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Morocco and Tunisia on the Shores of *Mare Nostrum*: Positive Differentiation Across the Mediterranean and Segmentation in the European Union Research Policy

Abstract

The European Research Area and Framework Programme 7 represents a conducive means for positive differentiation beyond the borders of the EU. The article aims to identify the ERA's differentiated integration and segmentation swatches by concentrating on the closely-tied neighbouring countries of Morocco and Tunisia. The thematic distinction of the Mediterranean represents positive differentiation that surpasses EU territory. It occurs based on the thematic priorities co-decided by key EU institutions and articulated by the European Commission in annual work programmes. Segmentation in research across the Mediterranean area is a centrally-steered process incentivised by the European Commission through open calls for project applications. Process tracing allows for even more nuanced thematic steering patterns to be explored. A content analysis of open calls with a specific focus on the annual work programmes demonstrates the important role played by the fact that Morocco and Tunisia correspond to the country category of "(African) Mediterranean Partner Countries". This geographical position offers preferential treatment to participate in several project applications explicitly inviting geographical focus on the Mediterranean area and/or partnerships with a Mediterranean membership.

Keywords: Differentiated Integration, Segmentation, Mediterranean, Framework Programme 7, European Research Area

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Introduction

The ERA's role in offering access to research-intense solutions to various challenges encountered by the European neighbourhood remains understudied. This topic invites more scholarly attention, especially in light of the approximations of what "an autonomous EU superpower" might entail in terms of the full instrumentation at its disposal for action (Riddervold, Newsome, 2018, p. 509). The Framework Programmes (FPs) of the European Union (EU) play an essential role in putting the ERA in motion, including offering participation options to the neighbourhood within the European research cooperation.

The focus is on the programming of specific EU funds allocated to two key Mediterranean countries, namely, Morocco and Tunisia. These are historical, front-running countries of the European Southern Neighbourhood (ESN) (Costa, 2010, p. 150; Gstöhl, Phinnemore, 2019, p. 4; Özlem, 2019, p. 123). Morocco and Tunisia enjoy a political dialogue with the EU, combined with various modalities of engagement in the EU policies that have a pronounced integrationist dynamic (Reptová, 2022, p. 575). Both Southern neighbours are the leading Arab countries in research and development investments (Campbell, 2014, pp. 31–32).

This article answers the following research question: How do differentiated integration and segmentation in research cooperation help achieve the overarching goals of the ESN and the ERA? The article aims to identify the ERA's differentiated integration and segmentation patterns by focusing on Morocco and Tunisia as deeply-interwoven, neighbouring countries. This aim is pursued by concentrating on the role of the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) of the European Commission in steering segmentation through issuing guidelines for thematic and international partnership priorities. Identifying these centrally-steered conditions for research partnerships helps one to understand better the factors which shape the research landscape and institutional strategic actorhood of applicants.

The European Neighbourhood Policy is a flagship initiative of the Union's external action (Reptová, 2022, p. 565). Through the extensive export of its acquis communautaire and incentives toward political and economic reforms, the EU strives to bring together and transform its neighbours as well as promote stability, prosperity, and resilience in its nearby geographic areas (Bradford, 2020, pp. 70, 87; Reptová, 2022, p. 569).

The ERA was launched in 2000 to establish an integrated research area open to the world where researchers, scientific expertise, and technological solutions could seamlessly circulate to benefit the Union's competitiveness

and excellence (Olechnicka, Ploszaj, Celińska-Janowicz, 2019, p. 139). This unified space for research is achieved by the EU Member States and associated countries, such as the ones situated in the neighbourhood, aligning their modes of engagement according to mutually-agreed rules, regulations, and collaboration plans.

