consultations relates is the establishment of good working relations with Tunisian partners. During the exchanges that occur during consultations, information can flow in both directions. Officials in the Tunisian delegation feel that this is an opportunity to explain and promote its own policies towards a group of potentially relatively influential stakeholders. As an official from the EU delegation's cooperation section puts it:

The biggest problems of the EU is that it is really bad at communicating. We don't manage to explain what we are doing, so there are lots of people who are afraid of things we are doing like the DCFTA. So we can use these meetings to reduce misperceptions.²⁷

EU officials see the proliferation of misperceptions as a factor that is potentially undermining the effectiveness of the EU's approach to Tunisia. Among civil society, a particularly controversial issue in EU-Tunisian relations is the EU's plan to conclude a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Tunisia. Many in civil society and Tunisian society at large feel that this agreement would mainly foster the interests of

²⁶Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in June 2015 (40).

²⁷Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (9).

European businesses and be detrimental to those of Tunisian industry. As one civil society activist says:

These agreements are dangerous, they don't factor in the asymmetries between the North and the South. (...) [The DCFTA] follows the same logic as the 1995 Association Agreement. We should first have an evaluation of how the Association Agreement has influenced the Tunisian economy.²⁸

Moreover, Tunisian civil society activists see the agreement as a continuation of the EU's pre-2011 policy of prioritising trade and liberalization over democracy and human rights. EU officials feel that this is a misconception of what the agreement is actually about. As the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS puts it:

We believe that what the EU is offering with this very badly called DCFTA, it is really badly called because it doesn't correspond with what it contains, what it offers is really integration of the Tunisian economy, I think progressive integration in the EU single market but to the pace that they have chosen and within the template and the priorities that they will define. (...). And of course there is a negotiation process, but for the EU with its 500 million inhabitants, negotiating with Tunisia in this context where we really want to support their transition, is really a contribution to our support to Tunisia. It is not that with this 10 million people market, we want to gain trade-wise. It's not like what we are discussing with the Americans, with TTIP.²⁹

EU officials maintain that the EU's objectives are often misunderstood and misrepresented, and that they are therefore causing mistrust and opposition within Tunisian society. Hence, they see consultations as an opportunity to inform, reassure and potentially persuade civil society activists of the benefits of the DCFTA and other complex and controversial policies. They see consultations as a chance to build and rebuild trust with local stakeholders that they consider to be key to the EU's democracy promotion agenda. In fact, as they see civil society activists as social multipliers, they also hope that changing their views

²⁸Interview with an activist from the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), held in Tunis in May 2015 (32).

²⁹Interview with the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5).

might help them to convince broader audiences in Tunisian society. As the afore-mentioned official puts it:

Of course, this is where civil society really should play a role in defining the Tunisian project if you want. We know very well that it is not our intention to try and force a process together with the Tunisian authorities against Tunisian civil society. Because first it would just fail, and second it is not the spirit of what we are doing. So we are trying really to involve them as much as possible.³⁰

This notion that the EU's agenda “would just fail” if civil society is not taken on board seems to indicate that EU officials see a practical need to include it. This notion is supported by an EU official in the EU delegation:

Everybody is convinced that we need to consult much more with civil society. (...) It is not that you can always have unanimous support, but at least do some better explanation of what we intend to do because of the political issue that could present itself.³¹

The way these officials frame the rationale of consultations indicates a certain hope that the EU delegation's consultations with civil society might help to at the very least inform civil society about the EU's policies and clarify misperceptions about them. They seem to hope to ensure that civil society activists feel included. At best, they would like to mobilise Tunisian civil society for the EU's agenda and thus to convey a sense of local ownership of the EU-Tunisian relations, or the perception thereof. Such notions partly correspond with the practices of EU funding for Tunisian civil society discussed in the previous chapter.

8.2.3 Exerting influence

Finally, EU officials use consultations to exert influence. This happens indirectly through the EU's above-mentioned attempts to explain its agenda and to try to mobilise civil society for it. However, there is also a more direct form of exerting influence that occurs particularly in the context of the tripartite meetings. Since they include representatives of government authorities, civil society and EU representatives, they enable interesting dynamics as they

³⁰Interview with the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5).

³¹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (13).

allow two sides to rally against the third. For example, in fields in which the EU and Tunisian civil society tend to have similar views, such as human rights or the fight against corruption, they may jointly exert moral pressure on the government. As the EEAS' desk officer for Tunisia indicates:

These representatives of civil society are selected by the EU delegation, so sometimes we also pick interlocutors that are a bit challenging to discuss for Tunisian authorities. Particularly on human rights. So sometimes it's a really animated debate. (...) And then it is the official formal subcommittee, which is of course only bilateral, without civil society, but which can really build on the discussion and all the concerns and interests and discourse of the civil society that have been heard before. So we can really work on that basis.³²

This notion that the EU can enhance its negotiation position towards its interlocutors in the Tunisian government by reiterating the fact that its position enjoys the support of Tunisian civil society is confirmed by an official in the EU delegation:

It is a formalised process, it's usually in the morning you have the meeting with civil society and in the afternoon you have the subcommittee meeting. So then when you meet the government you can say look, this is what these guys [civil society] said this morning. And they were there, so they can't deny it.³³

Meanwhile, on issues such as structural economic reform or free trade, the EU might be able to counter criticism from civil society representatives, which tend to be economically left-wing and thus often rather critical of the EU's economically liberal reform proposals. However, this very much depends on who holds the respective political offices. While the Islamist Ennahda party is rather economically liberal and thus EU-friendly in its approach to structural reforms and free trade with the EU, Nidaa Tounes has a much less clear, often quite inconsistent approach when it comes to economic policy.

However, these dynamics can also work against the EU as there are some issues, such as the EU's policies on migration or the quantity of financial assistance that is channelled to Tunisia, on which the views of Tunisian authorities and Tunisian civil society converge

³²Interview with the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5).

³³Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (10).

and diverge from the EU's preferences. On such occasions, the tripartite format enables civil society and government representatives to side against the EU. Hence, during the sub-committee meeting, the Tunisian government might point to the support that its position received from civil society during the consultation.

Finally, the EU feels that it exerts another, more indirect form of influence as its consultations bring together different segments of Tunisian civil society and foster and enforce exchange and debate between them. As an EEAS official points out:

What's interesting is also the sort of dialogue between civil society organisations. Because obviously in the social sector, you have UTICA and UGTT which are sort of natural opponents, and which were on the political process worked together very well. And we hope that this can also help social dialogue in Tunisia. So you have sometimes positive effect on the national level.³⁴

As indicated in the previous chapter, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA) is the country's national employers' association whereas the UGTT is the Tunisian General Labour Union. Along with two other organisations, they comprised the Tunisian National Quartet which was crucial in overcoming the country's 2013 political crisis and is widely considered to have played a major role in safeguarding the Tunisian transition to democracy at a critical juncture. While EU officials certainly do not claim any credit for the National Dialogue, they do feel that they play a positive role in bringing together organisations with different backgrounds and fostering dialogue between them.

