

TUNISIA AT A CROSSROADS

*Study conducted as part of the initiative:
“Osservatorio Medio Oriente”*

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Introduction

This policy brief is mainly the result of three roundtables organized by CeSPI with the support of Compagnia di San Paolo, held between September 2023 and February 2024. The events gathered different experts, scholars, civil society representatives and institutions to discuss the current political and economic situation in Tunisia, with a focus on its impact on women's activism and the migration dossier. In addition to political and economic developments, analyzing the progress of women's rights and the state of migration management could help in understanding whether Tunisia has gone down an authoritarian point of no return at the crossroads of its path for a "democratic transition" and the subsequent impact on its external partnerships. Special attention has been dedicated to the external ramifications of migration as the main dossier in both Tunisia-Italy and Tunisia-EU relations.

Kais Saied: an authoritarian outsider

Since his election in 2019, Kais Saied has always been considered an outsider in the Tunisian political landscape. A constitutional lawyer, the 65-year-old President presented himself as an independent personality with the aim of cleaning up the country from corruption and traditional political mechanisms.

Without any political manifesto or affiliation, Saied was able to mobilize most of the population around him, winning the elections with 72% of the vote. With the slogan of "*al-sha 'b yurid*" ("the people want") a title borrowed from the slogans chanted during the uprisings, he claimed that "citizens do not want electoral programs to be offered to them, rather, they want to be day-to-day political actors"¹.

In this context, the political legitimacy of the new President was based on a mix of populism and anti-politics discourse, justified by the rising economic crisis and the jeopardized political path of post-2011 Tunisia. What emerged was a clear will of dissolving the democratic path started in 2011, despite it serving to gain public consensus during the first phase of his rule. Although considering the popular support that Saied was able to gain by stressing his "clean face" from the corruption characterizing the former regime, he did not succeed in curbing the structural problems affecting the country. The situation got worst by the spread of Covid 19 and its economic, social and public health effects on an already fragile population. The lack of basic services, along with the incapacity of the government to provide the society with an exit strategy from the crisis, brought to a centralization of power to the Presidency

The first political victims of this situation were the executive body of the State. Between 2019 and 2023, Tunisia saw five different Prime Ministers and several government reshuffles, which went together with the progressive reduction of the political space and a growing centrality of the Ministry of Interior in terms of societal control and influence over the Presidency.

Finally, in 2023 this process of power centralization resulted in the dissolution of both governorates and city hall councils. This was part of Saied's anti-politics rhetoric labelling the local governments as "*States within the state*". However, the aim was to eliminate possible threats to his political power, as most of the governorates and city hall councils were run by the Islamist party Ennahda². This measure went along with the increasing repression of political activists and restrictions of the social space which have been (and still are) the main tools of the government to "maintain order and security" in the country.

The 25th of July 2021 represented the peak of this centralization maneuver, when the President froze the Parliament by lifting the immunity of its deputies and dismissing Prime Minister Hichem

¹ C. Fulco, M. Giampaolo, "The neoliberal cage. Alternative Analysis of the Rise of Populist Tunisia Middle East Critique, 32(1), 27–52.

² See: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230309-tunisian-president-to-dissolve-municipal-councils-ahead-of-local-elections>

Mechichi. This U-turn was the start of the authoritarian shift of Tunisia's President and the beginning of political polarization between those who opposed the move (Islamists and some left-wing parties) and those who supported it (some nationalist and leftist organizations).

Thereafter, what happened was an actual centralization of power and its customization. This was, in part, due to the political profile of Kais Saied that remained "independent" and free from any political organization. This influenced both internal and external policies of the country and was characterized by an increasing process of securitization (without solving any economic grievances) and a restriction of the public space, with Saied also acting as a maverick in foreign affairs.

