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Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model

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ABSTRACT This article puts forth a new heuristic model for analysing the EU’s democracy assistance to non-accession countries. The EU’s democracy assistance has predominantly been scrutinized in academia through the so-called democratization-stability dilemma, whereby allegedly the EU is found to single-mindedly promote regime stability to the detriment of democracy. Nevertheless, we argue that this conceptualization falls short of analysing the full dynamics of EU democracy assistance. Our contribution provides an alternative to the traditional conceptualization of EU democracy assistance, by proposing three alternative nexuses of analysis: formal/substantive democracy, elite/non-elite engagement and security/stability. We apply this new analytical framework to the study of EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia from 2011 to date. While EU’s political and financial investment in the transition has been considerable in the three nexuses, negative interaction effects have generated several inconsistencies that affected several areas of EU’s democracy assistance.

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The European Union’s (EU) institutions and different EU member states have taken a strong interest in the Tunisian transition to democracy since the Jasmine or Tunisian Revolution in 2011. Tunisia held the country’s first-ever democratic elections to nominate members of the Constituent Assembly that same year. In 2014 the new Constitution was approved by national referendum, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held. Tunisia’s first local ballots took place in 2018, and its second set of presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2019. The EU has warmly welcomed the decided efforts by the Tunisian people to leave former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s more than 20 years of authoritarian rule behind. The Tunisian transition is depicted by the EU as “a source of hope”, “an example for other countries” and “a symbol of democratic change” in an area of the world otherwise characterized as plagued by instability and violence.¹ It has been posited that Tunisia’s successful
transition into a prosperous, peaceful and stable democracy could have the potential for triggering positive reverberations throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The EU has therefore asserted that it has a "strategic interest to have a strong, democratic and stable Tunisia as its neighbour" and that it is willing to "use all its instruments to support the Tunisian people, accompany the electoral process, promote human rights, support democratic and socioeconomic reforms, improve security and strengthen civil society".

The EU’s perception of its own role as a staunch “supporter” of the Tunisian democratization process, echoes its efforts over past decades to assist other democratic transitions whether in accession countries, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries or elsewhere. Scholars have taken note of how the EU’s ambition to prod on incipient democratization processes, and/or lend conditional support to effectuate change in democratizing or authoritarian contexts, has grown since the 1990s. However, different in-depth or comparative case studies over the same time period have also found many features of the EU’s democracy assistance in third countries inconsistent or even questionable. Such authors have offered several explanations for why the EU does not always succeed in its professed aim to support democratic transitions. Many accounts nonetheless centre on the inconsistency produced by the so-called democratization-stability dilemma, a trade-off that renders efforts in democracy assistance void due to EU’s prioritization of regime stability. While we find such arguments stimulating, for our purposes we believe this explanation too narrow, as we will elaborate on below. Hence, here we will outline an alternative model for analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance, by exploring the EU’s support for the Tunisian democratic transition in the past decade. For this purpose, our article does two things. First, we re-conceptualize (in)consistency in EU democracy assistance. Our goal is to move beyond the stasis of the democratization literature, by proposing an innovative, tripartite nexus approach. Second, the article maps out the dynamics of the different nexuses and how they affect the EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia. The added value of our argument compared to existing literature is that it bridges intra- and extra-EU elements influencing democracy assistance, as well as accounts for changing practices over time. Furthermore, it provides a full and cross-sectorial account of EU assistance to Tunisia as opposed to the partial, sector-specific views hitherto predominant in the literature.

The article is based on a cross-case analysis, drawing upon EU official documents, interview material, speeches by Tunisian elite and civil society as well as secondary literature. The first section provides a literature review and sets out the conceptual framework. The second section explores the empirical evidence through the optics of the three nexuses, while in the Conclusions we reflect upon EU democracy assistance to Tunisia since 2011 and the theoretic insights derived.

**(In)consistencies in EU democracy assistance: practice and theory**

It has been argued that the EU did not become a significant referent in democracy assistance until the 1990s. The implosion of the East bloc and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War was to become EU’s first true test as a concerted supporter of democratic transition in third countries. The post-Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe turned to the EU and its member states for technical and financial assistance after a wave of pacific revolutions ushered in democracy. The
scope of the EU’s democracy assistance was later broadened and incorporated into various other policy frameworks encompassing non-accession states, such as the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the 2000 ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (also known as the Cotonou Agreement) and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy. The focus of the EU’s democracy assistance in these early years was on technical support for elections, as well as on reforms to stimulate good governance and market liberalization. EU methodology, whether in enlargement or third countries, relied on a combination of political or economic conditionality, i.e. incentives (“carrots”) or threat of sanctions (“sticks”), as well as firm criteria and timelines for reforms (“benchmarking”).

