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# Framing migration in the southern Mediterranean: how do civil society actors evaluate EU migration policies? The case of Tunisia

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## Abstract

After repeated failed attempts to reform its dysfunctional internal architecture, the external dimension has become the real cornerstone of the EU's migration strategy, with the Mediterranean as its main geographical priority. In spite of routine rhetorical references to its cooperative and partnership-based nature, the EU external migration policy-making remains essentially unilateral and top-down. Civil societies of sending and transit countries, in particular, tend to be excluded; however, better understanding the policy frames and priorities of "partner" countries' stakeholders vis-à-vis EU migration policies represents a crucial task. Based on extensive fieldwork carried out in the context of the MEDRESET project, this article contributes to fill this gap by focusing on the case of Tunisia. In a context of much lower salience and politicisation compared to the European context, Tunisian civil society actors are critical about the EU's security-based framing of migration and mobility. However, rather than displaying a radically antagonistic stance, the most influential Tunisian civil society stakeholders show an overall collaborative attitude towards the EU. This may represent a strategic resource for the EU to promote a more participatory governance of migration, which may lead to more balanced, effective and mutually beneficial migration policies in the Mediterranean region.

**Keywords:** Migration policy, External dimension, European Union, Policy frames, Civil society, Mediterranean, Tunisia

## Introduction

The governance of international migration has gained an increasingly relevant role in the external relations of the European Union (EU). Since the first emergence of an "external dimension" (ED) of the EU migration policy at the 1999 Tampere Council, cooperation with third countries has become part and parcel of the European policies in the field of migration and asylum (Boswell, 2003; Lavenex, 2006). Throughout the years 2000s, the EU external migration policy has been gradually reinforced and integrated into the broader EU's foreign policy, especially following the launch of the Global Approach to Migration (GAM) in 2005 and its renewal as GAMM (with a second M for Mobility) in 2011 (European Commission, 2005, 2011b).

The 2011 uprisings in North African and Middle East countries marked a further strengthening of the ED of European migration policies and a parallel shift of their geographical focus from the eastern to the southern neighbourhood of the EU (European Commission, 2011a; European Commission and High Representative, 2011). Building upon the broader cooperation framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or Barcelona Process, established in 1995 (Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 1995), since 2011 the Mediterranean has steadily become the main area for implementing cooperation policies in the field of migration management, not only for southern European countries (which had developed this kind of policies at the bilateral level since the late 1990s) but also for the EU as a whole.

Another turning point in the evolution of the ED was the 2015 so-called refugee crisis – in fact an EU governance crisis (Pastore, 2017). Starting from that moment, the goal of a more effective migration management (actually consisting in the containment of mixed migration flows to Europe) has become a key element driving the EU's external action. Moreover, the geographical focus of EU migration cooperation policies has expanded further south, to include (along with Mediterranean countries) also sub-Saharan countries of origin and transit (European Commission, 2015, 2016a), as proved by the launch of initiatives such as the Khartoum Process (EU-AU Ministerial Conference, 2014) and the EU Trust Fund for Africa (Council of the EU, 2015).

This article moves from the assertion that the development of the EU's external migration policy has been characterised by fundamental divergences of views, interests and approaches, not only between the EU and the third countries concerned, or between (predominantly) sending, transit and receiving States, but also among institutional and civil society actors both in Europe and in third countries. The implications of these cleavages have often been overlooked, thus hampering cooperation in this crucial area of policy (Cassarino, 2014; Collyer, 2016). European external migration policies have either been confined to sectoral and security-oriented approaches (e.g., bilateral and European readmission agreements), or diluted into more comprehensive but formalistic and hardly influential instruments (e.g., Mobility Partnerships) (Papagianni, 2013; Völkel, 2014; Zapata-Barrero, 2013; Zapata-Barrero & Gabrielli, 2017).

This has left ample room for the prevalence of unilateral top-down migration strategies pursued both at the European level and at the bilateral level by some Member States (Cassarino & Lavenex, 2012; Hampshire, 2016; Reslow, 2012).<sup>1</sup> The limited involvement of so-called “partner countries” in the elaboration of cooperation initiatives in the area of migration has de facto resulted in a lack of ownership of such (officially) cooperative policies on the part of third countries, and especially on the part of their civil society stakeholders, often leading to outcomes that were unsatisfactory for all the parties involved. The limited involvement, if not the exclusion, of civil societies of sending and transit countries from negotiations, political dialogue and policy-making processes is problematic, if only because it leaves the ED with thin and fragile consensus

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<sup>1</sup>Notwithstanding the prevalence of unilateral top-down migration policies, which is closely linked to a traditional asymmetry in power relations between northern and southern Mediterranean countries, some scholars have highlighted that South-Med countries have been able to use migration strategically in a logic of bargaining and reverse conditionality vis-à-vis their European counterparts. In many cases South-Med countries have actually managed to exert pressure and push forward their policy agenda and interests in the negotiations with European countries and the EU (Cassarino, 2005; El Qadim, 2010; Paoletti, 2010).

bases.<sup>2</sup>Against this background, this article aims to examine overlaps and differences in the way different stakeholders on the two shores of the Mediterranean understand, frame and evaluate migration-related policy issues and the corresponding EU policy responses, focusing specifically on Tunisian civil society actors' policy frames. The article analyses and contrasts the European official framing of migration and migration cooperation policies in the Mediterranean (and towards Tunisia in particular) with the way Tunisian civil society stakeholders frame migration-related issues and evaluate EU policies in this field. The choice of Tunisia as a case study is linked to a number of factors, including: the crucial role played by the country in the Arab Spring<sup>3</sup>; the changes the revolution brought about in the country and in EU-Tunisia relations; the flourishing of a lively civil society; and the evolving migration profile of the country (Lixi, 2018; Natter, 2015).

In terms of methodology, this article combines desk and field research. Firstly, the main policy documents relating to the ED produced over the last 20 years by EU institutions are analysed with the purpose to identify how the EU has framed cooperation with Mediterranean third countries in the migration policy field. Secondly, in order to investigate how Tunisian civil society stakeholders frame migration and EU migration policies, we rely on empirical information gathered through a fieldwork carried out between July 2017 and March 2018 in the context of the MEDRESET project.<sup>4</sup>

The article is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical framework of the analysis and provides a definition of policy frames as applied in the context of migration policy-making and to our case study. The third section considers how the EU has framed migration cooperation with southern Mediterranean countries, and how the EU's official policy frames have impacted on the elaboration of its external migration policy, focusing in particular on the framing of cooperation with Tunisia. Based on the conceptual framework outlined in the second section and on interviews conducted with civil society stakeholders involved in migration policy-making in Tunisia, the fourth section analyses how the latter frame migration-, mobility- and asylum-related issues and evaluate EU policies in this field. The last section entails our concluding remarks.