Since Saied's populist discourse is at the core of his internal legitimacy, the tactic to maintain a certain degree of popularity was that of *divide and rule*. This new political discourse allowed Saied to build up a hierarchization of people demands, wherein human, gender and minority rights are situated at the bottom of the pyramid. Although this could be considered a general trend – also in Europe – in Tunisia corresponded to an increasingly restricted space for advocacy groups, human rights advocates and political activists, as well as journalists. This came in parallel with the increasing centralization of the Ministry of Interior and its security apparatus, as it had been during the Ben Ali era.

That said, however, the State was incapable of dealing with social grievances. The increasing unemployment rate (16.40% in 2023), notably that of youths (40.58% in 2023), as well as the informal employment (43.9% in 2023) are just some of the economic indicators that characterize Saied's rule³. In addition, at the macroeconomic level, what seems to be a real nightmare for the country is the public debt that, in the last few years, passed from 68% to 80% of the national GDP. Even in this case, the increasing inflation rate and lack of foreign currency brought the government to reduce imports (notably food), provoking shortages in basic goods (milk, crops, and vegetables). In addition, the reduction of food imports did not correspond to a greater internal production as the agricultural sector suffered from water shortage and climate change.

To afford this complex economic situation, the country has been dealing with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to receive a \$1,9-billion loan. However, talks with the IMF have become more difficult than ever, due to the President's refusal to respond to the demands of the financial institution, as he explained "foreign diktat that will lead to more poverty are unacceptable"⁴. The country, in the last decade, benefitted from three different loans from the IMF (in 2013, 2016 and 2020) for implementing economic reform to reinvigorate the country's economy. Poor results in terms of reforms and the effects of the cut in services showed the hardships of coping with the loan's conditionality and put the country in a stalemate position. Although considering the last loan of US\$745 taken during Pandemic, the crosscutting effects of Covid-19 and the economic vulnerability of the country (along with the rise of food prices) brought Tunisia to a black hole.

The President's refusal of the conditionality of the loan is part of Saied's populism but also shows the weaknesses of his strategy. Saied appears as the only man in power, but the lack of support from political organizations (except for small political parties) could challenge his role in the long term. Thus, he uses nationalist rhetoric warning about external threats to divert attention and maintain his position. Despite many analysts seeing the refusal of the IMF loan as an ideological position, what pushes the President in this direction is the fear for his own power: cuts in services and subsidies could generate social unrest and protests that could undermine the country's stability.

The latest developments between Tunisia and its European partners should be read within this framework. Since the risk of default for Tunisia was (and still is) very tangible, the EU attempted to deal with the presidency to mediate for the acceptance of the loan. Also, the EU offered economic support to the country during 2023 to avoid major economic collapse and an increase of migration

³ World bank data, see: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview>

⁴ Here is the discourse of the President on IMF loan: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/07/tunisi-as-president-kais-saied-rejects-imf-diktats/>

flows. As a result, in July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed an MoU establishing full and comprehensive support to the country by investing 900 million euros in different fields⁵. This monetary support was mainly tied to the acceptance of the IMF's loan conditions, while just 150 million euros were recently delivered to the country for macroeconomic support⁶. In addition, another 105 million euros have been delivered to the country for migration management.

Until now, despite the efforts of the international community to support the necessary reforms for an IMF loan, the country is turning its attention to other partners that would grant less conditionality over budgetary support. Since 2022 Tunisia has attracted \$500 million in Saudi financial assistance as well as a \$200 million loan from Algeria (\$100 million of which was deposited in the Tunisian central bank).⁷

In this scenario, the country is walking on a tightrope with inflation reaching 9% in September 2023, along with a rocketing increase in food prices and basic goods. Of similar consequence are the effects of climate change on the agricultural sector. Despite representing 9% of GDP, the agricultural sector is crucially important to the maintenance of a sort of equilibrium in terms of a balance of payments.

