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Socio-Cultural Challenges of the Maghreb States and Their Impact on Relations With the European Union

The political upheavals that began in the Maghreb states and subsequently spread across the Mashreq region were, at least in part, the consequence of profound demographic transformations. Population geopolitics clearly demonstrates that the now historic uprising in Tunisia against the regime of Ben Ali was not a coincidence, but rather reflected a very specific demographic moment in the country's age structure (Dumont, 2012, p. 93). Alongside the economic challenges stemming from the uneven distribution of developmental potential along the North–South axis of the Mediterranean Basin (Huber, Nouira, Paciello, 2018, pp. 2–22), it is precisely the socio-cultural variable that determines not only the nature of current and future relations between the European Union and the Maghreb states, but also the stability of the entire region, of Europe, and indeed of the wider world.

The purpose of this article is to analyse socio-cultural factors as significant driving forces shaping the application of new policy frameworks in relations between the European Union and the Maghreb states. Identifying these factors makes it possible to capture the key challenges in Euro–Maghreb relations and to understand how current developments within the Arab states of North Africa influence the nature of their interactions with the European Union. Describing and evaluating these dynamics may also prove useful for formulating new strategic approaches at both national and regional levels.

Among these factors, particular attention should be devoted to demographic trends in the region, upon which the socio-economic stability of both the Maghreb subregion and the wider Euro-Mediterranean area (Euromed) largely depends. An analysis of the demographic dimension inevitably requires consideration of migration, whose characteristics have themselves undergone processes of evolution. To capture the transformations that have occurred since the “Arab Spring,” a deductive approach will be employed – one that traces the evolution of migration patterns across the entire Mediterranean Basin (MB) before analysing them in greater detail within the Maghreb subregion.

These variables hold significant analytical value and may help to answer the question of the likely direction of future relations between the European Union and the



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Maghreb states. The working hypothesis suggests that the current socio-cultural context of the Maghreb countries – particularly the issues of migration and unemployment – will compel the European Union to undertake a series of actions, while partially transferring responsibility for their implementation to third countries. All of these dynamics will become increasingly apparent in the perspective of 2030. Verification of both the research objective and the hypothesis will be achieved through the application of factor analysis and a quantitative comparative strategy, primarily employing statistical techniques.

1. Migration and demographics

Migration movements have continuously reshaped the cultural configuration of various regions throughout history, a phenomenon particularly evident in the Mediterranean Basin. In this area, the traditional distinction between countries of emigration and immigration has largely disappeared. Today, most states experience both processes simultaneously, while some have assumed the role of significant transit zones for migration. These transformations have directly affected the Maghreb states. They are the result, on the one hand, of globalisation, which has contributed to what Koser (2018) terms the “convergence of humanity in the world,” and on the other, of the “Arab Spring,” which not only revealed the evolution of these trends but also underscored the growing importance of the Maghreb states in the context of mass migration from Africa to the European Union (Stachurska-Szczesiak, 2017, pp. 77–95).

Today, both bottom-up and top-down processes of simultaneously opening and closing the movement of people have become increasingly visible. Migration, understood in this way, transforms international relations by redefining the sovereignty of receiving states, while placing greater emphasis on countries of origin. This, in turn, has given rise to a new form of diplomacy involving both global and regional governance of migration (Wihtol de Wenden, 2013, p. 264). Moreover, in the context of growing global inequalities, migration has become inextricably linked to the development trajectories of the countries of the Global South. Income disparities – both within and between states – are compounded by social, legal, and health-related differences (Wise, Covarrubias, 2009, pp. 85–103). These transformations have created a context conducive to the current expansion and reconfiguration of migration within the Mediterranean region (Castles, Miller, 2011, p. 74), profoundly shaping the contemporary nature of relations between the European Union and the Maghreb states.

The shared maritime and land borders of the states bordering the Mediterranean Sea offer this region both opportunities and constraints. Owing to the development of modern air and maritime transport, the Mediterranean Basin is now more than ever capable of serving as a bridge of mobility between three continents.

However, the Braudelian conception of the Mediterranean² – as a maritime basin surrounded by societies, cultures, nations, and economies whose mutual interactions, despite their differences, for decades constituted the added value of the region, making

² F. Braudel (1902–1985) – contemporary French historian, expert in Mediterranean affairs.

it a genuine “cultural area” – has been distinctly disrupted. The political revolutions in the North African states marked a visible moment of rupture in the perception of the Mediterranean as a bridge between civilisations. This shift also had direct consequences, notably in the form of reduced predictability of migratory movements within the Euro-Mediterranean space.