8.3 Inclusion and exclusion

Having established the objectives of the practice of EU consultations, the chapter now moves to further deconstruct them and to examine the relevant sub-practices it is made up of. The first main question to be raised is who is attending the EU's consultation meetings as well as what determines the attendance. In this context, it does not only matter who takes part in the EU's consultations processes but also who does not. Hence, the following section looks at the practices that determine both who is included and who is excluded from EU consultations. It starts by briefly outlining the EU's working definition of civil

³⁴Interview with the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5).

society, moves on to the way actors are invited and finally discusses how the EU's practices determine who is able to actually come and attend the meetings.

8.3.1 The EU's conception of civil society

A first factor that influences who is attending the EU's consultation is the definition of civil society used by those EU officials in charge of inviting the attendees. The EU's official definition says that "civil society refers to all forms of social action carried out by individuals or groups who are neither connected to, nor managed by, the state"³⁵ and lists NGOs and grassroots organisations, but also the social partners as examples. The EU delegation in Tunisia does not have a precise and coherent definition of what it means by civil society. Hence, it is largely at the discretion of individual EU officials to let their invitation practices be guided by their own understanding of civil society. The absence of a formal definition also enables them to let their choice be informed by the objectives that I have identified in the previous section.

Lists of invitees as well as observations of consultations that I made during my fieldwork in Tunis indicate that EU officials' definitions does not only include civil society organisations in the classic sense but also journalists, lawyers, academics or representatives of the public and private sector. This is confirmed by an EEAS official:

For example, UTICA, which is the main organisation of entrepreneurs, is for us clearly a part of civil society. And it was one of the four members of the [National Dialogue] Quartet. [...] So certainly for us, and here I am not speaking about the guidelines that I receive, in my perception civil society should have a very large definition.³⁶

It should be noted though that it is sometimes not entirely clear in which capacity civil society activists have been invited as many of them have different affiliations. Notably, many lawyers and academics that are invited to consultations that correspond with their professional specialisations are also engaging within classic civil society organisations.

Hence, EU officials' working definition of civil society actors considered for consultation meetings might be summed up as non-state actors that are particularly knowledgeable or

³⁵EUR-Lex. *Glossary of summaries: Civil society organisation*. Luxembourg, <http://bit.ly/2QUroCI> (accessed on: 24.04.2017).

³⁶Interview with the Tunisia desk officer at the EEAS, held in Brussels in March 2015 (5).

politically relevant. These actors can be both representatives of organisations and individual citizens that engage for a certain cause in a voluntary capacity or as part of their jobs. In this context, knowledgeable means that they can provide EU officials with information that they deem useful. Politically relevant means that although they are not part of the political class, they do wield a certain degree of political influence. This might be due to the size and power of the organisations they represent, their ability to shape public opinion or their influence on the political class. While these criteria would also be met by faith-based activists, they do not seem to be included in EU officials' informal definition.

8.3.2 Who gets invited

While such a rather vague definition significantly increases the scope of potential invitees for public consultations, this does not necessarily mean that EU officials make use of the entire potential scope. For each consultation, the EU invites civil society activists that are deemed to have relevant stakes in the policy field that is discussed. As there is no formal procedure or system to determine who will get an invitation, it is largely at the delegation's discretion to choose which civil society organisations to consult. More precisely, it is at the discretion of the individual EU official who in charge of the policy field that the respective consultation is linked to and who is therefore organising it. As one EU official put it: "Basically the organisers invite the people they know. There are certain civil society actors that have established expertise in the domain, in the area. So they are invited."³⁷ Another official said that

Each file-holder at the delegation, each diplomat working on different thematic areas has his own contacts within civil society that are specialised in the respective area. [...] They will be involved in getting together the right actors, those who have some expertise in this domain.³⁸

In practice, this means that they are likely to invite civil society activists that they are aware of due to their prominence and their role in Tunisian politics and societies. These actors include a range of Tunisian individuals and organisations that have been playing a historical role such as the UGTT or the LTDH.

³⁷Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (9).

³⁸Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (13).

A key actor that brings the EU delegation together with these historical civil society actors is the previously mentioned EuroMed Rights. Its Tunisian member organisations are the Committee for the respect of Freedom and Human Rights in Tunisia (CRLDHT), the LTDH and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD).³⁹ Those organisations cover a substantial share of non-Islamist pre-2011 civil society actors as most activists from the pre-2011 generation were members of at least one of them. Due to its regular interaction with the delegation during both consultations and joint projects, EuroMed Rights influences the choice of civil society activists that are invited. This might occur indirectly through its function as a platform for exchange. However, it might also occur directly. For example, in the context of the above-mentioned project geared towards mobilising civil society, it was in fact EuroMed Rights itself who selected the organisations that attended. Moreover, the organisation sometimes advises them who to invite on a given topic. As one of their staffers told me, “they ask us for propositions, so we give them names and associations, we provide them with lists.”⁴⁰ As EuroMed Rights plays a role in choosing invitees for the EU’s consultations and due to the organisation’s network, the selection of civil society activists attending EU consultations is geared towards the older generation. During the consultations that I observed as well as the closing event of the EuroMed project, to which all participating civil society activists were invited, I noted that they featured mainly participants of a rather advanced age. Only very few representatives of the young generation of activists were present.⁴¹

Other actors that are regularly invited are the representatives of big international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch or the different Oxfam entities, which also have many non-Tunisian employees. This is not only due to their prominence but also because they have sophisticated lobbying and advocacy strategies and staff that is geared towards reaching out to international organisations and donors. Moreover, many of them have been working with EU officials in the context of the execution of EU-funded projects. In fact, as an EU official points out, the delegation is often inviting people that they got to know in the context of previous project funding:

³⁹EuroMed Rights. *Members*. Copenhagen, <http://bit.ly/2BJwZl1> (accessed on 11.07.2017).

⁴⁰Interview with an employee of EuroMed Rights, held in Tunis in August 2015 (59).

⁴¹Fieldwork notes made while observing an EU consultation with civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 18.05.2015, and while observing the closing conference of the Euromed Rights project in the Hotel Africa in Tunis on 29.5.2015.

Databases are established with NGOs we worked with in the past. It's usually through financing organisations that you get to know an organisation, through the implementation of the project, through interaction. Officials will have been involved in managing contracts with civil society actors here in Tunisia, and that would be how they build up their contacts.⁴²

The notion of such practices is confirmed by civil society activists. The co-founder of one of the newer but still quite prominent civil society organisations told me that

We were invited by the Council of Europe, but the EU we don't have direct contact with. They have done something to evaluate Tunisian EU operations, but we were not invited. They invited their guys.