Furthermore, even if the country is not self-sufficient in agriculture, the policies implemented in the last two decades contributed to the deterioration of national agricultural production. Intensive farming aimed at exports has negatively influenced national production. The cultivation of olive trees, dates and a few other products, reduced the fertility of the land and damaged the soil.

In addition, the export-focused orientation of the sector means farmers cannot sell many products to the local market. As a result, the already poor national supply of olive oil has raised its prices domestically. This example, along with other economic sectors, seems to replicate the long-standing logic of dependency on external markets, namely the European market.

Free-trade agreements, despite some positive results, generated a dependence relationship from which Tunisia's economy is not benefitting. The low added value of exported goods is not comparable with that of imports from Europe. The lack of a solid private sector and the lack of diversified industrialization brought the country to dependency on more developed countries

In this sense, the nature of the political system in Tunisia is central for developing a more advanced industry. What prevented the country from building a solid national industry as well as a stronger agriculture sector has been decades of authoritarian rule that left no space of maneuver for the development of the private sector and the strengthening of the already vibrant civil society, the same civil society that animated the Tunisian squares in 2011 and was able to create a political alternative in the country.

In this sense, the legitimacy that foreign actors are giving to the government could represent a replication of the "bad practices" of the past (pre-2011).

Before and after 2021: the impact on women's rights progress and activism

Since Saied's July 2021 power grab, a wide range of developments including decree laws to attack the right to freedom of expression as well as arbitrary detentions targeting high-profile critics⁸ have jeopardized progress made since 2011. The constitution adopted in July 2022 has been considered an institutionalized way to erode the already fragile "democratic transition" since it "dismantles

⁵ For a detailed document on the MoU: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887

⁶ See: <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/03/04/eu-150-million-to-support-economic-reforms-in-tunisia/>

⁷ See: I. Diwan, H. Alaya, H. Meddeb, *The Buildup to a Crisis: Current Tensions and Future Scenarios for Tunisia*, Carnegie Endowment, January 2023. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2024/01/23/buildup-to-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia-pub-91424>

⁸ In recent years, several bloggers and journalists have been prosecuted in military courts (rather than civil courts) after being charged under the code of military justice, which criminalizes the criticism of the military and its commanders. See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2023>

many of the guarantees to the independence of the judiciary, removes protection for civilians from military trials and grants the authorities the power to restrict human rights”⁹.

In a hostile socio-cultural environment, women’s rights organizations are increasingly common targets of criticism, especially when talking about “full” equality. Also, with a political and social vision strongly embedded in conservatism¹⁰, Saied’s presidency is challenging the already fragile implementation of women’s rights as well as the long-standing fight of feminist movements.

In 2011, Tunisia became the first country in the MENA region to change its autocratic regime through a widespread popular uprising that opened new spaces for civil society in the name of social justice, dignity, equity, and democracy. Feminist movements started to shape new and different forms of activism. The monolithic and top-down concept of *state feminism* used as a smokescreen to exercise control over women’s rights in the past decades was overcome. Although characterised by generational, geographical, and social cleavages, new associations emerged both in the capital and throughout the country.

Cyber activism accompanied women’s struggles before and during the whole transitional period, contributing to the achievement of the further mobilisation, also in relation to the LGBTQIA+ community. The so-called *hashtag activism* was used in different campaigns such as #Ena Zeda, also known as the Tunisian #MeToo, to speak out against sexual harassment¹¹.

Thanks to their activism, since 2011 Tunisia’s feminists have secured some of the most progressive rights in the Arab world including, among others, the 2014 Constitution, considered a breakthrough for women’s rights¹²; law 58 countering gender-based violence and the electoral law establishing vertical and horizontal parity in the political parties’ candidate lists, which contributed to the fostering of women’s participation in Parliament.

While social norms have not always followed legal developments and patriarchy has remained rooted in society¹³, these measures have contributed to the advance of the legal framework of women’s rights with the support of both civil society and the government.