One of the most striking features of the region’s traditional division – and one that reinforces today’s rupture in mutual ties – is the persistent imbalance between human potential and natural resources. This inexhaustible reservoir of population in the South continues to fuel migration, both legal and irregular. For years, numerous scholars of Mediterranean studies have predicted, on this basis, growing tensions and even political or military conflicts arising from the deepening demographic imbalance (Crippa, d’Agostino, Dunne, Pieroni, 2025, pp. 596–618). As early as 1995, O. Faron and P. George observed that “we are witnessing a genuine wave of influx, reflected in data on population growth rates, which forms the basis of our projections for the future” (Faron, George, 1999, pp. 323–358).

This “alarmist” discourse on demographic growth in the southern Mediterranean appears to have been somewhat exaggerated, as argued repeatedly by the renowned French scholar Y. Courbage. “With the exception of Egypt, the demographic slowdown has become a defining feature of most southern countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, as well as Libya, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine” (Courbage, 1997, pp. 11–26). This phenomenon is expected to continue for several years, paving the way for a kind of “golden age of demography.” However, this advantage will prove short-lived. By 2025, the ageing population of the Maghreb will increasingly swell the ranks of the elderly, bringing with it the very same social and economic challenges currently faced by the northern Mediterranean states (Courbage, 1997, pp. 11–26).

According to multiple data sources, the ageing process in Maghreb societies will occur much more rapidly than in Europe. The proportion of people aged 60 and over is projected to nearly double within just 35 years (from 2015 to 2050): from 8.9% to 23% of the total population in Algeria, from 10% to 24% in Morocco, and from 11.7% to 26.5% in Tunisia. In absolute terms, the number of people within this age group is expected to rise even more dramatically – from 3.6 million to 13.2 million in Algeria (a more than 3.6-fold increase), from 3.5 million to 11 million in Morocco (a tripling), and from 1.3 million to 3.7 million in Tunisia (2.8-fold increase) (Muriel, 2020).

Europe’s influence on broader social transformations in the Maghreb states appears to be stronger than in the countries of the Middle East. This is due not so much to geographical proximity as to historical circumstances, the impact of the media, and the enduring legacy of colonialism – still evident today in the almost obligatory use of European languages, most notably French.

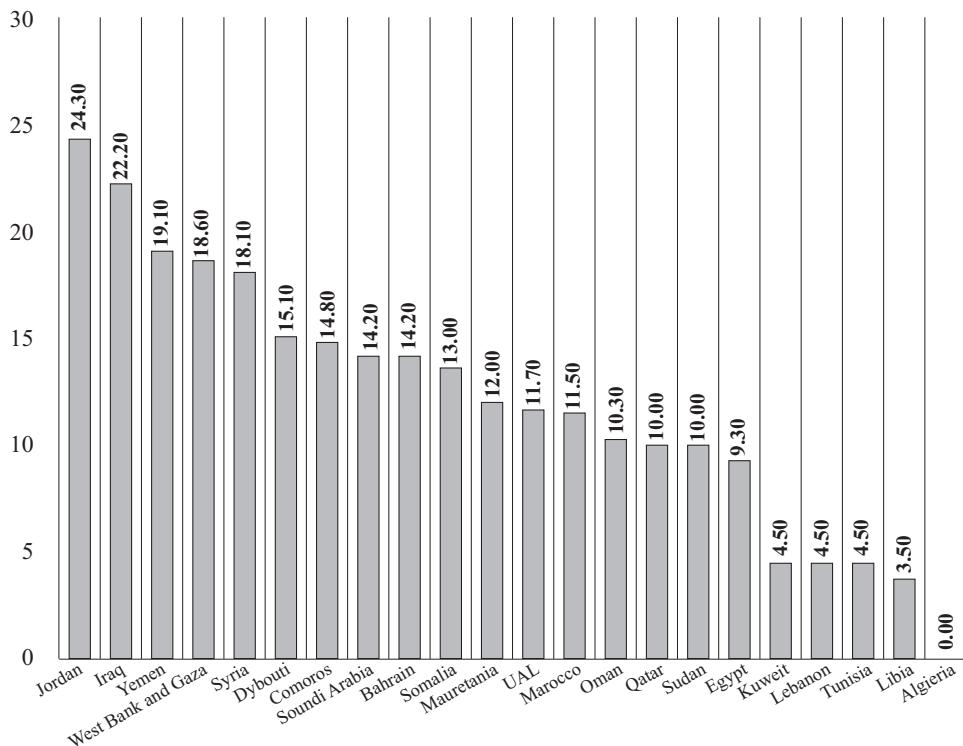
Considering the demographic data from the 1960s and 1970s for the North African states – where fertility rates were extremely high, averaging 6.5 children per woman in Tunisia and Morocco, and as many as 8 in Algeria – few could have anticipated such a dramatic behavioural shift, reflected in the sharp decline in fertility observed by 2000, when the rate had fallen to 2.1 children per woman. It is nevertheless noteworthy that in none of the Maghreb states has the fertility rate dropped below the replacement

threshold, which has been established at 2.08 for Tunisia, 2.2 for Algeria, and 2.5 for Morocco (Nau, 2012, pp. 770–771).