### **Analysing stakeholders' policy frames in the field of migration**

The analysis of stakeholders' frames proposed in this article moves from the conceptual premise that the Mediterranean is a constructed and contested space; not only have its

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<sup>2</sup>As concerns civil societies of destination countries, their perspective and policy frames were also analysed in the framework of the MEDRESET project, including through fieldwork and interviews with key European civil society actors (Roman, 2018a). This part of the research showed that European civil society stakeholders are to some extent more involved in the EU migration policy-making compared to South-Med civil society actors, at least through dialogue and consultations. However, similarly to South-Med CSOs, European civil society representatives claimed the need for a more participatory governance of migration, which should go beyond merely formal civil society consultations.

<sup>3</sup>Tunisia is the country where the uprisings started in January 2011 and it is generally considered as the only country where the Arab Spring has been successful, despite persisting difficulties.

<sup>4</sup>The MEDRESET project ([www.medreset.eu](http://www.medreset.eu)) aimed to reset the way we think and represent the Mediterranean, and to develop alternative visions for a new Mediterranean partnership and corresponding EU policies in different fields, including inter alia the field of migration and mobility. The project was funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme and run from March 2015 to August 2019. It involved a consortium of research and academic institutions from different disciplines from the Mediterranean region. FIERI was co-leader of the thematic work package on migration and mobility and coordinated research and fieldwork in four Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon and Turkey).

social constructions varied over time, but most importantly its inhabitants have framed the Mediterranean space in different terms (Cebeci & Schumacher, 2016). Also Euro-Mediterranean relations and cooperation policies, including in the area of migration, have been framed and perceived in different ways by different stakeholders.

Over the past decades, scholars have analysed the role of discourses and ideas in policy-making and policy change (Bleich, 2002; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Radaelli, 1995; Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004). These authors have stressed that both policy problems and their possible solutions (i.e., policy interventions) are constructed or framed by different actors mainly drawing upon ideational resources rather than objective facts and interests. With particular regard to the issue of migration, European scholars have generally talked about “policy frames” (Bleich, 2002, 2011; Scholten, 2011) or “policy narratives” (Boswell, Geddes, & Scholten, 2011; Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011) when analysing the role of ideas, perceptions, beliefs, normative appreciations and knowledge claims concerning a certain migration issue or migration policy-making.

Drawing upon Boswell, Geddes and Scholten (2011, pp. 4–5), we conceive the structure of policy frames as consisting of three essential components: 1) the *definition of the policy problem*, which typically involves claims about the scale and nature of the problem; 2) the *causes of the problem*, including claims on the extent to which such causes can be controlled through policy interventions; these “causal stories” often imply attributing blame to specific factors or actors; and 3) the *solutions to the problem*, including claims about how policy interventions have affected, or are likely to affect, the problem.

The first and second components described by Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten (2011) correspond to what Benford and Snow (1988, 2000) identify as the first “core framing task”, which they call “diagnostic framing”; this includes both the identification of the problem and the identification of the source(s) of causality, blame and/or agents responsible for the problem. The third component identified by Boswell et al. corresponds to Benford and Snow’s second core framing task, i.e., “prognostic framing”, which involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem and the strategies to achieve it.<sup>5</sup>

This literature typically refers to policy problems as the object of policy frames. However, the use of this terminology risks being in itself a way of framing negatively (i.e., as a problem) the subject matter one is dealing with (in our case migration). Therefore, in the framework of our research (and especially when interviewing stakeholders) we have preferred to talk about *policy issues*; the adoption of a more neutral terminology could allow interviewees to frame the issue at stake not necessarily as a problem or threat, but also as an opportunity.

Our analysis of Tunisian civil society stakeholders’ frames (and the structure of the fourth section of this article) reflect the tripartite structure of policy frames described by Boswell et al. (2011, pp. 4–5). We focus, first, on the stakeholders’ identification and definition of the key migration-related *policy issues* in the context of Tunisia (also in

<sup>5</sup>Benford and Snow (1988, 2000) describe a third core framing component, i.e., “motivational framing”, which consists of identifying a rationale for engaging in collective action. This agency component is not included in the theoretical framework proposed by Boswell et al. (2011), which does not deal specifically with social movements as, in contrast, the works of Benford and Snow do. For this reason we consider the analytical framework proposed by Boswell et al. to be more suitable for the type of frame analysis that we have conducted.

comparison with other policy issues). We then move on to illustrate how stakeholders describe the *causes* of such migration-related policy issues, namely the factors and actors affecting them. Finally, we consider the stakeholders' evaluation of the *policy responses* elaborated by the EU in order to tackle such issues and their causes.

### **The EU's official migration policy frames on Tunisia: euro-centric, security-oriented, conditionality-based<sup>6</sup>**

The issue of migration and mobility in the Mediterranean space is clearly framed in terms which are determined almost exclusively by the agenda of the EU institutions and some key Member States. These frames, and the European policy agenda related to them, have been changing over the last years (at first following the 2011 Arab Spring, and more decisively with the 2015 refugee crisis), in parallel to an increase in so-called mixed migration flows crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe.<sup>7</sup> This expression corresponds to the perception of European national governments and EU institutions that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish within Mediterranean migration flows between persons who move because they are forced or displaced and in need of protection, and those who move voluntarily and are economically motivated (Oelgemöller, 2011, p. 112).

The fundamental structure of the European migration agenda appears to consist of three distinct (although interdependent) policy areas (Pastore, 2015). These are: 1) the governance of legal migration, and especially labour migration; 2) the governance of irregular migration flows, including the components of such flows that are seeking international protection (mixed migration flows is the designation now most commonly used at the EU level); and 3) the governance of short-term mobility, including the issue of visa facilitation. This tripartite distinction reflects the dominant EU-driven categorisation of migration flows (and corresponding areas of policy intervention), which has emerged and consolidated over the last decades. This is reflected in the policy instruments that the EU has adopted in the framework of its cooperation policies with southern Mediterranean countries.

Such policy instruments have formally tried to integrate (at least on paper) the three policy areas of legal migration, irregular migration and mobility into a comprehensive strategy, and to include in the picture also the migration-development nexus (especially since the adoption of the GAM in 2005) and the issue of international protection (since the 2011 launch of the GAMM). However, the dominant focus (both of EU policy documents and concrete cooperation initiatives) has always been on the management of irregular migration – i.e., on cooperation policies in the fields of border control, fight against human trafficking and smuggling, return and readmission.

In particular, initiatives under the pillars of migration and development and international protection are still largely underdeveloped in the overall framework of

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<sup>6</sup>This section focuses exclusively on the EU's official migration policy frames emerging from an analysis of the policy documents produced by the EU institutions. It does not analyse the framing of European civil society stakeholders. As mentioned above, this was investigated by one of the authors always in the framework of the MEDRESET project. This study shows that the framings of European and Tunisian (and more in general southern Mediterranean) civil society stakeholders are very close. See: Roman, 2018a.