Since 2021, however, in addition to legal setbacks in law such as the removal of gender parity and youth quotas in candidate lists¹⁴, there has been an increasing rhetoric of demonization towards civil society and feminist movements, both of which have been accused by the President of serving foreign interests threatening national security.

The President’s aim to replace NGO Law 88 of 2011, restricting the formation, activity, and funding of civil society organizations¹⁵, is among the fruits of this repressive attitude. Together with the general limitation of actions for civil society, if implemented, this measure will especially affect women’s rights organizations.

⁹ See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/tunisia-adoption-of-new-constitution-marks-a-setback-for-human-rights/>.

¹⁰ Whether the 2022 constitution underlines that women and men are “equal in rights and duties and are equal before the law without any discrimination,” Article 5 stipulates that “Tunisia is part of the Islamic Umma [community/nation],” making the realization of the purposes of Islam a responsibility of the state. According to HRW, such provisions could be used to justify attacks on women’s rights based on interpretations of religious precepts. See <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/tunisia>

¹¹ To go into depth see F. Ben Salah, #EnaZeda: Tunisian 'Me Too' movement met with both support and smear tactics, Middle East Eye, February 2020; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/enazeda-tunisian-me-too-movement-support-smear-campaigns>

¹² See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/2/tunisia-new-constitution>

¹³ See L. Coslovi, A. Ianni, M. Giampaolo, *Mobilizing women: le donne nella società tunisina del post 2011*, CeSPI Research report, December 2022. https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/wps_13gennaio_def_ita.pdf

¹⁴ See To go into depth see S. Yerkes, M. Al-Mailam, *Tunisia’s New Electoral Law Is Another Blow to Its Democratic Progress*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2022; <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/11/tunisia-s-new-electoral-law-is-another-blow-to-its-democratic-progress-pub-88127>

¹⁵ See Amnesty International, *Tunisia: Repressive NGO draft law threatens independent civil society*, October 2023; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/tunisia-repressive-ngo-draft-law-threatens-independent-civil-society/>

Already representing small percentages in the total number of Tunisian associations, the ones campaigning for women's rights deeply rely on foreign funding. Whether external support generally comes with very poor consultation on local needs and focuses on projects, rather than on CSOs' sustainability, different donors including foundations, embassies, UN agencies, international and bilateral cooperation agencies nonetheless have been the ones mainly financing organizations supporting women's rights in Tunisia. Indeed, the access to public/governmental funding is limited to those organizations mainly affiliated with the government or pursuing the official position of Ministries.

Together with the challenges linked with this associationism, repression has been widely used to target dissidents by "limiting" the digital space. "Facebook, Twitter, and other social media are being abused to target and silence feminist activists, especially vocal opponents of President Kais Saied's increasingly autocratic rule"¹⁶ and many activists are now practicing self-censorship to avoid repercussions¹⁷. Once a safer and inclusive way for activism, government restrictions, poor sustainability of online campaigns as well as increasing episodes of gender based violence through the internet are deeply challenging digital freedom as well as women's activism.

Since the feminist project is a social project, the fight for women's rights needs to be backed by both civil society and authorities. Nowadays, together with the presidency's autocratic posture, there is no strong cooperation and partnership between the feminist movement and progressive political parties for advocacy on the women's rights struggle. But also, the feminist movement is run through a generational gap. Positions vary on different aspects, such as intersectionality, to which the younger generation is more oriented than the older one.

Despite lacking a unified message, Tunisian feminists still have the strength to debate, however.

Until space for international cooperation is allowed, encouraging exchanges on women's rights, gender and intersectionality, strengthening consultations with local stakeholders in settling priorities, supporting sustainability of women's organizations and sustaining visibility and sustainability of their campaigns could help in mainstreaming the fight for women's rights while countering the restriction of the public space in Tunisia.

Migration as a tool for legitimacy?