When I asked him to clarify what he meant by "their guys" he said "their partners, they invite the guys they fund."⁴³

Officials also invite civil society activists they noticed or met in other contexts such as diplomatic receptions, events and conferences or in private capacity. In fact, the relations between EU officials and civil society activists that get invited to consultations range from professional acquaintances to personal friendships. Friendships between diplomatic staff and individuals working for NGOs are quite common as they often move in similar circles as the EU delegation's officials. These circles are Tunis-based and dominated by expats and Tunisia's European-oriented elites. "You know these people because they go to Villa, because you meet them at your friend's birthday party or when you have a shisha in La Marsa," the respective EU official, who is in his early thirties, told me.⁴⁴ The place referred to as "Villa" is a small hotel and bar with a large terrace called "Villa 78." It was opened by a Palestinian-American in 2014 and quickly became a meeting point for young expatriates and locals that are able and willing to pay Western prices. It has become particularly popular among journalists and the Tunis-based NGO community, but also attracts younger officials from diplomatic representations.

These factors determining who gets invited to consultations with the EU's delegation to Tunisia also influence who gets included in consultations with EU officials visiting Tunisia

⁴²Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (9).

⁴³Interview with the co-founder of a Tunisian civil society organisation, held in Tunis in May 2015 (33).

⁴⁴Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (13).

or in Tunisian civil society delegations invited to Brussels for the same purpose. Asked how they choose the civil society activists they invite to Brussels or include into meetings with visitors to Tunis, an official from the EEAS official says:

When it comes to that, we also largely rely on the delegations, they have the experience on the ground. (...) Of course, we have other sources of information as well, but mainly we rely on the delegations.⁴⁵

As a result, the EU's practices, the invitees are usually not necessarily representative of Tunisian civil society or indeed Tunisian society more generally. As one activist points out: "The question of representativeness is always a relevant one. For example, the meetings at the delegations are always the same people."⁴⁶ Due to the role of civil society activists' prominence in determining their chance of being invited as well as the role of EuroMed Rights as a multiplier, activists from the pre-2011 generation tend to be overrepresented. At the same time, civil society activists working for professional NGOs and often of non-Tunisian origin are over-represented due to their focus on reaching out as well as the higher likelihood of meeting officials working for the EU delegation in more informal contexts. This tends to come at the cost of the inclusion of newer organisations and grassroots activists.

8.3.3 Who is able to participate

While the invitation practices are a first hurdle that filters out potential attendees of the EU's consultations with civil society, the practical question of who is actually able to attend the meetings constitutes a second one. This relates to the delegation's practices determining the setting of the consultations. To begin with, consultations usually take place in hotels close to relevant ministries in Tunis or on the premises of the delegation in the Berges du Lac neighbourhood in Tunis. The EU delegation does not cover the travel expenses of those it invites.⁴⁷

The EU officials' conceptualisation of civil society as well as their invitation practices already make it more likely for civil society activists attending the EU's consultations to be

⁴⁵Interview with an EEAS official working on Euro-Mediterranean relations, held in Brussels in March 2015 (6).

⁴⁶Interview with an employee of Jamaity, held in Tunis in August 2015 (57).

⁴⁷Interview with an EU official from the political section of the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2019.

Tunis-based. The practices of only hosting consultations in Tunis and not reimbursing travel expenses further compounds that trend. During the final conference of the afore-mentioned EuroMed project, I spoke with two activists from Sfax, a coastal town located about 300 kilometres south of Tunis. They had been invited for a consultation but stated that they were not able to attend due to the distance. The reason they had joined the conference was that they had come to Tunis for family reasons.⁴⁸

Generally, those few non-Tunis based actors that attend consultations largely come from the proximity, that is mainly the affluent coastal north. Moreover, even among the Tunis-based actors, those who are involved with organisations located in the proximity and that have sufficient funding to spare on transportation are more likely to come. These organisations tend to be professionally run associations. Moreover, the consultations mainly take place during normal working hours. Hence, it is harder for voluntary civil society activists whose professional obligations leave them with little flexibility. As a result, most attendees are either individuals that are working full-time for professional NGOs or they are volunteers who enjoy a certain degree of flexibility. Analysing the lists of attendees, it might be observed that there are large numbers of lawyers and academics among them, which might be explained by the fact that they are more flexible with regards to their working hours. Moreover, many attendees belong to the older generation of activists, many of whom have already reached their retirement age.

A further practice that influences who is able to attend the consultation meetings relates to the EU's language regime. The consultation meetings are usually conducted in French without any Arabic interpretation being provided. An EEAS official pointed said that "we don't need interpretation. Most interlocutors speak French, even if it is not perfect French. In Tunisia it is very particular."⁴⁹ French is indeed very widely spoken in Tunisia. However, one might argue that it is indeed "most interlocutors" rather than "all interlocutors." Hence, language skills are a further criterion of indirect exclusion. Activists with lower levels of French are either unable to attend or less likely to feel comfortable in the French-speaking environment and choose not to attend as a result. If they do attend, they are less likely to make themselves heard. This assumption was confirmed by observations I

⁴⁸Fieldwork notes made while observing the closing conference of the Euromed Rights project in the Hotel Africa in Tunis on 29.5.2015.

⁴⁹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (10).

made while attending an information session for a funding line in May 2015. The meeting was dominated by a small group of rhetorically highly skilled activists that included not only Tunisians but also French NGO workers.⁵⁰ Moreover, even though this is a rather marginal phenomenon, there are also a few civil society activists within the young generation who are more proficient in English than in French.

8.4 Execution of EU consultations with Tunisian civil society

The exact execution of the EU's consultations with Tunisian civil society varies but the meetings tend to follow a similar pattern. Representatives from the EU open the meeting explaining what the EU is doing or planning to do, answer questions to further clarify before inviting the attending civil society representatives to comment on the respective issues. These comments might be followed by further clarifications or responses from the EU delegations' officials. As consultations are usually devoted to quite specific issues, the agenda tends to be set in advance by the EU delegation. However, the discussions that occur in the context of consultations tend to be quite flexible. As an EU official from the delegation puts it:

It's generally a very open forum. It's not particularly formal. There is an opening of the meeting, but once the floor is open, you can go off in many directions in the discussion and conversation.⁵¹

With consultation meetings not always following overly strict procedures, much depends on the conduct of the individual EU officials organising or participating in them. With delegation officials representing the EU as an institution, their conduct also affects the way their interlocutors perceive the EU and its goals and actions in Tunisia more generally. In fact, several civil society activists that I interviewed did not differentiate between the EU, its delegation in Tunis and individual officials working for it. Rather, they used these terms synonymously when talking about their experiences during the consultations or their views about them.

⁵⁰Fieldwork notes made while observing an information session for civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 22.4.2015.

⁵¹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (9).

