

EMBRACE

Working Paper 04



Geopolitics and the Convergence of Non-Democratization Interests in Algeria

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Table of Contents

Introduction to the EMBRACE project.....	6
Introduction.....	6
1. Methods and Materials.....	7
1.1. Methodology and data collection techniques used	7
1.2. Problems encountered and deviations from the research plan	9
2. Algeria's Transition Trajectory: Internal and External Democratic and Anti-Democratic Actors....	9
2.1. Brief introduction to the trajectory	9
2.2. Brief introduction to the geopolitical rivals.....	12
2.3. Relationship with the EU	13
2.4. Relationship with Russia	16
2.5. Relationship with China	17
2.6. Mapping the actors involved in the democracy processes.....	17
2.7. Reconstructing the recent history of geopolitical competition.....	19
2.8. Conclusions about the motivational factors as backdrop to the geopolitical landscape and the democracy dynamics	21
3. Hypothesizing the Cluster of Factors Determining Competition over Democratic vs. Anti-Democratic Outcomes.....	22
3.1. Episode 1: Democratic Opening	22
3.2. Episode 2: Democratic Blockage	23
3.3. Analysis of the hypotheses and the conclusions drawn.....	24
4. Analysis of the three pillars of Tier II as both stand-alone set of factors and in their interaction	34
4.1. Pillar I: Density of ties with the EU.....	34
4.2. Pillar II: Domestic demand	35
4.3. Pillar III: Types of instruments used by authoritarian rivals	36
5. Configuration of blockages and opportunities for democratization	36
5.1. Behavioural factors	37
5.2. Institutional factors.....	38
5.3. Structural factors	39
6. Conclusion: Identifying openings enabling breakthroughs to democratization	39
References.....	41

Introduction to the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-25) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings. The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts. This Working Paper presents research undertaken in Algeria as part of the fourth cluster.

Introduction

In 1988, Algeria experienced a popular uprising demanding radical systemic change to the one-party, authoritarian system. While initially met with violent repression, the protests eventually ended with constitutional reform and the instauration of a multiparty democratic system. This democratic experiment, however, was short lived: following the electoral win of the Islamist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) party and a subsequent military coup in 1992, the country descended into a 10-year civil war. While the denouement to this period was the restoration of a semblance of representative democracy and presidential system, the political status quo set in place at the moment of the coup was virtually untouched until 2019, when a second mass uprising took place. Indeed, since 1992, the political status quo, based on an opaque tripartite arrangement between the army, its party cronies, and the state-owned oil company Sonatrach, had managed to maintain its hold on power (Entelis, 2013). Yet even after the 2019 uprising and the reshuffling of figureheads at the top, the ability of the *le pouvoir* (the nebulous network of military elites who control the political scene behind a seeming civilian façade along with their various business and political clients) to reconstitute itself (Ouaissa, 2021) has seemed immune to both internal and external democratization pressures.

Explanations for this authoritarian persistence have focused on a number of domestic mechanisms that have allowed for elite management and the system's self-reproduction, as well as the particular role that the global economic and political environment plays in maintaining the status quo. Volpi (Volpi, 2013), for example, cites the system of redistributed patronage, the heavy hand of the security apparatus, and the façade of democratization as key to authoritarian resilience. Likewise, Boubekour (Boubekour, 2013) argues that a process of alliance diversification through integration of business elites has allowed the

regime to renew itself in a manner that preserves its political monopoly. Looking more internationally, Werenfels (Werenfels, 2009) has argued that the international context and the primacy of anti-terrorism, alongside Algeria's vast oil wealth, has contributed to a tacit acceptance of the regime and its repressive, undemocratic ways.

Within the framework of the EMBRACE project's Work Package 7, this paper seeks to explore the blockages to Algeria's latest democratic trajectory through an examination of geopolitical competition over democracy promotion, focusing specifically on how Chinese and Russian influence and interventions rival EUDP to produce democratic vs authoritarian outcomes in Algeria. More precisely, this report examines, firstly, the various national political stakeholders and key geopolitical rivals – the EU, China, and Russia – and their interactions, and the geopolitical dynamics between the EU and its authoritarian rivals in Algeria, including their objectives, interests, strategies, and tools. Here, the analysis pays particular attention to whether these strategic interactions are motivated primarily by geopolitical considerations or rather authoritarian diffusion effects, estimating the intended and unintended consequences on democratization. This analysis will be conducted empirically in consideration of Algeria's most recent democratic trajectory, starting in 2011 with the critical juncture of the Arab uprisings and the democratization wave that swept across the region, culminating in 2019 in Algeria's popular uprising and subsequent presidential election and reconstitution of authoritarian power.

From here, the report will assess two distinct episodes that provide insights into how these geopolitical interactions intersect or clash to produce both democratic opening and closing. Three pillars will underscore the analysis of these episodes: the density of EU ties; the domestic demand for democratization/closer ties with the EU vs autocratization/closer ties with Russia/China; and the instruments of authoritarian rivals. These three pillars represent the conceptualization as determining the competition over democratic vs. anti-democratic outcomes. More precisely, these three pillars comprise: the types of relations that Algeria maintains with the EU, and in particular the density of political, institutional, economic and military ties; the particular configuration of domestic demand for non-EU influence; the type of instruments that authoritarian rivals are deploying in a particular setting - coercive, subversive or co-optative. These are studied both independently and in a dialectal relationship.

Finally, the analysis of geopolitical competition and its impact on democratization vs authoritarian resilience in Algeria evaluates the configuration of blockages – behavioral, institutional, and/or structural – that prevent breakthroughs in the realization of systemic political change in Algeria.

1. Methods and Materials

1.1. Methodology and data collection techniques used

The methodology selected for this research is based on the principles of triangulation of data sources. Triangulation is essential in the Algerian case given the difficulty of conducting fieldwork in the country, where security risks to both research participants as well as researchers are real and ever-shifting, but also the likely impossibility of reaching the military holders of power and the business and political elites that are in their clientele networks. Given this, materials gathered represent a combination of those that are publicly available and original materials generated by the project. In terms of publicly available materials, the following were gathered:

- 11 presidential discourses made concerning the key moments of pressure and potential democratization (2011 Arab Spring and 2019 Hirak popular uprising);

- Statistics regarding the 2012, 2017, and 2021 legislative elections, alongside which parties are pro-Hirak and/or EU-leaning;
- 6 Arab Barometer surveys and country reports tracking popular opinion towards democracy and the EU over the period 2006-2022;
- The Association Agreement between the EU and Algeria and its various revisions;
- European Parliament briefings on Algerian internal politics and EU positioning in 2018 (right before the 2019 Hirak; in 2023 regarding the crackdown on journalists and the media);
- 2017 IEMed survey on EU-Algerian relations
- EUEA communiqué about shifting approaches to Algeria (2020);
- Trade data with the EU, China, and Russia;
- Data on humanitarian aid to Algeria by source and as distributed by sector.

In terms of original materials, the research team conducted 14 semi-structured interviews in Algiers, Algeria in February-March 2024 and London, England in March 2024.¹ Interviewees were selected via purposive sampling. Interviewee types are broken down as:

- 2 interviews with EU representatives;
- 2 interviews with political elites;
- 4 interviews with representatives of the Algerian press and independent media;
- 6 interviews with pro-democracy civil society actors/ new political parties.

Type of data	Method for data analysis
Publicly available materials	Document analysis. This is most appropriate for assessing the ties and connections with EU and authoritarian powers and how these are translated into concrete actions and policies, and in particular for assessing how these shift over time across the trajectory under investigation.
Official documents, political, economic, societal data	Document analysis. This is most appropriate for assessing the ties and connections with EU and authoritarian powers and how these are translated into concrete actions and policies, and in particular for assessing how these shift over time across the trajectory under investigation.
Key texts and political discourse generated by political elites, grassroots actors, authoritarian powers	Frame analysis. Frame analysis will be used to determine how the relationship with the EU vs authoritarian powers is inscribed in broader Algerian political imaginaries as related to anti-colonialism, post-war stability, western military interventions, the authoritarian bargain and social contract, and sense of destiny and place in Arab regional and world politics.
Media material	Frame analysis. This will in particular be used for analysis of the disinformation campaign as per Episode 2.
Interview data	Narrative analysis. Narrative analysis will be used to understand from the perspective of the actors how they view the trajectories and episodes under investigation and their role therein, and how they justify or explain their

¹ Please note that we plan to conduct more interviews in April 2024 and specifically with key stakeholders that are part of the Algerian exile community in France.

	actions and decisions vis-à-vis different players (the regime and its clients, the EU, authoritarian powers).
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In addition, ARI produced, as part of its method for analysis, annotated timelines in correspondence with the three pillars that underscore analysis of the episodes. These timelines explore:

- The evolution of the EU's primary objectives in Algeria – as operationalized in official statements; types and content of agreements; and forms and volume of aid - with respect to critical historical junctures in Algerian democratization (and Arab region democratization): pre-2011; 2011-2019; in response to the 2019 Hirak movement; and in preparation for the 2024 presidential election.
- The evolution of the EU's relations with Algeria in strategic sectors – energy and hydrocarbons; security and anti-terrorism; migration – in relation to geopolitical developments internationally, and especially the Ukraine war, and political developments nationally.

1.2. Problems encountered and deviations from the research plan

With regards to the fieldwork and the gathering of original materials through semi-structured interviews, the safety of the research team did run into minor obstacles that, though not entirely unexpected, have had an impact on data collection. In the context of a looming presidential election in Algeria, originally scheduled for December 2024 and advanced to 07 September 2024 in an atmosphere of increased repression on political contestation, the ARI research assistant conducting fieldwork in Algeria was given a tacit warning by security services. As a result, the ARI lead researcher was not able to go to Algeria to conduct fieldwork and the decision was made to not pursue further in-person interviews in Algeria. Given this, further interviews will be conducted in April 2024 with stakeholders located in France as well as online via secure platforms such as Telegram or Signal.

2. Algeria's Transition Trajectory: Internal and External Democratic and Anti-Democratic Actors

As a reminder, the first tier of analysis is to examine geopolitical rivalry between the EU, China, and Russia in Algeria in terms of the objectives and tools deployed, motivations, and outcomes in terms of Algerian democratization. The analysis will assess the nature of autocratic competition, and the extent to which interventions of China and Russia in Algeria are specifically aiming to undermine or counter the EU (geopolitics as underscoring autocratic competition), or whether it is a result of authoritarian diffusion of norms, practices, and the exporting of business and governance models. The analysis will also consider the extent to which intentionality of actors (both domestic and foreign) explains authoritarian competition, and to what extent geopolitical rivalry produces instead unintended consequences on democratization.

2.1. Brief introduction to the trajectory

To conduct this first tier of analysis, the research considers the latest trajectory of Algerian democratization, covering the period 2011-2023. This period represents a critical juncture in contemporary Arab politics, commencing in 2011 with the mass uprisings and revolutionary movements that swept across the region to varying extents and varying outcomes, and the ensuing authoritarian backlash that has been witnessed across the region. The trajectory is also linked to how Algeria's political economy, based on the rentier state and the country's natural resources wealth and how this links to

structures of power, was impacted by broader trends. While Algeria is not usually lumped together as one of the original “Arab Spring” countries - the country’s mass anti-system uprising started properly in 2019 - there was nonetheless significant political mobilization throughout 2011 (and indeed, opposition to Bouteflika started as early as 2009 upon his constitutional reform to grant himself a third term in office). The protests in 2011, which started in response to price hikes, saw thousands of Algerian youth pour into the streets only to be met with initial violence on the part of police. This in turn led to an increase in the scope of the movement, marked by the mobilization of a broad cross-section of Algerian society and the pronouncement of diverse grievances and demands, ranging from sector-specific socioeconomic claims to much broader calls for systemic reform. Yet, striking in these protests was the persistence of old social cleavages among mobilized groups as well as the lack of consensus around a shared demand (Baamara, 2022). Indeed, this inability to form a cross-national, cross-ideological coalition (Del Panta, 2017) – alongside the still present memory of the 1990s civil war and its cooling effect on oppositional political and contestation - is one of the primary reasons why traditional mechanisms for weather contention were able to succeed.

The 2011 protest wave was accompanied by swift action on the part of authorities to clamp down on the movement and prevent outcomes similar to those in neighboring Tunisia or Libya, including new redistributive social justice offers to respond to socioeconomic grievances alongside cosmetic political reforms (Aït-hamadouche and Dris, 2012). The institutionalization of rent-seeking behaviors, facilitated by the political economic model, allowed for distributive policies that ensured cross-class support for *le pouvoir*. Indeed, the regime’s bases of support relied heavily on the wealthiest, who were able to benefit from business deals and notably through the hydrocarbons sector, alongside an inherent support of the military wielding shadow power through the executive. However, the grains of the future mobilization in 2019 were sown in 2011, and throughout the period of 2011-2019 sporadic anti-regime mobilization occurred, intensifying in particular in 2014 when Bouteflika acquired a fourth term in office despite being incapacitated by a debilitating stroke. Indeed, the inherent weaknesses of the regime – its diminishing legitimacy and inability to attract support from the middle and poorer classes, its lack of institutional mechanisms for the transfer of authority, the precarity of its patronage networks tied to the oil sector (Volpi, 2013) as a result of the failing economic model linked to broader economic trends that reduced the profitability of oil and natural gas – would factor into the mass uprising of 2019 and the more radical steps that were needed to ultimately reconstitute itself.