Some recent findings invite one to pay more attention to nuances, namely, how personal motivation or some systemic factors might generate specific, geographically-confined mobility and collaborative patterns within the overall ERA space (Schäfer, 2021). These are promising areas for studying differentiated integration and segmentation in this single market for research and what impact those dynamics bring into the context of the overarching goals of the ERA. Differentiated integration refers to closer interactions through institutions and policies with different commitments among the participating entities. Segmentation alludes to "variation in how problems and solutions are framed and understood within the same political order", thus leading to the formation of multiple sub-groups within that same order (Lord, 2019, p. 243; Onderco, Portela, 2023, p. 157). The term "segments" refers to functional constellations of various entities within certain policy domains which sustain a patterned reproduction of routines.

The article tests the following hoop test hypothesis: The participation of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based institutions in FP-funded projects is not based on a recommendation expressed in open calls for project applications to include entities from the ESN in the consortium. This hypothesis is tested by explaining outcome process tracing in order to open the black box of the decision-making that shapes the networked structure of the ERA. The importance of this hypothesis lies in its full acknowledgement of the potentially notable role of other explanations for the inclusion of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based institutions in FP-funded projects that are not tested in this article. The counterfactual that remains outside this paper is the potential existence of strong, lasting ties among researchers across diverse networks that enable swift consortium-building (Wagner, Whetsell, Mukherjee, 2019). In such a manner, this paper displays initial caution against attributing a decisive role to the European Commission as an integration entrepreneur. Such reservations against the role of the European Commission is counterbalanced by the role of expert networks and collegial ties in fostering consortiums supported by EU funding. Overall, the purpose of this research is to specify the role of the European Commission in fostering research ties between the EU and the ESN.

The analysis focuses on the open calls inviting project applications for the Framework Programme 7 (FP7). It explores whether the

recommendations enshrined in the open calls of projects implemented throughout 2014–2017 are an incentive to include Morocco-and- Tunisia-based entities in project consortiums in the post-volatile phase after the Arab uprisings (Lecocq, 2021, p. 2). It helps to clarify which types of incentives facilitate the incorporation of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in project consortiums. The selected time frame and 2014, in particular, coincide with the envisaged completion stage of building the ERA (Garben, 2018, p. 1303).

Volatilities brought about by the Arab Spring and the country-specific echoes witnessed over the past years across the ESN have proven that generalisations are challenging (Rieker, Riddervold, 2021). Therefore, this article should be considered one step towards filling the gap in existing research on diverse dynamics revolving around the ERA. This analytic task is accomplished by exploring the ESN countries with the closest links to the EU. The focus on the programming of research funding leads one towards an examination of "the sub-systemic level (...) where much of the everyday governing of the EU takes place" (Peterson, 2001, p. 295). Attention is paid to the processes outside the confines of national expert meetings.

The selected approach helps to go beyond the disparities of opinions among EU Member States about the developments in the European neighbourhood and the most appropriate responses (Amadio Viceré, 2021, p. 11). Instead, the focus is on the supranationally-steered processes for forming multi-stakeholder partnerships for tailored-research cooperation purposes. This article is consistent with invitations "to consider differentiated integration as a genuine sub-field of European Studies" (Leruth, Gänzle, Trondal, 2019, p. 1014). A preliminary indication is sought of what might be the DG RTD's role of the European Commission in steering certain differentionist developments and segmentation via priorities set for the allocation of EU funding for research-intensive projects. This article contributes to the growing literature of differentiation studies focusing on the underexamined differentiation dynamics in the research domain.

The analysis should be viewed in the context of the overarching goals set out in the decision concerning the studied FP7. It is open to third countries and international organisations (EU, 2006b, p. 2). Moreover, it prioritises the European neighbourhood and several thematic domains: "actions aiming at reinforcing the research capacities of candidate countries as well as neighbourhood countries and cooperative activities targeted at developing and emerging countries, focusing on their particular needs in fields such as health – including research into neglected diseases –

agriculture, fisheries and the environment, and implemented in financial conditions adapted to their capacities" (EU, 2006a, p. 10). What is of interest in this research project is where the thematic priorities tied to the ESN are featured and the patterns of this thematic presence, if any. These nuances should help one to understand which preconditions set by the European Commission have guided the patterns of project partnerships formed by successful applicants.

