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The European Neighbourhood Policy

The case of Morocco

Estudiante: **Carolina Pérez Diago**

Director/a: Hutan Hejazi

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1. <u>Abstract</u>

The Kingdom of Morocco has been an essential partner for the European Union since before the Maastricht Treaty, serving as a key link between the EU and the African continent. Due to their neighbour status, and history, the country shares strong cultural and historical ties with various EU member states, especially Spain and France. Over the years, Morocco has solidified its position as a key player in the EU´s foreign policy, particularly on migration, security, and counter-terrorism issues. However, this partnership is imperfect and characterized by mutual dependence, recurring tensions, and conflicting priorities.

In 1987, the Council of the European Communities, known today as the Council of the European Union, rejected Morocco´s application to join the European Communities on the grounds that Morocco was not considered a European state geographically, culturally, or politically. Even though Morocco was rejected, it has had a privileged relationship with the EU. During the past years, the two actors have signed numerous agreements, and in 2008, Morocco became the first Southern Mediterranean country to obtain the Advanced Status with the EU, further solidifying its privileged partnership.

Since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, Morocco has actively participated in initiatives aimed at deepening its economic and regulatory alignment with the EU. A crucial aspect of this partnership is the balance between cooperation and symmetry. While Morocco has benefited from financial and technical assistance, the EU´s influence in promoting democratic reforms and human rights has faced limitations.

Despite the evolution of the ENP and ongoing adjustments to its framework, the EU-Morocco relationship remains complex, shaped by mutual interests and structural inequalities. This study explores how the ENP has influenced Morocco´s political and economic trajectory, examining how it serves as a tool for integration or merely reinforces existing power dynamics between the two actors.

2. __Introduction__

Relations between the European Union and Morocco have become increasingly relevant in recent years due to different factors that have affected the Mediterranean region. The European Neighbourhood Policy has been a key framework for this relationship, encouraging the establishment of new agreements, joint security efforts, and a better border control management (Bicchi, 2010).

From a political point of view, Morocco has become a key partner in managing migration to Europe and fighting terrorism in the southern Mediterranean. Cooperation between the two has been essential for controlling European borders, with Morocco as a crucial point in the transit, origin and destination of migrants (De Haas 2016). At the same time, since 1995, with the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) through the Barcelona Declaration, the EU has promoted reforms in human rights and democratic governance. However, the partnership has been marked by power asymmetries, with the EU dictating the terms of cooperation in the most important areas (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005).

On the economic front, Morocco is one of the EU's main trading partners in North Africa. With the entry into force of the EU-Morocco Association Agreement in 2000, a Free Trade Area between the EU and Morocco was established, covering key aspects such as trade, investment, and energy cooperation (European Commission, 2025). The EU has been a significant source of economic support, helping to fund projects in areas like infrastructure or renewable energy (Faustini Torres, 2025). Even though the economy has benefited from a relatively stable political context, internal economic inequalities and social challenges remain a challenge in Morocco, hindering its economic development. (Becheikh, 2022).

From a geostrategic perspective, Morocco has a strategic location between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, making it a crucial ally for the EU. Moreover, its influence in the Western Sahara conflict and its relations with third actors directly affect the international dynamics involving the EU (Arango & Martin 2005).

This thesis uses relevant academic literature to analyse how the ENP has shaped the relationship between the EU and Morocco by applying theories such as the New Regionalism, the Imperial Model, and Geostrategies.

2.1   Purposes and Motives

On October 4, 2024, the European Court of Justice annulled the EU-Morocco trade agreements related to agriculture and fisheries. This decision was based on the fact that these agreements were concluded without the consent of the people of Western Sahara, violating the principles of self-determination (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2024).

The European Court of Justice has recognised the Front Polisario as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people, emphasizing that any agreement affecting Western Sahara must have the consent of its population (General Court of the European Union, 2021).

The motive behind this thesis is the belief that understanding the relationship between the European Union and Morocco is essential to comprehend the complexities of the EU's political situation. What led the author to choose this topic is that, despite numerous agreements and cooperation frameworks aimed at modernizing Morocco, promoting democratization, and fostering economic and social development, issues like the Western Sahara dispute or persistent human rights violations remain unresolved.

This contradiction raises the question of how effectively the ENP achieves its objectives. This policy was designed to promote economic growth, political reform, and regional stability, yet Morocco remains a challenging and unpredictable partner. The kingdom benefits from financial aid, trade, and political cooperation (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005) but continues facing serious human rights concerns (Faustini Torres, 2025) and unresolved geopolitical tensions. This dynamic challenges the ENP´s credibility as a tool for democratization and modernization, raising doubts about whether it fosters a genuine partnership or serves as a mechanism for the EU to control its borders.

This study aims to examine the original purpose and effectiveness of the ENP by analysing the power dynamics present in the partnership, determining if the two actors interact as equals or if there are power imbalances, and, finally, if it is a viable long-term model for the EU-Morocco relations or a limited structure that prioritizes EU security over meaningful political transformation.

2.2   **Objectives**

This thesis explores the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to understand the European Union's and Morocco's relationship. This study examines the reasons behind the creation of the ENP, how the policy has shaped the relations, and its limitations and contradictions. The ENP was created to promote democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, however, assessing if the policy has achieved its goals and what challenges and contradictions have emerged is important.

This thesis focuses on three main objectives. The first is to analyse the motivations behind the creation of the ENP, using the theories of New Regionalism, Imperialism, and Geostrategies. These theoretical frameworks are essential because they provide different lenses to understand the ENP not just as a cooperation policy, but as a mechanism shaped by power dynamics and shifting priorities. Secondly, the study will assess the limitations and contradictions of the ENP, focusing on the challenges the policy faces, such as the imbalance of power between the EU and Morocco. Finally, it aims to determine whether the policy´s original targets have remained the same or have shifted to align with the EU´s evolving priorities.

2.3   **Methodology**

The methodology used in this thesis is based on an academic literature review that combines historical, political, and geostrategic analysis of the relations between the European Union and Morocco in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The historical analysis of the relationship between the two actors is essential to understand how they have evolved and the historical factors that condition their political systems and societies. The context of both countries is explained separately, followed by the history of

their bilateral partnership. After establishing this context, the ENP will be explained in detail, focusing on its origins and the changes it has undergone.

Once the background of both actors has been established and the policy explained, the study will focus on the key elements that condition the relationship today, emphasizing factors such as security, migration, economic cooperation, and human rights.

The analysis relies both on primary sources, such as official EU documents and newspaper articles, and secondary sources, such as academic articles. It is important to note that, although an effort has been made to ensure an objective view, much of the literature used comes from European academic sources, which could influence the interpretation of the facts.

In the following section, the three chosen theories will be explained and then applied in the context of the ENP in Morocco. These theories have been selected because they offer complementary perspectives on the policy: New Regionalism portrays the ENP as part of a broader need for regional integration; Imperialism shows the ENP as a way for the EU to expand its influence past its borders and the Geostrategies provide different views on how the EU manages its borders with neighbouring countries. However, due to the limitations of time and extension of a final thesis, it has not been possible to explore all relevant aspects of the topic in depth, leaving the door open for future research.

Additionally, it is important to mention that Artificial Intelligence has been a tool employed in this work. It has been relevant in facilitating the research for articles, translation of documents, grammatical corrections and analysis of large volumes of information.

3. Contextual Framework
3.1   Contextual Framework
3.1.1   Context of the European Union

The European Union, composed of 27 member states, currently faces significant internal and external challenges that shape its global role. Externally, the war in Ukraine has triggered an energy and economic crisis, accelerating the need to diversify into other energy sources to reduce dependence on Russian gas (International Energy Agency, 2023). Internally, the bloc's cohesion is affected by divisions on key issues such as migration, climate change, and respect for the rule of law, particularly in countries like Hungary and Poland (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016).

The pressure of migration in the Mediterranean is a significant challenge for the EU (EU Parliament, 2017). This situation has led to reinforced and new agreements with strategic partners such as Morocco, which plays a crucial role in controlling migration flows to Europe (European Commission, 2013). However, this issue raises not only humanitarian challenges but also security concerns, as there is an ongoing debate about whether irregular migration flows are linked to human trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism (Financial Action Task Force, 2022).

The debate on security and terrorism remains a highly sensitive issue, as the Council of the European Union states, "Jihadist terrorism remains the greatest threat to the EU" (Council of the European Union, 2025). This threat continues to be a major concern, not just because of the entry of terrorists from third countries but also because of the radicalization within the EU. Even though there have been fewer jihadist attacks in recent years, these groups still pose a significant risk, especially as the types of extremist violence have expanded (Council of the European Union, 2025).

