



# The Aspiration towards Centrality in the European Research Area: The European Interest in Bringing the Southern Neighbourhood into the Picture

Dążenie do centralności  
w Europejskiej Przestrzeni Badawczej  
Europejskie zainteresowanie pogłębianiem współpracy  
z państwami Południowego Sąsiedztwa


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## Abstract

This article examines how research cooperation serves the goals of the European Southern Neighbourhood Policy and the European Research Area, through the lens of motivations and pursuits of Europe-based project managers. Following insight obtained from fifteen semi-structured interviews with the project managers funded by EU Framework Programmes, this article outlines that many Europe-based project coordinators welcomed Moroccan and Tunisian institutions to the consortia because this would enhance their position of centrality and point of expertise intersections

## Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób współpraca badawcza służy realizacji celów Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa wobec Południa oraz Europejskiej Przestrzeni Badawczej, przez pryzmat motywacji i działań koordynatorów projektów z europejskich instytucji. Na podstawie wniosków płynących z piętnastu częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów przeprowadzonych z koordynatorami projektów finansowanych w ramach Programów Ramowych Unii Europejskiej, artykuł wskazuje, że wielu z nich chętnie włączało instytucje z Maroka i Tunezji do konsorcjów projektowych, ponieważ wzmacniało

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in the European Research Area. Narrative analysis guides multifaceted conclusions. Agency strategies pursued through a scientific focus on the projects serve the overall goals of the European Research Area and the Southern Neighbourhood Policy. European project coordinators function as enablers of the EU structural diplomacy. The science diplomacy considerations are secondary and not unified across the examined projects.

**Keywords:** practice theory, narratology, European Research Area, European Southern Neighbourhood, Morocco, Tunisia, science diplomacy

to ich centralną pozycję oraz rolę węzłów łączących różne obszary wiedzy eksperckiej w Europejskiej Przestrzeni Badawczej. Analiza narracyjna prowadzi do sformułowania wielowymiarowych wniosków. Strategie działania podejmowane przez poszczególnych aktorów, realizowane poprzez naukowe ukierunkowanie projektów, służą ogólnym celom Europejskiej Przestrzeni Badawczej oraz Polityki Sąsiedztwa wobec Południa. Europejscy koordynatorzy projektów pełnią funkcję podmiotów umożliwiających realizację dyplomacji strukturalnej Unii Europejskiej. Względy związane z dyplomacją naukową mają znaczenie drugorzędne i nie są w sposób jednolity obecne we wszystkich analizowanych projektach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teoria praktyki, narratologia, Europejska Przestrzeń Badawcza, Południowe Sąsiedztwo UE, Maroko, Tunezja, dyplomacja naukowa

*Yet the most important thing for me is that our different voices, the pluralism of our voices, inside the EU sing the same song. We represent the same vision and all of us work on a daily basis putting together all our different instruments, different European institutions, different Member States, towards the same objective and coherent policy.*

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High Representative of the EU  
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the  
European Commission,  
Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC)  
University of Malta, 2 November 2016

## 1. Introduction

Research intensity is interwoven with efforts to address virtually every contemporary societal challenge. Incentivised by the EU policies, programmes, and instruments, European higher education and research institutions choose certain institutional means and funding measures to develop solutions for diverse contemporary challenges. These pathways deserve more scholarly attention. Understanding the prevailing motivations for fostering international ties with peers located in geopolitically volatile contexts provides a more nuanced picture of the driving forces of contemporary knowledge generation. The effects of politically defined steering measures on knowledge generation become better understood.

In studying how and why Moroccan and Tunisian higher education and research institutions are included in EU-funded consortia, this article examines the following research question: How does research cooperation help to achieve the overarching goals of the European Southern Neighbourhood (ESN) Policy and the European Research Area (ERA)? The research focuses on the period of 2014–2017, that is, after major upheavals caused by the Arab uprisings (Crieke-mans, 2021, p. 98; Dandashly et al., 2021, pp. 20–21; McKean & Szewczyk, 2021, pp. 59–61). This is the period of an attempted establishment of some normalcy and a return to more routine conduct of the EU relations with the ESN, where the ESN Policy and the ERA play a notable role.

To briefly introduce the chosen key EU policy frameworks and their goals, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) “sets up a large frontier zone” to the South and East of the EU to manage interdependencies and guard the EU against various challenges (Duran, 2021, p. 332). The regional foreign policy objectives increasingly guide the ENP. Each ENP country’s specificities and levels of ambition to engage with the EU in a mutually beneficial cooperation shape activities aimed at strengthening the prosperity, sustainability, and resilience of the neighbouring countries (Kausch, 2021, p. 7; Perchoc, 2016, p. 29). Morocco and Tunisia are among the most actively engaged countries with multifaceted ties to the EU (Šime, 2021, p. 4). The ERA was established following the conceptual aspirations of the European Scientific and Technological Space to bring closer various programmes and foster an integrated area for an exchange of ideas, expertise, and talent for the benefit of the Union’s competitiveness and economic growth (Carrozza et al., 2020, p. 581; Cassi et al., 2008, p. 664; Chrysomallidis et al., 2018, p. 62). Looking for cues relevant to the ESN and the ERA aspirations corresponds to the murkiness of the ENP and its estimated mixed track record, especially when addressing its Southern dimension (Boedeltje & van Houtum, 2011, p. 139; Hadfield, 2021, p. 159).