The next part of this article elaborates on the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of differentiated integration and segmentation. The third part outlines the chosen methodological approach and steps of process tracing. The fourth part presents key empirical findings of the content analysis of open calls on how and with which thematic propensity differentiation and segmentation are in-built into the steering of the consortiums and the ERA. The fifth part concludes that a more nuanced study of differentiation and segmentation is crucial for a more refined understanding of the ERA's networked patterns and steering measures.

Research Cooperation in the Context of the Differentiation Studies

Differentiated Integration and Positive External Differentiation

The conceptualisation of differentiation and differentiated integration commenced around the mid-1990s, resulting in at least thirty models (Bellamy, 2019, p. 177; Gänzle, Leruth, Trondal, 2021, p. 689). This emerging field of scholarly enquiry proved salient because, just a few years ago, it was observed that "only six Member States participate in all EU policies" (de Witte, 2018, p. 493). However, it would be a rather one-sided perspective to analyse differentiation and differentiated integration solely in a state-centric manner. Differentiation and differentiated integration manifest in the EU policy domains in uneven and diverse ways (Siddi, Karjalainen, Jokela, 2021, p. 6). Differentiation should be distinguished from differentiated integration, including the often-challenging dissimilarity between cooperation and integration.

Differentiation is a framework term. It refers to "both (differentiated) integration and disintegration" (Gänzle et al., 2021, p. 689). Differentiation is not a static phenomenon (Van den Bogaert, Borger, 2017, p. 234). Its patterns change across time periods. In this article, the study of differentiation focuses on differentiated integration. Furthermore, this study is time-bound and extended in two directions beyond the EU

Member States. Firstly, by incorporating the "external differentiation" dimension, this article understands differentiated integration as reaching far beyond this specific Union membership (Leruth et al., 2019, p. 1013). It conforms with differentiated integration being understood as "a process of coming together, albeit through institutions and policies which differ in terms of which Member States participate and with which commitments" (Lord, 2020, p. 243). The rules set out by the EU are not applied uniformly by all Member States (Telle, Badulescu, Fernandes, 2021, p. 1), as well as ENP countries and many countries across the world. These differences leave an imprint on the steering measures of supranationally-international partnerships and the viability of including certain entities in consortiums.

Differentiated integration is also defined as "an incongruence between *the territorial extension of* EU membership and EU rule validity" (Leuffen, Schuessler, Gómez Díaz, 2020, p. 1). This is where the blurred boundaries between EU membership and other countries come into play. The accessibility of the EU initiatives of specific policy domains to a range of entities located across the globe has already received an appraisal of the EU acting in "a (form of unwilling) hegemon" (Fossum et al., 2020, p. 2). With its rich literature on Europe-specific and international dynamics put in motion by the ERA, the research domain proves this as an empirically promising area for studying positive differentiation.

The so-called "low politics" areas, such as research (Schimmelfennig, Winzen, 2014, p. 363), just as the traditionally more high-profile portfolios of trade (Coremans, 2020; Coremans, Meissner, 2018; Garcia-Duran, Eliasson, Costa, 2020), do not escape political instrumentalisation towards non-Member States and entities located therein (Kaddous, 2019, p. 70; Leese, 2018; Vukasovic, Stensaker, 2018, p. 358). Functional heterogeneity is found in the EU's approach to economic and social policy issues (Patrin, 2021). However, more nuanced analyses than the referenced, concise remarks about the EU instrumentalisation of research towards Switzerland and the patchwork of functions of the European Commission in economic governance would help to build a more comprehensive picture of these dynamics and the overall role of research policy frameworks and funding measures to enable differentiated integration.

Higher education is one of the sectors that, with the Maastricht Treaty (Gornitzka, 2018, p. 242; Walakira, Wright, 2017, p. 10), has become "crucial to advancing and thickening integration" (Robertson et al., 2012, pp. 26–27). Consequently, the political instrumentalisation of the research domain for supranationally defined purposes is not surprising. Research is an intrinsic yet understudied part of institutional re-legitimation and

de-legitimation, prone to politicisation (De Bièvre et al., 2020, p. 241). This article offers one building block to commence the filling of this gap in related literature.