Despite this, the 2019 mass uprising, the Hirak, still came as a surprise. Findings from the Arab Barometer demonstrate that in the lead up to the 2014 presidential election, Algerians were feeling increased satisfaction with living conditions; increasing satisfaction with the state of the economy; and increased feeling that their basic rights were guaranteed, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to vote in elections. This seems to demonstrate that the manner in which the regime weathered the 2011 Arab uprisings – through the redeployment of social welfare programs – seems to have absorbed many grievances. Likewise, Algerians stated preference at this time for gradual reform rather than radical systemic change reflects both the inherited trauma of the civil war as well as reflections regarding the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring in other countries. The appetite for revolutionary action would have seemed quite low.

The trigger for the Hirak protests was the announcement that the infirmed president Bouteflika would seek a constitutionally illegal fifth consecutive term in office. The mass popular mobilization, marked by its nonviolence and representing a broad cross-section of Algerian society, successfully managed to force Bouteflika’s resignation by early April 2019. Indeed, and on the contrary to the 2011 episode, what changed in 2019 was the ability of the protestors to form a broad anti-regime coalition united behind a demand for systemic political change (Del Panta, 2022). The 2019 mass uprising saw the definitive

undermining of the regime's traditional social base, as evidenced by the broad cross-section of society that participated in the Hirak movement and the breaking of traditional social cleavages. Indeed, the fact that all social strata of Algerian society participated in the mass uprising, and that included much of the traditional bases of support of the regime, and the persistence of the movement over almost the entirety of 2019, demonstrated a deep political crisis that was not able to be resolved with the mixture of increased social spending and window-dressing reforms that had worked in 2011. Indeed, this seems to be the crucial point: the traditional mechanisms designed to absorb grievance, reconstruct or reassert patronage networks, and coopt opposition were not working nearly as successfully as the Hirak movement was not losing steam.

Even after the removal of Bouteflika from power, protestors' actions did not abate. Rather, the country entered into a prolonged phase of routinized strategic interactions between the protestors, who maintained bi-weekly demonstrations, and the armed forces, the de facto holders of power behind a civilian façade, who attempted to impose reforms top-down. At stake was the control of the post-Bouteflika transition process. While the protest movement had successfully secured the removal of the longstanding president from power, the mobilized masses sought to have civilian control over the next steps of the transition process; meanwhile, the armed forces sought to impose elections with their own hand-picked candidates in order to maintain the status quo (Ouaissa, 2021). In other words, these routinized interactions represented a prolonged period of struggle marked by citizens' efforts to ensure their ability to shape procedures and the regime's attempt to ensure that the transition process would maintain their control over the political scene. These efforts, which focused largely on delaying the presidential election, essentially represented the protestors' ability to prevent the regime from reconstituting itself through the same formal mechanisms of seeming electoral choice, or what Volpi describes as protestors' disrupting of the pseudo-democratic tools utilized by Algerian elites in the entrenched and discredited electoral authoritarian system (Volpi, 2020).

Unable to utilize the electoral process as a means of reasserting their popular legitimacy and confirming their discourse as securing Algeria's democratic transition, the armed forces instead undertook a widescale purge of Bouteflika insiders from their various positions as well as the imprisoning of numerous officials and elites on corruption charges. Such moves were designed to increase the armed forces' positioning vis-à-vis the population and a maintenance of the post-civil war bargain of security and stability in return for political quiescence. Nonetheless, the reforms put into place failed to change the mechanisms of power and instead were designed to placate protestors and a reframe the army's legitimacy vis-à-vis the movement and its demands (Boubekeur 2020). With the election of President Tebboune at the end of 2019, the period of strategic contingency and uncertain outcomes largely ended with the ensuing structural fixing and prevailing of the armed forces.

However, while the end of the cycle of contention – largely facilitated by the Covid 19 crisis and its dampening effect on collective action in the public sphere – did see the triumph of the regime as reconstituted around a new figure head and insider clan, the results of the 2021 elections seemed to reflect the persistence of the domestic political crisis. For the first time, the traditional party alliance did not win an absolute majority, with many votes going to independents. At the same time, the election was marked by the considerable repression of political parties and leaders that represented the Hirak movement in the lead-up to the election, the closure of public space in Algiers to prevent protests, and the very high rate of abstention (considerably higher than in the 2012 and 2017 legislative elections) and in particular in regions of opposition such as Kabyle. Since then, the Algerian public sphere and civic space has faced rising rates of repression, while the emphasis of the government has been on attempting to reclaim its golden diplomatic age in order to address regional crises and facilitate Algeria's economic transition. The new regime has also benefited from Europe's increasing reliance on Algeria for its natural

resources, especially in light of the war in Ukraine, which has bolstered regime durability by feeding into the fundamental pillars of its political economy.

To this point, it is these priorities – Algeria’s stance in regional politics and its reassertion of diplomatic weight; the urgency of economic revitalization in light of the contraction of the economy in the face of coronavirus declining hydrocarbon revenues – that have guided domestic politics and foreign affairs over the past several years. Indeed, the Tebboune administration has engaged in various reforms designed to “rehabilitate the state’s institutions, stabilize the country’s political and social fronts, revive the ailing economy, and reclaim Algiers’ place on the international stage” (Labidine Ghebouli, 2024). Meanwhile, the opposition has been hampered by internal crisis and relentless repression that prevents collaboration or electoral success, as well as its own inability to mobilize en masse behind a well-defined project of radical change.

2.2. Brief introduction to the geopolitical rivals

Russia and China constitute the main competitors for the European Union in Algeria. This is a result of the longstanding relationship that Algiers has cultivated with Moscow and Beijing for its military/security and economic needs, but also the emphasis that Algeria places on sovereignty, anti-colonialism and neutrality. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Algeria’s relationships with the EU, Russia, and China without taking into consideration the nature of the country’s political economic model as well as the discursive pillars of State legitimacy. On one hand, the Algerian political system is supported by the system of intra-elite management through patronage redistribution via the national hydrocarbon company Sonatarch. So important is Sonatarch, in fact, that it acts as a “state within a state,” the principal guarantor of state power and authoritarian upgrading (Entelis, 1999). Given this, and despite efforts at economic diversification, maintenance of the hydrocarbon sector’s infrastructure and profitability in international trade is of vital importance to regime maintenance.

On the other hand, since its independence in 1962, Algeria has built its domestic and foreign policies on a firm sense of sovereignty and staunch anti-colonialist discourse. Authorities always stress their exclusive responsibility over Algeria’s affairs and strongly reject any attempt to influence their decisions. Moreover, Algiers is also swift to issue statements condemning international comments on its domestic affairs. Importantly, this pro-sovereignty rhetoric of Algerian authorities enjoys popular support given the country’s history of struggle against colonialism and support of self-determination movements. For example, in 2019, slogans that emerged during the protest movement condemned any western attempt to interfere in Algerian affairs. In this context, Algerian authorities seek to maintain an independent posture while nurturing relations with different global poles from Washington to Moscow. Algeria’s sense of sovereignty is not limited to domestic affairs but is also well-highlighted on the regional and international scene. Algerian authorities established their post-independence foreign policy doctrine on guiding principles such as non-alignment, self-determination, and rejection of military interventions.

Finally, the country’s post-conflict context must be taken into consideration to the extent that shapes not only the policies of the regime vis-à-vis political opponents but also the degree of support it receives domestically and its ability to wave the specter of instability and political descent as a means of securing public quiescence. The military institution in particular is still marked by the 1988 revolt and 1990s civil war and its institutional reflexes to clamp down on contestation remain visible. This reality was solidified after the 2019 Hirak as Algerian authorities embraced a more radical interpretation of sovereignty which resulted in a large repressive campaign against activists.

Within this context, the types of instruments deployed by Russia and China in Algeria can be considered almost exclusively subversive (aimed at the EU, not the Algerian state) and co-optative as per the conceptual definitions outlined in the WP7 Literature Review:

- Subversive: "subversive those instruments that are deployed with the aim to undermine the political stability, institutional capacity, smooth functioning of key state and democratic institutions of states from within. Such instruments may be deployed directly against adversaries, like the EU and key Western states." In the case of Algeria, this can notably be detected in propaganda campaigns and other forms of diplomatic slandering designed to undermine the EU's reputation and interventions at the level of popular opinion.
- Co-optative: "tools that are deployed by authoritarian states with the aim to create a strong foothold of leverage, influence or soft power in a small state that is otherwise aligned with the EU and the West or ambiguous over its geopolitical orientation." In the case of Algeria, this includes: developing economic and security ties with elite groups and namely the military and the hydrocarbon business sector, as well as infrastructural development in the case of China's BRI; more limited but increased efforts at soft power on the part of China through deepening partnerships and interventions within the business sector, the cultural sectors, and universities.

2.3. Relationship with the EU

With regards to Algeria, the principles of conditionality and Europeanisation that form the backbone of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) were treated with suspicion. Those reservations intensified as the ENP was perceived as a European initiative that had not been agreed with the Mediterranean countries, on the basis of the risk that its policy of conditionality could be applied to the domestic policy of the partner countries. Indeed, up until 2011, the very logic of the ENP, the "stick-and-carrot" approach whereby deeper cooperation and financial aid is traded for progress, was largely rejected by the Algerian authorities and in particular given the importance of national sovereignty and anti-colonialism to political legitimacy and the foundation of the modern republic. Indeed, as Boumghar (Boumghar, 2013) writes, "Algeria, for historical reasons associated with its struggle for independence as well as with the combat that it has carried out and continues to carry out against terrorism and its international ramifications, has developed major sensitivity regarding issues of sovereignty and interference....this approach currently remains a determining factor in relations between Algeria and its international environs." Importantly, this was not just at the level of government but also extend to popular opinion. Those reservations intensified as the ENP was perceived as a European initiative that had not been agreed with the Mediterranean countries, on the basis of the risk that its policy of conditionality could be applied to the domestic policy of the partner countries.

At the same time, the reluctance to use political conditionality suggests that security considerations often overshadow democracy promotion efforts. The EU's concerns about domestic political stability and economic interests, as the threats of mass migration, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and terrorism in Algeria (especially in the wake of the civil war), required the EU to preserve the status quo there in which the military seemed to have established political control. Instead of being a policy priority, the promotion of democracy became a policy instrument that was used on occasion for the management of security concerns. To this point, the EU did not want to upset the existing status quo and preferred to secure its interests instead of leading a wave of democratization, which was likely to bring political instability. As Youngs (Youngs, 2002) argues, "the European policy toward Algeria was one of the most emblematic cases of non-intervention and of the EU's disinclination to employ coercive pressure in relation to democratic shortfalls." Likewise, existing trade agreements and business with Algeria were not used as instruments for pushing economic and political liberalization. These relations were not

conditional on the development of human rights and democracy in Algeria. On the contrary, despite an authoritarian regime and internal violence, negotiations for the Association Agreement between the EU and Algeria continued and were concluded in 2001.

The effect of the Arab Spring in Algeria alongside economic contraction, however, provided a new opening vis-à-vis the EU. Indeed, in the period 2018-2020, bilateral assistance from the EU reached €125 million. In this sense, at the start of the Arab Spring, Algeria and the EU were marked by high linkage (diasporic ties, civil society networks, etc.) and economic ties were particularly strong because of Algeria's importance as an energy provider. The regime managed to channel the popular protests without collapsing through the introduction of cosmetic reforms, selective repression, the neutralization of civil society and, particularly, the buying of social peace with aid and subsidies. In this context, in December 2011, Algeria officially indicated its willingness to start exploratory negotiations regarding the elaboration of an Action Plan under the renewed ENP. The partnership between the EU and Algeria, based on the 2005 AA, was modified in 2017 as part of the renewed ENP with cooperation scheduled until the end of 2020 (priorities included: research and innovation, higher education, regional security and counter-terrorism, the environment, civil protection, energy, and support for the diversification of the economy) (Zoubir and Tran, 2023). In this sense, there was a degree of discursive convergence, as the Algerian regime's touting of a commitment to democratization and political reform corresponded with the EU's broader re-commitment to Arab democracy in the wake of the revolutionary movements and the supposed shift towards a "more for more" policy. Yet, once again, energy and security issues took presence over democratic reforms, especially as these were used by Algeria as a means of reinforcing the political status quo. Instead, the EU has maintained a relatively diluted democracy promotion approach in Algeria and has placed emphasis on migration control and the energy partnership in particular, which has increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's need to secure its energy autonomy. This has provided Algeria with a degree of leverage in dealing with the EU.

To this point: Brussels and different European capitals maintain solid economic ties with Algiers. According to official figures, the sum of trade between Europe and Algeria reached 55 billion euros in 2022, making Europe the first economic partner of Algeria. In that sense, Europe's commercial activities with Algiers largely bypass those of regional and international competitors including China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf states. These economic ties are based essentially on the oil and gas sector as major European companies continue to invest in Algeria, especially after the Ukraine war. Moreover, the recent period has seen an increase in European interest and investments in other sectors especially joint industrial projects and cooperation on entrepreneurial ventures.