<sup>7</sup>For the first elaboration of the concept of mixed migration (and the first policy-oriented recommendations on how to manage it) see: UNHCR, 2007, Van Hear, 2011.

the ED, as shown both by the text and the ongoing implementation of Mobility Partnerships (MPs) – especially those with southern Mediterranean countries. Even with the recent emergence of the notion of mixed flows, the dominant securitised framing of irregular migration has not left room for a more human rights-based approach; the European focus continues to be on the need to stem and contain migration flows, rather than on the protection needs of forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Huysmans, 2000).

An analysis of EU policy documents clearly shows that the EU's and European countries' approach to cooperation with third countries has always been driven by Euro-centric security concerns and economic interests, while it has overlooked the partner countries' perspectives, needs and priorities. This Euro-centric framing is reflected not only in the earliest cooperation initiatives involving Mediterranean countries established in the 1990s (e.g., the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or Barcelona Process and the Association Agreements), but also in cooperation initiatives launched in the early 2000s (e.g., the 5 + 5 Dialogue and the European Neighbourhood Policy), as well as in more recent initiatives, such as the above-mentioned Mobility Partnerships. EU-Tunisia cooperation fits precisely in this picture, since the country has been involved in all these initiatives, but its chances to affirm alternative frames and priorities to those imposed by the EU and its Member States have been very limited.

Following the Arab Spring, the framing of EU-Tunisia relations could potentially change. On the one hand, the EU seemed willing to support Tunisia's democratic transition and the overall stabilisation of the region, as shown by the joint communication "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" issued in March 2011 (shortly after the revolution) by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In what seemed to be a very inspired and forward-looking document, moving from the awareness that "a radically changing political landscape in the Southern Mediterranean requires a change in the EU's approach to the region" (European Commission and High Representative, 2011, p. 3), the EU promised to re-found its relations towards North African countries on new, more equal and fair bases. In the area of migration, the joint communication emphasised the need to enhance "well-managed mobility" from Mediterranean countries to the EU. To this purpose, the Commission and the High Representative suggested the launch of Mobility Partnerships and committed to work together with Member States on legal migration legislation and visa facilitation options, demonstrating an apparent will to reframe priorities (European Commission and High Representative, 2011, pp. 6–7).

On the other hand, raising fears of unwanted migration pushed EU Member States to prioritise once again irregular migration, border control and readmission agreements, as proved by the communication "A Dialogue for Migration, Mobility and Security with the Southern Mediterranean Countries" issued by the Commission only a few months later, in May 2011. Moving from the assessment that the historic events that occurred in the southern neighbourhood of the EU "have also induced significant movements of people" (European Commission, 2011a, p. 2), this document downsized significantly the proactive partnership-oriented



approach characterising the first European reaction to the Arab Spring, and revealed a renewed focus on security aspects and a conditionality-based approach. Indeed, this communication listed a number of measures that partner countries had to implement as a precondition for increased mobility; such measures were “aimed at contributing to the creation of a secure environment” for the circulation of persons, and included: setting up voluntary return arrangements; concluding readmission agreements with the EU and working arrangements with Frontex; cooperating in joint surveillance operations in the Mediterranean Sea; and strengthening capacities in integrated border management (European Commission, 2011a, pp. 10–11).

For its part, also the new Tunisian government was torn vis-à-vis the EU’s ambiguous stance. On the one hand it seemed willing to continue its long-standing cooperation with the EU; on the other hand it was hesitant to accept the European dominant framing of migration as a mere security issue, as it became more reluctant to implement any European-driven decision against the will of an increasingly self-confident and organised civil society (Ben Khalifa, 2013, p. 182).

Looking for a more balanced relationship, more co-decision and a de-securitized approach to migration, in October 2011 Tunisia accepted to start a “Dialogue on Migration, Mobility and Security” with the EU, as a preliminary step towards the Mobility Partnership (MP). Negotiations continued for 2 years, leading to the signature of the Joint Declaration establishing a Mobility Partnership in March 2014.<sup>8</sup> The MP’s general objectives, as stated in the Joint Declaration, are the following: 1) to better manage the movement of persons for short stays and legal and labour migration; 2) to combat irregular migration and human trafficking and smuggling, and to promote an effective return and readmission policy; 3) to strengthen cooperation on migration and development; 4) to comply with international refugee law instruments; 5) to promote the integration of regular migrants through anti-discrimination policies and by recognising their contribution to the development of both their country of origin and residence. However, although on paper the MP was framed by the EU as a comprehensive and balanced instrument of cooperation, its implementation (including through the LEMMA project, the flagship project of the MP with Tunisia - <https://lemma.tn/>) demonstrated that in practice the stress was clearly put, once again, on strengthening cooperation on the management of irregular migration, promoting the signature of a European Readmission Agreement (EURA), and fostering return and reintegration, while offering only limited incentives in the areas of legal migration and mobility – among the incentives, the launch of negotiations for a Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA).<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the MP negotiations were promoted by the EU as a participatory process, actively involving civil society stakeholders. However, initially Tunisian civil society organisations were only partly involved, and denounced a lack of

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<sup>8</sup>The negotiation process with Tunisia took longer and was more complicated compared to the one simultaneously launched with Morocco, mainly due to the delicate situation of political transition in the country.

<sup>9</sup>Several scholars have criticised MPs as unbalanced, Euro-centric, security-oriented and conditionality-based instruments of cooperation; see, inter alia: Brocza & Paulhart, 2015, Lavenex & Stucky, 2011, Cassarino & Lavenex, 2012, Reslow, 2012.

transparency in negotiations (García Andrade, Martín, Vita, & Mananashvili, 2015, p. 132). They adopted a highly critical stance towards the MP and called for the Tunisian government to refuse signing it, and to refuse starting EURA negotiations, framing both instruments as mere means for the EU to externalise migration controls (Migreurop, 2013, 2014).

For some time, in fact, EURA negotiations did not start. It was only in October 2016 that the European Commission announced the opening of parallel negotiations for a EURA and a VFA with Tunisia (European Commission, 2016b). However, negotiations have made little progress so far, mainly due to the fact that the Tunisian government strongly opposes the inclusion of an obligation to readmit third country nationals. Nevertheless, the opening of these parallel negotiations, along with the launch of the LEMMA project in July 2016, and the joint communication on “Strengthening EU support for Tunisia” issued by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs in September 2016 (European Commission and High Representative, 2016), indicate that since mid-2016 the EU has pushed for a more general revitalisation of EU-Tunisia relations, including in the area of migration.