Europol's *TE-SAT 2024* report, which provides an overview, statistical data, major developments, and trends in the terrorism landscape across EU Member States, states that in two thousand and twenty-three there were a total of one hundred and twenty terrorist attacks across seven EU Member States, marking an increase compared to previous years.

Of these, ninety-eight were successful, nine failed, and thirteen were prevented According to this report, the pattern of these attacks has shifted, with separatist groups accounting for the majority (70 attacks), left-wing and anarchist groups responsible for 32 attacks, and jihadist groups carrying out 14 attacks (Europol, 2024, p.5). It is important to note that, definitions of terrorism are not universal, they are shaped by each country´s historical experiences and exposure to violence (Skipple, Sohlberg, Field & Thórisdóttir, 2025). Meanwhile, right-wing groups attempted two attacks, both of which were intercepted before execution. According to the report, despite their decline, jihadist attacks remain the primary security risk to the EU. At the same time, the rise of both right-wing and left-wing extremist attacks has become an increasing concern (Europol, 2024).

Terrorist attacks have declined, but the fight against them has intensified, worsened by domestic radicalization and the threat posed by external actors. Recent developments include the adoption of the Regulation on the Removal of Terrorist Content Online (Official Journal of the European Union, 2021), the strengthening of Europol´s mandate to improve data collection (European Parliament, 2022) and the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda (European Commission, 2020). Additionally, enhanced intelligence sharing with third countries (Council of the European Union, 2025), demonstrate the EU´s commitment on the fight against terrorism.

Economically, the European Union is one of the largest economies in the world, with a GDP of €17 trillion (European Union, 2023). According to official European Union data, Germany is the largest contributor to the EU's GDP, followed by France and Italy. .The service sector accounts for 72% of the EU's GDP, while industry makes up nearly all the remaining. The EU is the world's largest manufactured goods and services exporter, representing approximately 14% of the global merchandise trade. The United States is the leading destination for EU goods exports, while China is the leading source of goods imports. The EU's overall public deficit is 3.5% of its GDP, and its gross debt is 82%. The countries with the highest public debt levels are Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and Belgium (European Union, 2023).

To better illustrate the European Union´s economic influence at the global level, the following chart represents the EU´s share in world trade compared to other major international actors. This visual representation contextualizes the EU´s role as a leading economic power, highlighting its relevance in the international system.

Figure 1: *Share of the EU in world trade*
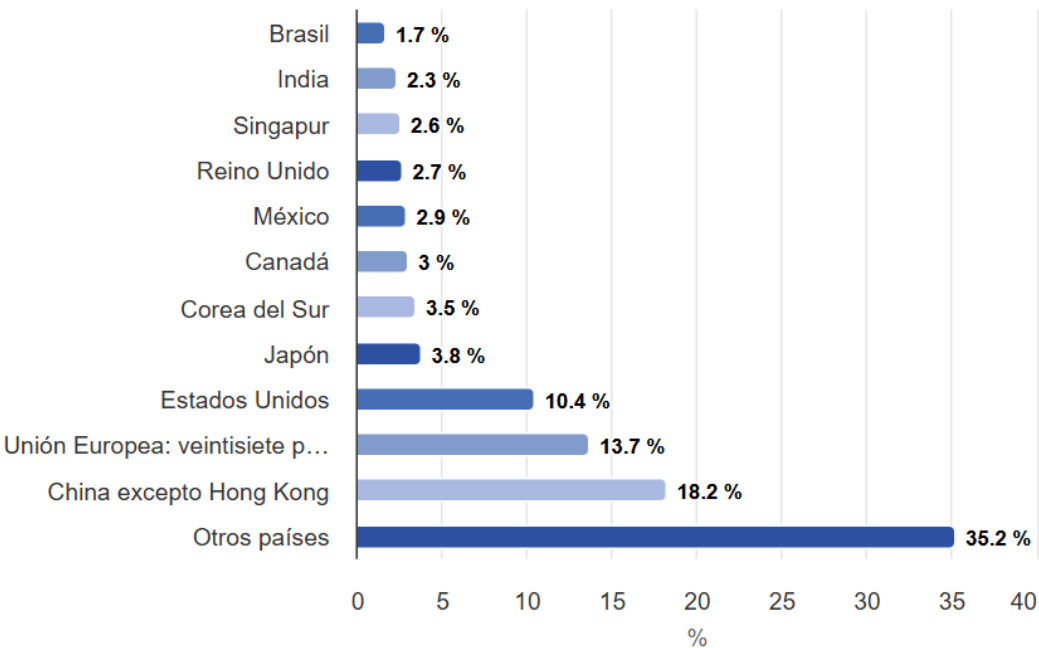
Source: European Union, 2023

The vertical axis shows various countries and regions significant in international trade, while the horizontal axis represents the percentage corresponding to each actor´s share of global trade. The EU has a prominent presence in global trade, with a total share of 13.7%, making it one of the leading trade actors in international commerce. This data places the EU ahead of big economies like the United States (10.4%), Japan (3.8%), or South Korea (3.5%) but behind China excluding Hong Kong (18.2%). These percentages indicate that, while the EU is a major player in global trade, China remains the largest trading economy, surpassing the EU by a significant margin.

Beyond the economic influence, the European Union also has a strong political influence through its foreign policy, especially in its neighbouring countries, which are directly affected by the European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP was launched to

promote stability, security and prosperity in EU´s neighbouring regions, and serves as the main framework to build and manage EU´s relations with these countries, both in the South and East. This policy plays a critical role in addressing the challenges that arise from the EU´s proximity to regions affected by political instability, economic problems and security threats(European Union External Action, 2021). By strengthening its relationship with neighbouring countries, the EU aims to create a stable environment based on cooperation.

Besides the cooperation aspect, the ENP places strong emphasis on regional security, economic prosperity, and promotion of European values. The main objective is to increase stability in the EU´s surrounding regions as it has recognised that instability nearby can quickly affect its own territory. At the same time, the EU promotes its values as a way to support long-term stability and increase its influence beyond its borders (Smith, 2005).

3.1.2   Context of the Kingdom of Morocco

With a population of nearly 38 million, Morocco enjoys relative political stability compared to other African countries (Becheikh, 2022). However, this stability is maintained through a highly centralized system, where King Mohammed VI, in power since July 23, 1999, concentrates the legislative, judiciary and executive powers (Caruso, 2021). Morocco is officially defined as a "constitutional, democratic, parliamentary, and social monarchy" (Constitution of Morocco, 2011, p.3). However, articles 7 and 41 are particularly important in defining its political system. These articles shape the duality that characterizes the regime in terms of its institutions (both traditional and modern), its leading actors (the King and the political parties that emerged from the National Movement), and its legitimacy (both religious and political).

Article 41 states that the King as "Amir al-Mu'minin" (Commander of the Faithful), must ensure compliance with Islam. The article states: ″Le Roi, Amir Al Mouminine, veuille au respect de l'Islam. Il est le Garant du libre exercice des cultes.″. This title grants King Mohammed VI a political-religious leadership placing him above the Constitution: "The king is not accountable to any other institution; he remains above the law" (Madani, Maghraoui, and Zerhouni, 2012, p.24).

On the other hand, Article 7 of the Constitution establishes a pluralist political system, explicitly declaring that a one-party system is illegal "Le régime du parti unique est illégal". According to Martín Muñoz, 1996, this clause, introduced in the 1996 Constitution, is attributed to King Mohammed VI's intent to prevent the concentration of power in a single party, particularly to counter the influence of the Istiqlal Party after Morocco´s independence from France. This measure was designed to safeguard the monarchy from the rise of a dominant party that could potentially weaken or even abolish it, as had occurred in other countries in the region, such as Tunisia (Martín Muñoz, 1996).

From an institutional perspective, Cavatorta (2016) states that the accession of King Mohammed VI expanded the competencies of elected representatives, fostering more genuine party competition and enabling regular, reasonably free and fair elections. However, despite these improvements, real political power remains concentrated in the monarchy, limiting the capacity of governments to implement reforms (Cavatorta, 2016). This constraint has contributed to growing dissatisfaction with political processes, as many citizens believe the government is failing to address socio-economic problems such as poverty, inequality, and corruption. Past governments, including the Islamist Justice and Development Party (IJDP), which governed from 2011 to 2021, have often faced concerns over the risk of social unrest driven by these persistent issues. Since 2021, the Head of Government has been Aziz Akhannouch, leader of the National Rally of Independents (RNI), a businessman close to Mohammed VI and the owner of the largest private wealth in the country. Previously, RNI, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) led the government from 2011 to 2021 but was unable to distance itself from the king´s influence (Caruso, 2021).