The basis of economic partnership between Algeria and Europe relies heavily on the hydrocarbons sector. For decades, Algiers served as a reliable and trusted energy partner for southern European countries particularly Spain and Italy. This cooperation was crucial throughout the past ten years following the security turmoil in Arab region after the 2011 uprisings. As the region experienced political upheavals and while traditionally strong partners such as Libya were unable to fulfill their energy commitments, Algerian Sonatrach oil and gas company played the role of a safety valve and ensured sustained supplies. Algeria is the third biggest supplier of gas to the EU, and the EU is the biggest importer of Algerian gas. Europe relies on Algerian gas for its security of supply and Algeria relies on the European market for its security of demand. This relation of strong interdependence in the energy sector led to the establishment of an EU-Algeria strategic partnership on energy in 2015. It covers cooperation on natural gas, renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy market integration.

Furthermore, Algiers emerged as a vital energy provider following the Ukraine war and sanctions on Russia which put European capitals in a precarious situation. Leading European companies such as French TotalEnergies and Italian Eni seized the opportunity and strengthened their cooperation with

Sonatrach by signing new exploration and production agreements. The new energy deals also extended beyond the traditional oil and gas sector to include new initiatives on renewables like solar energy and green hydrogen. This dynamic encouraged new partners such as Germany to explore areas of cooperation and work on a long-term strategy that would benefit both Algeria and Europe. From Algiers' perspective, these agreements are critical given the increase of local electricity consumption and the need to rehabilitate outdated local infrastructure.

The current momentum of post-Ukraine war rapprochement between Algeria and Europe capitalized on European energy needs to initiate investments across the industrial sector. In that context, Italian and French governments held several talks with their Algerian counterparts to assess opportunities for the private sector and accompany companies to launch business ventures in Algeria. For example, Italian Fiat recently established an assembling factor for the automobile industry in Algeria with the hope of promoting the latter as a nearshoring destination for future mega projects. These initiatives built upon a cooperation framework that previously existed during the era of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Additionally, the legal facilitations initially inscribed within the 2005 Association Agreement between Algeria and Europe proved helpful in providing a pathway to strengthen economic partnerships. In comparison with regional and global competitors like Russia and China, Europe holds a historical advantage that empowers Euro-Algerian trade. Europe understands and operates within the Algerian financial and economic landscape as its competitors struggle to establish long-lasting projects.

Nonetheless, in terms of political influence, the EU weight is generally weak and is often unable to pressure Algiers into specific stances or encourage specific reforms despite the existing legal framework of 2005 association agreement. With the EU, Algerian policy makers opted for a strategy of careful rapprochement that would ultimately allow controlled and limited progress of democratization. Algerian authorities have always been skeptical of European democracy promotion programs. Even as the EU and individual member states finance several exchange programs and enjoy contacts with pro-democracy groups within civil society, any attempt to pressure Algiers into democratic reforms often failed unless the ruling establishment decides otherwise. The EU has little leverage to pressure Algiers on democracy and rule of law even if the latter signed several binding agreements to initiate an extensive political dialogue. Indeed, despite the potential rhetorical openings towards the EU that the 2011 and then 2019 protest movements augured, deeper relations did not materialize in terms of activities and influence at the hypothesized level of “multi-level/multi-sectoral relations, with high stakes for the country in question and with extensive legal and institutional obligations/binds inbuilt in the relationship.” Moreover, the degree to which relations actually changed things substantively on the ground in terms of the political economy that allows for authoritarian reproduction is doubtful. While the EU represents Algeria's biggest trade partner and a major importer of Algerian hydrocarbons and investor in the energy sector, Algeria's economic independence thanks to its oil wealth has allowed it to resist deeper cooperation. This is also true for other sectors, such as cooperation on mobility and migration where Algeria has resisted EU incentive schemes to greater cooperation. **Indeed, as Hill (Hill, 2019) finds – and in direct contradiction to Levitsky and Way's (Levitsky and Way, 2005) model - “despite the intensification of the country's ties to the European Union (EU) from one regime to the other, the willingness and ability of Brussels to put democratizing pressure on Algiers decreased rather than increased.”**

In addition, Algeria's foreign policy does not provide openings for EU-Algeria rapprochement. Algeria is in a long-standing cold conflict with Morocco over the contested Western Sahara territory. Given the closeness of EU-Morocco relations, the Algerian position -which negates Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara – actually poses a diplomatic problem for the EU (Al-Fawiris, 2022). Western Sahara and its recognition as part of Morocco is perhaps the key foreign policy objective of Morocco: it is used as a

bargaining chip, for example, in the case of the Abraham Accords (Morocco accepted the signing of the Accords in trade for US recognition of Moroccan rights over Western Sahara).

By way of summary, EU relations with Algeria in the field of democratization over the course of the trajectory have been shaped by several internal and external forces that have rendered EU influence weak. The particularities of Algeria's political economy and the way the hydrocarbon sector fuels the regime's ability to not only survive but even reconstitute itself after uprisings, alongside the EU's increasing reliance on Algerian oil and in particular in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, has meant that EU interests intersect with regime maintenance dynamics. Likewise, the EU's security priorities in North Africa, and in particular in the wake of migrant crises as well as increased terrorism stemming from ISIS, have shifted priorities in a manner that reinforces repressive internal security practices in Algeria. In addition, the organizational strength of the Algerian regime and increasingly repressive arm, alongside the general disorganization of the opposition, has meant that capacity to resist EU pressure has increased over time.

2.4. Relationship with Russia

Russia is both the largest arms dealer to Algeria and a historic ally in terms of buttressing the anti-western and anti-colonialist discourse that has underscored the regime's *raison d'être* since independence in 1962. Though this relationship is a priority, it has nonetheless faced difficulties as a result of shifts in the global geopolitical context. The US' War on Terror in the wake of the September 11th attacks opened doors for security cooperation with western capitals, including Washington and different European capitals. Likewise, the Russian aggression in Ukraine poses a particular challenge to Algeria's staunch anti-colonialist discourse, and today offers opportunities for more rapprochement between Algeria and the EU in the field of military industry. In addition, the EU's notable shift from reliance on Russian gas to Algerian has meant that Algeria must walk a tightrope in its relationship with Moscow. However, given the heterogenous nature of the military command, some poles of powers are still skeptical vis-à-vis Europe's security agenda in the region and geopolitical vision, and ultimately the Russian-Algerian relationship has not been undermined as a result of the war or changes in energy relationships. Algiers certainly values its historic partnership with Moscow, but it is also attempting to distance itself from the ongoing geopolitical competition through an adamant reassertion of its non-alignment stance within foreign policy.

Surprising, Russia did not attempt outright to push for authoritarian maintenance during the 2019 uprising, and in fact stated that this was an internal domestic affair. This does not imply that they didn't have a preferred outcome in 2019: clearly, Russia did want to see regime continuity in terms of *le Pouvoir* and its strategic priorities and foreign policy orientations, and wanted to see an effective management of the opposition. And they did fear an outcome in which real democratic change could occur, and in which rapprochement with the west could be achieved. Yet instead of outright intervention and support to the regime in the 2019 protests, Russia instead sought to delegitimize the protests by publicly referring to them as chaotic riots, and pushed its own state-run press to link the opposition to violent Islamist extremist groups in an effort to undermine the nature of the movement in the international gaze. **Yet this limited intervention reveals Russia's longer-term strategy to maintain close ties to Algiers. Its primary interests concern not countering EU encroachment per se but rather the emphasis on the sale of arms and broader geopolitical interests in North Africa (Ramani, 2019).**

Indeed, Russia's primary interest in Algeria is the sale of arms: between 2014-2018, Russia was by far the most important supplier of arms to the Algerian military (66%) and the largest client in Africa (Ramani, 2019). This number dropped importantly in the period of 2019-2022; however, by the end of 2022 an important new contract was signed with Russia following a sharp increase in the Algerian defense

budget. In addition, Russian and Algerian diplomatic interests align to a certain degree in the conflict in Libya, where Russia seeks to secure a role as mediator in order to guarantee certain outcomes and where Algeria (which shares a lengthy and porous border with Libya) seeks to exert a regional diplomatic role to flex its strength and bolster internal security.

2.5. Relationship with China

Algeria is China's oldest and closest partner in North Africa and the Sino-Algerian partnership has expanded to most sectors including trade, the military, energy, infrastructure, and technology (Algeria has been a keen client of China's surveillance technologies as part of its repressive tools). Indeed, China has been Algeria's top trade partner since 2013. The importance of this relationship for China must be situated within the broader Belt and Road framework and the efforts of China in the Maghreb to secure access to resources and markets, have strategic leverage in Africa and the Mediterranean, but also counter the normative frameworks of the west. Algeria and China signed an MoU within the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018, and imports of Chinese goods into Algiers skyrocketed in the following years, demonstrating that China has rapidly made significant headway into the Algerian market (Jackson, 2024). As part of these privileged economic relations, significant facilitations have been offered to Chinese companies to invest in the local market including significant infrastructure contracts, and Algiers' bid to join the BRICS economic group underscores the strategic importance of relations with Beijing in contrast with Algeria's western partners.

Algeria's positive relationship with China is further consolidated by the latter's policy on non-interference in domestic affairs. However, the Hirak movement and the subsequent crackdown on corruption as part of the regime's bargaining with protestors did have an impact on China's interests in Algeria, at least initially, as several megaprojects were halted. Indeed, the sweeping dismissals within the ranks of the military and the arrests and convictions of business elites, all as part of the post-Hirak crackdown on corruption and purging of Bouteflika's regime clan for the purpose of power reconstitution, were at least in some cases linked to bribery and corruption on the part of Chinese firms seeking access to the Algerian market (Calabrese, 2021). However, this did not so much reduce China's overall influence in Algeria as simply replace one set of internal allies with another. Likewise, the consolidation of the partnership with China has been hampered by China's ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the Western Sahara conflict, a primordial domain of national security and sovereignty for Algeria. Nonetheless, political relations between Algiers and Beijing remain strong.

2.6. Mapping the actors involved in the democracy processes

The key domestic actors in support of or pushing democracy dynamics in Algeria can be broken down into the oppositional political parties; civil society actors who operate largely within the regime-defined red lines but nonetheless adopt a pro-democracy stance; and, most recently, the largely leaderless mass protest movement, the Hirak, vying for systemic democratic change. Indeed, the 2019 pro-democracy wave in Algeria can be traced back to 2011 and the nascent anti-regime protest movement that rose up as part of the broader Arab uprisings, marked by a broad coalition of traditional yet marginalized opposition actors, including political parties, long-standing human rights organizations, and independent syndicates. Taking inspiration from the successful ouster of Mubarak in Egypt and the model of its Kefaya opposition coalition, these actors coalesced to form the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD), calling for regular weekly protests (Del Panta, 2022). While mobilization petered out after only a few months, the coalition reemerged two times in the lead up to the 2019 Hirak (in 2014 under the name Barakat and in 2018 under the name Mouwatana), both times in protest of the presidential election and the candidacy of the incapacitated Bouteflika. In addition to these coalitions, the mobilization of middle class professionals also formed a constituency of the pro-democratic

movement, and in particular lawyers and journalists (Del Panta, 2022). Yet the revolutionary energy of 2019 was not uniquely the result of these more politically-oriented protest movement but also the mobilization of other groups, including public sector workers, industrial workers including in the extractive industries, and lower classes from peripheral regions, disenfranchised by the austerity measures and the collapse of the authoritarian bargain (Del Panta, 2022). To this point, what marks the 2019 Hirak movement, is not just the adhesion of these groups but indeed the mobilization en masse of virtually all sectors and groups in society for explicitly anti-regime and pro-transition demands.

In relation to the EU, these actors maintain varying degrees of relationship to the EU; however, even if aligned in terms of rights-based discourse and recognition of the problems with the current regime, these actors also largely remain inaccessible to the EU either because of their organizational format or repression, or because of suspicion of the EU and the upholding of principles of anti-colonialism and sovereignty – both of which have been greatly exacerbated by the Israeli war on Gaza and the EU's perceived complicity in genocide.

Despite the partial democratization of the 1990s, political parties occupy a middling place within Algeria's establishment, largely because of the success of pro-regime parties to mobilize their various sectoral constituents and benefit from patronage networks. Prior to 2019, what was observed in terms of electoral outcomes was the institutionalization of rent-seeking behaviors, facilitated by the political economic model, that allowed for distributive policies that ensured cross-class support for the political status quo. Two parties dominated: the FLN (the party of the president and the historical post-independence party that has long dominated the state) and the RND. These two parties' constituents reflect the regime's social bases of support, with the FLN drawing voters from the lower classes and the RND drawing voters from the upper classes. With regards to pro-democracy or EU-leaning parties, some historic parties such as the RCD are more inclined to develop warm relations with European counterparts yet are in favor of a managed and limited European democracy assistance. However, other conservative parties like the MSP, which may nonetheless seek regime change, are opposed to this assistance often perceived as foreign interference. This also includes new-generation political parties that, while ostensibly pro-democratic, are nonetheless weary of EU intervention. In addition, since 2019, the new-generation political parties that emerged either directly or indirectly out of the Hirak have not been able to achieve any form of electoral success, in part because they have been the targets of important repression but also because they have been unable to form a cohesive coalition. Thus, while the results of the 2021 parliamentary election saw for the first time the FLN-RND alliance not win an absolute majority, many votes went to independents and not pro-democracy parties.