According to data from the World Bank, which conducted research between 2011 and 2021 on fertility rates among Arab countries, considerable variation can be observed, although the overall trend remains downward. In the analysed Maghreb sub-region, this decline is evident in Morocco (11.5%) and Tunisia (4.5%), while Algeria stands out as the only country surveyed where no decline was recorded (0%) (Mohasneh, Ebrahim, 2024).

Table 1

Fertility decline rate (%) of the Arab countries: 2011–2021



Source: <https://mefj.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s43043-024-00205-6>.

The causes of this trend lie in the interplay of culture, religion, and the role of political institutions in the Maghreb states, which, by all possible means, seek to protect women from engaging in sexual relations outside marriage and, moreover, deny their capacity to raise children born out of wedlock. In such a context, the increasing age at which women enter marriage automatically reduces the likelihood of childbirth. This development is further reinforced by rising levels of education and urbanisation, as well as by the influence of population policies.

Any comprehensive understanding of the demographic situation in the South must take into account the specific context in which it occurs. Firstly, the demographic boom

in the South coincides with the ageing of European societies in the northern Mediterranean. Secondly, the economic growth of the southern Mediterranean states in the coming decades appears largely disconnected from, and unresponsive to, the increase in population within the Maghreb. This decoupling fails to translate into greater prosperity for these societies, thereby generating frustration. Finally, this constellation of factors triggers both regular and irregular migration from Maghreb societies, directed primarily towards the European Union.

However, numerous studies suggest that the rate of demographic growth is not directly correlated with the level of emigration. One example supporting this thesis is the research conducted by Hanna Zlotnik, Director of the Population Division at the United Nations. She compared two variables – demographic growth and emigration levels – across 120 countries between 1960 and 1995. The findings revealed a slightly negative correlation between these variables, offering a different perspective on demographic pressure. Populations tend to move towards densely populated areas that have already experienced rapid demographic growth, contributing to a phenomenon known as hyper-urbanisation. This trend is observed not only in the southern Mediterranean states but also globally (*Conférence de presse, 26 February...*, 2008).

Nevertheless, the same study also indicated the potential for large-scale migration in the event of serious economic or political crises. These findings proved accurate, as evidenced by the migration crisis of 2015–2016. Yet there remains an important exception to this rule: waves of migration can themselves trigger significant economic and political instability, both in the countries of origin and in those of destination. In the southern Mediterranean states, such instability was caused not so much by demographic factors as by the domino effect of the “Jasmine Revolution” and its repercussions, which led to an unstable situation in the countries neighbouring the European Union to the south.

2. The Maghreb states response to socio-cultural challenges

The linkage between demography and development proved to be a key element of the policies undertaken by the Maghreb states shortly after gaining independence from metropolitan France. The following section briefly outlines the demographic and population policies, as well as employment strategies, adopted by the Maghreb states in response to the socio-cultural challenges they faced in the post-decolonisation period. The consequences of these policies remain visible today and continue to shape the nature of their relations with the European Union.

2.1. Population policy

Tunisia was the first among the Maghreb states to launch population programmes that were remarkably pioneering for an Arab country. In 1964–1965, an experimental programme was established, serving as a pilot project for broader implementation within national social policy. It introduced family planning measures designed to support developmental goals, particularly for ambitious individuals seeking to improve

their socio-economic conditions. These initiatives were evolutionary not only within the African or Arab–Muslim context but even in comparison with certain European countries. For instance, the sale of contraceptives and abortifacients became legally available in Tunisia before it did in France. Examining this perspective helps to explain the success of Tunisia's fertility-reduction programmes (Gastineau, Sandron, 2000, p. 10). The Ninth Tunisian Development Plan for 1997–2001 represented a continuation of earlier initiatives, though this time it was explicitly aligned with the global strategy of sustainable development.

Despite the decline in the birth rate in Tunisia, the overall number of people of working age entering the labour market will remain relatively high until 2025, which will have implications for employment and the collective demand for social services. This pressure becomes evident when unemployment indicators are taken into account, as they remain persistently high in Tunisia and increasingly affect well-educated individuals. Unemployment averaged around 15.67% between 2005 and 2025, reaching a record level of 18.9% in 2011 (*Trading Economics*, 2025).

Reducing population growth became one of Algeria's main priorities from the moment it regained independence. The success of this strategy required the development of a genuinely long-term policy aimed at changing societal attitudes towards procreation. The need for population control through family planning was first recognised in 1968, but the true turning point came in 1983, when the Algerian government adopted a national action programme to regulate demographic growth. The programme was coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and served as an important tool for public information and education.