Morocco gained independence from France in 1956, establishing a hereditary monarchy under King Mohammed V (Arango & Martin, 2005). According to the authors, upon his death in 1961, the throne passed to Hassan II, who centralized power and suppressed political dissent. In the early 1970s, following two military coup attempts, King Hassan II faced significant pressure for constitutional reform. However, rather than losing power, he emerged from this crisis with even greater authority than his predecessors, leading him to take severe action against the opposition and to reinforce his nationalist goals in Western Sahara after the withdrawal of Spanish forces in 1975 (Maghraoui, 2001).

During the years of lead (1970s-1980s), thousands of political opponents were arrested, tortured, or disappeared as the regime silenced dissent (Amnesty International, 2010).

The ascension of Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999 closely aligned with the entry into force of the 1996 Association Agreement. From that moment, the new king aspired to strengthen Marocco´s relationship with the EU, advocating for an Advanced Status, a position that is less than a full membership and more than mere accession. To reinforce this legitimacy internationally and domestically, Mohammed VI aimed to demonstrate visible progress in governance and reform, presenting himself as a modernizing leader committed to maintaining strong ties with the EU (Martínez, 2009).

When Mohammed VI ascended to the throne, he inherited a country struggling with economic difficulties, high unemployment, and a growing Islamist influence. Promises of reform marked his early rule, he removed key figures from the old regime, including Driss Basri, the powerful Interior Minister who had overseen state repression (Martín Muñoz, 1996). He also established the "Instance Équité et Réconciliation", tasked with investigating human rights violations and state abuses committed during Hassan II's reign (Amnesty International, 2010). Additionally, political prisoners were released, and victims families received financial compensation. According to Amnesty International, 2010, political reforms were strategically implemented to manage opposition and maintain regime stability. But, as Cavatorta (2016) explains, the political reforms in Morocco, rather than being a challenge to the monarchy's power, have reinforced its role.

During the Arab Upspring, the February 20 Movement (M20F), a protest movement advocating for political reform, social justice, and an end to corruption, mobilized protests demanding "more justice, dignity and democracy" (Caruso, 2021, p.1) in response, King Mohammed VI launched constitutional reforms, including expanding the powers of the House of Representatives and the Prime Minister. Unlike many other Arab states where protest movements led to regime collapse or violent repression, Morocco´s monarchy took a different approach: "Faced with the example of Tunisia, King Mohammed VI quickly saw the need to get out ahead of the February 20 protest movement. With considerable financial support from Saudi Arabia to deploy, the monarchy made a high-profile commitment to meaningful reforms towards a constitutional monarchy."

(Lynch, 2012, p. 71). A new Constitution was approved in a 2011 referendum, temporarily calming protests while preserving the monarchy´s dominant role. According to Catalano & Graziano, (2016), despite the appearance of democratization, fundamental freedoms remain restricted, with journalists and activists facing legal persecution and widespread media censorship, including the banning of publications and the restriction of internet access.

Economically, the kingdom has experienced steady growth in key sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and renewable energy, increasing its GDP a 27% from 2010 to 2018. However, this progress has not translated into equal opportunities for the population, as social inequalities remain severe. Youth unemployment is high, illiteracy remains an issue, the judicial system is weak, and corruption persists (Becheikh, 2022). We can see the high levels of inequality in Morocco´s GNI index. According to World Bank data, the most recent measure, recorded in 2013, shows a score of 39.5. This index measures the distribution of income within a country, where 0 represents very high inequality and 100 represents perfect equality (World Bank, 2013). A score of 39.5 portrays the persisting economic imbalances in the country.

Some of the country´s major challenges include terrorism and migration. Morocco is crucial in managing migration flows towards Europe, acting as a transit and origin country. The EU has strengthened cooperation with Morocco to curb irregular migration, providing financial and technical assistance (Arango & Martin, 2005). However, this collaboration has sparked controversy, as Moroccan authorities have been accused of human rights violations in their handling of migrants (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005). Meanwhile, in terms of security, Morocco works closely with the EU to combat terrorism and extremist groups, yet concerns remain over radicalization and broader regional instability (Caruso, 2021).

3.1.3   <u>Recent history of the relationship between Morocco and the EU.</u>

The EU-Morocco partnership intensified with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) launched in November 1995, which aimed to foster political, economic, and cultural cooperation across the Mediterranean region. The EMP followed a holistic approach structured around three main pillars: political, economic, and cultural cooperation. This approach was based on the twin liberalization paradigm, in which social, political, and economic aspects should be interconnected to ensure balanced economic growth and human development, however, in practice, the EMP mainly focused on the implementation of the economic chapter (Catalano & Graziano, 2016, p. 368-369).

Meanwhile, EU's commitments to promoting democracy resulted in limited concrete actions. The "Mesures d´Accompagnement" (MEDA) programme served as the EMP's primary financial and operational tool. Between 1995 and 2006, Morocco received over 1.6 billion €, making it the largest beneficiary of EU assistance among all Mediterranean partner countries. (Catalano & Graziano, 2016, p.369).

The EU-Mediterranean Association Agreement came into force in 2000, emphasizing economic liberalization, political dialogue, and "respect for the democratic principles and fundamental human rights established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Euro–Mediterranean Agreement, 2000, p. 4). A key turning point was the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in March 2003, which reinforced the political dimension of the Barcelona Process by adding the conditionality of deeper economic integration, such as access to the EU´s internal market, in exchange for political, institutional, and economic reforms. Unlike the EMP´s one-size-fits-all model, the ENP adopted a more bilateral, country-specific approach through jointly agreed action plans (Catalano & Graziano, 2016).

In 2008, Morocco became the first Southern Mediterranean country to achieve advanced status, however, this designation primarily reinforced existing agreements rather than introducing new commitments. The framework focused on political dialogue, security cooperation, and Morocco´s progressive integration into the EU´s common market. While

the status was presented as a recognition of Morocco´s reform efforts, it lacked legal clarity and did not provide concrete advances in areas like agriculture or mobility.). In practice, it functioned more as a diplomatic gesture to maintain Morocco´s image as a model partner: "In the short term, it is mainly a public diplomacy move aimed at maintaining its status as 'role model' for other Arab Mediterranean counties" (Martín, 2009, p. 242. The launch of the Union for the Mediterranean that same year shifted EU priorities towards more technical and economic cooperation, rather than democratic transformation (Martín, 2009).

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 altered the geopolitical scenario in the Middle East and North Africa, led to a shift in EU policy, recognising the need to support democratic transitions in the region actively. As a result, in March 2011, the EU introduced a "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean", recognising that the EU must not be a passive spectator. It was based on three pillars: democratic transformation, civil society support, and inclusive economic growth. They also applied a more for more approach, offering incentives like financial aid, market access, and mobility partnerships to countries making democratic progress (Teti, 2012).

After the Arab Uprisings, Morocco remained the primary beneficiary of EU support, receiving 580 million € (2011 - 2013), additional funds under the Spring Programme, and a Mobility Partnership (2013) that facilitated negotiations on visa facilitation and trade agreements. The Spring Programme was a part of the EU´s Southern Neighbourhood approach to the, offering additional funding to countries that demonstrated a commitment to democratic reform (European Commission, 2011). The Mobility Partnership, meanwhile, positioned Morocco as a key migration partner and aimed to foster legal mobility for students, researchers, etc (European Commission, 2013). A Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) was also launched to integrate Morocco further into the EU´s internal market (European Commission, 2013).

In 2013, a new Action Plan (2013-2017) for the Advanced Status was adopted, focusing on regulatory alignment and Morocco´s gradual integration into the EU market. However, progress on democratic reforms remained slow, with only partial implementation of Morocco´s 2011 constitutional reforms. The EU criticized delays in

legal reforms, restrictions on freedom of assembly, and human rights concerns (Catalano & Graziano, 2016).

EU-Morocco cooperation deepened further in 2013 through the signing of the Migration Cooperation Agreement. This agreement aimed to improve migration management by reinforcing border controls and facilitating the repatriation of irregular migrants. In exchange, Morocco received financial aid and technical support from the EU (Council of the European Union, 2013; Catalano & Graziano, 2016). This partnership has played a crucial role in curbing migration from sub-Saharan Africa, establishing Morocco as a key ally in managing migration flows towards the European continent.

Despite all these advancements, there are still recurring tensions regarding migration, human rights, and democracy. Tensions over migration became evident in 2021 during the Ceuta migration crisis when more than 8,000 migrants crossed into the Spanish city in just a few days following a relaxation of border controls by Moroccan authorities. This move was widely perceived as retaliation for Spain's decision to provide medical treatment to Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front (Caruso, 2021). The crisis exposed the growing relevance of migration in diplomatic relations and highlighted how migration management has become a key factor in shaping political decisions.