In addition, formal and informal civil society form part of Algeria's pro-democracy landscape. This includes non-governmental organizations and associations that are the primary target of any associative cooperation efforts between Europe and Algeria, and indeed can also include associations that do not have a mission directly related to democracy promotion but that, nonetheless, do form an opposition that is able to voice criticism and mobilize (Northey, 2017). In relation to democracy promotion, Algerian human rights NGOs, for example, advance an agenda that is in harmony with Europe's values, interests, and geostrategic vision for the region. Various Algerian civil society organizations have been long-time beneficiaries of European finance, and indeed request support for their integration into Algeria's major public institutions in order to push for reforms from within (Martinez and Boserup, 2021). However, many oppositional organizations have been shuttered since 2019, such as RAJ, diminishing the potential for pro-democratic EU partnerships with Algerian civil society.

Finally, the Hirak movement and its ability to mobilize virtually all sectors of Algeria society represented a particularly strong pro-democratic political movement. However, problems within the Hirak in organizational and strategic terms hampered its ability to push forward effective reforms during the

height of its mobilization, and since then the movement has become victim to the natural demobilizing force of the Covid crisis along with severe repression. In particular, the Hirak has been unable to develop a unified vision and roadmap for political change in Algeria, and its inability to translate street mobilization into a political party force has prevented participation in processes of reform. The movement is also difficult to reach by the EU and its instruments: quite simply, the EU does not have a way to outright support through financial instruments a horizontal and leaderless movement. What the EU can do is push for the civic rights of activists to be respected and encourage negotiations with activists. However, as many activists have been imprisoned as part of the increase in repression since the regime was able to successfully conclude presidential elections in December 2019, the EU has been able to do little else than make regular calls for the release of political dissidents. Moreover, the activists of the Hirak – even at the height of the movement – expressed their own skepticism towards EU and insistence on non-interference. This has, moreover, very dramatically increased since 07 October 2023.

The key player in the Algerian democracy dynamic, however, is the military. No political force has a chance of pushing through democratic reforms and making any real advances with the military's consent (Martinez and Boserup, 2021). The most viable path to democratic reform in Algeria is in fact persuading the military to agree to structural reforms. Also to be mentioned are the Islamists. The Islamist FIS party won the election in 1990 and sparked the “Black Decade” of the civil war, a critical scar on collective memory marked by shared trauma Algerian population for its degree of violence. This worked to popularly legitimize the role of the military in politics. In the moment of the Hirak, Europeans feared that the FIS or other Islamist groups would rise to power or reignite a cycle of violence, and this perhaps also partially explains why the EU did not push for further involvement during the episode of opening (Ghanem, 2019). However, the Islamists, who have been allowed to enter parliamentary politics, having a degree of a moderating effect on them, have little popular currency and played no significant role in the Hirak.

2.7. Reconstructing the recent history of geopolitical competition

While there is no doubt that Russia and China do see an interest in countering EU influence in Algeria as part of normative geopolitical rivalry, the real strategic interests of all three actors in Algeria have less to do with democracy and autocracy than with energy, security, and economics. Moreover, given Algeria's staunch anti-colonialist and sovereigntist discourse – which holds popular legitimacy – and the non-alignment foreign policy stance, Algiers shuns interference into its own domestic affairs while also seeking to maintain relations with a variety of different major foreign powers. This works especially with regards to the EU, which is seen as the dominant imperial threat given the long and bloody history of French colonialism but also other European colonial and neo-colonial adventures in the Middle East. Indeed, Algeria's foreign policy sees a compartmentalizing of relations, where partnerships and cooperation are drawn on for the purpose of reinforcing the regime and its political economic model, bolstered by its ability to leverage the strategic interests of others to maintain a balancing act between relations with Washington, Brussels, Moscow, and Beijing to its own advantage. In this way, Algeria represents less a theater of geopolitical normative rivalry in terms of democracy vs autocracy than a domain where different geopolitical forces are able to find different degrees of convergence with Algiers on strategic priorities in a manner that contributes to regime maintenance.

Critical Moment in Algerian Trajectory	EU		Russia		China	
	Instruments	Objectives	Instruments	Objectives	Instruments	Objectives
2011 protests	Upgrading of ties to EU, opening of ENP discussion. €172 allocated for youth, employment €20 for political and economic reform	Bouteflika's promised political reforms are cosmetic and designed to weather protests; no demonstrable change in EU approach				
	In 2013, the EU launched two new programmes to support the socio-economic, agricultural and rural development in underprivileged areas of the country, for a total of EUR 50 million.	Trying to work - unsuccessfully - towards an ENP. EU also made recommendations on reforms for civil society and increased aid to civil society.				
Presidential elections held in April 2014; the process of constitutional reform had not progressed and other reforms such as associations law fell short of international standards.			2014-2018 arms sales	Economic interests for Russia but also extension of ties to military as part of countering EU influence	Upgrading of strategic partnership.	Focused largely on trade and purchase of weapons and military technologies
	Establishment of an EU-Algeria strategic partnership on energy in 2015, covering cooperation on natural gas, renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy market integration, and consists of					
	Shared Partnership Priorities (2017-2020) established.	Algeria and the EU agree to attach special importance to the implementation of the new provisions of the Constitution. The EU intends to support Algeria in their implementation, particularly in the fields of governance, participatory democracy, promoting and championing fundamental rights, including those of workers, enhancing the role of women in society, decentralisation, strengthening the judicial system, including prison administration, and enhancing the role of civil society, including through the use of the technical assistance programmes.			Algeria joins the Belt and Road Initiative	
2019 Hirak	High level meetings and setting up of committees have been achieved, but no notable progress on political reforms.					
Since 2019	EU statements		Relaunch of arms trade with 12 billion EUR contract		Deepening of strategic partnership for national security	Increased security cooperation, founded on territorial integrity and sovereignty principles; increased spread of surveillance and digital war technologies

2.8. Conclusions about the motivational factors as backdrop to the geopolitical landscape and the democracy dynamics

Given the particular political economic model of Algeria, along with its very specific positions with regards to sovereignty and non-alignment, the regime has demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience and ability to resist interference and certainly external political pressures. For the Algerian government, relations with foreign powers are first and foremost a means of permitting regime survival and renewing the political economic model in the face of internal contestations – both from pro-democratic opposition but also intra-elite rivalries. Indeed, Algeria did not actually need the support of anyone in 2019 to weather the mass uprising.

Because of its policy of non-alignment and the manner in which Algeria utilizes strategic relations as different components in its authoritarian resilience, the theory of autocratic diffusion can be excluded. Algeria takes what it can from its different strategic relations with the EU, China, and Russia in the optic of regime survival and within its own strategic priorities and its strict adherence to neutrality and anti-colonialism. This operates both at the level of the government but also the level of people, and has as much to do with the EU as with the China and Russia. Indeed, even looking at popular opinion surveys, findings from the Arab Barometer demonstrate that in the lead up to the 2014 presidential election, Algerians were feeling increased satisfaction with living conditions; increasing satisfaction with the state of the economy; and increased feeling that their basic rights were guaranteed, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to vote in elections. The findings in 2017, which specifically asked about the role of the EU in Algerian politics, were quite mitigated. While many felt that trade with the EU should be maintained, most respondents were held generally neutral or indeed negative perceptions of the EU's role on the development of democracy in Algeria. By 2021, two notable trends can be observed in the survey research. First is the high approval ratings of Algerians for China (at least 60% of those surveyed over the last few AB surveys have declared highest approval rating for China) and Russia (keeping in mind that this survey was taken at the end of the Trump years and also when the Russian Covid vaccine was delivered to Algeria); second is the dramatically increased stated preference for democracy, though also favoring strong man rule. By 2022, this trend was largely confirmed. In the latest AB wave, Algerians revealed a growing preference for Turkey and Russia, alongside positive attitudes toward China. This was specifically with regards to economic relations, however.

With regards to the other dimension of motivational factors and the extent to which geopolitical rivalry and the specific desire to counter the EU explains the objectives and instruments of Russia and China, this is certainly present and there is a clear interest to see regime maintenance and a reticence to see EU rapprochement or the emergence of a pro-democratic oppositional government. In this sense, it is neither unintended consequences on the part of Russia and China nor on the part of Algeria. **What is striking, though, is where these instruments are directed: while the EU targets the government and civil society in its pro-democracy tools, China and Russia's interventions are much more squarely directed at the military and, to a lesser extent, business elites. Given that the military is the key player in setting the course of Algerian political developments, the instruments more strongly tend towards dynamics of authoritarian maintenance rather than democratization.** Finally, with regards to the EU's unintended consequences: the Gaza war has almost certainly further undermined EUDP, with the unintended consequence of potentially increasing popular support or at least the tacit condoning of Russia and China.

3. Hypothesizing the Cluster of Factors Determining Competition over Democratic vs. Anti-Democratic Outcomes

The second tier of analysis explores the cluster of factors that determine geopolitical competition between the EU and rivals Russia/China with regards to Algerian political developments and moves towards/away from democratization, and the interplay between them. These cluster of factors are conceptualized as:

- 1) The density of ties with the EU ties in political, institutional, economic, and military terms;
- 2) Domestic demand for non-EU influence, as operationalized in political/cultural, economic/material, and historical factors;
- 3) The instruments that authoritarian rivals deploy, including coercive, subversive, or co-optative instruments.

The investigation of these cluster of factors and the interaction between them will be undertaken through a careful examination of two selected episodes of democratic opening/closing, drawing conclusions based on the set of 8 hypotheses guiding the research.

Brief introduction to the episodes selected

In Algeria's case, the 2019 protest movement known as the Hirak provides a valuable and extensive source for episodes on democratization opening and blockages. Following the forced resignation of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019, Algerians maintained their pressure to impose a radical and deep reform of the political establishment. Protesters succeeded in delaying presidential elections which were due to be held in July 2019 which could be considered as an episode of democratic opening. On the other hand, Algerians were victim of a propaganda campaign to impose the system's narrative and post-Bouteflika roadmap with little regard to protesters' demands. This can be viewed as an episode of democratic blockage.

Given this, the episodes selected can be categorized broadly as examples of a disinformation campaign aimed to undermine popular opinion on a particular issue; and active support to political or civic actors with clearly anti-democratic agenda and with significant influence or potential for influence in society.

3.1. Episode 1: Democratic Opening

Delaying July's election due to lack of presidential candidates is a clear example of how pro-democratic protests could force systems into some degree of concession, though falling far short of systemic reform. Despite the insistence of establishment forces, and namely the military, to organize elections as soon as Bouteflika resigned, they were incapable of enforcing their roadmap at the beginning. This instance encouraged hopes for a democratic transition that would allow Algerians to rethink their political system and be in control of their future. Several initiatives were born to organize social and political forces and prepare for next protest steps such as civil disobedience. Moreover, delaying the election was the only concrete demand that enjoyed full support of protesters after Bouteflika's departure and drew a moment of consensus amongst Hirak actors.

In this episode, the role of external actors under investigation here (the EU, Russia, and China) in lending support to protestors or putting pressure on the military regime to undertake a real transition was notably weak on all fronts (Grewal, 2021). This is in part a vestige of Algeria's war of independence and its staunchly anti-imperial and anti-colonial position, popularly supported, that eschews foreign intervention but also the vast interests (energy, security, trade) of the EU, Russia, and China who were

concerned about destabilizing their ties with Algeria and instability in the country more broadly. The EU, for example, in a statement issued 30 September 2019 concerning the delayed presidential election:

"Nous espérons que des élections contribueront à répondre aux aspirations profondes du peuple algérien, dans le respect des droits fondamentaux et dans un climat d'apaisement", a déclaré la porte-parole de l'Union européenne, Maja Kocijancic ce lundi à Bruxelles.

Elle a indiqué que "l'UE suit avec beaucoup d'attention les développements en Algérie et a encouragé depuis le début les Algériens à œuvrer à une issue démocratique et pacifique dans un esprit de dialogue et de responsabilité ", ajoutant que l'UE "maintient cette ligne.

Mme Kocijancic a souligné que "dans le respect de la souveraineté algérienne, il est important que les libertés d'expression, d'association et de réunion soient garanties aux citoyens comme prévu par la Constitution de la République algérienne", rappelant que l'Etat de droit et le respect des libertés et des engagements internationaux en matière des droits fondamentaux "se trouvent au cœur des relations entre l'UE et l'Algérie".