Secondly, in this article, differentiated integration incorporates so-called "positive differentiation". The term stands for a choice of "some Member States belonging to the core of the Union" to "decide to accelerate the pace of integration without penalising other Member States or hindering the integration process" (Gänzle, Leruth, Trondal, 2020, p. 245). In this article, the "positive differentiation" is not restricted solely to the EU Member States. The accessibility of various instruments supporting the ERA to entities located in non-Member States is a conducive area for study.

This article detaches the EU from its geographic borders by incorporating external and positive differentiation into the overall conceptual lens chosen for the research design. Such an approach allows for the analysing of differentiated integration as a governance construct that weaves diverse and ever-denser multilateral and integrationist interlinks across various countries and institutions. In stark contrast to the study of Eurosceptical opt-outs and temporary exclusion or exemption of new Member States (Schimmelfennig, Winzen, 2014), this article explores differentiated integration by focusing on positive external differentiation and segmentation. The integration of the front-running ESN countries is supranationally steered through specific programming and administrative means. Therefore, this article looks at ESN countries as intrinsic parts or positively differentiated entities of the overall policy framework structure of the ERA.

Segmentation

Segmentation is a crucial element of differentiation studies. A segment is debated as a characteristic of a policy domain or "functional realm" (Fossum, 2020, p. 41). "The existence of an *institutionalised coordination* body is a key feature of covert integration and integration through segmented orders" (Eckert, 2022, p. 23). This article combines segment with (the second generation of) multi-level administration (Benz, Corcaci, Doser, 2016; Trondal, 2020). Multi-level administration seeks to explain the "political organi[s]ation of the European administrative system" (Trondal, Bauer, 2017, p. 83). Multi-level administration refers to bureaucracies as "open systems that interact with their administrative counterparts from other levels of government in a multi-level executive system" (Gornitzka, Holst, 2015, p. 6). It sets conducive grounds for studying what supranationally

defined research directions and recommended partnership constellations incentivise multilateral multi-stakeholder partnerships to come together and contribute to a supranationally-approved project plan irrespective of their place of origin and the type of each consortium member.

Based on its expertise, the European Commission engages in a wide range of policy areas blurring the clear-cut distinction between communitarised and non-communitarised policies (Chou, Riddervold, 2015; Riddervold, 2010, 2011, 2016; Riddervold, Rosén, 2016; Riddervold, Trondal, 2017). The ERA and FPs contribute to such murkiness by funding multi-stakeholder partnerships assembled with a supranationally relevant purpose and a joint plan of activities covering myriad policy domains and thematic specialisations without a clear-cut distinction between communitarised and non-communitarised ones.

The thematic and administrative constellations defined in FP documentation are taken in this study as promising yet understudied empirical material that provides fresh insights into the supranational routines which contribute to specific segmentation dynamics. Likewise, this study contributes to the decades-long examination of the recent history of Community policies linking the Mediterranean coasts (De Witte, 1990).

A more nuanced exploration of diverse dynamics revolving around ERA is vital for a thorough understanding of the EU characteristics of "*scienti[s]ation* of politics and *politi-ci[s]ation* knowledge" (Gornitzka, Holst, 2015, p. 2). Similarly to bureaucratic structures but more loosely and temporarily (Christensen, 2015, p. 17), the ERA and other framework initiatives weave and employ collaborative research and pooled expertise in multiple ways. The ERA steering entities might encourage specific differentiated integration and segmentation dynamics as opposed to other alternatives. Taking that into consideration, it is understandable why FPs have been criticised for being "bureaucratic", "political steering", and "pork-barrel politics" (Persson, 2018, p. 415). FPs do not serve only purely scientific purposes.

Segmentation, "understood as a division into reliable segments for cooperation", has been suggested for the Eastern Partnership (Blidaru, 2020, p. 4). More empirical insights from Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods would help elaborate the segmentation role in more specific terms.