All throughout these first decades, however, the EU’s democracy assistance was consistently critiqued for its top-down approach to democracy assistance, which relied on an almost exclusive engagement with third-country elites. Critique was also levelled at the EU’s unwillingness or inability to marshal EU instruments in a timely and efficient manner conducive to sustainable democratic change. Despite the growing censure, it was not to be until in 2011 and in the context of the Arab uprisings – of which Tunisia was at the forefront – that the EU would begin a more thorough overhaul of its democracy assistance. The European Commission and the HRVP recognized that the events in the southern neighbourhood indicated that “EU support to political reforms in neighbouring countries has met with limited results” prior to 2011. Hence, it was felt that “a new approach is needed to strengthen the partnership between the EU and the countries and societies of the neighbourhood: to build and consolidate healthy democracies, pursue sustainable economic growth and manage cross-border links”. The carrots for democratic reform were now substantially boosted, while the sticks were quietly abandoned. In the ENP context, the EU extended incentives for democratic reform and consolidation in the form of cooperation aid, mobility and trade, the so-called “more for more” strategy. Finally, the non-elite, especially civil society organizations, were given a more central role. The European Commission argued that “[a]n empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and is an asset in itself” as it contributes “to more effective policies, equitable and sustainable development and inclusive growth”.

Despite reforms, however, the reports of the alleged failures of EU democracy assistance efforts persist and hence warrants our closer attention here. Our starting point for building a model for analysing the EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia since 2011 is to unpack the EU’s lack of consistent support for democratization in third countries. Inconsistency, in the broader EU foreign policy literature, refers to the unintended resultant of the collision of two or more policies that have divergent and/or incompatible objectives or resulting practices. Inconsistency is thus to be found when there is a discrepancy between stated policy objectives or between objectives and practice. It could be argued that inconsistencies naturally abound in public policy and are endemic to politics and public administration to a point where “consistency” becomes a policy ideal, subject to epistemic tension between different social collectives. In the area of the EU’s democracy assistance, inconsistency has most frequently been found in, and assessed on the basis of, different apparent moral trade-offs among policy objectives. One such trade-off is the democratization-stability dilemma. The inherent logic of this dilemma is that two policy objectives with alleged incompatible objectives are pursued at once (democracy and stability). Scholars have noted the tendency for stability to trump democracy in EU democracy assistance in
most third country contexts. They therefore pessimistically posit that “the EU’s approach of ‘stabilization first’ will not even in the long run translate into more intensive democracy promotion efforts”.

In a different set of literature, authors have identified further dilemmas affecting democracy promotion: democratization vs. peace-building, democratization vs. state-building and democratization vs. socio-economic development. In all the above sets of dilemmas, the former term is argued as being an objective which stands as a logical opposite to the latter. The consensus in the literature for this reason appears to be that democratization cannot be pursued simultaneously to these other objectives. We find such accounts a good starting point, but affected by certain shortcomings. In our view the dilemma literature overstates the logical “either-or” opposition between the two objectives, as it is difficult to envision functional democracy developing in absence of, for example, stability or socio-economic development. The inherent assumption of this literature is also that consistency in EU democracy assistance depends on the level of political liberalization of a country. Low levels of political liberalization are expected to prompt more inconsistency in EU democracy assistance, while consistency, conversely, is the norm in contexts where democratic practises have become more consolidated. We have not been able to corroborate this latter assumption in relation to our case study on Tunisia. Finally, we also note that the bulk of the dilemma literature is steadily trained on intra-EU sources of inconsistencies – whether stemming from EU institutions, the use of EU instruments or specific EU member states’ preferences – without due consideration for local conditions in the recipient country. There is thus a tendency to overlook other potentially important and concurrent explanatory factors in the EU’s (in)consistent democracy assistance equation, such as the politico-legal or economic preferences of local elite, civil society actors and/or the presence of additional foreign donors or powers. Here we bridge intra- and extra-EU elements influencing democracy assistance by considering both intra-EU dynamics (institutions, instruments and member states) and elements external to the EU (e.g. domestic dynamics in the transition country).

For these combined reasons, we here propose an alternative approach, without losing sight of some the key insights provided in the dilemma literature.

Our model is based on a tripartite analytical framework. We find three nexuses crucial for understanding the inconsistencies in EU’s democracy assistance in the areas of the substantive/formal, the elite/non-elite and finally the security/stability. We hold that each term in the respective nexus refer to an ideal concept that, far from being antithetical, interacts with its twinned term. The two coupled terms are thus not logical opposites or conceived of as engaged in an “either-or”, zero-sum game. Rather, we understand them as having an interaction effect on each other and their resultant is a co-production of that effect. The interaction between the two terms produces (un)intended outcomes which may affect the external actor’s ability to support democracy in third countries.