The Algerian media also played a significant role in disseminating information on family planning. Beginning in 1988, a series of public information campaigns on contraception methods was launched in cooperation with the health and social affairs sectors. The Ministry of Religious Affairs further contributed through educational initiatives, clarifying Islam's positive stance towards family planning – an argument that proved crucial in strengthening public motivation (Kouaouci, 1991, p. 42). By 1986, a gradual decline in fertility levels was already observable, accompanied by an increase in contraceptive practices (CENEAP).

Morocco was not an exception in its efforts to reduce fertility levels, pursuing similar objectives to those of the other Maghreb states. In line with the recommendations of the World Population Conference in Bucharest (1974), and later those held in Mexico City (1984) and Cairo (1994), the Kingdom sought to integrate its demographic policy as an integral component of its overall development strategy. When Morocco became an independent actor in international relations in March 1956, its society was characterised by high mortality rates. Moreover, the country's socio-cultural context encouraged high fertility: prevailing norms and traditions regarded children – particularly male offspring – as a form of wealth and an investment in the future security of their parents. The role of women was largely confined to reproduction and child-rearing, while the proportion of those using contraceptive methods did not exceed 8% (Mielusel, 2015, pp. 139–150).

Awareness of demographic challenges in Morocco was shaped by two key historical events. The first was the Royal Memorandum signed in 1966 by King Hassan II,

which publicly presented to political parties and national organisations an action plan aimed at implementing birth control measures. The second was the decree of July 1967, which repealed the legal prohibition on contraception and laid the groundwork for the adoption of a national family planning programme (*Rapport CERED...*, p. 9). While the 1980s were marked by the implementation of a stabilisation programme under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, intended to mitigate negative social consequences, the 1990s and the early twenty-first century represented a period of extensive reform designed to better prepare the Moroccan economy for the challenges of globalisation. As a result of these efforts, fertility rates declined from seven children per woman in the 1960s to 5.52 in 1982, reaching the current level of 2.26 in 2025 (*Morocco Fertility Rate 1950–2025*).

Thus, in the Kingdom as well, the decline in fertility rates is the result of an increase in the average age at which women enter marriage – from 17 years in 1960 to 23 years in 2025 (*Rapport CERED...*, p. 11; Acharki, 2024) – as well as a marked rise in contraceptive use, which grew from 19.4% in 1980 to 62% in 2023 (*Rapport CERED*, p. 11; *Aujourd’hui Le Maroc*, 2023). These shifts in reproductive and marital behaviour have played a crucial role in shaping the lifestyle of contemporary families. They were first initiated during the colonial period and have continued to evolve under the influence of urbanisation, mass communication, education – particularly that of girls – and the gradual integration of women into the labour market (Anzoule, Soufiane, 2010, pp. 4–23).

In this context, a key development in Morocco was the adoption of the new *Family Code* (*Moudawana*), which revised the previous version from 1958 and entered into force on 10 October 2004. Among its principal reforms were the introduction of joint responsibility of spouses within the family and the abolition of the principle of a wife’s “obedience” to her husband. Furthermore, women no longer require a male guardian to enter marriage, while the legal age of marriage was set between 15 and 18 years.

A significant provision of the Code concerns polygamy: while still permitted, it has been made considerably more restrictive, with the consent of the first wife now a legal requirement. Polygamy has not been abolished, but it is subject to strict conditions. Civil marriages contracted abroad are recognised under the new *Moudawana*, provided that at least two witnesses are Muslims. Divorce proceedings are now subject to judicial approval – previously an exclusive prerogative of the husband – and a simple repudiation letter issued before a religious leader is no longer valid. Women may now independently petition for divorce, and sexual harassment is classified as an offence punishable by law.

Another notable reform extended the right of women to transmit their nationality to their children. Although this right was not included in the initial version of the *Moudawana*, a public campaign led to its recognition, and King Mohammed VI officially authorised the amendment in October 2006 (Chekrouni, Saad Jaldi, 2024, pp. 4–34).

Given the above, population policies in the Maghreb aimed at curbing demographic growth are long-standing, dating back to the 1960s. Today, however, it is no longer solely the will of policymakers that proves decisive, but rather the aspirations of societies themselves to reduce family size. This reflects a profound cultural transformation

within Maghreb societies. In general, contemporary Maghrebi women do not have more children than European women of comparable socio-economic status. Yet the similarity ends there – at least for the coming decade. According to all available forecasts, despite these demographic evolutions, the age structure of Maghreb societies will continue to be characterised by a relatively large proportion of young people under the age of fifteen and a high share of the working-age population between fifteen and sixty-four (Stachurska-Szczesiak, 2007, pp. 39–40).

Moreover, the most recent findings presented in the State of World Population Report are rather striking. The report, unveiled in Rabat in July 2025 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in cooperation with the High Commissioner for Planning (HCP) to mark World Population Day, offered revealing insights into current demographic trends.

The report, entitled “The Real Fertility Crisis: The Pursuit of Reproductive Freedom in a Changing World,” reveals a striking finding: one in three people in Morocco declare that they do not have as many children as they would wish, and nearly half cite financial constraints as the principal obstacle. It is therefore not a declining desire for children that predominates, but rather the inability to realise such plans (El Haïti, 2025).