Materials and Methods

Process tracing is conducive to exploring causality (Beach, Pedersen, 2013, p. 3). Concerning the process tracing parlance, this study joins the

collective scholarly attempt to open the black box of the decision process (Gläser, Laudel, 2019). This attempt is performed with a hoop test hypothesis involving a particular, but not unique, prediction. Overall, the hoop test is a cautious attempt. A failure of a hoop test reduces confidence in the hypothesised mechanism, whereas confirmation does not clarify that the inference is undeniably accurate (Beach, Pedersen, 2013, p. 102). The specific hoop test modelled for this research design aims to offer a glimpse into which factors play a role in decision-making when forming and defining a consortium composition of a project application.

"High-quality qualitative research is marked by a thick description, and rich complexity of findings rather than deductive precision" (Vaismoradi, Snelgrove, 2019). The preliminary grounds for progressing towards a more in-depth description were prepared through data-set observations of projects and a thorough review of the relevant academic and grey literature referenced throughout this article (Šime, 2021). The hoop test captured by this article aims to thicken and coagulate the description and overall findings of a broader research project aimed at exploring implicit EU science diplomacy towards the ESN. During this stage, attention is paid to the content of open calls for project applications on which approved projects were implemented throughout 2014–2017.

Data-set observations of the projects prove that the FP7 Specific Programme "Cooperation": Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology (KBBE) engaged the most significant number of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in project consortiums (Šime, 2023). Therefore, the respective open calls of each implemented project are examined in greater detail to clarify whether the engagement of entities based in the ESN is guided by the top-down process of thematic guidance issued by the European Commission. The European Commission publishes the document packages of all open calls in an open access format. All packages were downloaded from the Participant Portal of the European Commission.

Morocco-based entities were participants of 15 projects funded by the KBBE Specific Programme. Tunisia-based entities were members of 13 projects funded by the KBBE Specific Programme. Eight projects coincide with Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities participating in the same project. Another overlap among the projects identified for the analysis is the KBBE open calls, on which basis the project applications of respective approved projects were submitted for FP7 funding. Several projects were approved based on the same call. It resulted in an analysis of 11 open calls.

Qualitative content analysis emanates from communication research but has recently experienced an overwhelming receptiveness in educational

research, psychology, and, to a lesser degree, chosen in business and organisation studies (Mayring, 2019; Prasad, 2019; Schreier et al., 2020). The method "is grounded in the importance of context and meaning, as well as the absence of *truth* and other unique attributes of a qualitative approach" (Roller, 2019). Qualitative content analysis is known for its diverse adaptations that stem from the particularities of a research domain where it is applied (Schreier et al., 2020). This diversity has encouraged talk about "qualitative content analyses" in the plural rather than singular (Kuckartz, 2019). Following earlier observations of the absence of a sharp, dividing line between the two (Marvasti, 2019; Schreier, 2013), the research design combines both quantitative and qualitative aspects of content analysis.

The term "category driven qualitative oriented text analysis" corresponds to the chosen research design (Schreier et al., 2019). Inspired by the earlier examples of coding applied in the study of universities (Warshaw, Upton, 2019), the first step is coding the open calls according to key terms associated with the studied geographical area and two selected ESN countries. All calls are screened to compile statistics on the presence of the following terms: "European (or EU) Neighbourhood", "Southern Neighbourhood", "North Africa", "Middle East and North Africa" or "MENA", "Mediterranean", "Morocco", and "Tunisia". These terms are good indicators of a specific contextual background that is considered conducive for incorporating entities from Morocco and Tunisia in project consortiums. It helps one to gain more confidence and trace whether the inclusion of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in the approved project consortiums is based on encouragement expressed by the funding authority or whether other explanations should be considered as potentially more prevalent. Besides the coding of "Morocco" and "Tunisia", each selected term indicates a specific geographic or policy propensity. This geographic denotation helps one to trace back and specify in which context both studied countries are mentioned in the documents.