Hence it is worth looking into the conduct of EU officials and how their conduct is perceived by Tunisian civil society activists attending consultations. A range of civil society activists that attended consultations noted a certain arrogance and paternalism among EU officials. “They feel they know what is best, they have a bit of a ‘take it or leave it approach,’”⁵² says one activist. In fact, some accuse the EU of being overly confident in and insistent on its policy prescriptions, some of which are seen as rather inadequate by various interlocutors in Tunisian civil society. One participant recounted a consultation during which an official told the invited activists that Tunisia should follow the EU’s guidance and cooperate with them, as “the alternative is to become a second Libya.”⁵³

Moreover, various civil society activists said that consultations at times feel more like an information session than an encounter aimed at getting their views. On such occasions, EU representatives spend a lot of the time explaining what they are doing or intending to do and why, with the inputs and feedback from civil society being less of a priority. They might also digress into entirely unrelated fields. This happened during a consultation I observed in the context of the above-mentioned EuroMed Rights project. When the discussion touched upon agriculture during a meeting of the working group on social and economic rights, an EU official indulged in a lengthy lecture on agricultural technicalities in Tunisia even though this was not the primary topic of the meeting. This came at the cost of one of the attendee’s speaking time.⁵⁴ In a follow-up interview, she phrased her indignation about this and questioned the purpose of her attendance: “I come here all the way from Ettahrir. (...) He just talks and talks and talks. I have better things to do.”⁵⁵

A similar reaction was provoked by a civil society consultation with the EU Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos which took place on Monday 11 May 2015 in the context of his visit to Tunis. The meeting was framed as a consultation with civil society on the EU’s migration policy. The Commissioner used this opportunity to explain the “European Agenda on Migration,”⁵⁶ which was presented two days later in Brussels. During the meeting, several attendees phrased their indignation about being

⁵²Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (20).

⁵³Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (27).

⁵⁴Fieldwork notes made while observing an EU consultation with civil society in the EU delegation in Tunis on 18.05.2015.

⁵⁵Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (19). Ettahrir is a delegation, that is a second level administrative division, in the governorate of Tunis.

⁵⁶Dimitris Avramopoulos. *Press statement by Commissioner Avramopoulos on the first measures under the European Agenda on Migration*. Brussels, 27.05.2015, <http://bit.ly/2ESfm6M> (accessed on 14.04.2017).

“consulted” on something that was effectively already set in stone.⁵⁷ The Commissioner acknowledged the problem, encouraged civil society activists to get in touch and emphasized that “our door is always open for you.” However, this was widely perceived as a hollow promise.

Such scepticism about the overall purpose of consultation meetings corresponds with statements made by various other civil society activists. As one of them put it: “They [the EU delegation] don’t really care for the feedback they receive. They do it [the consultations] because they have to.”⁵⁸ Others say that the consultations are good in principle but do not go far enough. As one activist puts it:

So in my opinion the main improvement in the relationship between the delegation and civil society is that it reflects a certain new will, but so far it still does not really involve and associate civil society in the partnership with the EU.⁵⁹

Another civil society activist compliments the improvements that have been made since 2011 but criticises that the interaction is still a bit one-sided:

So from this point of view there is a certain positive evolution, but it is still insufficient because generally it is content with information from civil society, but we need a dialogue aimed at involving civil society in the elaboration of projects, agreements, negotiations and all of that.⁶⁰

These sentiments are partly linked to the fact that the EU delegation’s direct influence on EU policy is limited. While the EU delegation’s officials take note of the feedback they receive from civil society representatives, they cannot and therefore do not make any policy commitments to act upon the inputs they receive. Their action is limited to conveying the message to the respective units in the EU Commission and EEAS in Brussels. There is a bit of scepticism among EU officials in the delegation on whether and to what extent their feedback is taken into consideration. As one put it: “We are regularly reporting to Brussels. Whether they take our advice is a different question.”⁶¹ Another official qualifies: “They

⁵⁷Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in May 2015 (18).

⁵⁸Interview with an activist, held in Tunis in May 2015 (17).

⁵⁹Interview with an activist from the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), held in Tunis in May 2015 (32).

⁶⁰Interview with Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH, held in Tunis in September 2015 (80).

⁶¹Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in April 2015 (13).

are listening to us in Brussels, but it's not that we report what they [Tunisian civil society] tell us and they change policy. It's more long-term, but it is matters."⁶²

Another problem mentioned by participants of civil society consultations was the way they are presented with information that they are supposed to comment upon. Attendees noted they are invited to comment on policy developments or projects that are highly complicated without having been given enough time to prepare. Various participants from civil society complained that documents containing crucial but highly technical information is distributed during the meetings, making it impossible for them to prepare and respond accordingly. The fact that such documents are usually only made available in French compounds these problems. Hence, they do not have sufficient time to actually read these documents carefully and are thus by default limited to providing rather superficial comments. A consultation on the second phase of the Judicial Reform Support Programme (Programme d'Appui à la Réforme de la Justice, PARJ), a twinning project aimed at judicial reform serves as an example. The participants were provided with the framework programme of the second phase – a long and highly sophisticated document – at the beginning of the meeting. Then EU representatives invited them to comment upon it. "It was Chinese, really. Mokhtar Trifi [former president of the LTDH] turned to me and asked: What's this? Do you understand anything? This is something where the EU still needs to improve," one attendee remarks.⁶³

8.5 Implications of EU consultation practices for Tunisian civil society

The impact of EU consultations with civil society on EU-Tunisian relations tends to be a rather indirect one. While information and feedback gathered through consultations might be reported up the chain of command, those EU representatives organising the consultations are rarely able to make direct concessions or promises as the meetings do not usually include high-level decision-makers. Neither are these officials in a position to promise that what they report back to Brussels will be heard and at some point translate into policy changes.

However, more direct effects of the EU's consultations might be observed in the other

⁶²Interview with an official from the EU delegation in Tunis, held in Tunis in August 2015 (63).

⁶³Interview with an employee of Euromed Rights, held in Tunis in August 2015 (51).

direction. EU officials' practices in their interaction with interlocutors from Tunisian civil society have an impact on two levels. First of all, they affect the EU's relationship with civil society. The practices that officials apply and their conduct within the meetings create or certain perceptions of what kind of an actor the EU is. For example, EU officials' conduct contributes to the image of the EU as a patronising and paternalistic actor. As a result, many participants of consultations are under the impression that the EU delegation either conducts them for its own benefit or because it feels that it has to do them. Negative perceptions might also be caused by other practices, such as the process that determines which civil society activists are invited to attend consultation meetings. For example, actors who are not invited might feel that they are excluded on purpose due to their views. Hence, the EU's practices may risk nourishing mistrust in the EU's goals and interests among parts of Tunisian civil society and thus be detrimental to some of the EU's objectives.

A second impact of the EU's consultation practices is that they empower a certain subset of Tunisian civil society. As a result of the EU's practices, those civil society activists that are invited to consultations tend to be either part of the older, pre-2011 generation of activists or of the professional NGO microcosm that includes many non-Tunisian staff. Moreover, those who are able to attend the meetings tend to be Tunis-based civil society activists. Hence, the views and voices of this non-representative subset of Tunisian civil society is empowered visa-a-vis both the European Union as well as the Tunisian government, as most of the consultations occur in the context of the tripartite meetings and thus also include representatives from the Tunisian government. This gives those activists that are invited an advantage over those who are not. It fosters the formers' respective goals and agendas at the cost of those of the latter. For example, activists that belong to the post-2011 generation who are more likely to represent the interests and concerns of the Tunisian youth are underrepresented. Moreover, the older generation as well as those activists working for professionalised civil society organisations tend to focus mainly on human rights in the widest sense. Hence, civil society activists that are concerned with socio-economic rights are underrepresented as well. Finally, with the EU's practices facilitating the attendance of Tunis-based actors, civil society from other parts of the country are also underrepresented.