2.2. Employment policy

A factor that continues to support labour markets in the Maghreb is migration – although its potential is also limited by agreements with the European Union. Long before the outbreak of the “Arab Spring,” the Maghreb states should have undertaken extensive reforms of their economies to meet the challenges posed by market pressures in the following two decades. The main recommendations of the World Bank included: a transition from public- to private-sector dominance; a shift from a closed to an open economy; a move away from an oil-dependent and unstable economic model towards one that is more diversified and thus more resilient; and, finally, improved governance of the public sector (Dyer, 2005, pp. 5–6). These recommendations, formulated twenty years ago, appear to remain both relevant and seriously considered by the Maghreb states. However, an independent and increasingly unpredictable factor that significantly hinders the pursuit of these ambitious objectives is climate change and its far-reaching consequences.

What, then, are the prospects for implementing internal market reforms in the Maghreb in order to curb migration? Initially, such reforms faced significant limitations due to the *social contract* established by Maghreb governments with their societies shortly after independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This contract defined the relationship between the state, enterprise employees, and other economic actors. It was based on strong state interventionism and a redistributive model of development. In exchange for improvements in social insurance and wage arrangements, society accepted greater state intervention at the cost of reduced civic rights – for instance, the renunciation of strike action.

Over time, however, by the 1980s, governments had lost their ability to meet these earlier commitments to citizens, primarily as a result of the oil crisis and fluctuations

in oil prices. This led to a decline in the demand for migrant labour and, consequently, a fall in budget revenues from remittances sent by workers employed in Europe. Faced with this deteriorating situation, Maghreb governments were forced to implement their own economic stabilisation programmes. The process was gradual and cautious, involving significant cuts to public spending. By the early 1990s, the effects of this policy had begun to be felt. Unfortunately, this coincided with growing pressure from the economically active population, the maturing demographic structure of the region, and an increase in the number of young people entering the labour market. In the Maghreb, labour market pressure was particularly acute between 1970 and 2000, when the growth of the economically active population averaged 3.5% per year (Dyer, 2005, p. 9).

Fifteen years have passed since the outbreak of the Arab revolutions and the subsequent efforts undertaken by North African states to stabilise the circumstances that had led to them. In addition to the absence of comprehensive economic reforms, one of the main challenges facing these countries has been curbing unemployment, which continues to threaten their internal stability. In the context of population growth and ongoing economic transformation, these states have adopted various strategies to stimulate employment.

Tunisia has focused on fostering entrepreneurship and technological innovation, while Algeria has sought to diversify its economy beyond the oil sector. Morocco, for its part, has long prioritised the development of key industries such as automotive manufacturing and aviation, aiming to create jobs for a skilled workforce. Despite these efforts, unemployment persists, exacerbated by both structural and cyclical factors that vary from one country to another.

The consequences of Morocco's employment policy can be assessed through the most recent data published by the High Commission for Planning (HCP). According to these figures, in the second quarter of 2024 the Kingdom recorded yet another rise in the unemployment rate, reaching 13.1% nationwide – an increase of 0.7 percentage points compared with the same period in the previous year. The upward trend affects both urban and rural areas: unemployment in cities climbed to 16.7%, while in rural regions it now stands at 6.7%.

The deterioration of Morocco's labour market results from a combination of factors. Firstly, the persistent drought has severely impacted the agricultural sector, traditionally a cornerstone of the Moroccan economy. Over the course of the year, this sector lost 152,000 jobs, representing a 5% decline in employment, highlighting the vulnerability of an economy still heavily dependent on weather conditions.

Moreover, difficulties have also affected the construction and public works sector, another major source of employment. It registered a loss of 35,000 jobs, primarily in urban areas – a reflection of the slowdown in the property market and large infrastructure projects, which for years had served as the driving force of the country's economic growth. Overall, the situation in Morocco's labour market reveals deep structural challenges. Unemployment particularly affects young people, reaching 36.1% among those aged 15–24 – an increase of 2.5 percentage points. Graduates are also among the most affected, with an unemployment rate of 19.4% (*Maghreb: le chômage explore...*, 2024).

Similarly, Algeria continues to struggle with high unemployment, particularly among young people with higher education. It is estimated that the number of unemployed university graduates increases by over 250,000 annually (Labbani, 2024, pp. 148–163). This situation stems not only from demographic factors but also from the country's economic reforms and its transition to a market economy more than two decades ago.

To address these challenges, the Algerian government has adopted a series of laws and introduced instruments aimed at supporting job creation. Of particular note is Strategy No. 1275, adopted on 27 September 2020, concerning the *university diploma/start-up* scheme. This initiative enables students to establish their own enterprises – or develop business ideas that could form the basis of future companies – while still at university, thereby fostering a new culture of entrepreneurship across the country (Labbani, 2024, pp. 148–163).