According to Caruso, 2021, the EU has maintained a position of neutrality in this matter as it continues to support an UN-led resolution for the Western Sahara conflict, favouring a referendum on self-determination. The tensions became further evident in 2024 when the European Court of Justice annulled EU-Morocco fisheries and agricultural agreements because they illegally exploited Western Sahara resources, reinforcing Europe's legal stance on the conflict (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2024).

The EU's close ties with Morocco have also raised concerns about human rights violations, which international organisations have widely reported. Moroccan authorities have been accused of restricting freedom of expression, repressing political dissent, and using torture against activists and journalists (Cavatorta, 2016). According to Amnesty International´s 2024 report, the government has: "convicted at least six individuals, including activists, journalists and a lawyer, for peacefully exercising their right to freedom

of expression. They also sporadically repressed dissent in Western Sahara. Authorities tortured and otherwise ill-treated some individuals perceived as critics". (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 266). The situation in the Western Sahara is particularly alarming, as Sahrawi activists have been subject to repression, ill-treatment, and imprisonment for advocating for independence (Caruso, 2021).

While Morocco´s human rights record is usually criticised, similar concerns have been raised within the EU itself. According to Amnesty International´s 2024 report, countries like Hungary, Poland and Greece have restricted press of freedom, mistreated migrants, and undermined judicial independence (Amnesty International, 2024). This situation raises questions about EU´s legitimacy in promoting human rights reforms abroad while facing violations within its own borders.

3.2   Evolution and Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy

The ENP was officially introduced in 2004 with the aim of strengthening relations between the European Union and its surrounding countries. As stated in the European Commission´s Strategy Paper, the policy aimed to promote a "ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations" (Commission, 2004, p.6). This included democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and good governance. Since its creation, the ENP promoted the belief that closer political and economic ties with the EU would contribute to regional stability. However, it is important to note that the policy was initially developed as a response to the challenges emerging in Eastern Europe after the enlargement, and its extension to the southern neighbourhood was the result of pressure from southern EU member states who feared a loss of attention to their geopolitical priorities (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008).

Overtime, the policy´s focus and rhetoric have changed. In the early years, the EU was portrayed as a normative power by texts like Wider Europe (2003) and the first ENP Communication (2004), which encouraged shared values and regulatory approximation. Migration, terrorism, and regional instability were acknowledged, but they were framed as developmental challenges rather than security threats. However, from 2007 onwards, the discourse surrounding the ENP began to reflect increasing concerns with regional security and control. The 2011 Review introduced the more for more principle, stating that those

countries that comply with more reforms and make them faster will have more benefits, reinforcing the logic of positive conditionality. Still, this review already marked a shift in the rhetoric, as it began to tie financial and political support to partner countries cooperation on migration and border management.

The turning point came in 2015, with a second review that introduced what the Commission describes as a "re-prioritisation and an introduction of new ways of working" (Commission, 2015, p.2). The previous incentive-based logic was replaced by a more pragmatic approach based on mutual interests, ownership and differentiation. The text explicitly states that "not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards" and that cooperation would be adjusted accordingly (Commission, 2015, p.2). Security, border control, terrorism and irregular migration became dominant priorities, while democracy promotion was pushed to a second place. As Browning and Joenniemi (2008) argue, this reflects a shift in the EU´s external borders from being spaces of cooperation and exchange to becoming borders of control.

These discursive shifts have translated into three core principles that shape the implementation of the ENP, joint ownership, differentiated bilateralism and conditionality (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008: Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2025). Joint ownership is based on the idea that partner countries participate in defining the content and direction of their cooperation with the EU. However, scholars question the practical application of this concept, arguing that these common values promoted by the EU are in fact EU centric norms imposed through asymmetrical negotiations. (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008).

Differentiated bilateralism, although presented as a flexible tool to adapt cooperation to each partner´s needs and aspirations, has also been criticised. While it distances itself from the one-size-fits-all model of the EMP, it reinforces power imbalances by allowing the EU so to set different terms and expectations for each partner, often depending on their strategic value. As Pace (2007) notes, this bilateral logic strengthens the EU´s hegemonic role and undermines the possibility of a balanced regional framework.

Conditionality, inspired by the enlargement process, follows the logic of rewarding reform with enhanced cooperation. Yet, in the absence of the membership perspective, this mechanism loses most of its power. As Schimmelfenning and Scholtz (2008) have pointed

out, democracy promotion through conditionality has only been effective when accompanied by the prospect of accession. In the case of Morocco, where such prospect does not exist, conditionality becomes an instrument to secure compliance on key issues rather than a tool for political transformation. (Catalano, 2016).

4. <u>Theoretical Framework</u>

Following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, the EU experienced growing enlargement fatigue, which was intensified with Türkiye´s accession process. The case of Türkiye sparked a new debate about the characteristics of Europeanness, questioning whether European identity should be defined by cultural traditions or geographical factors. Concerns have also arisen about the need to protect the achievements of the European project. "Enlargement fatigue has been accompanied by the worries that the recent expansion to 27 members may turn the EU into a bureaucratic dinosaur and further undermine the democratic legitimacy of the Union" (S. Browning, 2008, p.520). In this context, the desire to draw the final borders of the EU has become critical, as many fear that further expansion will not only make the union unworkable but may threaten its durability.

The questions surrounding the Union´s borders cannot be separated from concerns about its security, especially considering that the EU has used the carrot of future membership as a tool to promote stability in its borders. Defining EU´s final borders, presents a dilemma for its foreign policy: How to ensure stability in bordering countries once the incentive of enlargement is no longer available. The ENP emerged as a response to this challenge, aiming to create a benevolent and stable "stable ring of friends" (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008).

Scholars are divided over   how effective this new policy really is. As Scott (2005) points out, opinions are polarized between those who view the ENP as driven by neo-liberal/ neo-imperialist motives of economic hegemony and those who see it as a "potentially progressive form of "postmodern" regionalism" (Browning & Joenniemi,

2008, p.520). The tendency has been to view the ENP as a reflection of a fixed geopolitical vision of what the EU is about and how it aims to manage the broader European space.

In order to understand how the European Union interacts with its neighbours, several theoretical models have been developed to describe the nature of the EU´s geopolitical identity. Among the most cited are the theories of New Regionalism, Imperial Model and the Geostrategies. These models offer a vision of how power, sovereignty, and territoriality are conceptualized and exercised within and beyond the EU´s formal borders.

4.1   New Regionalism

As Börzel (2016) defines it, regionalism is a process through which states and societies build closer economic, political, security, and socio-cultural ties within a particular geographic region. This perspective views regions not as pre-existing or natural entities but as socially and politically constructed spaces shaped by actors interests, identities, and power relations. This theory explains why states cooperate within a geographic framework to address common challenges such as security, economic development, and political stability. According to Mattli 1999, countries also experience a need to belong to a region or organisation, reinforcing their participation in regional processes.

Regionalism has emerged as a response to the erosion of traditional border rigidity and the increased vulnerability of states to a more interconnected world. According to Bloor (2022, p.1), "As borders have become more porous, states have sought to co-operate more closely in order to deal with the consequences of interdependence.". This shift has exposed states to new challenges and made them more vulnerable to external pressures. In this context, regionalism serves as a strategy to enhance the capacity of countries to act collectively in both economic and political global spheres. The main target of regional alliances is to respond more effectively to collective threats (Bloor, 20222).

The relationship between regionalism and globalization is complex, as regionalism can promote cooperation while also limiting broader global integration. From a zero-sum perspective, regionalism may undermine national sovereignty by transferring decision-making power to regional organisations. However, other

interpretations suggest that sovereignty can be shared, strengthening regional cooperation without diminishing national autonomy (Hettne & Söderbaum, 1998, p.8).

It is also notable how regionalism plays an important role in conflict prevention. As Bloor (2022) notes, deeper integration helps establish zones of peace and stability. Regional blocs provide platforms for dialogue, mediation, and strong communication channels that offer peaceful mechanisms to address disputes. These networks make it easier to understand other´s positions, share information, and coordinate responses to regional challenges.

Regionalism is particularly useful for analysing how powerful regional actors intend to influence their surroundings. As De Lombaerde and Schulz (2010) argue, regionalism functions as a mechanism of internal coordination and a platform for external influence, often with global implications. Some actors can create scenarios that promote interregional interaction and act as mechanisms of cooperation and integration at the regional and global levels.