As announced in the Commission communication “on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration” of June 2016 (European Commission, 2016a), the EU has committed to take cooperation with Tunisia “to the next level, building on the existing Mobility Partnership”. However, also in these policy documents the EU’s support was framed as being mainly focused on reducing and preventing irregular migration, improving practical cooperation on returns, concluding EURA and VFA negotiations, and strengthening border management. The September 2016 communication mentioned also the EU’s support to the development and implementation of a national migration and asylum policy, and to the reinforcement of mobility schemes and labour migration schemes, but these commitments were framed in a much vaguer way, and seemed to entail a purely formal rather than real engagement (European Commission and High Representative, 2016, p. 12).

In the first months of 2017, the issue of cooperation on migration control and readmission with Tunisia was once again high in the European agenda and in the Member States’ interests. By reaffirming the European securitised framing of cooperation in the area of migration, in its “Renewed Action Plan on Return”, the European Commission identified Tunisia as one of the priority countries to conclude a EURA with (European Commission, 2017). Moreover, in the same period the German and Italian governments allegedly made pressures on the Tunisian authorities with regard to the readmission of third country nationals, suggesting also the possibility to replicate the mechanism established by the EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016. This would allow European countries to return to Tunisia not only non-Tunisian irregular migrants but also potential asylum seekers, and externalise asylum procedures and the reception of asylum seekers to Tunisia (AnsaMed, 2017; Fubini, 2017; EurActiv, 2017). This proposal clearly reflected, in an even more extreme form, the Euro-centric security-driven approach to migration management, in clear contrast with the human rights-oriented frames of Tunisian (and European) civil society stakeholders (ASGI, 2017; EuroMed Rights, 2017).



### **Tunisian civil society's migration policy frames: low salience, low politicisation, limited antagonism**

Under the Ben Ali regime, Tunisian civil society was heavily restricted and subject to the state's control.<sup>10</sup> In this context, migration was considered a particularly sensitive topic, to be kept in the hands of the Ministry of Interior. Thus, before the revolution, civil society activism on migration in Tunisia was extremely limited: there were no civil society organisations (CSOs) specialised on migration and asylum; the topic was largely absent from the media and public debate; and independent expression and political action by unauthorised associations was almost impossible (Bartels, 2015; Boubakri, 2013). After the revolution, the unprecedented increase in civil liberties prompted significant civil society activism, including in the field of migration and asylum (Mekouar, 2016).

Different types of CSOs became involved, namely: 1) well-established Tunisian diaspora organisations, which started to operate also in Tunisia, linking their claim for increased protection of migrant rights in Europe to requests for better treatment of migrants in Tunisia (e.g., *Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des Deux Rives* - FTCCR); 2) long-standing CSOs based in Tunisia working on human rights in general, economic and social rights, workers' rights or women's rights, which after the revolution started to embrace migrants' rights in their advocacy work (e.g., *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* - LTDH, *Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux* - FTDES, *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* - UGTT, *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* - ATFD, *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes Universitaires pour la Recherche et le Développement* - AFTURD); 3) newly-established CSOs and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialised on migration- and asylum-related issues (e.g., *Maison du droit et des migrations*, *Association Beity*, *Association des Familles Victimes de l'Immigration Clandestine* - AFVIC, *Association La Terre pour Tous*).<sup>11</sup> Despite the differences in the thematic focus, methodology and scope of their actions, all these civil society stakeholders criticise the security-driven approach characterising EU-Tunisia cooperation and advocate for a human rights-based approach to migration.<sup>12</sup>

The 2011 revolution did not only lead to the flourishing of CSOs in Tunisia, but it also opened the way for many international NGOs (INGOs) and NGO networks to establish and/or launch new activities and projects in Tunisia, usually in collaboration with local civil society (e.g., EuroMed Rights, *France Terre D'Asile*, *Médécins du Monde*, Islamic Relief, Red Crescent). INGOs (as well as other international actors and donors, such as international organisations, European foundations, European governmental agencies) that arrived in Tunisia after 2011 "brought not only funds, but also their interests and discursive frameworks with them" (Natter, 2018, pp. 11–12) and were relatively successful in promoting a change in how Tunisian institutional actors frame migration.

<sup>10</sup>With few exceptions (e.g., the *Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* and *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*, which nonetheless could only operate in a controlled and limited manner), organisations working on political issues were denied legal registration and consequently were not allowed to hold public meetings and access funding.

<sup>11</sup>For a concise description of the history, features and activities of the main Tunisian CSOs, see Roman & Pastore, 2018, p. 42–47.

<sup>12</sup>This critical framing of the EU's external migration policies is shared by the main European civil society stakeholders and international NGOs active in the field of migration and asylum (Roman, 2018a).

This section draws upon extensive fieldwork carried out in the context of the MEDRESET project. The fieldwork consisted of 22 interviews conducted in Tunisia in July 2017 and 7 additional interviews carried out via Skype or phone in February–March 2018 with a variety of stakeholders operating in the field of migration and asylum and/or involved in migration policy-making in Tunisia.<sup>13</sup> Interviewed civil society stakeholders included: Tunisian CSOs, NGOs and activists<sup>14</sup>; international NGOs and NGO networks with operational offices in Tunisia<sup>15</sup>; Tunisian trade unions and employers' associations<sup>16</sup>; Tunisian scholars and experts.<sup>17</sup> A limited number of interviews involved institutional stakeholders (i.e., Tunisian governmental actors and international organisations operating in Tunisia); these were included in order to add into the analysis the perspective of the institutional stakeholders with whom civil society actors usually relate and interact.

With regard to the representativeness of interviewed civil society stakeholders, it should be noted that the purpose of the research was to consult the organisations that are most influential and most actively engaged in the field of migration and asylum in Tunisia. However, focusing on the main CSOs dealing with migration has led us to involve mainly a certain type of civil society actors – i.e., relatively well-established and professionalised CSOs, with an international profile and strong ties with European stakeholders – as they are most actively involved in migration policy-making and in negotiations with the EU. Conversely, the genuinely local grassroots organisations, which are less organised and resourceful, have a limited international profile (or none at all), and are often unable or unwilling to access EU funding and participate in decision-making processes, were involved in our research to a more limited extent. This proves that, as observed by other authors, the EU support to South-Med civil society is selective, and targets specific actors with whom the EU deems it can work – namely national elites and well-established, professionalised and westernised CSOs (Bürkner & Scott, 2018).

#### **Low salience and even lower politicisation: an issue for specialists**

When asked to locate migration and mobility issues within a broader hierarchy of policy priorities, the large majority of interviewees admitted that, compared to other issues, migration is not perceived as a priority, neither by the Tunisian society as a whole, nor by Tunisian decision-makers. Therefore, the salience of migration as a policy issue in Tunisia appears to be rather limited; conversely, interviewees mentioned other policy issues, presenting them as serious and urgent problems that deserved prioritisation. These are: a) the overall socio-economic situation in the country, and specifically the issue of youth unemployment; b) other socio-economic issues, including: the situation of economic downturn, socio-economic inequalities between different regions across the country, poverty and under-development in rural areas, and the lack of economic

<sup>13</sup>See in [Appendix](#) the list of interviews with Tunisian stakeholders.