A third impact relates to the structure of Tunisian civil society more generally. For starters, one part of civil society – those actors who are included in the consultation meetings – gets access to an influential audience to which they can communicate their views and goals.

The others lack this sort of access and therefore loose influence in relative terms. The loss in influence of some activists due to the EU's consultation practices echoes the loss of influence that some parts of civil society face as a result of the unequal distribution of EU financial support discussed in the previous chapter. However, the inclusion of some actors and the exclusion of others also affect the dynamics between the different subsets of Tunisian civil society. As discussed in chapter six, there are a set of fault lines within Tunisian civil society. There are divisions between the pre-2011 and post-2011 generation of civil society, between those actors embracing professionalisation and those upholding the idea of volunteerism, between Tunisian and non-Tunisian actors as well as between Tunis-based and non-Tunis-based actors. The EU's inclusion of some and the exclusion of others contributes to further compounding these existing divisions between different sections of Tunisian civil society.

8.6 Conclusions

This chapter maps the practices that the EU employs in the context of consultation with Tunisian civil society and studies their implications for its structure as well as its relationship with the EU more generally. It finds that due to the EU's practices, activists included in EU consultations tend to be either part of the older, pre-2011 generation of activists or of the professional and international NGO microcosm that includes many non-Tunisian organisations and staff. Hence their voices are, in relative terms, empowered vis-à-vis both the EU as well as the Tunisian government. As a side effect, the question of who gets invited and who is not also contributes to existing tensions between civil society activists. Moreover, with consultations being a relevant source of information for the EU, the inclusion of a non-representative subset of Tunisian civil society leads to EU officials getting an incomplete picture of civil society's concerns as well as society's concerns more generally. Notably, the interests and concerns of the youth tend to get less attention. Finally, the practices that EU officials employed during consultations also contribute to the perceptions that parts of civil society have of the EU. As discussed in chapter five, Tunisian civil society tends to have a fairly positive disposition towards the EU and its activities in Tunisia compared to other countries in the region. However, EU practices enacted in the context of consultations at times also strengthen the notion of the EU behaving like a patronising and paternalistic actor.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

This thesis has been motivated and informed by two observations on the existing research on relations between the EU and actors in third countries undergoing democratic transitions. First of all, this research tends to be methodologically Eurocentric. Second, the EU and civil society as actors promoting democracy in transitioning countries are often framed as monolithic political entities, and interaction between the two is often analysed under that premise. The individuals involved on both sides, as well as what they actually do in practice when enacting their respective side's agenda, remain understudied. Moreover, there is little research on the effects of these individuals' ways of doing things.

This motivated the thesis' overarching research question which asked how EU democracy promotion practices shape civil society in transitioning countries. Tunisia's civil society was chosen as a case study due to the substantial role it has been playing in the country's political transition, as well as due to its increased interaction with the EU following the ousting of long-term dictator Ben Ali. This concluding chapter summarizes my findings, elaborates on their implications and puts them in the context of the existing literature on democratic transitions. Moreover, it reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of my conceptual and methodological approach and makes several recommendations on how the research on practices in democracy promotion may be taken forward.

9.1 Conceptual contribution

The main and overarching conceptual contribution of this thesis has been to demonstrate the centrality of practices to the promotion of democracy. It has shown that to understand democracy promotion, we need to go beyond the study of formal decision-making of those involved and beyond trying to assess its impact. Rather, the thesis has argued that understanding democracy promotion and its outcomes or lack thereof requires us to revisit the repertoires of practices employed by those enacting it within a country in transition. This includes both internal actors such as civil society as well as external actors such as the European Union, both of which can be conceived of as democracy promoters.

The literature seeking to explain democratic transitions and the role of the actors involved in it has led to two main strands of theory grounded in two different sub-disciplines of political science. Grounded in Comparative Politics, transitology and modernisation focus on the domestic dimension of democratisation and attach rather limited attention to external influences. Transitology focuses on the role of local agents and modernisation focuses on local structures, with both strands largely discarding the role of the respective other. Moreover, both are mainly rooted in rational choice theory, grounded in the positivist research paradigm and tend to work with large-N cross-country analyses rather than in-depth case studies. Meanwhile, International Relations (IR) scholars have produced a set of approaches on passive and active forms of democracy promotion. While the existing IR literature looks at both structure and agency and draws on both constructivism and rational choice, it focuses mainly on external agents and international structures as key determinants of domestic democratic change. While local actors and structures are not necessarily ignored, they are attributed a secondary, if not passive role. Similarly, limited attention is devoted to the domestic context in which local and external actors and structures interact with each other.

Moreover, both strands of theory share a certain top-down approach, which plays out both on the conceptual and on the methodological level. Conceptually, these approaches presuppose what democracy and democracy promotion are. They draw upon pre-defined notions of a liberal version of democracy that emerges and evolves hand in hand with a liberal economic order. Informed by these notions, both strands tend to develop general theories that are supposed to explain and predict developments in a large variety of differ-

ent countries and that are supposed to be valid relatively independently of the potentially quite different local conditions. Methodologically, their research designs tend to be deductive, pre-determined by these generalist theories and thus at risk of not putting sufficient emphasis on studying different local contexts. Examining the European Union and civil society as agents of democratic change, these strands of literature tend to conceive of them as rather monolithic actors and do not sufficiently account for their various internal fissures and incoherencies. And finally, interaction between the two tends to be studied as a linear relationship without sufficiently considering the complexities of interactions between individual EU officials and civil society activists.

This thesis shows how appraising democracy promotion through the practice lens can help to create an understanding that goes beyond these above-mentioned shortcomings. First of all, it helps to overcome the constraints of both the structure-agency dualism and the dichotomy between the rationalist logic of consequence and the constructivist logic of appropriateness. Moreover, it helps to go beyond the top-down approaches of the existing literature on democratic transitions, to overcome monolithic understandings of the EU and civil society and to better account for the complexities of their relationship. The practice approach does not provide us with mechanistic, all-encompassing explanatory frameworks that explain democracy promotion. In fact, it tells us that a social phenomenon such as democracy promotion is too complex and messy and features too many interlinked dynamics to be reduced to such a framework. However, the approach does provide us with a conceptual toolset that helps to interpret and understand democracy promotion.

Looking at EU officials and domestic civil society activists through the practice lens allows us to recognize that both their agency as well as the structures in which they move affect what they do and what they are. It acknowledges that what they are and what they do may be informed by both normative and rational concerns. Examining the practices through which they promote democracy thus allows us to understand what democracy promotion and civil society actually are in a given context. Finally, it acknowledges that the way the EU and civil society do democracy promotion is not only informed and constituted by the different constraints, interests, backgrounds and dispositions of those individuals enacting them, but also in reaction to the respective others' practices. In doing so, it shows how examining these reactions can help us to understand how EU practices shape the practices of activists and associations.