This strategy appears to be yielding gradual results: in 2024, the sector recorded a 9% decrease in job applications compared with 2023. It is evident that combating unemployment has become a priority for both the government and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who, during his election campaign on 7 September 2024, pledged to create 450,000 additional jobs (*Politique de l'emploi...*, 2025).

The Tunisian labour market is likewise characterised by structural imbalances, which translate into persistently high unemployment and the expansion of the informal economy. Unemployment particularly affects women, university graduates, and the western and southern regions of the country. The consequences of this situation include a growing sense of employment insecurity and a decline in overall economic productivity.

The active employment policies implemented over the past four decades have sought to align unemployment levels with economic growth and address the mismatch between education and labour demand. Although these initiatives offer additional training programmes that enable young jobseekers to enter the labour market with improved skills and knowledge – or to develop their own business ventures – they remain insufficient.

State measures have been complemented by programmes funded and supported by international organisations, including the European Union and various non-governmental organisations. Nevertheless, data from the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics at the end of 2024 indicate that the overall unemployment rate stood at 16%, while youth unemployment reached 40.5%, 39% among men and 43.3% among women (*Croissance économique et...*, 2024).

These figures point to the moderate effectiveness of Tunisia's employment policy in combating unemployment and stimulating economic recovery. At the same time, they highlight the persistent gender disparities in the labour market – an issue that should prompt the government to better coordinate reforms aimed at promoting inclusive growth.

Given the above, the fight against unemployment in the Maghreb states is likely to remain a long-term challenge, requiring a comprehensive approach and far-reaching structural reforms. The region's economic future will depend on its ability to create an environment conducive to the development of stable, high-quality employ-

ment opportunities, while simultaneously adapting to the new realities of the global labour market.

3. UE response to socio-cultural trends in the Maghreb states

In this context, it appears that the security of the European Union is increasingly linked to the labour market reforms undertaken in the Maghreb states, given the region's continuing demographic growth trend, which is expected to persist over the next decade. Although there are many positive perspectives on migration, in Europe – particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 migration crisis – the phenomenon is still predominantly perceived as a threat. For Europe, the key challenge lies in appropriately harnessing the demographic trends of its ageing population alongside the continued, albeit slowing, population growth in the Maghreb states. The task ahead is to transform the perceived risks of migration into opportunities for the European Union.

According to a United Nations report (2000), the population of Western countries is projected to decline by approximately 25–30% by 2050, meaning that the number of working-age individuals per dependent person will fall from four or five to just two. Migration is therefore deemed essential to prevent population decline across all the countries and regions identified in the report, including the member states of the European Union (*UN Population Division, 17 March 2000...*).

Migration therefore represents a means of increasing the proportion of people capable of alleviating the burden on Europe's pension systems. However, the potential to permanently and fully offset the demographic deficit through migration remains limited, partly due to the similar long-term age structures of the sending countries themselves. Moreover, the European Union's migration policy has been moving in a different direction and is not entirely inclined – largely under pressure from Poland and Hungary – to allow youth from the Maghreb states to play a significant role in filling this demographic gap.

The European Union has been highly responsive to the challenges emerging in the southern flank of the Mediterranean Basin. In this context, the Maghreb serves as an important point of reference – a subregion deeply interconnected with the EU, through which, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, common standards for managing socio-cultural challenges can be developed, addressing issues present both within individual states and across the wider region.

However, migration – both from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa – has become a contentious issue in Europe, for a number of reasons. These include the persistently limited effectiveness of EU employment policies and the sensitivity surrounding cultural identity. Given the high number of long-term unemployed persons within the EU, competition from migrant workers – including those from the Maghreb – is often viewed unfavourably. For instance, in France, the unemployment rate among individuals of Maghrebi origin reached 16% in 2023, a figure 10 percentage points higher than that of the population without a migratory background (INSEE, 2023).

This reality has prompted European states and regional institutions to take measures aimed at securing their borders, closing certain maritime routes, and tightening

national legislation on the right to asylum. At the same time, it has led them to seek opportunities for joint solutions to shared challenges in cooperation with selected neighbouring countries of the region.

The European Union has made this particularly evident by incorporating a security-oriented approach into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as early as 2004, framing its relations with third countries around border control and making migration one of its central policy priorities (Jeandesboz, 2007, p. 17).

Among the Maghreb states, the Kingdom of Morocco has emerged as the leading partner in cooperation with the EU on shared responsibility for addressing socio-cultural challenges within the Mediterranean region. It is hardly surprising that migration has been a key element of these relations since the mid-1990s. Yet much has changed since then: the debate surrounding migration – as a transboundary and global phenomenon – has increasingly focused on issues that contribute to heightened tensions and emerging frictions. The current priority is therefore to establish a flexible and non-binding normative framework for partner countries, aimed at promoting safe, orderly and legal migration.