The novelty of our heuristic device is thus that it combines three prominent nexuses in democracy assistance, while most accounts limit themselves to a single dilemma. We are thus able to provide a broader picture of most democracy assistance scenarios, as these three dynamics tend to be present at once. We also open the door to re-situating the academic debates away from inconsistencies between stated objectives, towards a more nuanced reflection on consistencies and inconsistencies – i.e. “(in)consistencies” – resulting as a combination from the interaction between various policy objectives, as well as practice, as they play out in a policy scenario. A final additional value of our tripartite analytical model is that it allows for adding further issue areas into the analysis of
democracy assistance, hence providing a broader scope of cross-sectoral overview. The focus in most accounts of EU democracy assistance has been on specific issue areas, mostly on financial instruments. Here, with the help of our analytical framework we can explore the politics of further issue areas in a cross-cutting manner. In continuation we will explain each nexus in more detail.

The first conceptual pair is formed by formal/substantive perspectives of democracy affecting the EU democracy assistance. Formal democracy encompasses the basic components of democratic processes such as elections, rule of law, division of powers and good governance. Formal democracy also includes rights that are directly associated with participation in the public sphere found in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, such as freedom of speech, information and assembly. The EU expressed its objective to pursue “deep and sustainable democracy” with neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. For the EU, a deep and sustainable democracy entails the right to vote “accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service.”

We understand substantive democracy to be where institutions provide the material background conditions that allow the optimal and effective exercise of the above enumerated political rights, together with the rights included in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Substantive democracy associates the quality of democracy with prosperity, the welfare state and low rates of socioeconomic inequality. The EU recognizes the importance of this dimension, as it is held that “democracy will not take root” unless there is an “inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development” to accompany it. This was also the main gist of the EU’s 2011 initiative for a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity for southern Mediterranean countries. It was held that “[p]olitical and economic reforms must go hand-in-hand and help deliver political rights and freedoms, accountability and participation.” Therefore, job creation, economic revivalization and growth and social protection are “crucial to ensure the sustainability of political reforms.”

The second conceptual nexus we discuss here is the one between elite and non-elite engagement. The elite engagement consists of the interaction between the democracy promotor and the transitioning country’s political or socioeconomic elite through institutionalized dialogue. This is the mainstay of the most common formulas of democracy assistance used by the EU and most international donors, as partnering up with the elite is seen as crucial to ensure the political commitment to and implementation of legal and institutional reforms in the political liberalization process. The non-elite engagement consists of direct interaction between the democracy promotor and civil society organizations (CSOs) or economic actors in countries in democratic transition. Alternatively, this level of engagement can consist of decentralized dialogues between CSOs and economic actors representing the democracy promotor with their homologues in countries immersed in democratizing processes. Having an active involvement of CSOs and economic actors is seen a desirable feature in a liberal democracy, whether for these actors to function as a policy “watchdog” or to help to supply public sector services in areas neglected by governments, or both. The EU’s attention to non-state actors in democratizing contexts has increased since 2011 as it has acknowledged that “[a] thriving civil society can help uphold human rights and contribute to democracy building and good governance, playing an important role in checking government excesses.” Hence, the EU provides democracy assistance “aimed at developing the advocacy
capacity of CSOs and increasing their ability to monitor reform and participate effectively in policy dialogues.”

The third and final conceptual pair is the security/stability nexus which refers to two socially constructed concepts present in most Western donors’ democracy-assistance discourse and practice. The concrete meanings of these two concepts may vary from donor to donor. As for the EU and its member states, scholars have noted that the term security spans a broad range of notions. Security, at its most basic, reflects a material understanding of security and hold connotations such as the long-term absence of insecurity, whether in the forms of conflict, violence, emergent threats or destabilizing illicit border flows. However, EU democracy assistance is also frequently premised on the necessity to build positive, holistic safeguards against insecurity or vulnerability in the deeper sense and the longer term. The European Commission has noted “the importance of ensuring human rights, rule of law and inclusive democracy to avoid alienating communities and creating conditions of insecurity.” The European Union Global Strategy, EU’s main foreign and security policy strategy document, affirms that peace, as well as existence of underlying institutional and societal strengths in partner countries addressing vulnerabilities and underlying structural risks across many sectors (energy, environment, etc.), are “key for prosperity and democracy” as well as indivisible from sustainable and inclusive development.