The intermediary step is the quantification of data (Vaismoradi, Snelgrove, 2019). This step allows for an exploration of the overall focus of the geographical patterns recommended by the funding authority. For the interpretation, the quantification is complemented with the relevant passages' excerpts to make more nuanced estimations in which broader context the ESN and, particularly, Morocco and Tunisia, are mentioned. This is where the strength of the qualitative content analysis plays out. It "is a method that reduces data, using categories that abstract from individual passages" (Schreier, 2013, p. 15).

Results and Discussion

Many projects implemented in the aftermath of the Arab Spring were selected based on open calls issued throughout the uprisings. The devised research design does not allow for the making of any claims about whether the open calls were tailored as immediate responses to the volatilities or not. This is another blank space where more research could reap highly relevant results which would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the programming of the EU funding and how geopolitical volatilities have impacted differentiated integration and segmentation patterns in research policy throughout the years.

The work programmes of 2010 and 2011 provide the most encouraging wording for focusing on the Mediterranean. The most resourceful passages for coding were descriptions of specific projects. Those are the passages of the annual programmes that offer the most references to the coded terms, with a clear majority of references to the Mediterranean instead of the other coded terms. The overwhelming prevalence of references to the Mediterranean is the link between the EU and two ESN countries – Morocco and Tunisia. Several project descriptions feature the Mediterranean in their titles, which is unequivocal about the geographic focus of the research projects. Other references to the Mediterranean justify the chosen topic for a suggested project as being relevant to the EU as a geographical unit and beneficial for a broader geographic scope and adjacent areas, thereby enhancing the international range of the research findings.

Comparatively fewer references to the "European (or EU) neighbourhood" or "neighbouring countries" prove that the Mediterranean link is the most conducive context for the involvement of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in the FP7 consortiums. The sea connects not only in a geographical sense, but also research-wise. The statistics are, however, sporadic even when references to these two countries are brought into the picture. The most widespread mention included in the work programme of 2011 is "(African) Mediterranean Partner Countries" along with countries that have established research cooperation agreements with the EU. Therefore, the involvement of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in project consortiums are encouraged both as Mediterranean countries and, to a lesser extent, as countries with which the EU has an established science and technology cooperation agreement. The geopolitical context is absent in the research policy and wording chosen by the funding authority to justify recommended collaborative guidance. "African Mediterranean Partner Countries" are usually distinguished from African, Caribbean, and

Pacific (ACP) countries. This distinction is present across the examined open call packages, including the FP7-AFRICA-2010.

The article set out to investigate the hoop test of the participation of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based institutions in FP-funded projects. It was hypothesised that such involvement is not based on a recommendation expressed in the open calls for project applications to include in the consortium entities from the ESN.

Based on the aforementioned empirical findings, the prediction captured in the hoop test is correct in the sense that it is not the policy context of the ESN that proves to be the most salient for the engagement of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in the projects funded by the FP7 KBBE Specific Programme. Instead, the guidelines for submitting projects focused on the Mediterranean and recommendations to consider involving "(African) Mediterranean Partner Countries" feature most in the open calls. This nuance has proven to be a suitable basis for grant awards.

These are noteworthy findings that contradict the general guidance concerning FP7 to prioritise the neighbourhood referred to in the introduction of this article. Keeping the focus on the European supranational entities as the selected multi-level administration level of this study, one potential explanation is that a specific programme of the FP7 is an implementation arm with a limited scope of policy coverage. A content analysis of KBBE shows that the ENP, and ESN in particular, is neither prominently nor explicitly featured in this policy range. Primarily, KBBE attempts to address specific issues and invites a focus on a limited geographic scope to ensure that the project application captures targeted interventions with tailored deliverables.

The findings bring geography into the study of supranationally-steered, positive external differentiation and segmentation. Systematic selection bias during the policy-making, planning, and programming phases may occur in response to issue saliency in a specific location. These results caution against broad generalisations. The findings obtained about particular countries in a study of one policy or programming instrument may not necessarily prove relevant in another. The rationale for close research cooperation with Morocco and Tunisia in the ERA setting financially supported by the FP7 should not be considered valid in other policy and programming contexts. FP7 is one form of EU assistance offered to establish and steer expert networks. The participation of Morocco and Tunisia in other expert networks could be guided by other considerations, functional reasoning and unique traits than those identified in the FP7 open calls.