There are two main forms of regionalism. Old regionalism, shaped by the Cold War bipolarity and nationalism, tends towards protectionism in the economic sphere. In contrast, Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum developed the New Regionalism Approach (NRA), which is embedded in the context of globalization and multipolarity. As the authors explain, "The new regionalism is a comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process, implying a change of a particular region from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity with regard to a number of dimensions, the most important being culture, security, economic policies and political regimes" (Hettne & Söderbaum, 1998, p.2). The authors support the idea that regionalism emerges more spontaneously from within the region and is shaped by internal dynamics and challenges rather than being externally imposed.

The NRA challenges the idea that regionalism is always positive or based only on economic logic. It states that regionalism is not just about focusing inward but also reflects deeper global interdependence and the limited ability of individual states to address transnational challenges. Notably, the NRA emphasises the asymmetry between core and peripheral regions, noting that "regions in the Core zone [...] have an impact

rather than being impacted upon" (Hettne & Söderbaum, 1998, p.14), while peripheral regions often struggle with instability and underdevelopment, relying on regionalism as a strategy to avoid marginalization (Hettne & Söderbaum, 1998).

The evolution from old to new regionalism reflects a shift from state-centred economic blocs to more flexible, multidimensional forms of cooperation that include political, normative, and identity-based components. In this context, Makarychev (2018, p.3) highlights the concept of normative regionalism, particularly relevant in the EU's case, where integration is linked to promoting values such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. However, regionalism is not a neutral process, it can reproduce asymmetrical power relations where dominant actors define the terms of cooperation. Moreover, the success of regional projects depends on the willingness of a leading actor to supply public goods and the states' interest in joining such efforts (Hettne & Söderbaum, 1998; Makarychev, 2018).

New regionalism is also influenced by nationalism and domestic factors (Axline, 1994; Palmer, 1992). Rather than being seen as an alternative to national interests, regionalism is a tool to strengthen and reinforce the state's role in an increasingly interdependent world. In a context marked by transnational challenges, regionalism emerges as a strategic response. By pooling sovereignty, states voluntarily transfer parts of their decision-making power to regional structures, not as a loss of control, but as a strategic effort to enhance their collective capacity for action.

4.2 **The Imperial Model**

Christopher S. Browning introduces the Imperial Model to describe Europe and its influence in foreign policy. The model shows the EU increasingly exhibiting imperial characteristics, whose external governance influences and controls neighbouring regions without direct rule or formal annexation. The power is seen as concentrated at the centre in Brussels and being dispersed outwards to different degrees (Browning, 2019; Cooper, 2003). The Imperial model is characterized by asymmetrical relationships, where the EU

sets the norms, values, and standards that other countries are expected to follow in exchange for economic benefits, trade, and cooperation mechanisms. These standards include political and normative expectations such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Browning, 2019, p.86). This arrangement is not a reciprocal partnership but a hierarchical structure where the EU dominates the agenda, leaving peripheral countries in a position of dependency (Browning, 2019, p.96). The model portrays the idea of the EU as a peace project that aims to extend peace and stability beyond its borders, thereby influencing political and economic developments in neighbouring regions and shaping their spaces. (Browning, 2019, p.86)

The importance of the border lies in its role in defining the EU´s identity as distinct from the others. While this border is crucial to the EU´s self-perception, it also serves as a dynamic and expanding zone of influence. Rather than formal governance, the EU´s external presence is focused on shaping its neighbours' political and economic space by projecting its norms and values, which align with its broader mission to promote peace and stability (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008).

This model is also closely linked to security concerns. As external threats, such as migration, terrorism, or instability, emerge, the EU seeks to manage and mitigate these risks through external action. The EU seeks to extend its security perimeter by engaging with neighbouring countries while maintaining the distinction between itself and the outside world. In this sense, the EU extends its influence and power to these countries but keeps its borders intact, preventing the internal issues of peripheral states from contaminating its security and cohesion: "Whilst internally processes of integration and debordering are valued as producing a Deutschian-esque security community, external borders need to be preserved to pre-empt contamination from external threats" (S. Browning, 2019, p.95).

4.3   Geostrategies

The explanation of the different geopolitical models serves as a first step towards understanding the European Union's evolving identity and the development of European space and governance. However, this framework is insufficient because it lacks flexibility and does not fully capture the complex dynamics of EU policies. One of the main problems is that these models can easily simplify reality. A policy can reflect different models in different ways, sometimes all at once, depending on the situation or location. For this reason, it is helpful to go beyond the models and analyse the geostrategies proposed by William Walters. These strategies show how the EU manages its borders with neighbouring countries. The ENP reflects this combination of approaches, showing that the EU does not use just one strategy, but combines several methods depending on the region and political context.

According to Walters, geostrategies focus on specific discourses surrounding borders, rather than representing broader geopolitical frameworks:

A geostrategy corresponds with a particular way of organising the space of the border. It presupposes many things, including particular definitions of the "inside" and "outside" of the polity, the types of threat or problem which the border is to address, and specific accounts of the time and the space of the border, Geostrategies entail certain territorialisations. Each implies a particular form of controlling space and population. But they also presuppose particular definitions as to identity and political rationality of Europe. (Walters, 2004, p.675)

Different geostrategies, therefore, involve specific ways of understanding geography and how certain territories are perceived and managed. The first geostrategy discussed by Walters is the march, which refers to ambiguous or fluid zones separating political or cultural entities. Rather than a clearly defined boundary, a march represents a space where different groups interact and overlap. Walters uses historical examples, such as the Anglo-Welsh marches, where English and Welsh settlements were mixed, and the line between the inside and the outside was blurred and flexible (Walters, 2004, p.684).Walters (2004, p. 684), describes the march as "something like an interzone between powers". The march can also be seen as a security belt, shielding Europe's stable

"core" from perceived disorder or instability beyond its borders (Walters, 2004, p. 683). However, Walters also notes that the march should not be seen as static but as a dynamic space that can shift over time. For example, before 2004, the EU viewed Central and Eastern Europe as part of its security buffer, but with the EU enlargement that followed, the concept of a march or buffer zone was pushed further eastward towards new neighbouring regions (Walters, 2004).

A second way the EU acts is through what some call a colonial frontier strategy. This approach views the frontier not as a fixed boundary but as a dynamic and expanding space where a dominant power engages with what lies beyond it. It is understood as a zone of contact, where interaction, assimilation, conflict, and efforts at pacification take place. Unlike traditional borders, the colonial frontier is not static, it is meant to be pushed outward, expanding the centre's influence. A key feature of this geostrategy is the presence of power asymmetry. The dominant actor assumes the right to determine what is considered legitimate or appropriate in this frontier space. As Walters explains, it is a way of organizing political space where the centre holds authority and claims the moral and normative right to reshape the periphery according to its values. In this framework, the goal is not merely to coexist with the outside but to transform it and align with the centre's norms, institutions, and preferences. Over time, this process aims to gradually incorporate the external space into the internal order, extending the reach of the centre's influence beyond its formal borders (Walters, 2004).

Another strategy is the limes, Walters describes it as distinct from the march, a fluid zone between powers, and the modern frontier, which is a strict dividing line. Instead, the limes should be understood as a boundary or outer edge, a limit that defines the extent of a political entity´s reach. It represents a fringe space, not entirely fixed, but more stable and enduring than the colonial frontier. Although the limes share similarities with the colonial frontier, especially in establishing a hierarchical relationship between the inside and the outside, the key difference lies in its orientation. While the colonial frontier is expansionist, aiming to extend influence and eventually incorporate the outside, the limes are more about marking the limits of expansion. Its purpose is to consolidate and preserve what the political centre has already gained rather than to continue expanding outward. In this sense, the limes reflect a stabilization strategy, seeking to secure and institutionalize the boundaries of the political community. It signals a shift from extending the border to

defining and managing it, reinforcing asymmetrical relations with neighbouring territories without necessarily aiming to absorb them fully. (Walters, 2004, p.691-692)

Finally, there is the networked (non) border geostrategy, which is closely linked to concepts of deterritorialization and the idea of a borderless world, which are commonly discussed in postmodern theories about Europe and globalization studies. According to Walters, 2004, this geostrategy is rooted in neoliberal principles that aim to eliminate barriers to the free movement of people, goods, and services, reflecting the core objectives of the EU treaties. A key aspect of the networked (non) border geostrategy is that physical borders are becoming less important. Traditional border control practices that once occurred at clearly defined checkpoints are increasingly spread across the territory. These practices are also carried out in close and networked cooperation with non-EU actors. In this sense, the entire national or European territory is treated as a border space, where effective control is achieved through collaboration between agencies on both sides of the border (Walters, 2004, p.679).

In the case of Morocco, all these strategies can be seen simultaneously, showing how the EU mixes different goals like security, economic cooperation, and value promotion into a complex and sometimes contradictory foreign policy.