9.2 Empirical contribution

The literature review has shown that the EU and civil society are often framed as monolithic political entities, and that interaction between the two tends to be analysed under that premise. Having mapped the practices of the EU and civil society in the context of democracy promotion in Tunisia, a first empirical contribution of this thesis is that it unpacks what constitutes EU democracy promotion and civil society in the Tunisian context. In doing so, it shows that neither can be appraised as a monolithic actor.

In the aftermath of the ouster of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Tunisian civil society has benefitted from a less restrictive political environment and increasing funding from external actors interested in supporting the Tunisian transition. However, the new opportunities and the emergence of a new generation of activists have also highlighted the various differences within civil society. Tunisian civil society comprises a diverse range of different types of actors with different backgrounds, interests, views and approaches that inform the practices of their activism. Increased freedom encourages some to pursue ambitious, idealist objectives that other, more pragmatic activists and associations fear might be counterproductive as it discredits the transition among more conservative parts of society. Increased activities of non-Tunisian organisations cause tensions on the question of how “Tunisian” Tunisian civil society should be. The increase in foreign financial assistance for civil society has caused tensions around the question of how independent associations should be. The availability of funding and the increased role of young people whose professional opportunities are limited has caused division over whether civil society should be professionally-run or an idealist calling and driven by volunteers. Notably, the thesis also identifies a generational divide between the practices of those activists that started to engage in the late 2000s or during and after the 2011 ouster of Ben Ali and those who were already active before. This division is based on a range of factors, including a sense of entitlement to the leadership of post 2011-Tunisian civil society on both sides, a lack of mutual respect for and trust in each other as well as differences regarding practices and priorities of civil society engagement.

As an institution with an internal organisational hierarchy, the EU is of course less diverse than any given civil society landscape. However, as the literature on the EU as a global actor has widely discussed, it is far from being a coherent actor in international affairs either. Such arguments tend to be linked to its set-up and the fact that its different

institutions often do not act coherently. Moreover, the predominance of the EU member states' governments in external action often undermine and prevent a coherent stand on issues that may qualify as high politics. In the context of democracy promotion, however, the EU has regularly been attested to apply a "one size fits all" approach in its interaction with partner states in both the Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood. While this may be an accurate appraisal of its policy frameworks, such notions do not sufficiently account for the fact that institutional power tends to be distributed along the line of policy implementation. The practices of all those involved between decision-making on policy and its enactment on the ground do shape policy as well, and the practices of those enacting the EU's agenda locally may differ from context to context. As this thesis has shown, even within one local context such as Tunisia we cannot presume that the EU always acts as one coherent and unitary actor. Ultimately its practices are enacted by individuals, and it is the entirety of these individuals' practices that constitute what the EU as a democracy promoter is.

The second main empirical contribution of this thesis relates to Tunisian civil society's interactions with the EU. Despite its internal divisions, Tunisia's civil society has been widely identified as a relevant factor that helped prevent the country from following the unfortunate path of other states that faced popular uprisings in 2010/11. Notably, its role in resolving a major crisis in 2013 led to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize for a quartet of four associations in 2015. Accordingly, the EU has identified Tunisian civil society organisations (CSOs) as key partners for its democracy promotion agenda. Its engagement with Tunisian CSOs occurs through two practice repertoires: First of all, the EU provides substantial financial assistance, which aims at empowering local actors to engage for democracy, rule of law and human rights. In that context, the EU funds numerous CSOs that are implementing projects on a wide range of issues such as election monitoring, gender equality or the fight against corruption. These bottom-up measures complement the EU's top-down approach to democracy promotion, which involves direct influence on the Tunisian government through aid conditionality and other political and economic incentives such as enhanced access to its markets.

Second, the EU regularly invites civil society activists to consultation meetings to give them the opportunity to comment on and discuss EU-Tunisian relations as well as Tunisian domestic affairs. While they deem this as the right thing to do, EU officials also see a practical value in these meetings as the insights they gather might help to improve EU policy.

More generally, in light of the EU delegations' limited staff and intelligence-gathering capabilities, these consultations are also seen as a source of potentially valuable information about political and societal developments within the country. Finally, the EU conceives of these consultations as a channel through which relevant stakeholders in Tunisia may be influenced.

The practices that occur in the context of these two interactions between Tunisian civil society and the EU constantly react to each other. Hence, practices on either side gradually contribute to changes in the practices on the respective other side. To begin with, a crucial issue affecting how Tunisian civil society conceives of the EU as a democracy promoter is the question of who gets invited to consultations and who is awarded grants – and more importantly: Who is not. Certain misgivings towards the EU are informed by frustration over not having been considered. Having said that, the EU does indeed enact practices that unintentionally lead to the exclusion of some parts of civil society. In the case of the consultations, it is often at the discretion of the EU officials organizing the meeting in question to determine who gets invited. In order to have a fruitful meeting, officials quite understandably invite individuals of whom they know that they have expertise on the subject to be discussed. However, in practice, this means that they tend to invite activists that either have a certain degree of prominence in Tunisian society or that they have already engaged within the context of previous project funding. At the same time, the fact that the most relevant consultations usually take place in the EU delegation in Tunis and during working hours makes it hard for non-professional and non-Tunis-based activists to attend, even if they are invited. As a result, the EU tends to get a one-sided view on developments in Tunisia, that ends up informing its own practices.

The EU's funding practices are indirectly excluding many CSOs as well. For example, the grants awarded through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), a key funding line for civil society in third states, all range between several tens and several hundreds of thousands of Euros. The EU prides itself with having quite low overhead costs in its development assistance. This means that only a low share of its aid budget is used for administrative purposes such as running application procedures and overseeing project implementation. Such costs are rising proportionally with the individual number of grants that are awarded, which incentivises the EU to award fewer and larger grants. However, this practice excludes all those CSOs who lack the capacity to manage projects with

such large budgets. Moreover, the distribution of large grants requires burdensome application procedures that are hard to complete and quite discouraging for Tunisian activists. As a result, substantial amounts of EU funding are going to professionalized CSOs that are staffed with experts trained and experienced in grant writing and project management. Meanwhile, local activists whose engagement is driven by idealism, based on volunteering and informed by on-the-ground knowledge are often left behind. Not only do they have less of a chance of obtaining a grant, they may not even have the time and resources to spare to make the major effort that a grant application requires. With the EU's funding and consultation practices regularly including some parts of Tunisian civil society and excluding others, the EU also contributes to changes in its overall structure in the medium to long term. Due to the EU's practices, activists included in the EU's civil society consultations tend to be either part of the old, pre-2011 generation of activists or of the highly professional and international NGO microcosm that has emerged since 2011 and includes many non-Tunisian organisations and staff. With these individuals being given access to decision-makers, their influence in relative terms is rising over time compared to those who are not included. Similarly, the EU's funding practices give professional NGOs an advantage over local grassroots movements. As a result, the former may increase their activities and gain influence and prominence in relative terms compared to the latter. Having more financial means at their disposal, they are more likely to influence the political executive or external political actors that are involved through aid and democracy promotion. Hence, these organisations are likely to a bigger impact on Tunisian politics.