Stability refers to the shorter-term premise of stabilization associated with EU’s democracy assistance. In essence, stability entails the temporary absence or suspension of conflict, of large-scale social, political or economic turmoil or of threats. In the Regulation establishing an Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, for example, EU’s short-term stability promotion is circumscribed “to contribute to the prevention of conflicts and to ensuring capacity and preparedness to address pre- and post-crisis situations […] and specific global and trans-regional threats to peace, international security and stability”.

Each nexus thus represents a set of coupled concepts which, as a result of their interaction, impact the EU’s democracy assistance. We therefore posit that when both terms in each nexus are present and pursued in mutually reinforcing fashion or in fair balance with each other a positive-sum interaction effect ensues, whereby the EU’s democracy assistance tends towards more consistency. However, when there is an absence of one of the two or an imbalance between the coupled terms, a negative-sum interaction effect is produced; the resultant of EU’s democracy assistance then tends towards inconsistency. There are thus two different interaction effects in each nexus – positive-sum or negative-sum – determining the outcome (consistency or inconsistency) of the democracy assistance. The three nexuses will, in continuation, be applied to the case of the EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia with a multi-sectoral approach. The question that the next section is trying to answer, through the prism of the three nexuses, is how (in)consistent has the EU been in assisting the Tunisian democratic transition from 2011 to date.

**(In)consistencies in EU democracy assistance to Tunisia**

**Formal/Substantive nexus**

Soon after the fall of Ben Ali’s regime, then High Representative and Vice President Catherine Ashton pledged the EU’s readiness to assist the process of planting “the
roots of deep democracy” in Tunisia by paying heed to both formal and substantive aspects of democracy (The Guardian, 4 February, 2011). To this end, in 2011 the EU launched a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity which included Tunisia and all southern ENP partners. The Partnership was later followed-up by the country-specific EU-Tunisia Partnership Priorities and its accompanying Action Plan (2013–2017), in which the EU vowed to support Tunisia in the implementation of a formal democratic institutional setting, consolidating rule of law and transparency in local administration. 7 percent (31 million euros) of funds allocated to Tunisia in the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) were mobilized to foment the formal dimension for democratic transformation and institution building between 2011 and 2013, including technical assistance in the organization of the elections of 2011 and later work of the Constituent Assembly. The EU also expressed a strong desire to foment the right conditions for substantive democracy. Indeed, emphasis in the 2013–2017 EU-Tunisia Action Plan was clearly placed on economic and social integration. A lion share of the ENPI in this period (73% in 2011–2013 and 62% in 2014–2015) was allocated to stabilize the Tunisian economy which had been severely affected by the Revolution. From 2014 onwards aid efforts were put towards regional and local development, mainstreaming social justice, inclusiveness and poverty alleviation as well as support for small and medium businesses.

For all purposes, the EU’s democracy assistance in these early years then appeared, at least on paper, to lend consistent support for Tunisia’s democratic transition. The Action Plan and the supporting financial instruments evoked a good balance between support for formal as well as substantive elements of democracy. However, there are several indicators that the efforts on the formal democracy stagnated by 2014 and that a complex set of dynamics affecting substantive democracy accelerated. The stagnation of the formal dimension was partly a consequence of internal political dynamics in Tunisia. The post-2011 period has been characterized by a fragmented political landscape. Tunisian coalition governments, frequently lasting less than a year, and frequently characterized by strong tension among the various coalition partners, never sat long enough to address needed fundamental political reforms like the establishment of the Constitutional Court or decentralization of the state, which could have strengthened the formal dimension of democracy. The delays or inadequate reforms in the formal dimension of democracy also had a notable knock-on effect on the prospects for deepening substantive democracy, as the needed institutional set-up and/or planning for job creation and welfare programmes could not be properly achieved.

However, it is pertinent to note certain EU practices related to the formal/substantive nexus also affected the consistency of its democratic assistance. In the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution, various EU member states, and other foreign creditors, began issuing demands that the nascent democratic Tunisian government assume responsibility for the 15 billion dollars foreign-owned debt accumulated during Ben Ali’s regime. In 2013, the Tunisian government reluctantly agreed to a bailout package administered by the International Monetary Fund to service the Tunisian public debt. The bailout affected both the formal and the substantive dimensions of democracy. At the formal level, the legitimacy of the Tunisian democratic institutions was undermined as the government was seen as too readily yielding to foreign pressure to have the Tunisian people foot the bill of Ben Ali and his family’s excesses. Some sectors of the public had held out their hopes to that the Tunisian government would make good on its 2012 pledge to hold an independent audit of the public debt, to establish whether liabilities should
fall on the Tunisian state or on the former dictator and his family. The loss of the government’s legitimacy in the formal dimension was further exacerbated as the prospects for substantive democracy began to dim. The bailout package entailed significant austerity measures, producing socio-economic hardships for Tunisian citizens in the form of increased unemployment or cuts in public spending. Popular resentment over the austerity measures and the erosion of the prospects for substantive democracy translated into a number of strikes or protests marches in the country. In a general strike on 2019, almost coinciding with symbolic date of the anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail – Tunisia’s oldest and most prominent trade union – put words to a widespread public sentiment that “the international financial community [is] obstructing the path of political reform and democratic transition that our people have called for over the past eight years.”