Enfin, la porte-parole a réaffirmé l'engagement de l'UE "à continuer à approfondir les relations avec l'Algérie, dans le respect de la souveraineté du peuple algérien." (Kocijancic, 2019)

Likewise, Russia's preference for regime stability meant that, as the military was reconfiguring itself, it did not interfere with the ouster of Bouteflika, an ultimately expendable face of the civilian façade (Benantar and Hemchi, 2023). Indeed, the only official statement made about the Algerian presidential elections during the entire Hirak period occurred only after the successful holding of an election in December 2019:

Jeudi 12 décembre s'est déroulée l'élection présidentielle en République algérienne démocratique et populaire.

Selon les informations rendues publiques par la Commission électorale nationale de l'Algérie, la victoire a été remportée par le candidat indépendant et ancien premier ministre Abdelmadjid Tebboune avec 58,15% des suffrages.

Nous considérons cet événement politique intérieur important comme un grand pas dans la garantie du développement successif de l'Algérie amicale.

Nous espérons qu'avec l'élection du nouveau chef de l'État algérien, les relations pluridimensionnelles entre la Russie et l'Algérie continueront de se renforcer et de s'élargir. (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Finally, while the EU did offer some degree of critique of Algiers' handling of the Hirak movement and protests regarding the presidential election by criticizing attacks of freedom of speech and assembly of the political opposition, China's Ambassador to Algeria backed the Algerian regime's response by emphasizing the primacy of non-interference in domestic affairs (El Kadi, 2023).

In this sense, there was a convergence of goals around the Hirak movement in terms of non-interference and preference for stability over regime change among all three geopolitical rivals (Boukhars, 2023).

3.2. Episode 2: Democratic Blockage

Nonetheless, this Hirak unity was put under serious challenges throughout August-December 2019 for the establishment to impose its roadmap. In that context, a hybrid propaganda and disinformation campaign was implemented as the system's strategy to oppose a democratic transition and opt instead for presidential elections that would favor the ascension of establishment figures. Prominent activists,

journalists and parties were accused of serving foreign intelligence apparatuses and senior policy makers of the Bouteflika era were prosecuted for corruption charges to win the public opinion. Indeed, according to interviewees for the research who themselves are journalists with different Algerian media, there was a notable shift in the extent and content of media coverage of the Hirak. As one interviewee states:

At the beginning of the Hirak, everyone was frustrated with Bouteflika's fifth term bid even within the system itself. Therefore, the main message was coordinated across all channels, both public and private. Our channel had started covering the Hirak even before the February 22 protests when sporadic and small demonstrations were observed in some parts of the Kabylie region. On February 22, all media took a hesitant stand as they were still waiting for the approval of authorities to share the images. However, in the following weeks, channels shared the same narrative focusing on the popular mobilization to demand reforms. It was clear that public and private media had received the green light from the military leadership to cover protests and even endorse them as the military was looking at ways to push Bouteflika into resignation.

From Bouteflika's resignation, the unity of the media changed about the need to cover the protest movement. In July, some media outlets especially those with a close proximity to the opposition parties were still covering the Hirak and inviting activists to speak in their programs. However, other traditional channels, especially state owned, started their manipulation of the protests because they claimed the July 2019 demonstrations were addressing the transitional government to continue reforms rather than postponing elections. After Bouteflika's resignation, it was obvious that the military leadership was not willing to give any more concessions and even postponing July 2019 elections was due to the lack of consensus on the successor of Bouteflika rather than an approval of the protest movement itself and demands of reforms.

This campaign could be studied as an episode of democratic backsliding since it extended across different sectors and was destined to weaken the protest movement with conspiracy theories and an anti-Western narrative. This strategy is similar to other campaigns which were and are used by authoritarian systems in the region to hinder any democratization attempts, especially those western-supported. Therefore, the campaign, its tools and victims all serve as an insightful case into democratic blockages.

Here, the role of Russia and China in fostering the campaign – either directly or indirectly – alongside an analysis of the framing of the campaign and in particular the anti-Western narrative constitutes a crucial part of the analysis. As the baseline: Russian state-owned media outlets RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic have emerged as major sources of news in the region (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2018), and as of 2019 the Wagner Group has helped spread disinformation not only in Algeria but across the continent (Borshchevskaya *et al.*, 2024). Likewise, according to one of our interviewees, “China specifically has been using social media outlets especially twitter to be in contact with the Algerian population and media outlets.”

3.3. Analysis of the hypotheses and the conclusions drawn

H1. The deeper the domestic political and institutional crisis and division in a given state the more likely it is that an authoritarian power will use subversive instruments.

In general, subversive instruments are deployed by Russia or China in Algeria, however, there not much evidence from the research conducted here that subversive instruments were deployed during the moment of deep domestic crisis in 2019. These subversive instruments – propaganda and other efforts to undermine EU policies and interventions in popular opinion – are not tied to the domestic political crisis per se.

In the case of Algeria, for H1, what is of interest in terms of domestic crisis is: 1) the degree to which different sectors of society not directly associated with *le Pouvoir* were either aligned with the popular protest movements and especially that of 2019 or indeed were fractured and thus able to be successfully coopted and reintegrated through redistributive patronage schemes; and 2) the degree to which there were cleavages within the holders of power or not.

With regards to the broader trajectory under consideration, the period of 2011-2023, while social cleavages did reflect political cleavages and in particular the degree of support given to the regime and its reproduction, this seems to have changed in the aftermath of the 2019 uprising. Presidential elections are not particularly interesting to look at, given that the military controls who can run for president. Instead, it is the legislative elections that can provide more insights regarding shifting dynamics and how these reflect the bases of regime support as well as subversive tactics. Prior to 2019, what was observed in terms of electoral outcomes was the institutionalization of rent-seeking behaviors, facilitated by the political economic model, that allowed for distributive policies that ensured cross-class support for the regime. Here, the regime's bases of support crossed between the poorest, who benefited from social welfare programs and the Arab socialist authoritarian bargains that prevailed across the region in the post-independence period, and the wealthiest, who were able to benefit from business deals, alongside an inherent support of the military who wields shadow power through the executive. In terms of electoral politics, two parties dominated: the FLN (the party of the president and the historical post-independence party that has long dominated the state) and the RND. These two parties constituents reflect the regime's social bases of support, with the FLN drawing voters from the lower classes and the RND drawing voters from the upper classes. In terms of opposition and exclusion, the Amazigh population, left out of the historic nation-state building process and the regime's clientèle networks, has traditionally aligned with opposition political parties and namely the FFS and RCD. Yet, another form of contestation that is prevalent in electoral politics is not voting for an opposition party but rather abstention altogether, notably among young people.

The 2019 mass uprising, however, seems to undermine the regime's traditional social base, as evidenced by the broad cross-section of society that participated in the Hirak movement and the breaking of traditional social cleavages. Indeed, the fact that all social strata of Algerian society participated in the mass uprising, and that included much of the traditional bases of support of the regime, and the persistence of the movement over almost the entirety of 2019, demonstrated a deep political crisis that was not able to be resolved with the mixture of increased social spending and window-dressing reforms that had worked in 2011. Indeed, this seems to be the crucial point: the traditional mechanisms designed to absorb grievance, reconstruct or reassert patronage networks, and coopt opposition were not working nearly as successfully as the Hirak movement was not losing steam. Quite the contrary, the repeated refusal of protestors to accept the various forms of maneuvering of the regime to reconstitute itself throughout the period of spring-summer 2019, signifying a deep polarization between the masses and the elite power holders, was only able to be quelled with the onset of drastically increased repression. Importantly, though, this deep division between the people and the regime did not empower oppositional political parties, who remained divided and unable either to assert themselves or acquire increased popular legitimacy on among the ranks of the Hirak (Dris-Aït Hamadouche, 2020).

Nonetheless, the results of the 2021 elections seemed to reflect the ongoing impact of this domestic political crisis. For the first time, the FLN-RND alliance did not win an absolute majority, with many votes going to independents. At the same time, the election was marked by the considerable repression of political parties and leaders that represented the Hirak movement in the lead-up to the election, the closure of public space in Algiers to prevent protests, and the very high rate of abstention (considerably

higher than in the 2012 and 2017 legislative elections) and in particular in regions of opposition such as Kabyle.

In terms of institutional crises, we know that there was an institutional crisis during the Hirak episode of potential democratic opening at the level of the magistrature. While historically the magistrature has been reluctant to enter politics, a large number of judges initially mobilized alongside the Hirak protestors in the early days of the movement to signal their refusal to oversee the elections in the event of a Bouteflika candidacy. Simultaneously, they announced their effort to establish an independent union to establish a degree of independence. Both these actions reveal a relational re-positioning of the magistrature in the political arena. This mobilization of the magistrates significantly increased during a period of nine days in October-November 2019, when virtually the entire magistrature went on an unprecedented strike to protest the reshuffling of colleagues. The striking judges framed their protest as a demand for the independence of the judiciary, a frame alignment process coinciding with the claims of the Hirak protestors. Their street mobilization was also met with violent repression, representing an unexpected degree of escalation on the part of authorities. However, the strike came to a quick resolution following a meeting between the head of the National Judges' Union and the General Secretary of the Minister of Justice, where retroactive salary increases were agreed upon. While the agreement also made provisions to include the magistrates in a broader discussion regarding judicial independence, the general feeling among the Hirak protestors and some Algerian analysts is that the purpose of the strike was less concerned with radical systemic change than exacting sectoral benefits from the Ministry of Justice.

At the same time, the major institutional crisis of the period was indeed within the rank of power holders and in particular the rivalries between Bouteflika and his "gang" (*issaba*), who had long been empowered, and other factions within *le Pouvoir* who were more interested in regime reconstitution than saving the figurehead at the top. This was indeed, the impetus for the mass arrests under charges of corruption and the various efforts to replace the Bouteflika power-holding clan in the lead up to presidential elections. Yet, even the presidential elections of 2019 that were eventually held in December were still marred by internal divisions within the regime power holders, indicating that the institutional crisis had not been entirely resolved (Dris-Aït Hamadouche, 2020).

In this sense, over the trajectory under investigation here, the deepest domestic crisis was occurring in 2019 at the institutional level (within the regime as it was trying to reconstitute itself) and between the largely united masses and the regime (who was not successful in using normal instruments of clientelism). However, and importantly, there was not at any time a particularly strong pro-Western dimension within this crisis. While the regime was putting forth in its media campaign the threat of foreign intervention, especially on the part of France but also the USA and Israel, as a means of undermining the Hirak in popular opinion, the Hirak itself was not particularly pro-Western or leaning towards the EU. Likewise, even though the traditional political parties were losing their constituents, the pro-democracy parties were not empowered either nor did they make any particular overture to the EU of the West in general. In this sense, while the nature of the crisis did threaten stability in Algeria, it did not necessarily imply that a much more pro-EU or pro-West leaning would result.

Matching Russian and Chinese interventions to this crisis is at best conjecture. In considering in particular authoritarian powers' assistance in the propaganda and disinformation campaign (a key tool used by the regime to shift the public narrative and undermine the Hirak and bolster adherence and popular legitimacy of the presidential elections), interviewees state unanimously that Russian and Chinese interference was unlikely and perhaps even unlikely to have been necessary. The state's control over and use of the media as a tool of propaganda for its own purposes was already a well-oiled machine. As one interviewee, a journalist from a diasporic news outlet, explains:

The propaganda campaign included all tools that the system had in possession and was able to mobilize at that time. The easiest approach was to use the state television to propagate fake news to undermine the Hirak and divide it. The system understood that the most precious asset of the Hirak is its unity and therefore relentlessly attempted to pursue a “divide and conquer” strategy all while advocating for its own narratives and objectives. However, also understanding the role of social media in the mobilization of the Hirak, the system established teams as part of the security apparatus, or what is now commonly known as the “army of electronic flies”, to spread lies about the protest movement. We followed the investigation that uncovered this security network which was established by top senior officials at the time including the former head of the army. Without forgetting the instrumentalization of newspapers especially those that are subsidized by the regime and its ministry of communication.

Russia and China are unlikely to have been part of this campaign. They were complicit though, as much of the international partners, because of their silent and their desire to protect their interests.

In this sense, there is no hard evidence that China or Russia deployed subversive instruments during the 2019 crisis, although it must be stated that the nature of the domestic political crisis did not necessarily require any additional outside assistance for the purpose of bolstering the regime, nor did it pose a threat to Russian or Chinese interests.

H2. The more the EU activity and influence, including its democracy promotion aims, in a given state is perceived by an authoritarian power as a major threat to its vital national interests the more likely it is to resort to coercive or soft coercive (subversive) instruments in dealing with that state

Coercive instruments have not been used by Russia and China in Algeria, so this part of the hypothesis can be excluded. Likewise, there is little evidence of soft coercive or subversive instruments being deployed by either state towards Algeria. However, subversive instruments were deployed to undermine the EU.

The most pressing crisis to Russian interests occurred with the Ukraine war, as the EU became far more reliant on Algerian energy supplies, requiring Algeria to undertake a balancing act to both take advantage of increasing economic ties with the EU while also maintaining privileged relations with Russia. While this seemingly has provided a window of opportunity for rapprochement to the EU, Algeria has been able to navigate these conflicting relations through a reassertion of its fierce foreign policy of non-alignment and the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference, while also balancing certain dimensions of rapprochement (and in particular increased economic ties with Italy) with freezing ties (the cutting of ties with Spain over the Western Sahara issue) (Henneberg, Rumley and Yavorsky, 2023).