In addition to empowering this non-representative and largely Tunis-based subset of Tunisian civil society, the EU's practices also incentivise those CSOs who are left out to become more professionalised and adapt more of a project implementation approach towards activism. Hence, the EU is contributing to the transformation of the practices of civil society engagement in Tunisia. In other words, it contributes to the process of activism increasingly turning from an idealist calling into a professional career that primarily values grant-writing and project management capabilities and is chosen by many who seek employment that is financially more attractive than many domestic public and private sector jobs. This potentially undermines the overall EU objective of creating a bottom-up force that is both rooted within and indeed influencing Tunisian society at large. Moreover, it

contributes to a further increase the existing divisions between different subsets of Tunisian civil society.

Finally, the EU's practices affect what kind of causes are particularly prominently advocated for. Both in terms of funding and consultations, they result in activists engaging for the most pressing concerns of the Tunisian youth being underrepresented. So are activists rooted in and advocating for the concerns of the interior regions. By and large, those associations and activists that are included tend to be more focused on progressive social reforms than on socio-economic rights. This is non-ideal at a time in which one of the most significant challenges to the successful transition of Tunisia is youth unemployment and the ensuing dissatisfaction with the post-2011 system in the impoverished rural inland regions of the country.

The risk of an elitist, Tunis-based civil society driving an agenda that is detached from Tunisian society in general and the country's interior regions in particular is illustrated by two recent reforms. One repealed a law that banned Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslim men, the other one guarantees that sons and daughters will receive equal inheritance in future. These reforms were met with applause from the Western world and contribute to the image of the Tunisian transition as success story and of Tunisia as a modern and progressive society in comparison to other parts of the Arab world. However, it is worth noting that these reforms – which Tunis-based progressive civil society organisations had lobbied for quite substantially – are not backed by domestic majorities. Opposition against such progressive legislation is particularly strong in the socio-economically marginalised inland regions, where its imposition on the far more conservative society reform may help Islamists in their attempts to discredit and undermine democracy. This danger becomes even more substantial if people in these regions start losing faith in democracy's ability to deliver the socio-economic improvement they have been expecting since 2011. Hence, the fact that EU practices change Tunisian civil society in a way that it is increasingly pushing a progressive agenda without working to root their progressive values in society across the country is a risk, particularly if they are at the same time leading to a neglect of the most driving concerns of average Tunisians. In the worst case, this might discredit civil society within the population and thus undermine the EU's objective of strengthening human rights and stabilising democracy in Tunisia. It should be noted that the EU is not the only international donor whose practices are contributing to such developments. However, as one of

the main providers of financial assistance and a key interlocutor for activists, its approach to Tunisian civil society does make a difference.

9.3 Avenues for future research

This thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of the practices of interaction at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion. It has contributed to a better understanding of what EU democracy promotion and civil society involve in the specific context of the Tunisian transition as well as how the practices occurring in the context of their interaction react to each other. In doing so, it has shown that the EU's practices contribute to shaping Tunisia's civil society landscape. As an empirically driven single case study, these findings have only limited external validity. This said, certain lessons from the Tunisian experience might serve as important indicators on how democracy promotion can be adapted in other contexts. Moreover, they may inspire the design and execution of similar case studies and the thesis may provide a template of how such case studies could be approached.

The EU is one of the key external actors involved in the Tunisian transition and one of the main interlocutors of Tunisian civil society. However, it is not the only one. Notably, the member states of the EU play a role as well. Moreover, there are various other external actors following a similar agenda, such as the United States, Canada, non-EU European states such as Norway and Switzerland as well as international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Meanwhile, various other external actors, such as the Gulf monarchies, pursue a different agenda. While the thesis has shown that Tunisian civil society's practices react and interact with the EU's practices, it would be interesting to explore how similar interaction between the practices of other actors play out.

However, we may also stay with the EU itself and study its interactions in the context of other countries both in the Mediterranean region and elsewhere. While the EU puts specific emphasis on Tunisia and Tunisian civil society, it engages in democracy promotion in other states of the region as well. Various of these countries have experienced political change as well as a transformation of civil society engagement as well, both linked to the Arab uprisings and independent from it. In reaction to the Arab uprisings elsewhere but strongly informed by local issues, Jordan has seen the emergence of the popular mobilization

referred to as Hirak (Arabic for “movement”) that is strongly grounded within the tribes that have historically been the source of support and legitimacy of the Jordanian monarchy. In Lebanon, a major garbage crisis in 2015 has inspired the emergence of various civil society movements engaging for political change. In 2017, the death of the fish vendor Mohcine Fikri in Morocco’s Berber-speaking Rif region drew parallels to the death of Tunisia’s Mohamed Bouazizi. Fikri had been killed by the crusher mechanism of a garbage truck, which was activated while he was trying to save his fish merchandise that the police had confiscated from him and thrown away. Outrage about this incident triggered the Hirak Rif (Arabic for “Rif Movement”), which quickly broadened its focus and began to encompass social, economic and political grievances in the Rif region and the country more generally. In 2019, we have seen protests in Algeria leading to the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika and protests in Sudan being followed by a military coup against Omar al-Bashir. This raises interesting questions about how these movements’ practices have evolved and are evolving as they become more organised. Notably, it might be worth exploring how their practices relate to and are informed by practices of past movements in their respective countries as well as by the EU’s past and present practices of interacting with activists in these respective contexts.

Moreover, we might further explore the practices of interaction occurring within the EU’s institutional set-up. This thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of practices of interaction at the nexus of the EU and Tunisian civil society in the context of democracy promotion. However, as indicated, implementation studies suggest that EU democracy promotion decision-making power is distributed along the series of interactions that connect those making policy decisions in Brussels and those being on the recipient side in a target country. Hence, further research might look at the practices that occur at the various sites of interaction in-between, both on the horizontal and the vertical level. Vertically, we might focus on the various interactions and examine the practices as policy travels down the hierarchy. We might thus look at practices of interactions between Brussels-based EU officials, between those in Brussels and those in an EU delegation, as well as between different officials within a delegation. Moreover, on a horizontal level, we might further zoom into the practices of interaction between EU officials and representatives of the member states in the Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party (MaMa) in the Council of the European Union.

Furthermore, we might look at the practices of interaction between the EU officials in EU delegations in third states and their counterparts in member states' embassies.