The European Neighbourhood Instrument serves as an illustrative example. The ENP, ESN and the European Neighbourhood Instrument

might be considered an entirely separate domain of EU engagement with both ESN front-running countries with less preoccupation with research intensity and more attention paid to immediate assistance provision. By and large, the European Neighbourhood Instrument does not fund research projects. MobiDoc project is an outstanding exception, and was implemented in Tunisia to provide stipends to PhD candidates co-funded by a company where the student develops a thesis. The National Agency for Promoting Scientific Research managed the project (Délégation de l'UE en Tunisie, 2022; Hadj-Alouane, 2022).

To look even more broadly, a successful hoop test does not provide definite proof that, solely based on the thematic steering encouraged by the European Commission, Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities have been involved in the consortiums funded by the FP7 KBBE. Other factors might also feed into a comprehensive explanation of why specific entities from these countries were selected for consortium membership. The exploration of such things requires other research techniques. However, the overwhelming prevalence of references to the Mediterranean in the recommended project descriptions (along with, to a lesser degree, the general thematic outlines) have an undeniable role to play. This hoop test strengthens confidence in the influential position of the European Commission in shaping the initial dynamics for multilateral partnerships putting in motion ERA through FP7 projects.

FP7 open calls show that, in the contemporary setting, strong actors might not be pushing only for integration (Rye, 2020, p. 207). Positive external differentiation is manifested in the form of specific, top-down defined thematic orientation and recommended constellations of partnerships. FP open calls are a segmenting measure that deserves a more nuanced examination through other research methods.

As mentioned earlier, differentiation comes in multiple forms. Besides those already examined in the differentiation studies, science and technological development policy deserves more attention. The guidance enshrined in the open calls to address Mediterranean issues and involve "(African) Mediterranean Partner Countries" proves that external and positive differentiation has a considerable footprint in the research domain. Depending on the specific research domain, there might be some distinctively unique reasons and characteristics for differentiated integration. In the case of FP-funded projects, the European Commission has a crucial role in putting specific collaborative and integrationist developments in motion instead of others.

The thematic distinction of the Mediterranean is a clear example of when positive differentiation that surpasses the EU borders occurs due

to the thematic priorities co-decided by the key EU institutions and articulated by the European Commission in the annual work programmes. It trickles down to the project calls and implementation of successful project applications. The qualitative content analysis findings demonstrate that positive differentiation of selected ESN countries in the ERA results from thematic incentives in-built by the central EU institutions in open calls. The EU encourages and provides clear guidance through specific open calls to foster project consortiums across the Mediterranean or to address issues the Mediterranean area faces. The policy-guided instrumentalisation of the FP7 towards studied non-member states is a positive, not a penalising one. It fosters engagement, not exclusion.

Additionally, although the ESN proved not to have a prominent nor visible role in setting a conducive context for the involvement of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in KBBE-funded project consortiums, it does not mean that the issues addressed by the selected consortiums had no relevance in the context of the ESN's goals. Tackling pressing issues linked to the Mediterranean in such domains as irrigation-based water saving solutions, the assessment of natural and human-made pressures, wind energy, breeding efficiency in fruit trees, fisheries management, and aquaculture have an immediate or interconnected role in building more well-being, sustainability, and improved governance across the ESN. Thus, not stating the ESN as a defining factor for the incorporation of entities from two selected countries in the open calls does not mean that these projects have no salience in the broader context of cumulative and complementary efforts invested in helping the ESN to become a more stable, resilient, and prosperous area with close ties to the Union.

Conclusions

Morocco and Tunisia are encouraged to be involved in project consortiums because they are located within and face issues characteristic of the Mediterranean area. Both countries correspond to the encouraged partnering with what is geographically defined in the documents as "African Mediterranean Partner Countries". Although FP7 open calls do not prioritise explicit support to the ESN, positive external differentiation and segmentation in research cooperation enabled by the FP7 KBBE Specific Programme address issues relevant to the Mediterranean area. Morocco and Tunisia are among the countries recommended for FP7 project partnerships, thus extending the integrationist dynamics captured by the ERA beyond the EU Member States.