At the bilateral level, a five-year Action Plan aimed at strengthening the EU–Morocco partnership was adopted on 25 July 2005. The plan outlined a range of mutually agreed priorities and areas of cooperation. Among its key objectives were the effective management of migration flows, including the signing of a readmission agreement with the European Community and the facilitation of short-term visas for certain jointly defined categories of individuals.

However, the document was not legally binding and did not specify implementation deadlines or performance indicators. Nevertheless, its implementation allowed the Kingdom to receive a positive assessment from the EU, which in October 2008 granted Morocco the status of an “Advanced Partner.” This status entailed enhanced cooperation in strategic areas such as collective security, regional cooperation, conflict resolution, good governance, counter-terrorism, migration management, the promotion of human rights, and employment and social affairs. A flagship component of this cooperation concerned the approximation of legal frameworks through the gradual adoption of the EU *acquis* by Morocco. These efforts culminated in June 2013, when Morocco became the first Mediterranean country to sign a Mobility Partnership Agreement with the European Union (*Partenariat de mobilité...*, 2013).

The objective of this agreement was to ensure better joint management of migration flows, to prevent and combat irregular migration, and to promote return and readmission policies in exchange for a visa facilitation agreement. The Mobility Partnership represents a political commitment to achieving a set of jointly defined objectives, serving as a roadmap for mobility between the signatory parties. Subsequently, the Action Plan for the implementation of Advanced Status (*Plan d'action*, 2013) and the Joint Declaration on Shared Prosperity adopted in 2019 within the framework of the EU–Morocco Partnership (*Déclaration conjointe de l'UE et du Maroc*) marked the culmination of these relations.

Although the European Union also signed a similar Mobility Partnership Agreement with Tunisia in March 2014, Morocco has emerged as the key player in this field

of cooperation. This position is determined both by the scope of its capabilities and by the convergence of perspectives shared by the two partners.

Bilateral relations between the European Union and the Maghreb states are complemented by regional initiatives. A key milestone in strengthening the Southern Neighbourhood was the Communication of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, issued in February 2021, which established the New Agenda for the Mediterranean. This document was published on the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration and in the context of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, presented by the European Commission (EC) in September 2024.

The programme outlines an ambitious agenda designed to enhance long-term strategic planning through the creation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). Migration is described as a challenge requiring joint solutions and shared responsibility. In order to address irregular migration, the Agenda seeks to strengthen border management capacities and intensify efforts related to returns and readmission procedures.

The initiative is modelled on the Strategic Priorities of the European Council for 2019–2024, which emphasise border control, the fight against irregular migration, and effective return mechanisms through deeper cooperation with countries of origin and transit. The centrality of migration within the EU's political agenda was reaffirmed by High Representative Josep Borrell in March 2021, when he stated that “the EU has both the need and the desire to ensure that migration, in all its dimensions, becomes a key element of Europe's relations with third countries” (Diallo, 2023, p. 11).

Given the above, the shared Mediterranean space compels both the European Union and its Member States to pursue migration policies in cooperation with third countries, thereby integrating them into a broader framework of partnership. However, the implementation of actions under the EU's new migration initiative has been partially obstructed, notably by Poland, which faces its own challenges concerning population movements along the Union's eastern borders.

This area of cooperation has also generated considerable controversy in the EU's relations with the Maghreb states, through which both Sub-Saharan and Maghrebi migration flows pass – movements often perceived by those countries as a social and economic safety valve. One thing is certain: negotiations at both the EU level and within bilateral relations with Morocco, as well as the need for greater engagement from other Maghreb countries, will require a readiness to compromise from all parties involved.

Conclusion

It must be clearly stated that the foremost challenge shaping the future trajectory of Maghreb societies lies in meeting the needs of their populations – above all, by creating employment opportunities for young people, so that migration does not become their only viable option. The broader Mediterranean context, when viewed through the prism of Africa's population growth contrasted with the ageing demographic of Europe, positions migration as a key determinant of security – not only for individual states, but for the region as a whole, and indeed for both continents.

Given the foregoing analysis, one may venture to pose a controversial question: can Europe's ageing process be mitigated through the implementation of an appropriate migration policy? According to demographic studies conducted by the UN Population Division, Europe would need to accept around 700 million immigrants by 2050 in order to maintain a balance between the active and inactive population – a ratio of roughly 4:1 – and thereby prevent the collapse of its pension system. Yet these are purely quantitative projections.

For many scholars, as well as policymakers, replacement migration cannot serve as a sustainable solution to demographic ageing. In the long term, a steady influx of migrants would generate additional labour demand, while potentially challenging Europe's cultural values. The issue thus calls for a measured and humane approach – one that transcends the confines of geographical proximity or economic rationality.