The Tunisian public perception was thus that the bailout package destabilized both formal as well as substantive democracy.

Another example of where the formal/substantive nexus cause inconsistency in the EU’s support for Tunisian democratization can be found in the EU’s push for launching negotiations with Tunisia on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in late 2015. DCFTA has the explicit aim to enhance elements of substantive democracy such as sustainable growth and employment creation through market access, improvement of the investment climate and ongoing economic reforms in the country. The logic of DCFTA reveals the strong belief – some say bias – within the EU that market liberalization and economic growth are essential motors of democratic transition. There is a belief in EU capitals and institutions, shared by many Western democracy promoters, that the legitimacy of any democratic political system is closely linked to the soundness of a country’s economic performance. However, while the Tunisian government was initially onboard with DCFTA, the public unease soon became evident as the latter feared economic readjustments in the short to medium term, similar to the bailout, which would only further increase unemployment and potentially cause the destruction of traditional industries and local agriculture. In the eyes of the Tunisian public, there was a risk that the EU’s DCFTA offer could have threaten to derail the spirit of the Tunisian revolution and further undermine the prospects for formal and substantive democracy. Hence, yielding to public demands prime minister Youssef Chahed announced in 2019 that he would not accept the DCFTA agreement and/or continue negotiations, if the EU did not modify different aspects of the agreement. This represents a curious case of (in)consistency in EU democracy assistance. The DCFTA, designed to support the democratic transition through market liberalization, has not been finalized. However, the EU democracy assistance can still be seen as consistent, as the DCFTA negotiations generated the unintended effect that good democratic practices in Tunisia were reinforced. The EU’s DCFTA offer created a mutually reinforcing effect between formal and substantive democracy, as it sparked a lively public debate on the link between economic liberalization and social justice and that governmental accountability to the public subsequently improved as it tried to match public demands to policy.

In sum, the consistency of the EU’s support for the Tunisian democratic transition has been conditioned by a series of interaction effects produced in the formal/substantive nexus. As political fragmentation increased in Tunisia after 2014, aspects of formal and substantive elements of democracy were left unimplemented or unreformed, negatively affecting both Tunisian democracy reforms and the EU’s ability to consistently
support such reforms. The negative dynamics were further compounded by external creditors’ insistence on debt service. However, in the context of the EU’s DCFTA we find an unintended positive interaction effect in the formal/substantive nexus, which has served to enhance democratic practices in Tunisia.

**Elite/Non-elite nexus**

We find that there was a largely positive interaction between the twinned concepts in the elite/non-elite nexus, although also here (in)consistent outcomes in EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia have occurred. Since 2011 Tunisian elites, civil society organizations and economic actors have on the whole shared the objectives to accomplish a democratic transition in the country and this consensus has made interaction largely fluid. The EU has supported the dialogue between the elite and non-elite in Tunisia by ways of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, and the creation of the *Programme d’Appui à la Société Civile en Tunisie*, a generously funded ENPI programme designed to spur the dialogue between state authorities and CSOs. Moreover, in 2013 the EU launched a flagship initiative to facilitate dialogue between Tunisian elites and non-elites in the form of the Tripartite Dialogue. This initiative, implemented by EuroMed Rights, offered a unique space of consultation between governmental authorities, CSOs and the EU before it was ended in 2019. Another EU-sponsored initiative has been Jamaity.org, an online platform created in 2014, which brings together more than 1,600 Tunisian civil society organizations and provides useful information on EU projects and funding opportunities.