<sup>14</sup>Including representatives of: *Association des Etudiants et Stagiaires Africains en Tunisie* (AESAT), AFTURD, FTFCR, FTDES, LTDH, *La Terre pour Tous*, *Maison du droit et des migrations*.

<sup>15</sup>Including representatives of EuroMed Rights, Islamic Relief, *Médecins du Monde*, Red Crescent.

<sup>16</sup>Representatives of UGTT and *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat* (UTICA).

<sup>17</sup>Migration experts and academics were included among civil society stakeholders because the knowledge they produce can contribute in a significant way to the construction and reproduction of migration policy narratives (Boswell 2009, Boswell et al., 2011) or to the framing of migration policy (Scholten, 2011). Scholten rightly observes that science is “one of the institutions that can affect how policy problems are framed” (Scholten, 2011, p. 79).

reforms, investments and development policies; c) the still delicate political situation in the country, especially the ongoing process of democratic transition and difficulties related to it; and d) the issue of Islamic terrorism and security-related problems.

While some interviewees (some academics and INGOs) asserted that in Tunisia migration is absolutely not a priority, most interviewees included migration in the country's hierarchy of policy priorities, but they linked it to the general socio-economic situation of the country. In this context, migration was predominantly framed as Tunisian emigration to Europe (especially emigration of young Tunisians) rather than African immigration to Tunisia, and it was portrayed as the unwelcome consequence of the country's difficult socio-economic and political situation.

Several interviewees affirmed that in Tunisia migration is not a politicised issue. An academic explicitly stated that: "differently from the EU, in Tunisia no political party has used migration-related issues in political terms; migration is not the object of nationalist or xenophobic political positions; actually, it is not the object of political debate at all".<sup>18</sup> According to the same interviewee, in 2011 there has been a public debate on migration in the country, although limited to the departure of young Tunisians towards Italy, and the related issue of those among them who died or disappeared during their journey (Ben Khalifa, 2013). However, this debate was limited to the issue of Tunisian migrants (and did not include, for instance, the issue of Sub-Saharan migrants who fled Libya and were hosted in Tunisia) and was in any case circumscribed to that specific period and events. These findings were confirmed also by other contemporary fieldwork-based studies (e.g., Abderrahim & Zardo, 2018).

The limited salience, high volatility and low politicisation of migration at the level of public opinion and in the confrontation between political parties in Tunisia are in clear contrast with the comparatively higher salience of the issue in Europe and its definitely higher level of politicisation and mediatisation, both at the national and European level. While in Tunisia, as confirmed by a governmental actor, "on the issue of migration and mobility there are no particular divergences between the government, civil society organisations active in this field and broader public opinion",<sup>19</sup> in Europe migration-related issues are often made the object of political controversies and divergent claims involving different political parties, institutional and non-institutional actors, and the broader public opinion (Van der Brug, D'Amato, Ruedin, & Berkhout, 2015).

In addition, it must be noted that in Tunisia the issue of migration seems to be on the one hand removed from the public debate and on the other hand made the object of a specialised, technocratic knowledge. Whilst it does not seem to be perceived as an issue by the Tunisian people in general, migration is framed as a policy issue by "the specialists" or "the experts", i.e., those civil society actors who are actively involved in migration policy-making. According to the above-cited academic, for instance, "even cooperation with the EU in the field of migration is not made the object of political debate; negotiations with the EU are framed as a merely technical issue and they are not mediatised at all; Tunisian civil society has no idea of what the mobility partnership, the readmission agreement or the visa

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<sup>18</sup>Interview with a member of academia/expert, 13 July 2017. This and the following excerpts from interviews are based on hand-written notes taken by the researcher during the interviews. This is due to the fact that the MEDRESET methodology did not allow for interviews to be recorded.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with a governmental actor, 13 July 2017.

facilitation agreement are; the only actors involved in this, along with the Tunisian government, are some expert CSOs and NGOs”.<sup>20</sup>

### Experts' perceptions of a growing migratory complexity

Several interviewees (governmental actors, academics, local CSOs and INGOs) highlighted the fact that Tunisia's migratory profile has significantly changed, especially after 2011, becoming increasingly complex and diversified. It was noted that, while Tunisia is still generally perceived as a country of emigration with a large diaspora abroad, it has also become a “migration hub”<sup>21</sup> – i.e., both a transit country for migrants and asylum seekers who are headed to Europe (but who may possibly end up staying in Tunisia) and a destination country for sub-Saharan students and workers.

As highlighted by those expert civil society actors who deal with migration-related issues, this growing migratory complexity poses significant new challenges in terms of migration governance. The increasing awareness, especially among civil society stakeholders, of the country's migratory complexity is reflected in what interviewees identified as the main migration-related policy issues in the Tunisian context, the main factors affecting them and the actors who are considered to be responsible (or are blamed) for them.

The first policy issue singled out by most interviewees is Tunisian emigration towards Europe. This is still perceived by both Tunisian authorities and society in general as a primary concern in the field of migration governance, especially with regards to the issue of young Tunisians who cross the Mediterranean by boat in the attempt to reach Italy and Europe, commonly defined as “*harraga*”.<sup>22</sup> Civil society stakeholders identified different factors and actors affecting this phenomenon, focusing in particular on: a) the socio-economic situation in Tunisia; b) the responsibility of the Tunisian government in terms of lack of policies or ineffectiveness of existing policies; and c) the restrictive migration policies put in place by the EU and European countries. In relation to this, some interviewees emphasised also a substantial lack (or shortage) of legal migration opportunities for Tunisian workers in Europe. Some stakeholders focused specifically on the issue of highly-qualified labour migration and its implications for the country.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, the issue of refugees in Tunisia was also mentioned as a relevant migration-related issue for the country. However, this issue has a very precise temporal and spatial location, as it concerns the inflow of refugees from Libya to southern Tunisia following the 2011 Libyan war. The war actually caused two distinct inflows of refugees, the Sub-Saharan and the Libyans. While the inflow of sub-Saharan refugees was generally framed in negative terms by both the Tunisian people and public institutions (“the images of masses of people in precarious conditions in the Choucha camp remained impressed in our collective

<sup>20</sup>Interview with a member of academia/expert, 13 July 2017.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with a member of academia, 7 July 2017.

<sup>22</sup>The term *harraga* (from Arabic) means “those who burn (the borders)”; it identifies North African migrants who try to enter Europe by using irregular means (typically crossing the Mediterranean by boat).