It is evident that, in the short term, challenges associated with irregular migration will intensify, particularly given that by 2050 more than 40% of the world's children are expected to be born on the African continent (Bouissa, 2018, p. 84). In the medium term, it will be necessary to establish an assistance package that also takes into account the processes of democratic consolidation and socio-economic stabilisation in the Maghreb states. In the short term, in order to address this challenge, the European Union may attempt to exercise greater control and manage the waves of irregular migration more effectively. At this stage, the Maghreb states – above all Morocco – may play a key role by combining efforts towards economic integration with the inclusion of migration strategies on both sides and by directing initiatives towards the global reconstruction of Africa. A significant and potentially effective development in this regard is the new Pact for the Mediterranean – One Sea, One Pact, One Future: Shared Ambitions for the Region, launched by the European Commission's Communication of 16 October 2025. The title leaves no doubt that addressing the problems arising at the intersection of societies in the North and, in particular, the South of the Mediterranean Basin is possible through the continuation of joint regional governance, in which the Maghreb states may play a fundamental role.

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Summary

For the European Union, the Mediterranean region holds strategic importance. It is an area of many opportunities, but also of considerable challenges. The numerous crises currently affecting the region, including the demographic one, have disrupted the Braudelian perception of the Mediterranean as a maritime basin surrounded by societies, cultures, nations and economies, whose interactions over the decades – despite their diversity – constituted an added value, making it a true “cultural area.” Unfortunately, socio-economic uncertainty, unemployment, conflicts and climate change have made a return to such thinking impossible.

In recent years, these factors have worsened due to the internal instability of several states on the southern flank of the Mediterranean Basin, including the Maghreb countries. The European Union's involvement in stabilising the situation in the region and supporting the Maghreb states has been longstanding and visible at various levels of activity since the 1960s. Today, more than ever, the support provided to the southern partners focuses on strengthening the resilience of their societies – particularly the youth – and their governments in implementing demographic and employment policies. Both the European Union and the governments of the Maghreb states are fully aware of the challenges they face on a daily basis. This, in turn, compels governments to engage with other actors at multiple levels in pursuit of shared objectives, creating what may be described as a form of regional governance order.

The purpose of this article is to analyse socio-cultural factors as key driving forces shaping the application of new patterns of interaction between the European Union and the Maghreb states. Their identification will make it possible to capture the nature of Euro–Maghreb challenges and to understand how current developments within the Arab states of North Africa influence the evolution of their relations with the European Union.

Key words: Migration, population policies of the Maghreb states, migration governance in the Mediterranean Region, EU migration policy

Wyzwania społeczno-kulturowe państw Maghrebu i ich wpływ na relacje z Unią Europejską

Streszczenie

Dla Unii Europejskiej region Morza Śródziemnego ma strategiczne znaczenie. Jest to obszar wielu możliwości, lecz także wielu wyzwań. Liczne kryzysy, w tym demograficzny, występujące obecnie przecięły "Braudelowskie myślenie" o nim jako morskim zbiorniku, otoczonym społeczeństwami, kulturami, narodami i gospodarkami, których przenikanie się przez dziesięciolecia, mimo odmienności było wartością dodaną Śródziemnomorza, czyniąc z niego „obszar kulturowy”. Niestety, niepewność gospodarczo-społeczna, bezrobocie, konflikty i zmiany klimatyczne uniemożliwiają powrót do takiego myślenia. W ostatnich latach czynniki te uległy pogorszeniu ze względu na niestabilność wewnętrzna niektórych państw południowej flanki BMŚ, w tym państw Maghrebu. Obecność UE w stabilizowaniu sytuacji w regionie, ale także wspieranie państw Maghrebu jest znana i widoczna na różnych poziomach aktywności od lat 60. XX w. Dzisiaj bardziej niż kiedykolwiek wsparcie partnerów z Południa dotyczy wzmacniania odporności ich społeczeństw, zwłaszcza młodych oraz ich rządów w realizacji polityk demograficznych i zatrudnienia. Zarówno UE, jak i rządy państw Maghrebu mają świadomość znaczenia wyzwań, z którymi na co dzień przychodzi im stawić czoła. To z kolei zmusza rządy do wchodzenia w interakcje z innymi podmiotami na różnych poziomach dla osiągania wspólnych celów, tworząc coś na wzór regionalnego ładu zarządzczego.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza czynników społeczno-kulturowych jako istotnych sił sprawczych warunkujących aplikacje nowych schematów działań na linii UE–państwa Maghrebu. Ich identyfikacja pozwoli na uchwycenie wyzwań europejsko-maghrebskich oraz pozwoli zrozumieć jak to co się dzieje obecnie wewnętrz arabskich państw Afryki Północnej ma wpływ na kształt relacji z UE.

Slowa kluczowe: migracja, polityki populacyjne państw Maghrebu, zarządzanie migracją w basenie Morza Śródziemnego, polityka migracyjna Unii Europejskiej

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