Nevertheless, while the elite and non-elite interaction in Tunisia have dramatically improved since 2011, in part due to EU democracy assistance initiatives, there is also evidence for the EU collusion with the Tunisian government that has caused some negative interaction effects. One area where interaction between elite and non-elite have met substantial obstacles was, for example, in the context of the consultations for the EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership Agreement of 2014. The Mobility Partnership envisioned to provide visa facilitation for e.g. Tunisian students, NGOs and businesspeople, in return for a commitment to readmission of undocumented migrants reaching the EU from its territory. The problem for Tunisia’s civil society and economic actors became that, although mobility is an issue of broad societal importance, the consultations for the Mobility Partnership were held strictly between the EU and the Tunisian government. Hence, contrary to stipulations of good democratic practice, relevant NGOs were neither consulted nor granted access to such talks. For this purpose, Tunisia’s most prominent human rights organizations, together with a number of European NGOs, condemned “the lack of transparency in the [Mobility Partnership] negotiation process which did not involve civil society actors”. The dynamics in the interaction between elite and non-elite grew worse as the EU began to exhort the Tunisian government to restrict undocumented migration in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis and the rise of the populist radical right in several EU member states. In 2018 the EU proposed to finance UN-administered camps on Tunisian soil for undocumented migrants rescued at sea or even to act as first ports of call for asylum seekers before they reach EU territory. Tunisian CSOs and economic actors have been vocal in their critique of such EU propositions. They oppose such migration camps and in general any externalization of EU border control into their country’s territory as, to their mind, such practices do not only undermine the legitimacy of the sovereign, democratic institutions of Tunisia.
but they also fail to provide adequate safeguards to protect human rights. Moreover, CSOs also critiqued how the EU-Tunisian talks once again failed to live up to good democratic principles of public consultation and further undermined open and good communication between elite and non-elite.

In sum, interaction between Tunisian elites and non-elites and governmental accountability to the public have improved in the past decade. The overall positive-sum dynamics of strengthened democratic practices has enabled the EU’s democracy assistance to maintain certain consistency. However, the lack of elite and non-elite dialogue in the area of mobility and migration camps have caused tensions. The EU’s and the Tunisian government’s preference for not including civil society in certain politically loaded debates undermined the prospects for a broad social and democratic consensus on matters of migration. This has caused turbulence in the democratic transition and (in)consistencies in the EU’s democracy assistance.

Security/Stability nexus

In reference to the security/stability nexus, internal Tunisian and external (mostly EU) political dynamics shifted initial positive interaction effects to negative, producing a (in)consistent resultant in the EU democracy assistance. The first years of the Tunisian transition were marked by insecurity, ranging from political pre-election turmoil in early 2011, the massive arrival of refugees from the Libyan civil war, to the clashes with Salafists in 2012–14, when followers of Ansar Al-Sharia committed a number of terrorist attacks. This initial period was also marked by discussions on how to build a democratically accountable police and military. The EU advocated for a reform of state institutions and strongly encouraged public debate on security sector reform. The EU’s position was to promote a restructuring of the police, the military and the judicial system, alongside relevant legislation, in order to transform the former regime’s repressive approach to security and replace it with a democratic human security approach. While keeping an eye on the abovementioned short-term risks to stability, the EU defended a good balance in the security/stability nexus and fostered a positive-interaction effect.

However, after the assassinations of left-wing political leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013, the focus within Tunisia shifted from security sector reform to ensuring effectiveness of the police forces in the short term. Hence, the main obstacle to reforming state institutions became a shifting Tunisian domestic view of security forces and the prioritization of stability over long-term security. These domestic dynamics were reinforced by the approach of important external actors, such as EU member states Germany, France and the United Kingdom in the framework of the G7. In contrast to the EU institutions, they chose a security assistance strategy based on training and equipping Tunisian police and military in order to increase their capabilities and short-term effectiveness in public-order management. However, as the security situation further deteriorated in the country in 2015, with the terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum, in Sousse and against the Presidential Guard, the EU institutional approaches shifted and fell in line with the Tunisian government and the G7 EU member states. The EU now declared the Tunisian democracy as “fragile and facing serious risks” such as Salafi jihadism, the return of foreign fighters from Syria, the destabilization of Libya (a usual rear-base for terrorist groups operating in Tunisia) and internal political fragmentation. This shift in the EU’s
democracy assistance was reflected in the EU-Tunisian strategic priorities for the period 2018–2020. The lopsided focus on the short-term stability comes at the cost of long term security and hence causes a negative interaction effect in the security/stability nexus. The focus on stability and efficiency of security forces, over security sector reform, makes the EU and its member state complicit with Tunisia in practices which might not be conducive to its transition towards a mature democracy. The focus on stability reinforces those actors within the security apparatus who are opposed to human security-based security sector reform and who favour the repressive culture characteristic of the Ben Ali regime. Tunisian CSOs have indeed expressed concerns over police abuses of the counter-terrorism law and of the state of emergency prerogatives since 2015. The Tunisian branch of the World Organization Against Torture affirms in its last report on arbitrary administrative control measures that “the security threats that Tunisia has faced […], and the authorities’ response to these dangers, have continued to dampen initiatives to curb systematic abuses of human rights since 2011.” In this sense, a positive step in the direction to try to restore a more holistic approach in the security/stability nexus has been the reactivation of the Programme d’appui à la réforme et à la modernisation du secteur de la sécurité de la République tunisienne (PARMSS). The first EU-Tunisian PARMSS meeting was held in 2019 and there is a general commitment among the parties to try to re-engage with Tunisian security sector reform, although concrete steps and time schedule are still pending. Tunisia’s efforts to reform of its security forces, if confirmed and sustained, will likely become an important milestone in the country’s pursuit of consolidating the Tunisian democratic transition.

