



# A Black Swan in North Africa: A Review of the EU's Democracy Promotion Policies in Tunisia

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## Abstract

The Arab Spring shook the authoritarian regimes that ruled for decades in North Africa and the Middle East. For the first time in many Arab countries, people revealed their democratic aspirations. Unfortunately, these aspirations have been frustrated: in the 'best' cases, the uprising did not manage to overthrow the dictatorship, in the worst, the uprising resulted in a civil war. There is only one exception: Tunisia succeeded in its democratic transition and the new democratic framework is currently consolidating. Tunisia was not alone in this arduous endeavour: the EU was ready to support the transition process and its successful outcome was warmly welcomed on the other shore of the Mediterranean. This analysis addresses the EU's democracy promotion policies in Tunisia, aiming to understand their evolution and to assess their effectiveness. Did Tunisia become a democracy thanks to the EU's support?

Assessing the impact of an external actor might be difficult, as many variables contribute to determine the outcome of a democratic transition: the successful outcome of the process in itself is not a relevant indicator, as it might depend on a number of factors. Therefore, I opted for a two-folded approach: On the one hand, I analysed the EU's democracy promotion declaratory policy and its implementation. On the other hand, I identified several internal key actors and analysed their perception of the EU's contribution to the process.

Two are the main findings of this research: firstly, the EU's approach to democracy promotion evolved over time, adapting to new circumstances. During Ben Ali's dictatorship, the EU did not apply any substantial pressure on the regime in order to trigger democratic reforms. When the uprising began, the EU maintained a cautious stance until the ousting of the dictator. Only once the regime had fallen, the EU renovated its commitment to democracy promotion. Secondly, the EU's democracy promotion policies did not have a substantial impact on the outcome of Tunisia's democratisation. Unlike the rest of the Arab Spring countries, Tunisia managed to establish a democratic institutional framework thanks to some peculiarities of its society's structure. According to the key players' perception, the EU positively contributed to the success of the transition, but it did not make the difference: Tunisia would have become a democracy with or without the EU's political and financial support.