In general, though, the type of EU activity in Algeria and its ensuing influence does not pose a major threat to authoritarian powers’ interests, as the EU places emphasis on migration control and anti-terrorism cooperation, energy, and security – all of which actually bolster the holders of power and reinforce regime stability, which is also in the interest of Russia and China. And while we do see around 2011 the convergence of pro-democracy discourse from the EU towards the Southern Neighbourhood and from the Algerian regime (with the EU issuing two communiqués ‘A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity’ on 8 March 2011 and ‘A New EU Response to a Changing Neighbourhood’ on 25 May 2011 and the Algerian president stating in an official communiqué “Democracy, freedom, justice and the rule of law are all legitimate demands that no one can ignore. Our people are young and ambitious, hence the need to satisfy, day after day, the multiple demands in all areas and we are today, more than ever, challenged to carry out socio-economic and political reforms” on 16 April 2011), in both cases, such declarations remained largely at the level of discourses, with other key interests (security, energy, and

migration on the side of the EU; regime maintenance on the side of Algeria) taking precedence in terms of actual actions. This is indeed the consensus across much of the literature. Likewise, while we do see increasing EU-Algeria ties during the trajectory under investigation here with the signing of, these ties were mostly energy and economic in nature. And importantly, as the EU is dependent on Algerian energy supplies and heavily interested in security and migration cooperation, this means that the regime has been able to resist any pressures toward reform. Indeed, Meanwhile, Russian and Chinese ties were mostly military and security in nature. These combined relations all push towards regime maintenance.

Likewise, in terms of popular support and public opinions, the existing data shows that there was little reason for authoritarian powers to fear an increasingly pro-Western leaning among the Algerian population at large. Findings from the Arab Barometer demonstrate that in the lead up to the 2014 presidential election, Algerians were feeling increased satisfaction with living conditions; increasing satisfaction with the state of the economy; and increased feeling that their basic rights were guaranteed, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to vote in elections. This seems to demonstrate that the manner in which the regime weathered the 2011 Arab uprisings seems to have absorbed many grievances. Likewise, Algerians stated preference at this time for gradual reform rather than radical systemic change reflects both the inherited trauma of the civil war as well as reflections regarding the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring in other countries.

The findings in 2017, which specifically asked about the role of the EU in Algerian politics, were quite mitigated. While many felt that trade with the EU should be maintained, and that European culture had some positive aspects, most respondents were held generally neutral or indeed negative perceptions of the EU's role on the development of democracy in Algeria. In addition, they were quite negative regarding the role of the US and its perceived interventionism, mirroring the long-held anti-colonialist discourse and emphasis on sovereignty of the regime. Nonetheless, they also expressed much deeper "economic anxiety, concern over corruption, distrust in politicians, and dissatisfaction with the quality of public services" alongside growing distrust in Algerian public institutions. They also downgraded their perception of Algeria's level of democracy while simultaneously declaring demonstrating an increased preference for democracy.

Similarly, the 2017 IEMed survey that specifically considered popular opinion towards the EU revealed skepticism on the part of Algerians regarding EU support to Algerian democracy. In particular, the cite that inconsistent EU approach to the Southern neighborhood alongside support to authoritarian regimes undermines the credibility of the EU. Surprisingly, the survey also finds that, when it comes to Algeria-EU relations, the most important issues are educational and scientific cooperation and the promotion of democracy, with only very few (10%) listing trade as important.

By 2021, two notable trends can be observed in the survey research. First is the high approval ratings of Algerians for China (at least 60% of those surveyed over the last few AB surveys have declared highest approval rating for China) and Russia (keeping in mind that this survey was taken at the end of the Trump years and also when the Russian Covid vaccine was delivered to Algeria); second is the dramatically increased stated preference for democracy, though also favoring strong man rule. By 2022, this trend was largely confirmed. In the latest AB wave, Algerians revealed a growing preference for Turkey and Russia, alongside positive attitudes toward China. This was specifically with regards to economic relations, however. Moreover, economic conditions and the ability of democracy to deliver economically remain a critical point in Algerians' political preferences. While the majority continue to state that democracy is preferable, they also demonstrate increasing skepticism of its ability to perform well economically or take swift, decisive conditions.

Given that the activity and nature of EU ties was not leading to pro-democratic influence at the level of the political sphere, and that public opinion was not leaning towards the EU or the West but rather was leaning increasingly towards a favorable opinion of Russia and China, there was no specific need to deploy coercive or subversive instruments at the level of the state or political elites. Likewise, while the Ukraine war did provide an important window of rapprochement with the EU over energy needs, this has not led to a recalibrated relationship with Russia but rather a calibrated foreign policy by Algiers that maintains relationships through the materialization of the priorities of non-alignment and sovereignty. In this sense, while the research here seems to validate the second conclusion of the hypothesis “authoritarian powers are less inclined to use coercive instruments when the domestic context (political and societal) does not favour approximation with the EU,” the caveat is that coercive instruments were not being used over the course of the trajectory under investigation thus it is difficult to see any evidence one way or the other.

With regards to subversive instruments being deployed to undermine the EU, this is addressed in H5.

H3. The more well-established and denser relations of a given state are with the EU the less likely it is that an authoritarian power will use coercive measures in dealing with that state.

In general, given that Russian and Chinese measures can be qualified as co-optative and not coercive, it is not possible to truly comment on this hypothesis. However, what can be seen is that as EU relations have become denser over the course of the trajectory, co-optative measures have also increased in the part of Russia and China.

As explained previously, this is in part be due to the fact that increased ties with the EU have actually reinforced regime stability and decreased the EU’s ability to pressure on Algiers. Citing Hill (Hill, 2019): “despite the intensification of the country’s ties to the European Union (EU) from one regime to the other, the willingness and ability of Brussels to put democratizing pressure on Algiers decreased rather than increased.” The particularities of Algeria’s political economy and the way the hydrocarbon sector reinforces regime stability, alongside the EU’s increasing reliance on Algerian oil and in particular in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, has meant that EU interests intersect with regime maintenance dynamics. The same is true in the fields of security and migration, in which EU security priorities have increasingly favored a repressive hand in Algiers over the course of the trajectory.

In addition, and importantly, what we also see is that as the EU relations have become denser, so have relations with Russia and especially China. China and Algeria signed an MoU in 2018 as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and since trade has been boosted significantly and in particular Chinese exports to Algeria. Likewise, Algeria has been a keen client of Chinese surveillance technologies, part of its regime maintenance and repressive fracture. At the same time, the density of relations with Russia and in particular Russia’s sale of arms to Algeria but also diplomatic convergence of regional security issues has not been harmed over the course of the trajectory but indeed have increased.

H4. The EU will be ready to “dilute” its democracy promotion principles and give priority to security and material interests in its policies and measures in a given state the more it encounters domestic anti-EU sentiment or pushback by authoritarian rivals in that state.

The hypothesis appears to be confirmed by the research.

In general, the EU has a relatively diluted democracy promotion approach in Algeria and has placed emphasis on migration control and the energy partnership in particular, trends which have in fact increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU’s need to secure its energy autonomy. This has provided Algeria with a degree of leverage in dealing with the EU and its member states, and in

particular in sensitive dossiers such as the Western Sahara issues and relations with Morocco. Thus, here the EU's diluting of democracy promotion is at least partially a result of the reality of energy needs in light of the war in Ukraine, and the primacy placed on regime stability in Algeria. Likewise, the EU's democracy promotion toolkit in Algeria is focused largely on economics and not political reform. As one interviewee from the delegation in Algiers states:

Our main objective in Algeria is to assist the people in achieving prosperity and stability in line with the aspirations of the population and the agenda of local authorities. My work at the delegation began after the 2019 Hirak, and since then, we have worked tirelessly to improve relations with the new Algerian administration and capitalize on the Hirak's promises to assist local democratic actors. We noticed an emergence of new actors across the political and economic scenes and our strategy now focuses on nurturing ties with these actors to empower Algeria's economy and assist authorities with the generational transition...

Since 2019, it is true that our work has increasingly focused on independent economic operators and civil society organizations, but we hold various briefing meetings with heads of political parties, prominent lawyers and human rights defenders, officials from different ministries in addition to experts and activists...

In general, we prioritize dialogue, trade and exchanges to promote democracy whether in Algeria or across the region. Since the signature of the association agreement, we have a regular dialogue with Algerian authorities and having attended and organized such meetings since 2019, I could say that all topics are discussed with respect of Algeria's institutions. We also observed the official and popular excitement and interest about investments and are actively assisting EU institutions and companies to navigate Algeria's economic space.

In terms of anti-EU sentiment, both at the popular and elites levels, and how this relates to the dilution of democracy promotion, the interview data with EU representatives does seem to confirm a correlation, especially in the wake of the Hirak. Given the importance of non-intervention and anti-colonialism both at the level of political authorities but also in the collective political imagination, anti-EU sentiment and a strong resistance to EU intervention was palpable during the Hirak movement, and awareness of this and how it shaped a weak EU response is confirmed in the interviewees. As one interviewee from the delegation in Algiers explains: "the Commission's position was to listen to Algerians rather than impose any form of support and respect the official and popular sensitivities." The interviewee goes on to state:

The delegation did not have a proper policy but was implementing the policy recommendations from Brussels. Additionally, there is a general belief amongst all diplomatic representations in Algeria that democratization is a local business and this belief is supported by both the policies of the government and stances of the political elites and population...

We live in a different era and considering the ongoing international geopolitical competition including in the North African region, adapting our approach is a necessity not to be left behind. In that sense, the first thing we are aiming to achieve is understand these [pro-democracy] actors better and reach out to the central committees and commission in Brussels with policy recommendations based on the evidence we are gathering. The EU will not abandon its democracy promotion efforts but we are adjusting them according to the wishes and priorities of the local population.

Likewise, an interviewee from DG Near explains:

The EU considered that Algerians' peaceful uprising may assist in the renewal of political elites and inclusion of civil society actors, but assisting in that process was difficult for various reasons.

Algerians proved hesitant in asking for help and, understanding the importance of sovereignty for the population and authorities, we did not want to overstep or expand our role beyond what was required from us...

It was difficult to offer any direct assistance to authorities since the message we constantly received and abided by given the peaceful nature of the Hirak was that this is a domestic matter and that Algerians will decide for themselves. Also, protesters agreed with the government on this point and this further discouraged any direct intervention in Algerian affairs. Looking back at the moment after five years of the protest movement, this assessment is still valid and no other option would have been viable.

H5. An authoritarian state will seek bottom-up allies and/or to exploit grassroots demand for non-EU influence, when political elites in a given state maintain or seek to develop denser relations with the EU, including in the field of democracy promotion.

The hypothesis seems mostly confirmed, although we cannot definitely track the extent to which authoritarian states' efforts to seek bottom-up allies and exploit grassroots demands are a response to deepening EU ties or whether this would have occurred regardless of density of EU ties in Algeria.

Generally speaking, both Russia and China are able to pursue their strategic interests in Algeria despite denser relations with the EU precisely because Algiers insists on a foreign policy of non-alignment and its right to pursue relationships and strategic sectoral partnerships with anyone free of geopolitical implications. This is clearly understood by the EU representatives interviewed here. In addition, Chinese and especially Russian relationships in Algeria are clearly geared towards the actors that control the sectors they are most interested in: the military, hydrocarbons, business elites, and political elites. This being said, the interview data indicates that Russia and especially China are indeed pursuing more relations with Algerian sectors beyond the usual suspects who represent the holders of power. Interviewees seem to confirm that China has been reaching out to other sectors, including the business sector but also the cultural sector and universities, thereby increasing its presence and ability to wield influence. Indeed, China's gifting of a 40M USD opera house is emblematic of a soft power approach. These efforts to extend partnerships and reach outside of elite circles does seem to coincide with the deepening of ties with the EU but, importantly, also with the deepening of ties with China. Thus whether this is a response to deepening ties to the EU or merely the expected result of deepening Chinese opportunities and interventions in Algeria cannot be determined. Yet, interviewees confirm that such relations cannot be conceived in purely transactional terms but are also designed to sway popular opinion in favor of China's multipolar vision for the international order.

Importantly, though, EU representatives interviewed here do confirm that there are efforts on the part of Russia and China to undermine Algeria's relationship with the EU in popular opinion. As one interviewee from the EU delegation states:

From the Russian side, Algeria is another battle for the ongoing animosity with Europe. In fact, it is clear from our very limited interactions with Russian diplomatic diplomats at official ceremonies that the EU and its member states are perceived as an enemy. We also notice frequent social media attacks and attempts to undermine the ongoing work between Algerian officials and their European counterparts. This animosity is reduced with Chinese diplomats but there is still a sense of geopolitical and economic competition as Chinese diplomats are too focused on the ongoing economic cooperation with Algeria and opportunity for Chinese companies...

Our issue at the EU delegation is not with Algerians but with propaganda campaigns that aim to mislead the Algerian population on the engagement and aims of the EU and its member states.