In sum, in the security/stability nexus, the EU initially helped to foment positive interaction effects, but when the Tunisian government, supported by the G7 including determined EU member states, shifted priorities after a series of events in 2013 and 2015, short-term stability in the form of police effectiveness began to overshadow longer term human-security concerns. This entailed that EU became complicit in fomenting a negative interaction effect, which affected the consistency of EU democracy assistance. While references to concerns over the state of emergency and other practices not conducive to democracy (e.g. torture) regularly show up in speeches made by the EU or its member states, practices on the ground in Tunisia indicate a tacit support for status quo. With the reactivation of PARMSS, however, there might be grounds to argue that Tunisia and the EU are jointly trying to move towards a better balance in the security/stability nexus which, if confirmed as a trend, would have positive effects both for the Tunisian transitions as well as the consistency of EU democracy assistance.

Conclusions

The EU has declared itself to have a strategic interest in the success of the Tunisian democratic transition and allocated substantial amounts of democracy assistance to support the country in its aspirations. However, although the Tunisian government, its civil society and the EU have been largely united in their will to consolidate the democratic transition, the EU’s support to Tunisia has been marked by several (in)consistencies. In the formal/substantive nexus we found both negative as well as positive interaction effects which produced resultant (in)consistencies in the EU’s democracy assistance. Despite the EU wanted to establish a positive balance between substantive
and formal dimensions of democracy promotion, reforms did not advance due to political instability in Tunisia and EU’s position in debt services and trade. However, EU-Tunisia relations in these dimensions paradoxically spurred democratic debate in the country. In contrast, in the elites/non-elite nexus, we found an overall positive-sum interaction that strengthened democratic practices. This has enabled the EU’s democracy assistance to obtain certain consistency, albeit important tensions in the areas of mobility and migration camps. Finally, in the security/stability nexus we again find a combination of positive and negative interaction effects. The latter has been the dominant trend from 2015 onward as foreign donors, including the EU, and public opinion in Tunisia shifted its preferences from long-term security sector reform to short-term stability concerns.