Over the past two years, the outflow of migrants from Tunisia has increased dramatically both as a consequence of the deep economic crisis and the worsening authoritarian drift of President Kais Saied¹⁸. With no prospects for the future, emigration seems to be the only viable route for an increasing number of Tunisians, regardless of gender, age, socioeconomic status and place of residence.

The significant increase in the rates of irregular migrants from Tunisia prompted the recently installed Italian government to a notable dynamism and prominence, both at the bilateral and European level, with the aim to gain the prompt cooperation of the Tunisian government in curbing

¹⁶ See I. Ben Said, *Women and Democracy Under Threat in Tunisia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2023; <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90797>

¹⁷ According to the Freedom House report on freedom in 2023, self-censorship in Tunisia has increased dramatically since July 2021, when the president seized unilateral control over the political system. See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2023>

¹⁸ Of the approximately 105,000 irregular migrants arriving on the Italian coast in 2022, about 18,000 were Tunisians and about 50% of the total of those arriving through the central Mediterranean route sailed from Tunisia. In the same year, non-Tunisian migrants accounted for about half of the migrants intercepted at sea by Tunisian authorities. In 2023, when the number of irregular arrivals at borders reached about 153,000, Tunisia overtook Libya as the main point of departure of the Central Mediterranean route and Tunisian nationals increased up to 17,322. See: <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/02/nuovi-sviluppi-sulla-rotta-tunisina-sempre-piu-pericolosa/#:~:text=Secondo%20i%20dati%20del%20Forum,che%20scompaiono%20senza%20lasciare%20traccia.>

departures. In return, Tunisia has been offered greater economic and political dividends through the involvement of the European Commission. After intensive negotiations between Tunis, Rome and Brussels, the European Commission and Tunisia finally signed the controversial MoU in July 2023. Presented as a holistic agreement aimed at strengthening cooperation in several areas (macroeconomic stability, trade, energy transition, cultural exchanges and migration), the MoU has, at its core, the fight against irregular migration. It has generated bitter criticism both from the European Parliament that found itself bypassed by the Team Europe Initiative in the finalization of the deal and from civil society, due to the impact the MoU will have on the safeguards and guarantees of migrants' human rights. It also raises questions about its actual effectiveness in reducing irregular migratory flows. Tunisia has clearly reiterated in the MoU that it "*is not a country of settlement for irregular migrants [...] and [that] its position [is] to control only its own borders,*" thus expressing its refusal to adopt migration and asylum legislation and to accept the repatriation of citizens of other countries. Nor does the MoU contain references to the introduction of visas for other African citizens, considered by many the only measure potentially helping the reduction of migrants transiting across Tunisia.

The signing of the MoU is part of the broader framework that has seen the EU reach a historic political agreement with the new Migration and Asylum Pact. A pact that, according to most observers, aims at reducing protection standards in Europe and deterring arrivals, rapid returns or reducing so-called secondary movements¹⁹.

Italy has hailed the pact as a success, even if it does not certainly meet the demands of the European countries on the Mediterranean. The pact does not go beyond the Dublin system, nor does it seem to be decisive in terms of compulsory relocation. Rather, it introduces rules that will increase the burden over countries of first entry and will push them, directly or indirectly, to increase return/readmission operations.

The pact is so unfavorable to the Mediterranean European countries that many observers wonder about the real *quid pro quo* offered or promised to win their favor, while others see the pact as a tacit agreement between the countries of Central and Mediterranean Europe²⁰. The latter countries will play the role of border guardians – a role that the new pact is destined to strengthen – on the condition that the former countries leave their hands free, without placing too many regulatory and political obstacles in their own way and in their relations with countries of origin. A request that, in the same logic is also made – and evidently granted – to Tunisia. In the same hours that the MoU was signed, Tunisia deported and abandoned hundreds of migrants, young people, pregnant women and children at the borders with Algeria and Libya.