This sentiment is seconded by the respondent from DG Near:

Russia and China look at the EU as the first competitor in North Africa. Since the invasion of Ukraine, we have seen divergences between Russia and China on how to address the EU and its role in Algeria and across the Maghreb. While China is merely interested in opportunities of economic cooperation and diplomatic rapprochement, Russia opts in a more aggressive way towards our interests in Algeria. The EU is constantly targeted by disinformation campaigns that undermine European economic and security interests particularly regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine to portray the EU and the West in general as the reason for this aggression. We also noticed increasing threats from Chinese operators and circles of influence against European companies which are active in the Algerian local market.

H6. Political elites in a given state will tend to seek alternative geopolitical options the more their cost-benefit calculations about their state's relations with the EU seem less favourable to their political and material interests.

Over the course of the trajectory under consideration here, there is no evidence that relations with the EU would harm the political and material interests of elites and in this sense the cost-benefit calculation would not have driven any move towards alternative geopolitical options. On the contrary, Algeria's stance has long been to seek a variety of relations and partnerships that promote the material and political interests of elites and in particular the holders of power (the military, hydrocarbon business elites, and civilian political elites part of *le Pouvoir*), and avoid any implication in geopolitical alignments. Indeed, the costs required of political elites for increased ties with the EU do not threaten the political status quo but in fact reinforce it. For example, Algeria has been able to resist EU pressure to more broadly condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine, and discussion of political reform is limited to dialogues without any requirements for progress. On the contrary, the EU has largely supported the so-called "transition" under way in Algeria under the new president Tebboune. Meanwhile, the efforts towards economic diversification and transfer of technologies and skills that are associated with the nature of EU ties are seen as welcome benefits.

This being said, Algeria does undertake a "balancing act" in its relations with the EU and authoritarian rivals, as mentioned previously. This is both made clear in Algiers' diplomatic exchanges, where the country's fiercely independent position and refusal of intervention in domestic affairs is reaffirmed but also in other diplomatic efforts, such as the freezing of relations with Spain that acts to counter the deepening of ties with Italy. Given this, the evidence in the Algerian case cannot be used to comment on the hypothesis one way or the other.

H7. The higher the popular demand for non-EU influence in a given state is, the easier it is for political elites to question the primacy of EU influence and to seek to balance it out through the increase of influence of authoritarian rivals.

This hypothesis is confirmed.

As previously mentioned, the demand for non-EU influence in domestic politics is high in Algeria and was particularly prevalent during the Hirak movement. While this is almost certainly both a reflection of the primacy of anti-colonialism and sovereignty in the popular imagination, it is also a strategic choice made by protestors. In calling for non-EU interference in the Hirak, the movement was undermining the

capacity of the regime to propagate the narrative that the protests were the result of foreign intervention and thus illegitimate. As one research participant, an activist from a feminist organization, explains:

I am not sure the EU could have done anything to support the Hirak for three main reasons. First, there is a general skepticism across the population about any foreign intervention. We saw slogans at the protests warning all international partners from interfering in this movement. Algerians saw this as their fight and the heritage of the Arab uprisings also had their impact on the choices of the Algerian society. Second, authorities in Algeria are allergic to any form of foreign intervention, and any attempt by the EU to engage on the Hirak would have been met with severe diplomatic repercussions. Also, I think the EU itself was a bit lost when the movement erupted because no one really understood what was happening.

Likewise, as previously mentioned, Algiers' dominant foreign policy stance of non-alignment has allowed it to maintain and indeed even deepen relations with a variety of geopolitical rivals, even in the context of the Ukraine war. The "balancing out" is indeed a deliberate strategy of Algeria as a means of maintaining good relations with everyone.

H8. The higher a state's economic dependence on an authoritarian power, the more that power will feature in the cost-benefit calculations of political elites and the less inclined the political elites will be to accept EU influence in matters of democracy, and other key policy making spheres.

The hypothesis cannot be adequately assessed in the case of Algeria, given the particularities of its economy. The Algerian economy is almost entirely driven by its hydrocarbon sector and in this vein has provided the country with a high degree of economic independence but also a source of regime stability through the capacity to self-finance a vast clientèle system. However, diminishing returns in oil sales since 2014, dwindling foreign reserves, and systemic problems such as unemployment have created significant pressure on Algiers to diversify its economy. Indeed, the Tebboune government has placed economic reform high on its list of priorities, and economic diversification is a viewed strategic necessity, especially given the state's incapacity to finance its development needs. Given that Algiers' economic policy is based on strategic balancing between different powers and the hedging of bets (Hamaizia, 2020), this does mean that there is no one country on which Algeria is dependent for trade; however, China has emerged as Algeria's top trading partner and has heavily invested in Algeria's infrastructure and development through loans, investments, as well as aid gifts. Nonetheless, Chinese penetration of the Algerian market and its presence in infrastructure is not received without criticism: China benefits far more from the trade deficit with Algeria rather than the other way around, and the mega construction projects have been drivers of Chinese employment, not Algerian (Hamaizia, 2020). At the same time, Algeria has maintained and deepened its economic ties to Europe, not the least thanks to the Ukraine war and shifts within the EU and its member states towards Algerian energy, while economic diversification and transition are one of the dominant themes of the ENP and bilateral relations. Given this, the cost-benefit calculations of political elites with regards to economic relations seek to balance relations and diversify sources while maintaining the primacy of a "new strings attached" approach, meaning that economic relations are more transactional.

4. Analysis of the three pillars of Tier II as both stand-alone set of factors and in their interaction

In considering Tier II and the clusters of factors that play the determining role in geopolitical competition over political/democracy outcomes, what is striking in the Algerian case is that geopolitical competition within the episodes under investigation is virtually non-existent. There was no notable intervention of revival powers in the episodes here, and no real efforts deployed to shape political outcomes. All three actors (the EU, Russia, and China) had a preference for regime stability, all actors abided by a non-interventionist policy, with the exception of a few statements made here and there – Russia to frame the Hirak as riots and an Islamist threat in its own press; the EU to criticize attacks on freedoms of expression and assembly in the lead-up to the presidential elections; China to subtly criticize the EU for making such criticisms. But generally, all three maintained their distance from the Hirak and referred to it as a “domestic affair.” This is a reflection of both their strategic interest to maintain good ties with the regime - regardless of the civilian figurehead on top – but also the understanding that the rejection of foreign interference into national issues is echoed in popular demands.

Instead, the factors determining geopolitical competition for political outcomes can be better assessed in Tier II with regards to the trajectory. This section draws conclusions for each pillar.

4.1. Pillar I: Density of ties with the EU

The density of ties with the EU is a factor in determining geopolitical competition, at least from the point of view of EU representatives interviewed here who sense the weight of geopolitical competition for influence in Algeria but also who perceive of deliberate disinformation campaigns and communications efforts waged by authoritarian rivals to undermine the role and interference of the EU in Algerian domestic affairs. However, a few things should be noted:

- Between the EU and Russia, the domains of ties with Algiers are not overlapping but complementary. The EU’s ties are primarily in the field of trade, energy, and security – all of which bolster the existing power structure and business model of the clientèle state. Russia’s ties are primarily in arms sales, which also strengthens the regime. Even in the context of deepened ties with the EU since 2011 and the move towards increased reliance on Algerian oil in the wake of the Ukraine war, the density of EU ties have not created any notable shift in Algerian foreign policy or Algier’s ability to maintain neutrality and a variety of relationships including with Russia. Indeed, as previously stated, Russia’s primary interests concern not countering EU encroachment per se but rather the emphasis on the sale of arms and broader geopolitical interests in North Africa (Ramani, 2019)
- Between the EU and China, there is more direct overlap in the domain of ties as China has surpassed the EU as Algeria’s first trading partner. However, as China has been able to include Algeria in its BRI framework and has significantly increased its access to the Algerian market, the rise in ties to the EU has been at least met if not surpassed by the rise in ties to China.
- EU ties to Algeria, even if rising during the trajectory under investigation, are not primarily related to governance issues or democratization. To reproduce from page 15, “as Hill (Hill, 2019) finds - and in direct contradiction to Levitsky and Way’s (Levitsky and Way, 2005) model – ‘despite the intensification of the country’s ties to the European Union (EU) from one regime to the other, the willingness and ability of Brussels to put democratizing pressure on Algiers decreased rather than increased.’”
- Finally, while the EU does employ EUDP towards the government and direct tools to pro-democracy actors, these are rather minimal in nature. The EU very pointedly did not intervene

in the episode of democratic opening under investigation here, and it has not applied any significant pressure for regime change but rather accompanies the supposed “transition” after the Hirak. China and Russia’s ties, however, are much more squarely directed at the military and, to a lesser extent, business elites. Given that the military is the key player in setting the course of Algerian political developments, the instruments weigh heavier on dynamics of authoritarian maintenance rather than the EU’s less weighty tools for democratization.

4.2. Pillar II: Domestic demand

Synthesizing the role of popular opinion and political elites with regards to the EU reveals a general consensus around aversion to any perceived EU intervention into domestic political affairs. This is the result of historical antecedents and namely the 132 years of French colonization and a brutal war of independence that still lives in the popular imagination but also the Algerian state’s staunch foreign policy pillars of neutrality, sovereignty, and non-interference, all of which squash domestic demands for EU influence. And over the course of the trajectory under investigation, in looking at opinion polls, there is in fact evidence that domestic demand for EU influence actually declined: the findings of the 2017 Arab Barometer survey found that most respondents held generally neutral or indeed negative perceptions of the EU’s role on the development of democracy in Algeria. The negative perception of the EU has also grown exponentially since the 07 October 2023 war on Gaza, and the lack of faith in the EU and its perceived hypocrisy in the fields of human rights promotion and democratization cannot be overstated.

Importantly, the lack of domestic demand for EU influence was particularly palpable during the Hirak. As previously mentioned, while this is almost certainly a reflection of the primacy of anti-colonialism and sovereignty in the popular imagination, it is also a strategic choice made by protestors. In calling for non-EU interference in the Hirak, the movement was undermining the capacity of the regime to propagate the narrative that the protests were the result of foreign intervention and thus illegitimate. And interviewees further state that there was nothing productive the EU could have done to assist the Hirak. Moreover, the research demonstrates that this lack of domestic demand for EU influence actually did act as a barrier to EU democracy assistance during the period of democratic opening, as confirmed by interviews.

However, it should be noted that this lack of domestic demand for non-EU influence is not correlated with a rising demand for undemocratic influence, at least not in popular opinion. In particular, during the episode of democratic opening, the popular demand was for *no* foreign influence regardless of source or ideological bent. And even political elites were not vying for foreign influence during the Hirak, as the regime simply did not need it to reconfigure itself under a new civilian façade and so-called post-Bouteflika “transition.” And while survey data does demonstrate that popular opinion of Russia and China has improved since the Hirak, it is not entirely clear if this also correlates with a domestic demand for Chinese and Russian influence beyond their clients (i.e. business, military, and political elites that benefit materially from these relations). In the last two rounds of the Arab Barometer survey (2021 and 2023), the survey finds high approval ratings for China and Russia, although with the caveat that this is within the economic field. And China in particular has been able to penetrate not only the Algerian market but also other sectors such as the university, giving it new vectors of soft power.

In sum: the demand for democratic influence seems lowest during moments of political crisis or democratic opening, precisely because of the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference in the popular and political imagination. However, general skepticism towards the EU and its democratization role has been growing throughout the period under investigation alongside improving popular opinion of China and Russia, at least in terms of how these relations benefit Algeria. This context certainly acts as a

blockage to EUDP as identified by EU representatives interviewed here as well as social and political actors.

4.3. Pillar III: Types of instruments used by authoritarian rivals

As previously mentioned, two types of instruments are used by China and Russia: subversive instruments, and namely disinformation campaigns and communications actions meant to undermine popular opinion of the EU's role and influence in Algeria, and co-optative instruments and namely ties within the domains of the security sector, business, and infrastructure that actually serve to bolster the regime's clientèle structure and maintain *le Pouvoir* in power.

During the episodes under investigation here, there was virtually no subversive tools used by authoritarian rivals with the exception of China calling out the EU, albeit indirectly, for having denounced attacks on freedom of speech and assembly during the lead up to the December 2019 presidential election. In general, the subversive tools were not really coming into play during the episode of democratic opening as there were neither needed nor useful, given the primacy of non-interference in domestic affairs held by both protestors and the regime alike. Co-optative tools, however, have been longstanding and do indeed serve to shore up the material and immaterial interests of the holders of power in Algeria, and namely the military and business elites. Importantly, as previously mentioned, Russian and Chinese instruments work towards regime maintenance by directly bolstering the holders of power and pushing for status quo maintenance of the Algerian state's business model. Yet they also do not face much by way of geopolitical rivalry, as the EU's interventions and interests lie somewhat elsewhere. While there is a degree of geopolitical rivalry in terms of trade between the EU and China, the EU's top interests in Algeria – energy, migration, security – are not the primary interests of either Russia or China. Likewise, fueling the EU's top interests also creates dynamics of regime maintenance, with very little by way of pressure towards governance reform. In this way, the various tools deployed by the three geopolitical rivals under investigation can be seen as somewhat existing in parallel, as part of Algier's general strategy of partnership diversification and bet hedging, and all work towards regime stability.