5. **Analysis**

As mentioned previously, this analysis aims to explore the motivations behind the creation of the ENP. To approach this, this study will begin by examining how concepts of freedom and democracy have evolved in the country, using tools such as Freedom House as indicators of political and civil liberties.

Freedom House is an independent organisation that assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties worldwide. According to its 2024 report, the Kingdom of Morocco had a status of partially free, with an overall score of 37/100, political rights rated 13/40 and civil liberties 24/60. But, as several scholar argue, indices like Freedom House cannot fully capture the complexity of democratization processes (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002;

Coppedge et al, 2011)

Beyond international indices, is crucial to consider academic perspectives that study how civil and political liberties are experienced and constrained in Morocco. Based on interviews with local stakeholders, Faustini Torres (2025) highlights that, elements like EU´s externalisation agenda, particularly in the field of migration has had political consequences in countries like Morocco. Rather than encouraging democratic development, this agenda has contributed to the consolidation of authoritarian practices. Civil society organisations and specially migrants are increasingly marginalised in a regime that is increasingly repressing dissent: "A central concern raised by stakeholders involves the worsening human rights situation in Morocco […] Beyond migrants, Morocco´s enhanced coercive capacity has had significant repercussions for local populations and opposition elites, particularly in regions like the Rif" (Faustini, 2025, p.19).

5.1   The ENP as an alternative to EU accession

As stated previously, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed as a response to the EU´s enlargement fatigue, particularly after the 2004 expansion, which saw the admission of ten new member states. Enlargement has historically been one of the EU´s most powerful tools for reforming third countries, fostering political stability, and integrating them into the European order. However, the EU now faces a fundamental dilemma: while further enlargement could promote economic growth, security, and democratic values, the institutional capacity of the EU to absorb more members is increasingly strained (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008; Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005). This shift from enlargement to neighbourhood cooperation through the ENP can be interpreted through the lens of the imperial model, which suggests that the EU seeks to maintain control and extend its influence over the periphery without offering the possibility of membership.

In this context, the ENP was established as an alternative to EU membership, offering neighbouring countries a structured framework for cooperation in areas such as trade, security, and political reform without offering the prospect of accession (Browning

& Joenniemi, 2008, p.524). While it facilitates access to certain benefits, such as improved trade relations, cooperation in security, economy, education etc, the absence of membership raises questions about its effectiveness.

While most of the EU´s eastern neighbours, have reacted with limited enthusiasm, largely because of the absence of the accession possibility, southern mediterranean countries like Morocco, Tunisia, and Israel have seen the ENP as a valuable step forward: As Del Sarto and Schumacher state, this south mediterranean countries tend to see the policy as beneficial, as it provides access to economic and trade benefits, security cooperation etc without the full obligations of EU membership (Del Sarto, Schumacher, 2005). These states do not need to fully comply with the Copenhagen criteria required for accession but must still meet specific conditions, particularly in economic governance, regulatory alignment, and democratic reforms.

However, for others, the ENP remains insufficient, as it demands alignment with EU policies and values without the promise of future membership. This reflects the logic of the imperial model, where the EU sets the rules without granting an equal partnership. According to Browning and Joenniemi (2008), the success of such policies depends on whether alternatives to accession are truly attractive.

This asymmetry is particularly evident in Morocco´s case. Despite applying for EU membership in 1987 and being rejected on geographical and political grounds, Morocco has remained one of the EU´s most engaged partners. In 2008, it became the first Southern Mediterranean country to receive Advanced Status, granting it enhanced economic ties, political dialogue, and sectoral cooperation agreements. From the perspective of the imperial theory, this status reinforces a system in which the EU expands its influence while maintaining a position of power.

5.2   Analysis of the ENP
5.2.1   Regionalism

From a regionalist perspective, the ENP can be seen as a response to the EU´s role as a region builder with its neighbours. The EU is understood as an actor that creates spaces for cooperation and interaction at the regional and global levels. However, this model questions how effective the ENP really is in promoting cooperation. On one hand, the EU acts as a builder of a common space based on the objective of bringing the partner countries closer to each other as well as to the rest of the EU´s neighbours. On the other hand, it is also judged if further integration with the EU could lead to a distancing of Morocco from other African regional unions, possibly leading to new tensions.

In the southern dimension of the ENP, Morocco is often cited as a model partner due to its consistent engagement with EU-led initiatives and its early adoption of reforms aligned with European norms. From a regionalist perspective, the ENP reflects the EU´s border strategy to construct a regional order that is normatively aligned with its values, structurally integrated through trade and governance frameworks, and politically stable. But this regionalism is not neutral, as Hettne and Söderbaum (1998, p.7) explain, "regionalisms are political and social projects, devised by human actors in order to transform or alter existing structures". This portrays the EU as trying to reshape neighbouring spaces to make them align with its own strategic objectives.

The Union acts as a region-builder, not simply by exporting rules and standards, but by promoting a common normative space, which Farrell (2009) refers to as a normative region that brings its neighbours closer to the EU without offering them full membership. However, analysing the ENP through this theoretical lens also reveals its limitations. While the policy presents itself as a tool for promoting prosperity and political convergence, it is marked by a clear imbalance of power in which the EU defines priorities and benchmarks, while Morocco is positioned as a recipient of this framework. As Söderbaum (2006) points out, regionalism often masks power imbalances under the guise of cooperation. In this sense, the creation of the ENP can be seen, on one hand, as a positive approach of the EU to build a common space and address shared challenges, but on the other hand, as a mechanism that reinforces inequalities between the union and its neighbours.

The historical context further supports this analysis. After the initial launch of the ENP in 2004, Morocco quickly became one of the most engaged actors. This can be partly explained by the structural vacuum left in the region following broader geopolitical shifts, and the EU's ability to offer a sense of regional belonging and economic opportunity. As Mattli (1999) argues, the demand for regional integration is often driven by the perceived benefits of stability, recognition, and development. Morocco's willingness to engage with the ENP may thus be understood as a strategic decision to secure a place within a European-centred regional order, without compromising its autonomy or non-aligned foreign policy.

To sum up, if we analyse the ENP from the point of view of regionalism, we see that its nature is based on the need for states to join their regional neighbours to face common threats. Therefore, we can affirm that the motivation behind the creation of this policy is cooperation between countries. However, this theory also highlights the significant power asymmetries in the relationship between the two actors, the EU brings countries together, but sets the rules of engagement, which explains why this relation remains fundamentally asymmetrical.

5.2.2   <u>**Imperial Model**</u>

From an imperialist perspective, the ENP was created as a tool through which the EU exercises influence beyond its borders without direct control. Rather than promoting an equal partnership, the EU acts as an imperial centre that defines the rules of the game, conditions of financial support and cooperation, and expands its influence while preserving a clear separation between "us" and "them".

Under this theory, the EU sets the basis of the relationship by exporting its political legal, and economic norms as prerequisites for access to benefits like trade, funding or mobility frameworks. These norms are not negotiated on equal terms but are imposed by the EU, reinforcing a hierarchical structure in which the EU governs indirectly through conditionality and soft mechanisms. Morocco is expected to adapt to these standards, but it remains outside the decision-making core, illustrating the asymmetry of the partnership.

Under this view, the promotion of democracy is not seen as an end itself, but as a

tool that legitimizes the EU´s influence in the region. Morocco is both framed as a partner and as a resource of instability, reinforcing a dynamic where the EU evaluates and lead, while Morocco adapts.

A central feature of this imperial model is the EU's effort to extend its influence beyond its formal borders. Although it maintains a clear external frontier, it wants to reshape the political and economic landscape of its neighbourhood to align with its own interests. This external governance is justified primarily by security concerns: Morocco is framed as a potential source of threats like irregular migration, terrorism, or instability, that must be managed to protect the EU's internal cohesion. Through the ENP, the Union attempts to stabilize and control this buffer zone. This reflects what Browning and Joenniemi (2008) define as the integration–security dilemma, the contradiction between the EU's discourse of shared integration and its simultaneous effort to secure itself from external threats.

Moreover, this approach relies heavily on distinction and differentiation. The EU constructs a normative identity based on peace, stability, and order, which is contrasted with an unstable and threatening outside. While it promotes cooperation rhetorically, the EU ultimately prioritizes its own security and strategic goals, reinforcing its dominance over the periphery (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008). In this sense, the ENP can also be interpreted as what Emerson (2002, p.1) calls a "friendly Monroe Doctrine", where the EU assumes a superior position in managing its neighbourhood, under the narrative of peace and development. The ENP becomes not a tool of mutual integration, but a framework for governing from a distance, shaping the Moroccan society but maintaining it at distance.