Therefore, the MoU appears functional and complementary to the new migration and asylum system designed by the pact, marking a change in the Italian strategy. With limited solidarity, securing cooperation with departure countries in return and readmission as well as in limiting departures become of crucial importance. It is no coincidence that the urgency to sign the MoU coincided with the approach of the JHA Council of 8-9 June, where agreement on two key asylum and migration files was reached. Furthermore, as some observers have pointed out, the first tranche promised by the Commission was granted to Saied, as the political agreement on the Pact was reached on 20 December.

There is no doubt that through a stronger partnership focused on countering migration, Italy also aims to strengthen Tunisia's stability. To Italy, Tunisia is an important partner in terms of energy, economy, trade and security²¹. A collapse of the Tunisian economy could not only cause an

¹⁹ ECRE (2023) Editorial: Migration Pact Agreement point by point <https://ecre.org/editorial-migration-pact-agreement-point-by-point/>

²⁰ Pastore, F (2023) Dopo l'ultima strage: politiche europee e interessi italiani <https://aspeniaonline.it/strage-politiche-europee-interessi-italiani/>

²¹ In 2022, Italy was Tunisia's leading trading partner, with an interchange of EUR 7.1 billion. In August 2023, Terna and Steg signed the Grant Agreement with the European Commission that kicks off the EUR 307 million financing for

exponential increase in migration flows but could also negatively impact cooperation in many areas. In their public statements, both Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tajani have never failed to reiterate the importance of Tunisia's stability, and it is no coincidence that the path leading to the MoU has been accompanied by Italy's important sponsorship of Tunisia, not only in the European context, but also on the occasion of Tajani's official visits to the IMF headquarters in Washington.

In this sense, the Europeanisation of the Tunisian migration dossier made by Italy is twofold: on one side, it responds to the need for a greater space of maneuver in negotiations with Kais Saied and on the other, it is a tool to throw a political bailout to a regime increasingly in a crisis of legitimacy both internally and internationally. Over the last quarter of a century, cooperation on migration has always represented a mutually beneficial terrain between the EU and the authoritarian regimes in North Africa, where different priorities have found common ground. Through the transfer of economic resources for externalizing its borders, the European countries secured cooperation in the fight against irregular migration, while the authoritarian regimes used these resources to strengthen their police and military apparatus as well as to increase their ability to control not only their borders but also their populations.

There are two main things worth noting here. The first is that the process described above took place with regimes already established and perceived as immovable, whereas in Tunisia it now risks supporting a kind of authoritarian restoration after the democratic interlude that began in 2011.

A second element concerns the unpredictable behavior of Kais Saied, as demonstrated by negotiations with the IMF as well as those over EU funds. While this aspect could be linked to his personality, it also serves his need to win back the favor of an increasingly disillusioned electorate.

In the past months, the MoU seems to have succeeded, with a sharp drop in departures registered from Tunisia during the last months of 2023 and the first quarter of 2024. Interceptions, and repatriations, including the controversial voluntary returns,²² have multiplied at Tunisia's land and sea borders. However, as the recent upturn in departures from Tunisia in April 2024 seems to suggest, while the conditions for an agreement with the IMF do not seem easy to reach, the approaching elections scheduled for autumn may push Kais Saied to reopen "the doors" for departures to gain internal consensus and financial support from the EU. The time seems favorable considering the large resources allocated recently, in the framework of the recent MoU, between the EU and Egypt. The MoU between Tunisia and the EU also recalls the commitment of the two parties in the promotion of legal migration as well as the mobility of skills at all levels, including by facilitating visas, reducing their costs and committing to the implementation of a Talent Partnership to promote legal migration benefitting sectors of activity and occupations jointly identified.