<sup>23</sup>On this point, different frames emerged, as some interviewees emphasised possible negative implications related to “brain drain”, while others stressed a potential for the development of the country in terms of “brain gain”.

memory as an infernal circle<sup>24</sup>), the inflow of Libyan nationals was perceived rather positively (“Libyans were welcomed in Tunisia as ‘brothers’ and hosted in the houses of Tunisians; there were no integration issues”<sup>25</sup>). This is also linked to the fact that the Libyans arrived in Tunisia with significant financial resources and invested in the real estate business, partly compensating for the economic downturn that Tunisia was undergoing.<sup>26</sup>

Some expert civil society stakeholders mentioned as a policy issue also the fact that a proposal for a new national asylum law (drafted in partnership with the UNHCR) is stuck in the Parliament since a couple of years. Interviewees provided two different explanations of the causes of this impasse. Most of them affirmed that the problem is not a lack of political will; rather, the Tunisian Parliament has a huge backlog of law reforms to discuss, and the creation of a national asylum system is not among the country’s or the government’s priorities. Conversely, a minority of interviewees argued that this is a political blockage, i.e. a strategy put in place by Tunisia in response to the European pressures to pass the law, aimed at contrasting any possible European project of externalisation of the asylum procedures in North Africa.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, the issue of sub-Saharan immigration to Tunisia was identified as a specific policy issue only by expert CSOs, migrant associations and NGOs working specifically on this topic. These actors highlighted several problems relating to the legal and policy framework regulating immigration to Tunisia, which is considered to be too restrictive, oriented to the criminalisation of migrants, and informed by a securitising approach. They criticised in particular the imposition of penalties on irregular migrants and the virtual impossibility for them to regularise their stay in Tunisia.<sup>28</sup>

With regards to the living and working conditions of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, expert civil society stakeholders stressed specific challenges related to human rights protection (focusing in particular on access to labour and labour rights) and poor integration in the Tunisian society (highlighting problems related to housing and residential segregation). The related issue of discrimination, racism and xenophobia targeting African people in Tunisia was also described as serious and widespread. Therefore, specialised civil society actors framed in overall negative terms the situation of sub-Saharan migrants in the country and the existing Tunisian legal and policy framework on immigration, which was described by several interviewees as “outdated” and “unsuitable” for a country that has become also a destination of migrant flows. Following the revolution, specialised NGOs and migrant associations have been voicing their criticism and advocating for a reform of Tunisian immigration law, also with the support of Tunisian academics and INGOs (Ben Jemia & Achour, 2014). The main objectives of their advocacy actions vis-à-vis the national government were: de-penalising irregular

<sup>24</sup>Interview with a governmental actor, 13 July 2017.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with a governmental actor, 18 July 2017.

<sup>26</sup>However, as mentioned by some civil society actors, even though they are called “brothers”, Libyans do not have any formal legal status in Tunisia: they are considered neither migrants nor asylum seekers, and they do not get the UNHCR refugee status.

<sup>27</sup>“The EU wants Tunisia to pass this law so that the country would become eligible to receive asylum seekers and process their applications, and it would be possible for the EU to define Tunisia as a safe country” (interview with a representative of an INGO, 4 July 2017).

<sup>28</sup>Under Tunisian law, irregular stay is a crime punished with a penalty of 20 DIN per week of irregular stay, which amounts to 1000 DIN per year (ca. 340€). This represents a major problem for irregular migrants, who are not allowed to leave the country (not even to return to their country of origin) unless they pay a penalty, which is constantly increasing.

migration, enhancing migrant rights' protection and migrant integration, and combating discrimination and racism.

Therefore, these actors considered as a problematic issue in itself the persisting stalemate of the reform of Tunisian immigration law – a process initiated in 2011 by the newly-established State Secretariat for Migration and Tunisians Abroad, with the elaboration of a comprehensive *National Migration Strategy*, i.e., a new legal and policy framework on immigration, emigration and asylum drafted in cooperation with Tunisian civil society (Ben Jemia & Achour, 2014). Since 2013 a draft version of the *National Migration Strategy* has been circulating, but it has never been officially adopted by the government. According to expert civil society stakeholders, multiple factors have contributed to this impasse, including: the sometimes problematic relations between different national institutions involved in migration policy-making and the overlapping of their competences; EU-Tunisia relations and the pressures exercised by the EU on the Tunisian government through its cooperation policies<sup>29</sup>; the uncertain political situation in Libya<sup>30</sup>; and the lack of a truly participatory decision-making process actively involving CSOs.

When considering the factors and actors affecting the above-mentioned policy issues, interviewees addressed also the lack of inter-governmental cooperative relations among southern Mediterranean countries. According to Tunisian civil society stakeholders, the lack of strategic regional alliances, especially in the field of migration, may be linked to two factors: a) southern Mediterranean countries tend to accept and uncritically perpetuate the European framing of Euro-Mediterranean relations as purely bilateral one-to-one relations, following the model of the European Neighbourhood Policy; and b) each country perceives its general situation and its national interests as individual, peculiar and often in conflict or competition with those of its neighbours.<sup>31</sup>

#### **Civil society actors' evaluation of EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration**

Civil society actors highlighted that current European policies addressing Tunisia are obsessively focused on improving border control and increasing effective returns, while cooperation in other policy fields, such as labour migration and development – which would be beneficial to reducing irregular migration – is made conditional to cooperation in stemming maritime migration flows.

More in general, civil society stakeholders claimed the need for more equal and balanced relations between the EU and Tunisia in all policy fields.<sup>32</sup> They also stressed that Tunisia should not adapt its priorities to the representation the EU has of the country and more in general of the southern Mediterranean shore; rather, it should

<sup>29</sup>According to interviewees, the Tunisian government would not adopt legislation or policies in the area of migration that would be disliked by the EU institutions and Member States, as the EU cooperation and support (not only in this policy field) is considered as crucial for the long-term strategic interests of the country.

<sup>30</sup>“Until the political situation in Libya is not solved and stable, it may be difficult and inappropriate for Tunisia to pass a law that may have a relevant impact on Libyan nationals, and could thus negatively affect Tunisia-Libya relations” (interview with a migration expert/academic, 15 July 2017).

<sup>31</sup>Relations between Maghreb countries (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria) are still quite tense, both at the level of trade relations and political relations, with the unresolved issue of Western Sahara representing a crucial obstacle for enhancing regional cooperation.