To sum up, the ENP reflects a modern form of imperial governance in which the EU, acting as a central power, defines the rules, controls access to benefits, and extends its norms to surrounding states without offering full inclusion. This model preserves a boundary between the European self and the external other, while simultaneously transforming the periphery into a zone of influence. The nature of the ENP under this theory is thus not one of balanced cooperation, but of structured dependency, where the EU maintains power through conditionality, soft governance, and the strategic management of its external neighbourhood. The promotion of democracy is not seen as an end itself, but as a discourse that justifies the EU´s influence in the region. Morocco has

been defined simultaneously as a partner but also as a source of Instability, reinforcing a hierarchy where the EU leads and evaluates, and Morocco aligns and adapts.

5.2.3   Geostrategies

The EU´s approach to its border with Morocco reflects a combination of limes, colonial frontier, and march geostrategies, complementing each other. While limes highlights the consolidation of external boundaries, the colonial frontier reflects the EU´s attempt to transform its periphery through its influence, and finally, the march strategy emerges in times of crisis, positioning Morocco as a buffer zone. Together, these geostrategies show how the EU combines cooperation and control to manage its neighbourhood.

The limes geostrategy best captures the EU´s general approach towards Morocco. Rather than seeking territorial expansion, this strategy aims to consolidate the Union´s external perimeter. The EU does not draw hard borders but instead delegates security responsibilities to Morocco, which is expected to manage its frontiers in line with European standards. As Del Sarto and Schumacher (2005) describe, the goal is to build a ring of friends that stabilises the EU's neighbourhood and distances potential risks from European territory. This logic creates a buffer zone where the EU's influence fades outward, blurring the line between internal and external governance while maintaining a clear distinction between "self" and "other."

According to Browning and Joenniemi (2008), this buffering logic means the EU's influence does not stop at a clear border but fades outwards, creating zones of cooperation where partners are still treated as others and are never fully equal: "This group of friends is also seen as foreign, and those excluded from the 'ring of friends' fall into an even more distant category of 'non-friends' or 'geographical others'" (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008, p.532).

At the same time, the EU presents itself as a peace project that exports the benefits of integration without offering full membership. This vision aligns with the colonial frontier strategy, where the EU acts as a transforming force. Under this model, the

neighbourhood is not meant to remain separate but to progressively shaped and aligned with European norms and institutions. Conditionality plays a key role: "a system of sticks and carrots in which soft and open borders constitute a reward for progress in meeting European standards" (Berg & Ehin, 2006, p.60). Morocco must adopt EU defined values and reforms in exchange for closer ties and financial support. The EU defines goals, evaluates progress, and retains the right to withdraw cooperation if expectations are not met, reinforcing a hierarchical relationship lacking shared ownership.

While limes and colonial frontier logics dominate, elements of the march geostrategy become visible in times of crisis. In these moments, Morocco is treated not as a cooperative partner but as a defensive barrier, expected to absorb internal threats on behalf of the EU. This reflects a more reactive approach, prioritising containment over mutual development. The 2021 Ceuta migration crisis is a clear example, where Morocco´s role as a gatekeeper became instrumental in managing EU directed migration flows.The EU´s reliance on Morocco for border control shows how fragile the partnership can be, when political tensions arise, strategic interests often take priority over cooperation goals. This situation illustrates how the march logic can operate as an emergency tool within a broader strategy.

Together, these geostrategies exposed the sometimes contradictory nature of the ENP. The EU simultaneously promotes cooperation and enforces conditionality, it seeks to stabilise borders while projecting influence beyond them. Morocco, in turn, becomes a hybrid space, a strategic partner, a dependent periphery and a buffer zone, all shaped according to EU priorities. Rather than applying a single model, the EU´s geostrategic approach towards Morocco is a fluid mix of consolidation, transformation, and defence, which reinforces the asymmetries inherent in the ENP framework.

As we have mentioned, William Walter´s strategies are a way to study how the European Union manages its borders with neighbouring countries and how it integrates different approaches depending on the political and regional context. Having studied the most relevant geostrategies in the case of Morocco, we will now analyse which are less relevant and why.

We can establish the network non border geostrategy as less relevant, which is linked to concepts of deterritorialization and the idea of eliminating borders. According to Walters, this strategy implies that traditional border controls are dispersed throughout the territory and even eliminated. Instead of fixed borders, a border space is created that occupies the entire region. This geostrategy has a limited application in the context of the ENP in Morocco as a traditional approach to borders is still in place, where physical borders and agreements on the control of migration flows are reinforced, so that there is no free movement of people between the EU and Morocco, border controls remain in place. The migration externalization policies that have been implemented in Morocco focus on the delegation of responsibilities for border security issues, without establishing a fluid or decentralized control network.

We have seen that Morocco plays an essential role as a border bridge, with a more fixed and structured vision, managing migratory flows towards Europe under a model that reflects more the geostrategy of the limes than that of the networked border. Morocco is not part of a dynamic of borderless areas but has the task of controlling and maintaining fixed borders, controlling the entry of people into European territory. Therefore, although this geostrategy could be very interesting and beneficial for the EU if correctly applied, in the current situation we cannot apply it in the relationship between Morocco and the EU.

On the other hand, the geostrategy of the march has a partially relevant application in the analysis of the partnership between the EU and Morocco. According to Walter, a march is not a defined and static border but an ambiguous zone separating different political entities, it is seen as an intermediate territory. In a sense, Morocco can be seen as a kind of interzone or buffer zone between the EU and other North African regions, especially in terms of migration and security. As we have explained above, outsourcing border control to Morocco can be seen as an attempt to keep instability of the African continent away from reaching European borders. In this way, Morocco acts as a barrier that defuses regional tensions and helps the EU to manage migration flows and security. However, the application of this geostrategy is limited as the relationship between the two actors may be perceived as not as fluid as a march, as the asymmetry of power and conditionality makes the EU be seen as an authority that sets the rules of the partnership, making the association more rigid and hierarchical than a traditional march.

5.3   How the EU employs power in its ENP in Morocco

Understanding how the European Union exerts influence in Morocco is crucial to reveal the asymmetries in their relationship. Since the EU does not have direct control, it uses soft power and indirect strategies to influence the making of policies. As Grossklaus and Remmert (2016, p.1) explain, this approach, known as political steering, allows the EU to influence the behaviour and decisions of external actors without coercion or formal authority. These mechanisms include financial aid, trade agreements, and access to the European market in exchange for political and institutional reforms. Additionally, the EU uses discursive strategies to promote ideas such as good governance and modernization, not only steering governmental reforms but also influencing the broader political narrative within Moroccan society. This combination of incentives and discourse enables the EU to project its norms and consolidate its influence without coercive mechanisms.

The EU´s use of power in Morocco can be categorised into three broad mechanisms. First, hierarchical steering is limited since the EU lacks formal authority over Morocco and cannot exert direct coercion. Second, indirect steering relies on incentives such as financial aid and market access to encourage Morocco to adopt democratic and human rights reforms. Lastly, soft steering shapes political discourse on governance and democracy, allowing the EU to influence Morocco´s trajectory without direct intervention (Grossklaus & Remmert, 2016).

A key criticism to the ENP is that the EU presents democracy promotion as a technical issue rather than a fundamentally political one. While Morocco is a major recipient of EU financial support, the primary focus of this partnership remains stability rather than deep democratic transformation. Despite the EU´s rhetoric on democracy, it has often prioritized cooperation on security, migration, and economic agreements over enforcing strict human rights standards. This highlights the limitation of the ENP, where democratic principles are upheld in discourse but often take a secondary role in practice.

Asymmetry also plays a role in the dynamics between the two actors. Within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU holds the authority to assess Morocco´s progress based on criteria that it mostly defines unilaterally, while Morocco has

limited capacity to influence the terms of evaluation. The policy´s targets may not necessarily reflect Morocco´s priorities or consider the needs of its society, for example, what development entails from a European perspective may not be the kind of development that the country needs.

The concept of power in the ENP can be examined through different theoretical lenses. Traditional actor cantered approaches in International Relations perceive power as an attribute possessed by actors, shaping their interactions through material and institutional resources. In contrast, constitutive approaches focus on how power relations shape actors identities and capabilities over time. The promotion of democracy and the rule of law within the ENP encompasses elements of both perspectives, as the EU actively influences Morocco´s institutional development while also defining the standards by which it is assessed.

Much of the scholarship on power in the IR has been dominated by neorealism, which explains power dynamics through the distribution of material resources among actors (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). According to this perspective, the EU´s influence over Morocco stems from its economic and political leverage, as it provides financial aid and access to European markets in exchange for compliance with governance reforms. However, an alternative soft power perspective has emerged, arguing that the EU´s ability to shape Morocco´s trajectory relies on normative and discursive influence rather than direct coercion. Proponents of this view contend that soft power depends on maintaining structural asymmetries between actors, allowing one actor to shape another's political and economic choices through persuasion and attraction rather than force.