On the Italian side, some first steps in this direction have been taken through the signing of an initial memorandum of understanding for the entry of 12,000 non-seasonal workers (4,000 per year), which envisages close cooperation between the ministries and labour agencies of the two countries. It is also likely that Italy will focus on Tunisia in the framework of the various opportunities supported by the European Commission, such as the Thamm Plus program, or

the interconnection between Italy and Tunisia. For the first time, EU Connecting Europe Facility funds have been allocated to an infrastructure project developed by a Member State and a Third State. See: <https://www.terna.it/it/progetti-territorio/progetti-interesse-comune/interconnessione-italia-tunisia#:~:text=Nell'agosto%20del%202023%20Terna,interconnessione%20tra%20Italia%20e%20Tunisia.>

²² On the concerns expressed by civil society regarding the appropriateness of financing voluntary return programs from Tunisia and the real purpose of these operations, see: <https://www.asgi.it/allontamento-espulsione/tunisia-rimpatri-consiglio-di-stato/#:~:text=ASGI%20ritiene%20che%20in%20tale.e%20proprie%20E2%80%9Cespulsioni%20mascherate%2080%9D.>

initiatives for the circular migration of talent, as it is also conceivable that an attempt will be made to increase the number of out-of-quota entries that can be activated through training courses abroad. It is too early to say whether these first encouraging measures will mark the beginning of greater and more structured cooperation between the two countries on legal migration. On the one hand, those initiatives can be considered steps forward in relations between the parties involved, while on the other, they maintain the “hidden” goal of migration containment. Despite their inevitable intersection, it would be desirable for these two areas of cooperation on migration to be characterized by greater autonomy and symmetry.

Moreover, to foster legal migration, a strong adjustment of the legislation and capacity of the Italian administration and the Tunisian counterpart is needed. In this sense, they should be able to promote an effective matching between labour supply and demand and to level the asymmetry between the public and private sectors.

However, it is important to insist on promoting legal migration and circular migration schemes, both to strengthen cooperation between regions, territories and productive sectors in the two countries, and to support Tunisians without directly supporting Kais Saied's authoritarian drift.

Conclusions

As of now, new spaces for cooperation between the EU and Tunisia are very limited. On the one hand, this is due to the EU's building “sectorial” partnership, rather than comprehensive relations with its Mediterranean neighbors. On the other hand, the authoritarian drift and unpredictable attitude of Saied restrict the prospects for a sustainable partnership.

In this context, the EU's *look for stability* strategy must cope with the evolution of the socio-political and economic context of Tunisia. Saied's refusal of IMF conditionality, beyond nationalist rhetoric, came in a context of economic crisis where cuts on basic services including fuel and food subsidies would have made the lives of many Tunisians unaffordable, generating social unrest and, most likely, an even more authoritarian turn. So, the *dependency logic* needs to be overcome, opening spaces for horizontal relations, especially in terms of trade and the economy, by supporting the private sector without exploiting the country's resources.

Human rights protection fostering equality and dignity for all must return to the core of EU-Tunisia relations, since the two parties have signed important deals on strategic issues such as green transition, climate change and food security that cannot be effectively implemented in a repressive context. This should consider the reality on the ground, with special attention to civil society. As demonstrated in the post-2011 uprising, civil society has been the most important actor in supporting the path for democratization. With the restriction of civic spaces, the role of civil society has been sidelined and repressed along with most of the achievements reached during the transitional period. This is particularly true when it comes to women's activism, which has contributed to many legislative reforms that are now challenged by involutions in the political sphere. Despite unfulfilled hopes for the building of a new Tunisia, there are still some spaces for debate across civil society, especially in the context of women activism, that should be supported.

Furthermore, since migration is at the core of EU-Tunisia and EU-Italy relations, there is a need to invest in legal migration pathways (including that of circular migration) to enhance collaboration between countries, as well as their productive sectors, to attract respective talents. In addition, both the EU and Italy must keep their focus on migrants' rights protection. Despite the lack of a national legislative apparatus granting overall protection to migrants and asylum seekers and the increasingly limited space of action for CSOs working in the field of migration, strengthening the role of civil society supporting migrants' inclusion and integration could help in countering xenophobic narratives.