The findings show that research cooperation helps achieve the overarching goals of the ESN and the ERA through supranationally-defined, thematic propensity and consortium composition that successful applications for the FP7 KBBE funding must respect. The examined open calls of the FP7 KBBE Specific Programme display specific traits of instrumentalisation of research cooperation for ESN. This instrumentalisation is thematically tailored to tackle some pressing issues faced by the sea and the Mediterranean shores. Thus, it corresponds to the goals of the ESN to advance toward a less volatile, better governed, and more prosperous neighbourhood. Likewise, the intention is for these solutions to be co-developed and applied in a coordinated manner. Therefore, the incentives in-built in the open calls serve, inter alia, the primary integrationist goals of the single research space captured by the ERA. Additionally, the calls steer towards an extension of this unified area of talent and excellence flows to include "African Mediterranean Partner Countries" or states geographically located nearest to the Union.

The hoop test was successful, but not because of the assumptions enshrined in the hypothesis. The assumption was that the participation of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based institutions in the FP-funded projects is not based on a recommendation expressed in the open calls for project applications to include in the consortium entities from the ESN. Consequently, the hoop test passing during this research project strengthens the confidence that it is not the ESN policy context that is the most salient for the active incorporation of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in the projects funded by the FP7 KBBE Specific Programme. Instead, the status of being an "African Mediterranean Partner Country" plays a crucial role. Being geographically situated and specialised in Mediterranean research is what the funding authority encourages the most.

The distinction between references to the ESN and the Mediterranean is important because each of these politically-salient geographic areas refers to a slightly different country grouping. The ESN does not refer solely to the Mediterranean littoral countries; it covers several countries in the Middle East as well.

The research domain proves to be very promising for studying external differentiation along with positive differentiation that displays differentiated integration incentives. The ERA and FP7, in particular, are conducive to positive integration beyond EU borders. The Mediterranean setting has benefited from a supranationally-favourable climate that has translated into a specific support structure for projects. The Mediterranean factor is explicitly and systematically integrated into the thematic propensity of the FP7 KBBE calls for partnerships and research diffusion.

Segmentation linking the Mediterranean shores via research is a centrally and top-down steered process, not an ad hoc or accidental occurrence, and is far from an unintended consequence. The Mediterranean area is a clear example of the EU's segmented order. In this segmented constellation, research-intensive solutions to the pressing (environmental, technological, and know-how) challenges are systematically encouraged to be co-developed, or that research findings be diffused among broader expert circles across the Mediterranean. Being Mediterranean counts more in terms of the eligibility of Morocco-and-Tunisia-based institutions interested in participating in the FP7 KBBE projects than any other statuses towards the EU. The bilateral science and technology cooperation agreements established with the EU, Morocco, and Tunisia have a lesser salience than the geographical factor of being Southern Mediterranean.

Because of the article's focus on work programmes and thematic calls, drawing more definite conclusions or detailed assumptions about the track record of the thematic incentives presented by the European Commission as being potentially prone to generating epistemic dependence or segmented epistocracy across supported project consortiums and beneficiaries proves challenging. This would require a more qualitative, in-depth examination of the consortium composition, geographic dispersion, and interactions among consortium members.

Further study using another methodological approach, such as expert interviews, would be worth considering in order to obtain even more insight into which considerations guided the European Commission to choose to frame the analysed documents with a propensity towards the Mediterranean positioning rather than the ESN framework. It would add a new dimension to the studied mechanism.

Bearing in mind that differentiation is not static, this study captures a time-bound snapshot of incentive structures for incorporating Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities into the European research-intensive consortiums. It cannot be ruled out that other periods may reveal different logics and supranationally defined argumentation for incorporating Morocco-and-Tunisia-based entities in the FPs' frameworks.

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