In the absence of strict conditionality or coercion within the ENP, much of the scholarly debate has focused on the role of norms in external governance. The EU's influence in Morocco does not function through explicit demands but rather through subtle mechanisms that embed European standards within Moroccan governance structures. This raises a broader question about the nature of the EU's engagement: Is the ENP a genuine partnership based on mutual interests, or is it primarily a tool for extending EU influence while maintaining an unequal power dynamic? Understanding this question is crucial to assessing whether the ENP serves as an effective model for external governance or merely reinforces Morocco's dependence on the EU without fostering substantial political

transformation.

5.4 Contradictions and limitation of the European Neighbourhood Policy

After analysing how the European Neighbourhood Policy works in Morocco and having established that the interpretation of the policy depends on the theory used, we will now explore the contradictions and limitations of this policy in the Alawi monarchy. The main contradictions in this relationship include the prioritization of strategic interests, its original design and the persistence of power asymmetries.

Firstly, in order to understand the contradictions of the ENP we have to trace back to its origins. As mentioned, the policy was initially developed in response to challenges arising in Easter Europe after the 2004 enlargement, and its extension to the southern neighbourhood occurred mainly due to the pressure from southern EU member states. As a result, the ENP remains predominantly East-oriented in its logic, which limits its effectiveness in the South. Unlike former Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, based on the principle of regionality, the ENP is structured around differentiated bilateralism, this shift, as Pace (2007) argues, reinforces a more hegemonic and potentially imperial dynamic, as the EU deals with each southern neighbourhood individually and from a position of dominance.

One of the main problems is that, although the ENP promotes values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as we have previously stated, in reality it prioritizes regional stability, security and migratory control. For example, this policy establishes that if there are setbacks or no progress is made in the established targets, both economic and technical aid could be reduced or even cancelled. However, in the case of Morocco, despite setbacks on democratic reforms and the repression of fundamental freedoms, which have been denounced by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the EU continues to provide financial aid to the Moroccan government, especially for the purpose of controlling irregular migration flows. It is interesting that even though these setbacks have taken place, Morocco continues to be one of the EU's partners that has received more economic support. In August 2022, the EU announced a new funding package of at least €500 million for 2021–2027 (El Pais, 2022),

which is about 50% more than in the previous period. This increase shows how important Morocco is for the EU, especially in migration issues and the prioritisation of security over the improvement of human rights conditions.

Secondly, another important point that has been briefly mentioned before is the imbalance in the decision-making and the establishment of conditions. Although the policy framework emphasises partnership and mutual interest, in practice, it is the EU the one that defines the objectives, sets the conditions, and determines how progress is measured while Morocco has little influence (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005). Rather than being the result of a negotiated consensus, the benchmarks are rooted on European norms and values, often imposed unilaterally This demonstrates that Morocco is not viewed as an equal partner, but rather as a recipient with limited influence, a situation that lacks shared ownership. This asymmetry can lead to a sense of dependency, where Morocco´s sovereignty and political autonomy are compromised by the conditionality imposed by the EU.

We also have to consider if the ENP has incentivised a real change in the country. Instead of leading to deep democratic reform, the system of rewards and conditions can sometimes strengthen the existing elites, who know how to meet EU demands on paper without real changes. This raises questions about calling Morocco a Model Partner, a questionable title due to the fact that the government continues to control media, repress journalists and activists, use migration as a political weapon and repress Western Sahara.

Despite the cooperation between Morocco and the EU under the ENP, serious problems with social and human rights remain. According to Amnesty International (2023), the government continues to repress dissent, restrict freedom of expression, and punish journalists and activists. There are also reports of torture, especially in Western Sahara. Legal inequalities persist too, women still face discrimination in inheritance and abortion laws, and same-sex relations are criminalised in the Penal Code. These issues, along with the lack of accountability for deaths like those of dozens of migrants in Melilla in 2022, show that progress on rights has been slow. Morocco has accepted some international recommendations, but rejected others that would require bigger legal changes.

As mentioned, one the essential elements of the ENP is the promotion of Human Rights by the EU which can be seen as a hypocritical measure when international non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International have reported human rights violations within the European territory. This contradiction of promoting change in other countries when the situation in EU countries has not improved might affect the credibility and legitimacy of the European Union.

Amnesty International's 2023/2024 report highlights the fragility of the situation of immigrants in southern Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain. In southern areas like Ceuta and Melilla there have been recurrent reports of excessive use of force, pushbacks at the border and unsafe living conditions in migrant camps: "On 24 June, the Spanish and Moroccan authorities used unlawful force and acts which may amount to torture and other ill-treatment to repress an attempt by a large group of people… that aimed to enter and seek protection in Melilla. At least 37 people died and over 470 were illegally expelled" (Amnesty International Report 2022/ 2023, p. 340). Other examples include the CIES in Spain, which have been accused by many human rights organisations and NGOs as "centres that violate human rights and serve the function of intimidating the migrant population residing in Spain while segregating this group and criminalizing them in the face of public opinion" (Rights at the Southern Border, 2024, p. 12). Other campaigns, such as CIES No, have emphasised that: "Within its walls, we have met children who denounce police violence, victims of trafficking, minors, seriously ill people" (Samb, 2020, El Salto).

Also noticeable is the selective empathy that the EU employs with refugees, for example, refugees from the war in Ukraine have been received with speed and generosity by all EU member countries, which contrasts with the treatment given to immigrants from North Africa who face a very different reality. In many cases, instead of receiving humanitarian assistance and protection, they suffer summary expulsions, arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment (Amnesty International 2024) "Racism has also been apparent in the treatment of those fleeing conflicts and other crises. The policies of migration deterrence and externalization that the European Union, other European states and the USA have adopted or maintained have forced people fleeing conflicts, as well as other crises, into dangerous journeys. This has contrasted with their generally positive treatment of Ukrainians seeking safety" (Amnesty International, 2024, p.16). This situation

not only represents political hypocrisy but could undermine the moral legitimacy of the EU.

6. <u>Conclusions</u>

To conclude this research, it is essential to reflect on the theoretical frameworks that have guided the analysis. The selection of the Imperial Model, New Regionalism, and Geostrategies have not been arbitrary, but rather respond to the need to capture the complex structure of the ENP as they allow for a critical understanding of the policy beyond its normative discourse.

Through the theories of New Regionalism, the Imperial Model and William Walters Geostrategies, this paper has analysed three different approaches to understand the ENP in Morocco. Despite their differences, they all converge on the same idea that the policy serves to consolidate the EU´s influence over its southern neighbourhood. From the New Regionalism perspective, this policy was created out of the need for countries to collaborate with their neighbours to address common challenges. However, the creation of this space for cooperation is only possible if countries align with European norms and values, which ultimately portrays the policy as a mechanism for the EU to expand its influence. From the Imperialist approach, the EU uses this policy as a tool to exert its influence beyond its borders, being the main actor defining the rules of the game. In terms of geostrategies, the limes strategy stands out, since the EU aspires to build an external perimeter and form a ring of friends. In this framework, Morocco is seen as a buffer zone, collaborating in border control in exchange for trade agreements and economic aid, but without becoming a member of the EU.

The ENP´s initial goal was to promote political stability, democratic values and integration, yet, overtime, it has shifted towards the prioritisation of EU interests. This contradiction between the discourse and its practice is central to understand the policy´s evolution.

In conclusion, the ENP in Morocco is marked by the contradiction between its normative discourse and its implementation. While it claims to promote democratic values and human rights, in practice it is a tool that serves diverse strategical interests from the

EU. The asymmetry of power in the relationship is evident, and its future could depend on how EU migration policy, security cooperation and human rights management in Morocco evolve.

7. **Appendix**

Declaración de Uso de Herramientas de IA Generativa en Trabajos Fin de Grado

Por la presente, yo, Carolina Pérez Diago, estudiante de Relaciones Internacionales y Comunicación Global de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado " Análisis del discurso político en Venezuela ", declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de IA Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación:

1. **Sintetizador y divulgador de libros complicados**: Para resumir y comprender literatura compleja.

2. **Traductor**: Para traducir textos de un lenguaje a otro.

Afirmo que toda la información y contenido presentados en este trabajo son producto de mi investigación y esfuerzo individual, excepto donde se ha indicado lo contrario y se han dado los créditos correspondientes (he incluido las referencias adecuadas en el TFG y he explicitado para qué se ha usado ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares). Soy consciente de las implicaciones académicas y éticas de presentar un trabajo no original y acepto las consecuencias de cualquier violación a esta declaración.

Fecha: 28/04

Firma:

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