Finally, we might apply the practice approach to studying democracy promotion in a comparative way. While the type of large-N cross-country or longitudinal studies that have been used in transitology are obviously neither viable nor desirable in the context of practice-based approaches, smaller comparative studies between a limited number of cases are possible and potentially quite valuable. We might bring in such a comparative dimension by either comparing the EU and other actors' practices of interaction with civil society in Tunisia or another country. Or we could keep our focus on the EU and compare its practices of interaction with other civil society landscapes in different countries of the Mediterranean or elsewhere. In doing so, we could then compare EU interaction with civil society in countries with different levels of political freedom, different EU interests in terms of security and trade as well as different levels of willingness to let the EU get involved in domestic affairs.

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List of interviews

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
1	Advocacy officer at the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)	Brussels, 11.3.2015	English
2	Advocacy assistant at the EMHRN	Brussels, 11.3.2015	English
3	EEAS official working on Counter-Terrorism	Brussels, 12.3.2015	English
4	Programme officer at the European Endowment for Democracy (EED)	Brussels, 20.3.2015	English
5	Tunisia desk officer at the European External Action Service (EEAS)	Brussels, 23.3.2015	English
6	EEAS official working on Euro-Mediterranean relations	Brussels, 23.3.2015	German
7	Project manager at the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)	Brussels, 24.3.2015	English

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
8	Member of staff of the Tunis office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	Tunis, 9.4.2015	German
9	EU official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 16.4.2015	French
10	EU official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 16.4.2015	English
11	Two Tunisian activists	Tunis, 22.4.2015	French
12	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 1.5.2015	language
13	EU official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 4.5.2015	English
14	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 5.5.2015	French
15	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 6.5.2015	French
16	Co-founder of a Tunisian association engaging for LGBT rights	Tunis, 7.5.2015	French
17	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 8.5.2015	English
18	EU official from the political section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 14.5.2015	German

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
19	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 18.5.2015	French
20	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 18.5.2015	French
21	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 19.5.2015	French
22	Member of staff of an international NGO	Tunis, 20.5.2015	English
23	Co-founder of I-Watch	Tunis, 21.5.2015	English
24	Tunisian staff member of an international NGO	Tunis, 21.5.2015	French
25	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 22.5.2015	French
26	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 22.5.2015	French
27	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 23.5.2015	French
28	Accountant of a Tunisian civil society organisation	Tunis, 25.5.2015	French
29	Project manager of a Tunisian civil society organisation	Tunis, 25.5.2015	English
30	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 25.5.2015	French
31	Secretary-General of the Organisation Tunisienne du Travail (OTT)	Tunis, 26.5.2015	French

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
32	Tunisian activist from the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES)	Tunis, 27.5.2015	French
33	Co-founder of a Tunisian civil society organisation	Tunis, 3.6.2015	English
34	Tunisian activist from the Association tunisienne des femmes democrates (ATFD)	Tunis, 9.6.2015	French
35	Sayida Ounissi, MP for the Ennahda party	Tunis, 9.6.2015	English
36	Co-founder of a civil society organisation specialised in election observation	Tunis, 10.6.2015	French
37	Two members of staff of ATL MST Sida	Tunis, 11.6.2015	French
38	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 11.6.2015	French
39	Foreign election observer of the Carter Center	Tunis, 11.6.2015	English
40	EU official from the political section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 12.6.2015	English
41	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 16.6.2015	French

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
42	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 16.6.2015	French
43	CEO of a Tunis-based micro-credit institution	Tunis, 17.6.2015	English
44	Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, president of Doustourna	Tunis, 17.6.2015	French
45	Abdelkrim Harouni, senior member of the Ennahda party and former Tunisian minister of transport	Tunis, 1.7.2015	French
46	Abdessattar Ben Moussa, president of the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH)	Tunis, 24.7.2015	French
47	Staff member of an international NGO	Tunis, 27.7.2015	English
48	Senior member of the LTDH and the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH)	Tunis, 30.7.2015	French
49	Sana Ben Achour, director of Beity	Tunis, 31.7.2015	French
50	Senior member of the LTDH	Tunis, 7.8.2015	French
51	Staff member of EuroMed Rights	Tunis, 7.8.2015	English

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
52	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 8.8.2015	French
53	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 8.8.2015	English
54	Senior member of the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFTURD)	Tunis, 10.8.2015	French
55	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 11.8.2015	French
56	Member of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)	Tunis, 11.8.2015	French
57	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 11.8.2015	French
58	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 12.8.2015	English
59	Staff member of EuroMed Rights	Tunis, 13.8.2015	French
60	Leadership of the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT)	Tunis, 13.8.2015	French
61	MP from Nidaa Tounes	Tunis, 14.8.2015	French
62	Senior member of the UGTT	Tunis, 17.8.2015	French
63	Official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 18.8.2015	English

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
64	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 19.8.2015	French
65	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 19.8.2015	French
66	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 21.8.2015	English
67	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 21.8.2015	French
68	Two senior officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Development	Tunis, 24.8.2015	French
69	Official from the Tunis office of the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)	Tunis, 24.8.2015	English
70	Two senior Tunisian officials working for the Programme d'Appui à l'Accord d'Association (P3A)	Tunis, 27.8.2015	French
71	Former staffer of the Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile (PASC)	Tunis, 28.8.2015	English
72	Senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Environment	Tunis, 29.8.2015	French
73	Leadership of the UGTT	Tunis, 31.8.2015	French
74	Senior official from the Tunisian Ministry of Development	Tunis, 4.9.2015	French

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
75	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 7.9.2015	French
76	Senior official of the Laboratoire de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire (Lab'ess)	Tunis, 8.9.2015	French
77	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 11.9.2015	French
78	Amira Yahyaoui, co-founder and former president of Al Bawsala	Tunis, 14.9.2015	English
79	Senior staff member of Jamaity	Tunis, 14.9.2015	English
80	Mokhtar Trifi, former president of the LTDH	Tunis, 15.9.2015	French
81	Senior member of the Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie (ONAT)	Tunis, 1.10.2015	French
82	French official at the Institut français in Tunis	Tunis, 1.10.2015	French
83	Senior official of EuroMed Rights	Tunis, 1.10.2015	English
84	Official from the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)	Brussels, 9.8.2017	English

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
85	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 16.8.2018	English
86	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 16.8.2018	English
87	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 17.8.2018	English
88	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 17.8.2018	English
89	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 17.8.2018	English
90	Tunisian activist	Berlin, 17.8.2018	French
91	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 4.10.2018	English
92	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 5.10.2018	French
93	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 5.10.2018	French
94	Official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 6.10.2018	French
95	Official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 9.10.2018	French
96	Official from the cooperation section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 9.10.2018	English
97	Tunisian activist	Tunis, 9.4.2019	French
98	Tunisian activist from FTDES	Tunis, 11.4.2019	French
99	Senior officials from I-Watch	Tunis, 11.4.2019	English

Interview number	Interviewee(s)	Place and date of the interview	Language of the interview
100	Director of Al Bawsala	Tunis, 12.4.2019	English
101	Founder and director of the Solidar Tunisie	Tunis, 12.4.2019	French
102	EU official from the political section of the EU delegation in Tunis	Tunis, 12.4.2019	English
103	EU official from DG NEAR	Brussels, 18.6.2019	English