5. Configuration of blockages and opportunities for democratization

When considering the interaction between the three clusters of factors, geopolitical rivalry and its impact on democratization or political outcomes is least perceptible during the episode of domestic political crisis and potential democratic opening. Rather, the impact of his rivalry and how it is expressed is better perceived in the longer trajectory under investigation. Here, the rivalry is less about blocking democratization or EU influence in the field of governance and political reform than it is about maintaining various state interests and access in specific fields (arms sales; infrastructure contracts; business opportunities) as well as maintaining strong ties to the regime. This lack of competition over Algerian democratization is in part because the EU only has very weak democracy influence in Algeria to begin with, and this has not improved over the course of the trajectory, but also because the interests of China and Russia in Algeria are less concerned with Algerian domestic politics than broader geopolitical interests in North Africa and Africa, where having good ties to the Algerian regime can facilitate other geopolitical and strategic interests farther afield. So, while geopolitical rivalry does exist in Algeria and is perceived by the EU as a blockage to the relationship with Algerian society, and namely through the communications campaign seeking to tarnish the EU's image, and while the EU does fear Russian and Chinese influence and penetration in Algeria, the reality is that the rivalry is not the primary cause for blockage of EUDP. EUDP is blocked during moments of political opening not by geopolitical

rivals but by other factors including lack of domestic demand and also a desire to protect the EU's other interests. Meanwhile, Russian and Chinese military and economic ties and co-optative tools that designed to both meet material interests of both states and bolster regime maintenance are not countered by EU ties and tools.

This final section identifies key trends in terms of blockages to democratisation and classifies them into three clusters of factors: behavioural, institutional and structural factors.

5.1. Behavioural factors

With regards to democratization in general, the primary behavioral blockages among civil society, social movements, and the potentially mobilizable public is the lack of ability to politically organize themselves around formal institutions or representative bodies, as well as the lack of ability to arrive at general consensus regarding the vision and set of reforms necessary for a democratic Algeria. This is in part, at least, the result of Algerian contemporary history, and namely the end of the colonial era and the violent civil war – both of which rest in living memory – that act as barriers to collective action and a certain degree of ambivalence and wariness of radical political change for fear of further destabilization or loss of autonomy.

Indeed, the leaderless nature of the Hirak and the lack of ability to move beyond a shared set of grievances and backward-looking demands are frequently cited in the literature as some of the reasons for the failure of a meaningful democratic transition in Algeria in the aftermath of the mass uprising (Volpi, 2020; Grewal, 2021). An explanation of this behavioral blockage during the Hirak episode from a representative of a pro-democracy and new generation political party interviewed here, is revealing:

*This large consensus continued until the July 2019 elections which triggered bigger questions about the end goal of the Hirak and the ability of the movement to achieve its objectives. Of course, forcing the system to postpone or cancel elections seemed as a huge win, but it also opened doors to the fear of political instability especially since no one knew where things are heading. **We noticed tensions with the protest movement on two levels: logistically and politically.** On the logistics level, it became evident that the leaderless nature of the Hirak is starting to impact its mobilization. We recommended to other segments and actors within the movement to find ways to designate leaders but no one wanted to assume the responsibility because of fear of rejection but also repercussions and lack of vision. On the political level, we were firmly against calls for a constituent assembly and believed that not everything should be deconstructed or ignored, but we should rather build on what has already been done. Other actors disagreed and believed that the entire heritage of the post-colonial Algerian state should be reconsidered. These fundamental differences were not resolved and were partially the reason why we decided to withdraw from the movement after December's elections.*

This analysis by no means implies that the behavioral tendencies of bottom-up actors are entirely the reason for a lack of democratization in Algeria, nor that their behaviors are devoid of democratic content. On the contrary, as shown by Hadj-Moussa and Sukarieh (Hadj-Moussa and Sukarieh, 2023), the practices associated with these behaviors of the unorganized opposition created new spaces of deliberation and autonomy, as well as counter-narratives, that are themselves part of a broader democratizing process [see also (Northey, 2017)].

Nonetheless, these behavioral blockages to democratization are compounded by a long history of rent-seeking behaviors by a host of political and business elites that have distinct material and immaterial interests in preserving the operational status quo. Importantly, this does not equate to maintenance of those in top positions of power but rather the maintenance of the underlying *Pouvoir* and its system of

redistribution. Finally, the behaviors of the regime, and namely the use of cooptation, outright repression, and both legal and extra-legal closure of the civic space, all act as blockages to democratization by cutting off pro-democracy currents and actors.

Likewise, with regards to EUDP, the primacy of non-interference in domestic affairs and the safeguarding of sovereignty, both in the public imagination but also by power holders, means that demand is for EUDP is low, especially during moments of political opening and even among pro-democracy actors supported by the EU. This is further exacerbated the deploying of disinformation campaigns by the Algerian regime, who has multiple channels for controlling the narrative and ensuing that popular demand for EUDP remain low, as well as the subversive instruments by Russia and China to tarnish EU intervention and presence.

5.2. Institutional factors

With regards to democratization in general, several different institutions can be classified as blockages: the media, the judiciary, the political parties, and most importantly the army (Martinez and Boserup, 2024). The media sector is tightly controlled, with independent media and journalists subject to the harshest repression and a state-run and pro-state media dominating the public sphere and the narrative to the advantage of the regime. As previously explained in this report, this utilization of media channels to undermine the credibility of the Hirak was a main tool in suppressing the pro-democratic current and in legitimizing the December 2019 presidential election despite not having met the demands of protestors. The judiciary, for its part, while formally independent is submissive to the will of the executive, as evidenced by the episode of contestation by the magistrates and their acquiescence. Finally, the pro-democratic oppositional parties have been unable to mount a strong enough response to resist the regime's ability to reconfigure itself. While these parties were able to build a coalition during the Hirak, the Forces of the Democratic Alternative, comprising seven political parties as well as independent syndicates and civil society organizations, and put forth a set of demands as the basis for a democratic transition, they were unable to organize a national conference due to restrictions by the authorities. As a result, they remained in a nascent phase of action and political organizing, politically blocked from making any progress on political change beyond disavowing the army's process. As Beddoubia (Beddoubia, 2024) writes,

[T]he many initiatives launched by political parties and civil society during and after the Hirak have failed to articulate an end to the crisis. Despite the strong involvement of parties, trade unions, and civil society, political and ideological differences, and the relationship to political power itself continue to block possible avenues out of the crisis. The conditions conducive to holding a political debate and free and responsible dialogue have been hampered by the regime's refusal to engage in any dialogue with the opposition, and their categorical rejection of a transition period (p.67).

Finally, with regards to the army, it has historically positioned itself as the guarantor of the Algerian state and its stability and autonomy, and enjoys a degree of popular legitimacy. Importantly the army plays a regulatory role in the Algerian political arena, managing all aspects of public and political life including setting the rules of engagement. Indeed, the army's role in politics has been to perpetuate the status quo and the maintenance of *le Pouvoir* through a controlled political liberalization and limited degree of competition (Boumghar, 2024). As an institution, the army has been buttressed in its role in authoritarian maintenance through the constitution, which, despite constitutional amendments made in 2020 designed to usher in a "New Algeria" and veritable process of democratization has instead created new institutional mechanisms to allow for regime maintenance and interference into civil society, the founding of political parties, and the electoral processes as well as the curtailing of numerous civil

liberties. In addition, the move to a hyper-presidential system under the new constitution also empowers *le Pouvoir*, given that the president is objectively a civilian façade behind which the real holders of power reside.

5.3. Structural factors

The oil wealth of Algeria has been a historic blockage to democracy in that it has allowed the regime to reassert its authoritarian bargain and resist popular movements for political change, as in 2011; however, this economic model has been showing its limitation and was not the primary mechanism for weathering the 2019 Hirak. Nonetheless, the natural resources of Algeria can be considered a structural blockage to EUDP, as the EU's reliance on Algerian energy sources, in particular in light of the Ukraine war and its disruption to EU energy supplies, the importance of maintaining good ties with Algiers out of necessity has weakened the appetite of the EU to wield influence or try to push forward Algeria's democratization process. On the contrary, the existence of such massive oil and natural gas wealth in Algeria acts as structural blockage precisely because it creates a host of relations with foreign partners that act to reinforce the status quo.

Likewise, Algeria's sheer size - being the largest country in Africa – and its geostrategic position on the Mediterranean coast and endowed with long and porous borders with a number of security hotspots (Libya, Mali, Niger, Western Sahara) means that its stability and cooperation in security issues are paramount to a number of foreign powers including the EU (Cavatorta, 2001) and Russia. This has translated as well to various forms of foreign aid and partnership that aim at authoritarian maintenance, including the reinforcement of the security sector and its repressive tendencies.

6. Conclusion: Identifying openings enabling breakthroughs to democratization

Despite not having been able to produce a democratic transition ultimately, the Hirak can nonetheless be considered the quintessential moment of democratic opening in Algeria, given the ability of the movement to unite the social space around a common demand for radical political change and the ability to protestors to push back, at least partially, on the regime's efforts to reconfigure itself. Just as importantly, the experiences of the Hirak have created new spaces, forums, and capacities for dialogue, autonomy, and organization that, while not sufficient alone to withstand the repressive mechanisms of the regime, are nonetheless part of a broader democratizing process. Thus, while the movement was successfully stamped out and new frameworks and figureheads have been created for regime maintenance, buttressed by various international partnerships that also work towards authoritarian reproduction, there was nonetheless over the course of the trajectory under investigation the creation of a democratizing potential. In this sense, the Hirak episode, alongside the broader trajectory under investigation here, is instructive in providing recommendations for how the democratic transition can be enabled in Algeria – keeping in mind that external actors such as the EU can't capitalize on moments of democratic openings stemming from political crises without causing more reputational and rejection not only by the regime but indeed by pro-democracy actors themselves, and keeping in mind where EU interests ultimately lie and that increasing pressure on the Algerian regime is neither likely nor particularly effective:

- The extractivist tendencies present in economic exchanges with China are viewed poorly in Algeria and could harm the currently rosy view of Algeria-China ties. The EU can increase its ties, fight subversive campaigns designed to harm its reputation, and increase its overall image in

Algeria – which has been particularly harmed by the War on Gaza - by focusing on the exchange of skills, technologies, and co-development as part of support to an economic transition. However, such efforts would need to be carefully designed to not produce new forms of injustice, as the EU's Green New Deal has done in Tunisia (Delpuech, 2022). While this would not contribute to democratization by itself, it would nonetheless change the way the EU is viewed and increase the value of its partnership.

- The EU should not cede ground on other soft power areas like universities, research partnerships, cultural exchanges, etc. The EU has ties with pro-democracy actors like political parties and some civil society, but this is relatively small, and the closing civic space and various forms of restrictions they face means that EUDP through these actors is relatively weak. Extending beyond pro-democracy actors and in ways that are non-normative allows for deepening ties without threat of being labeled as acts of interference or insincerity. This could have a cumulative effect in improving the EU's image as well as general institutional familiarity with the EU outside of the usual circles.
- The media sector is key. The disinformation campaign waged against the Hirak was viewed by pro-democracy actors and independent journalists interviewed here as some of the primary reasons why protestors were not able to mount more effective resistance to the December 2019 presidential election. Likewise, the media plays a role, as cited by EU officials interviewed here, in tarnishing the EU's reputation in Algeria and thus harming its ability to wield influence. Buttressing the independent media can be a key way to promote democratization by allowing for the possibility for counter narratives to emerge.
- While pro-democracy actors interviewed here do not feel that the EU could have done anything to support democratization during the Hirak, they are nonetheless disappointed – if not to say disgusted – with the EU for its lack of assistance to the freeing of political detainees and its position with regards to the War on Gaza and complicity in the Palestinian genocide. This reputational harm caused to the EU could jeopardize future efforts of EUDP, including some partnerships with pro-democracy actors and support to civil society, political parties, etc. who may decide against accepting any funds or collaborations with the EU (as is being seen today in Tunisia). Being aware of this risk and finding ways to work with Algerian actors to listen to, acknowledge, and address their concerns should be a primary task of the delegation, who already feels there is an impasse between what is dictated by Brussels and the reality on the ground.
- Finally, with regards to support to pro-democracy actors and the democratic potential opened over the course of the trajectory and the episode of the Hirak in particular, the EU should avoid deploying the same tools and tactics as prior to the Hirak. Changes in the institutional framework, which provide more opportunities for repression and the curtailing of oppositional voice, as well as general disillusionment on the part of pro-democracy actors with the EU and its lost moral authority, mean that the continuation of the same formula as before is no longer possible. The EU's discourses of human rights and democratization frankly ring very hollow. The EU could, nonetheless, find other grounds on which to build democratizing potential, such as gender equality (frequently cited in the interviews), support to coalition-building to capitalize on coalitions built during the Hirak, and providing spaces and opportunities for future scenario planning to help actors prepare for the next democratic opening.

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