<sup>32</sup>“Tunisia needs the EU's support in this phase of transition, but at the same time it should be treated in a more equal way, as a peer country, also because it has a crucial role in North Africa” (interview with a representative of a CSO, 5 July 2017).



provide its own alternative representation, and should uphold its own priorities in the negotiations with the EU.<sup>33</sup> As concerns more specifically the governance of migration, interviewees were generally in favour of implementing more balanced, integrated and comprehensive cooperation policies. These should not be limited to border control, but should also speak to different policy areas, so that EU-Tunisia relations are overall more coherent.<sup>34</sup>

As concerns specific EU-Tunisia cooperation initiatives in the area of migration (i.e., the European Readmission Agreement (EURA), the Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) and the Mobility Partnership), it is worth noting that the Tunisian government and a majority of Tunisian CSOs and NGOs share the same position and have formed a “united front” vis-à-vis the European Union. This is especially true for the ongoing parallel negotiations for readmission and visa facilitation agreements.<sup>35</sup> The main points of this shared position are: that the EURA must be linked to the VFA (thus, enhanced cooperation on readmission on the part of Tunisia is conditional to the establishment of a facilitated visa regime for Tunisian nationals); that readmission obligations cannot include third country nationals; and that readmission cannot be carried out based on a “European laissez-passer”. Interviewees affirmed that these three points are firmly non-negotiable.<sup>36</sup>

With regard to one of the most recent policy developments in the external dimension of the EU migration policy – i.e., the EU-Turkey Agreement and its possible replication in other contexts (mentioned above in the third section), Tunisian civil society actors confirmed that “following the EU-Turkey deal, the European strategy changed a bit; we witnessed more pressures on Tunisia, and offers of relevant financial agreements as a quid pro quo for increased cooperation, based on a similar mechanism as the EU-Turkey one; what we are trying to avoid as civil society is that the Tunisian government finds itself in the same situation as Turkey”.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, generally-speaking Tunisian civil society actors seem to share the overall critical framing of European CSOs and international NGOs on the EU’s external migration policies in the Mediterranean area, which are criticised for their security-oriented and conditionality-based approach (Roman, 2018a). At the same time, most Tunisian CSOs have established a united front with Tunisian authorities aimed at promoting more equal and balanced EU-Tunisia relations and less Euro-centric and sectoral migration cooperation policies. In fact, despite an overall critical stance towards the EU external migration policies, most Tunisian expert CSOs and NGOs are keen to be involved in a constructive dialogue with national and European institutions and claim an active role in decision-making processes in the field of migration.

Thus, rather than taking a more radically antagonistic stance towards the EU and/or the national government and refusing dialogue with institutional actors, the majority of Tunisian civil society stakeholders display a cooperative attitude and value the

<sup>33</sup>Interview with a member of academia, 7 July 2017.

<sup>34</sup>“Tunisia cannot merely play the role of Europe’s border guard; we need to cooperate also in different fields in an integrated way and on more equal bases; for instance, we need to enter into economic agreements that do not penalise Tunisian agriculture” (interview with a representative of a CSO, 5 July 2017).

<sup>35</sup>“The Tunisian government is for visa facilitation; it stands on the right side of the civil society on this issue; in this field the role of CSOs is very important” (interview with a governmental actor, 11 July 2017).

<sup>36</sup>However, it must be noted that some grassroots associations and civil society activists have a more radically critical perspective and declared to be against the EURA as a whole.

<sup>37</sup>Interview with the representative of an INGO, 4 July 2017.

opportunity of being involved in EU-Tunisia negotiations in the area of migration. Moreover, the substantial convergence of views between Tunisian institutional and civil society actors on the main EU-Tunisia migration cooperation initiatives may result in a stronger “Tunisian position” vis-à-vis the EU and European countries.

Conversely, the fieldwork carried out in Morocco as part of the MEDRESET project showed that Moroccan CSOs have a more radically critical stance towards the EU’s and European countries’ cooperation policies, including in the field of migration, which are considered as a continuation of the European colonialist policies in the African continent. For this reason Moroccan CSOs are apparently less keen to be involved in a political dialogue with the EU (Harrami & Mouna, 2018).<sup>38</sup>

### Concluding remarks

This article has first considered how the EU frames its external migration policy in the Mediterranean area, and in particular towards Tunisia. Based on an analysis of EU policy documents, it has been argued that the ED has been largely informed by a Euro-centric security-oriented and conditionality-based approach, which has overlooked the perceptions, interests and priorities of southern Mediterranean countries. Secondly, based on first-hand empirical information, this article has analysed how Tunisian civil society stakeholders frame migration, migration governance in Tunisia, and European cooperation policies in this field.

This analysis has revealed a sharply discordant framing between the EU’s dominant discourse and the civil society stakeholders’ narratives concerning in particular: the salience, volatility and politicisation of migration as a policy issue; the migration-related issues that should be prioritised; and the policy instruments that should be used to tackle them. While the European official institutional framing of Mediterranean migration is largely security-based and grounded on the perception of migration as a threat, Tunisian civil society actors perceive migration-related issues through a more migrant-centred and human rights-oriented frame (Geddes & Lixi, 2019). Such discordant framing may result in discordant practices, leading to a fundamental lack of policy coherence in the EU external migration policy. In the framework of the ED, policy coherence would require a more comprehensive approach to the governance of migration, more balanced relations between the EU and Mediterranean third countries, and the full inclusion of the perspectives and priorities of southern Mediterranean stakeholders (especially civil society stakeholders) into the design and implementation of migration cooperation policies. In this respect, in light of the specific features of its civil society and of its democratisation process, Tunisia may actually become a laboratory where the EU could test more participatory forms of migration management.

As examined in the previous sections, Tunisian CSOs have displayed different attitudes vis-à-vis the EU and the national government over time: criticism, agreement and cooperation. Firstly, against a backdrop of general criticism towards the European securitising top-down approach to migration governance, most civil society actors were highly critical towards the EU in particular in the initial phase of Mobility Partnership negotiations, when they claimed they had not been actively included, and pressured the

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<sup>38</sup>For a broader comparison among different civil society perspectives, priorities and policy frames in four North African and Middle East countries (i.e., Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Turkey), see: Roman, 2018b.

EU for the MP to become a more participatory process. At the same time, CSOs expressed their criticism also in the context of domestic migration policy-making, addressing the national government with pressing requests and advocacy actions for the reform of the national legal and policy framework on migration. Secondly, in the context of external migration policy-making, when the main civil society actors started to be actively involved both in the implementation and monitoring of the MP and in the EURA and VFA negotiations,<sup>39</sup> they agreed a shared position with the national government and formed a “Tunisian united front” vis-à-vis the EU. Thirdly, this led the most influential expert CSOs operating in the migration policy field to develop a more cooperative attitude both at the domestic level vis-à-vis the national government, and at the international level vis-à-vis the EU.