Our model helps us understand the (in)consistencies of EU’s democracy assistance in Tunisia as the resultant of different actors and dynamics, and not solely as the outcome of contradictions between EU’s stated objectives and actions. The advantage of this analytical approach is that it allows to grasp the complexities of democracy assistance beyond dilemmas and trade-offs and may cover more ground than simply focusing on formal democracy promotion. We believe that our model and insights could be generalizable to other democracy promoters (e.g. the US or individual European countries) as well as to other countries undergoing democratic transition. Our findings are consistent with the scholarship which try to shift the analytical focus away from the notion of unidirectionality between democracy promoter and democratizing country, based on coercion or transactional conditionality, to the more Habermasian and consistent democratic practice of donor-recipient interaction based on negotiation. Where we potentially differ with the latter is that we are a bit less optimistic about that the outcome of such negotiations will always be good-faith support of democratic transition. Power asymmetries can still affect outcomes in certain areas such as debt service, mobility and security assistance in the case of Tunisia. Our heuristic model also usefully contributes to open up debates over whether the democratizing country has more “agency” and control over its transition, and thereby less constrained by structural forces or foreign donors, than the traditional scholarship on democratization has granted. In the Tunisian case study, and even with all the ups and downs and external pressure imposed on the country since the revolution, local elite and non-elite actors appear to be reasonable able to mould and shape the democratic transition. Such insights are key both to understanding the success or not of democratic revolutions, but also to prompt further reflection on whether democracy promotion (externally imposed) is at all a viable policy in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. European Commission and HRVP, EU Support for Tunisia; European Parliament, Tajani in Tunisia and EUGS, Three Years On, Moving Forward.
2. EUGS, Shared Vision, Common Action.
3. European Commission and HRVP, EU support for Tunisia; see European Commission, Strategic Priorities 2018–2020.
4. Youngs, ”Democracy Promotion as External Governance?”
5. Ibid.
6. Pace, ”Paradoxes and Contradictions”; Youngs, ”Democracy Promotion as External Governance?”; Bicchi, ”The Politics of Foreign Aid” and Börzel and van Hüllen, ”One Voice, One Message”
7. See note 4 above.
8. Although it could be argued that the conditionality linked to the European Communities’ Association Agreements during the Cold War was a form of proto-democracy assistance, as the prospect for economic association with the Community was only open to countries with demonstrated commitment to democracy (e.g. Greece, Portugal, Spain and Turkey).
10. The ENP encompasses the following countries: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine.
12. Del Sarto and Schumacher, “From Brussels with Love”.
14. For a lucid critique of this overhaul see Natorski, “Epistemic (un)certainty”. 
16. Ibid.
20. Natorski, “Epistemic (un)certainty”.
21. The origin of the dilemma is based on the assumption that promoting democracy in authoritarian states entails the risk of destabilization since transitions and regime change can go together with political turmoil and even sometimes violent conflict, see Börzel and van Hüllen, “One Voice, One Message”.
23. Grimm and Leiniger, “Not all good things go together”.
24. With the notable exception of Pace, Seeberg and Cavatorta, “The EU’s democratization agenda”. However, in contrast to our pursuits here, they study inside-out and outside-in factors by bracketing either the ‘inside’ or the ‘outside’ impact of democracy assistance.
25. Richter, “Two at One Blow?”
28. See note 15 above.
30. European Commission and HRVP, A partnership for democracy.
32. Dimitrova and Pridham, “International Actors and Democracy Promotion”; Crawford, “Foreign aid and political conditionality” and Holthaus, “German and US democracy assistance”.
33. See note 30 above.
34. Ibid.
36. European Commission, Thematic Programme on the Promotion of Democracy.
37. See note 2 above.
39. See note 30 above.
41. Court of Auditors, *EU assistance to Tunisia* and European Parliament, *EU policies in Tunisia*.
42. See note 40 above.
43. Court of Auditors, *EU assistance to Tunisia*.
44. European Parliament, *EU policies in Tunisia*.
45. We counted 12 significant cabinet reshuffles from 2011 to 2020, including 7 changes of prime minister.
46. In July 2012, a proposed bill for a debt audit was submitted to the National Constituent Assembly, and President Marzouki announced shortly afterwards that there were plans to an inquiry into whether loans extended by foreign creditors to the Tunisian state during the Ben Ali regime were embezzled by regime supporters and/or the dictators’ family.
47. UGTT, *مائعلا نيمأ لاماكة ملَك* authors’ own translation from Arabic.
48. The DCFTA covers goods, including agricultural produce, capital and services as well as a series of changes in the legal frameworks regulating areas such as technical barriers to trade, sanitary measures, investment protection, public procurement and competition policy.
49. For example, the analysis of DCFTA indicate that, even with a proposed exemption period of 10 years, the influx of EU agricultural products into Tunisian markets (meat, milk and cereals) would cause negative effects on local production and destruction of jobs in local companies. Moreover, the macroeconomic impacts such as elimination of tariffs would produce a reduction of state revenues and thus impact Tunisia’s capacity to spend in social programmes. Grumiller et al., *The Economic and Social Effects*.
50. Interview with Tunisian senior official, Brussels, January 2019.
52. See note 50 above.
53. Since 2011, around 2 million euros are allocated on quasi-annual basis to CSOs through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.
54. It is worth noting though that the EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia after 2011 was initially fraught with all the normal teething problems of civil society access to EU funding calls and overreliance on professionalized NGOs which the EU’s democracy assistance has suffered from in most third-country contexts. In Tunisia, it was alleged that EU calls for projects were too difficult to fulfil for local organizations with no specific technical expertise in this kind of bureaucratic procedures, see Nouira and Redissi, *EU Democracy and Human Rights Policies*. Moreover, Tunisian CSOs found linguistic and symbolic barriers to EU funding, given that much of the documentation and guidelines produced by the EU Delegation in Tunis were only available in French, as opposed to Arabic or Amazigh, see Weilandt, “Divisions within Secular Civil Society”.
56. Colombo and Meddeb, “Fostering inclusiveness”.
57. Zardo and Abderrahim, “Migration and Mobility” and Cassarino, “Channelled Policy Transfers”.
58. EuroMed Rights et al., *Tunisia-EU Mobility Partnership*.
60. Rivera Escartin, ”Populist challenges to EU foreign policy”.
62. Hanau Santini and Cimini, ”The Politics of Security Reform”.
63. Bouagga, ”Pas de révolution dans les prisons”.
64. Ibid.
65. See note 62 above.
66. The G7 was a multilateral coordination platform for international donors in the Tunisian security sector. In 2015 it became the G7+6 as the original members were joined by the EU, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).
67. See note 62 above.
68. European Commission and HRVP, *EU Support for Tunisia*.
69. See note 59 above.
70. Durac, “Counterterrorism and democracy”.
71. See OMCT, *Être S*. 
72. Ibid., authors’ own translation from French.
73. See the special issue by Poppe, Leininger and Wolff, “Negotiating the promotion of democracy”.

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