This limited propensity to conflict between Tunisian civil society and governmental actors, and the overall collaborative attitude of the main CSOs involved in external migration policy-making may represent strategic resources for the EU to elaborate more balanced migration cooperation policies, able to include Tunisian interests and priorities more broadly and systematically. Apparently, the EU has so far displayed a contradictory strategy towards civil society stakeholders in South-Med countries, and Tunisia in particular. Besides involving CSOs on a selective and ad hoc basis (Bürkner & Scott, 2018), the EU has tasked local civil society with a dual function: on the one hand to cooperate in the implementation of EU policies (e.g., the MP), thus legitimising them despite their Euro-centric, top-down and securitising approach; and on the other hand to promote human rights and democracy at the domestic level – with the risk to create a short circuit between the two functions. But the EU does not seem to have so far tasked civil society actors with an actual co-production function in the migration policy field. Against this background, the collaborative attitude of most Tunisian CSOs may represent a resource for the EU, as the establishment of truly participatory decision-making processes may contribute not only to more effective and mutually beneficial cooperation policies, but also to a stronger legitimisation of EU policies, as well as to the promotion of a more human rights-oriented governance of migration.

However, along with possibly positive consequences in terms of a more participatory governance of migration, the establishment of a “Tunisian alliance” in the external relations with the EU may have negative consequences internally – i.e., a negative impact on national migration policy-making. Indeed, it may cause the softening of the internal political dialectic and the weakening of civil society pressures on the Tunisian government, with regard to certain migration-related issues. It seems, in fact, that civil society advocacy actions aimed at reforming Tunisian immigration law, de-penalising irregular migration, enhancing the protection of migrant rights, fostering migrant integration, and contrasting discrimination and racism have been gradually losing strength.

The EU may be considered as having at least some indirect responsibility in this “regression” – or withdrawal or weakening – of civil society internal

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<sup>39</sup>Tunisia is the only country where, since 2016, the EU has systematically involved the main Tunisian CSOs in political dialogue and negotiations through so-called “tripartite dialogues”, which take place before every official EU-Tunisia meeting (Roman, 2018a, p. 12). As concerns more specifically the field of migration and mobility, the EU and Tunisia are engaged in the implementation of the Mobility Partnership signed in 2014. In this framework, Tunisian CSOs are actively involved not only as project implementers but also in decision-making processes – i.e., three CSOs are members of the Steering Committee of the LEMMA project and represent civil society instances in that venue (Roman & Pastore, 2018).

advocacy actions. EU-Tunisia negotiations and cooperation policies are still predominantly focused on European security-oriented priorities (i.e., migration management, border control, fight against human trafficking and smuggling, return and readmission), while other migration-related policy issues, especially concerning immigration to Tunisia and the situation of sub-Saharan migrants in the country (e.g., migrant integration, rights protection, anti-discrimination measures, and the national law reform) are generally not included. Conversely, incorporating these issues in the EU-Tunisia political dialogue in the field of migration would probably contribute to support civil society and migrant associations' claims vis-à-vis the national government, especially in view of a much needed immigration law reform. This would be a welcome development not only for Tunisian CSOs and for migrants in Tunisia, but it could have positive implications also from a European purely security-oriented perspective, as a more effective and balanced governance of migration in Tunisia may contribute to reduce migration to Europe.

## **Appendix**

### **List of interviews with Tunisian stakeholders**

#### ***First interview round***

- Interview 1. Interview with two male representatives of an INGO, Tunis, 4 July 2017.
- Interview 2. Interview with a male governmental actor, Tunis, 4 July 2017.
- Interview 3. Interview with a female migration activist, Tunis, 4 July 2017.
- Interview 4. Interview with a male representative of a CSO, Tunis, 5 July 2017.
- Interview 5. Interview with a male representative of a trade union, Tunis, 5 July 2017.
- Interview 6. Interview with a male representative of an intergovernmental organisation, Tunis, 5 July 2017.
- Interview 7. Interview with a male representative of a CSO, Tunis, 6 July 2017.
- Interview 8. Interview with a female representative of a CSO, Tunis, 6 July 2017.
- Interview 9. Interview with a female member of academia, Tunis, 7 July 2017.
- Interview 10. Interview with a male representative of a migrant association, Tunis, 10 July 2017.
- Interview 11. Interview with a male representative of an INGO, Tunis, 10 July 2017.
- Interview 12. Interview with a male representative of a CSO, Tunis, 11 July 2017.
- Interview 13. Phone interview with a female governmental actor, Tunis, 11 July 2017.
- Interview 14. Phone interview with a male representative of an INGO, Tunis, 12 July 2017.
- Interview 15. Interview with a male governmental actor, Tunis, 13 July 2017.
- Interview 16. Interview with a male member of academia, Tunis, 13 July 2017.
- Interview 17. Interview with a male representative of an international foundation, Tunis, 14 July 2017.
- Interview 18. Interview with a male migration expert/academic, Tunis, 15 July 2017.
- Interview 19. Interview with a female representative of an INGO, Tunis, 17 July 2017.
- Interview 20. Interview with a male governmental actor, Tunis, 17 July 2017.
- Interview 21. Interview with a male governmental actor, Tunis, 18 July 2017.
- Interview 22. Interview with two male representatives of an employers' association, Tunis, 18 July 2017.

### Second interview round

Interview 23. Skype interview with a male migration expert/academic, 16 February 2018.

Interview 24. Phone interview with a male representative of a CSO, 28 February 2018.

Interview 25. Skype interview with a male representative of an INGO, 1 March 2018.

Interview 26. Phone interview with a female representative of an INGO, 2 March 2018.

Interview 27. Phone interview with a female representative of an INGO, 9 March 2018.

Interview 28. Skype interview with a female representative of a CSO, 29 March 2018.

Interview 29. Skype interview with a female migration activist, 13 April 2018.

### Abbreviations

AESAT: *Association des Etudiants et Stagiaires Africains en Tunisie* – Association of African Students and Trainees in Tunisia; AFTURD: *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes Universitaires pour la Recherche et le Développement* – Association of Tunisian University Women for Research and Development; AFVIC: *Association des Familles Victimes de l'Immigration Clandestine* – Association of Families Victims of Irregular Migration; ATFD: *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* – Tunisian Association of Democratic Women; CSO(s): civil society organisation(s); ED: external dimension; EU: European Union; EURA: European Readmission Agreement; FTCT: *Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des Deux Rives* – Federation of Tunisians for a Citizenship across the Two Shores; FTDES: *Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux* – Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights; GAM(M): Global Approach to Migration (and Mobility); INGO(s): international non-governmental organisation(s); LTDH: *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* – Tunisian League for Human Rights; MP(s): Mobility Partnership(s); NGO(s): non-governmental organisation(s); UGTT: *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* – General Union of Tunisian Workers; UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; UTICA: *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat* – Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Craftsmanship; VFA: Visa Facilitation Agreement

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### Authors' contributions

FP wrote sections 2 and 3; ER wrote sections 1, 4 and 5. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Availability of data and materials

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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