The hoop test hypothesis in this case is formulated as follows: The Europe-based coordinator of a Framework Programme (FP)-funded project welcomed

a Moroccan and/or Tunisian institution(s) to the consortium because the coordinating institution wants to improve its centrality in the ERA. The hoop test takes a conscious step back from a relatively narrow preoccupation with the two chosen policy frameworks, namely, the ERA and the ESN. The hypothesis introduces professional and strategic motivations to the comprehensive enquiry into the research managerial routines of project managers who represent the coordinating institution of the consortium. These activities are at the core of translating the ERA and ESN goals into tangible actions and achievements founded on collegiality and collaborative relationships. Thus, to build on the research question, the studied mechanism positions the ERA and ENP goals as the causes and the corresponding project results as the outcomes. Referring to the hypothesis, the project managers pursuing their own interests are agents who, through project management and other relevant interactions, put in motion causal forces to interconnect the causes and the outcomes.

Practice theory studies routine activities of various individuals and collective bodies. The strength of practice theory is its appreciation of the “inescapable perspectivism” of interpretation and clarity that there is no “view from nowhere” (Eggeling, 2021, p. 165; Hamati-Ataya, 2011, p. 282; 2012, 2018b; McCourt, 2012, p. 33). Stressing the importance of habitus and mastery of the field (Perret, 2025, p. 1131), views on practices are closely tied to prior experiences of *agencements* and the environment in which the individual or an institution operates in the pursuit of capital acquisition. Empirical analysis focusing on the practices of project managers largely relies on the narrative analysis performed based on the transcripts of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted online via video calls throughout 2022.

This article contributes to several strands of academic research. Foremost, this in-depth study of interviews with project managers brings more empirical insights to the study of EU science diplomacy and EU structural diplomacy by building on the practice theory (Kustermans, 2016), focusing on recent EU-funded research and innovation projects. Through its focus on project manager-level considerations, this article adds to the literature on ERA governance, and its multifaceted role, including in the external action and neighbourhood contexts in an age of flexibility in foreign policymaking (Renard, 2016, p. 32). Additionally, by bringing to the fore the strategic motivations of project managers in including Moroccan and Tunisian institutions in project consortia, this article offers one more insight relevant to the literature on “the utilitarian turn in research funding” (Van Dooren et al., 2010, p. 44) and the managerialism of higher education and research institutions (Teichler, 2021). Furthermore, this article contributes to the growing literature on the multifaceted impact of extramural resources on universities, including EU-funded projects, and collaboration among shifting and ever-evolving disciplines and sectors represented by a wealth of professions (Felt, 2017, p. 55; Hesjedal, Åm et al., 2020; Moghadam-Saman, 2021; PARISS Collec-

tive, 2020; Powell & Baker, 2021, p. 31; Sørensen, 2021; Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). Last but not least, this article draws attention to multiple considerations and incentives that motivate staff of higher education and research institutions to seek EU-funded opportunities to work with colleagues from the ESN. These dimensions add to the attainment of more overarching goals articulated through diplomatic aspirations and external action.

The article's first part introduces the key elements of practice theory chosen to form conceptual foundations for this article. The second part explains methodological considerations and choices for process tracing through a narrative analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts. The third part presents dynamics of the studied framework field with subsections dedicated to nodality, in other words, the position of a hub that hosts intersections of diverse institutional expertise, as well as science diplomacy, structural diplomacy, and *agencements*. The fourth part discusses the strengths and limitations of the findings, such as the geographical prevalence of the interviewees from Southern Europe. The final part claims that many project managers welcomed Moroccan and Tunisian institutions to the consortium because that would work in favour of their increased nodality in the ERA framework field.

## 2. Practice Theory

This article's main elements of Bourdieu-inspired contemporary practice theory are field, habitus, and capital. They are coupled with *agencements*. The field is the central element of the theory. The field is a relatively autonomous social microcosm (Wagner, 2018). Each field is a social space governed by its own rules and characterised by a unique configuration of agents, hierarchical relationships between them, and varied levels of relationality through diverse forms of interaction (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 38; 1990, p. 35; Champagne & Christin, 2012; Lebaron & Le Roux, 2013, p. 108). Bourdieu left to his followers a reworked meaning of habitus that alludes to "a structuring mechanism" embodied by agents in the form of a socialised predisposition (Wacquant, 2002, p. 553; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 18, 126). Consequently, habitus refers to a repertoire of improvisations, their corresponding logics of action followed by individuals as agents in a specific social environment (Champagne & Christin, 2012). Capital captures the perceived social reality with a certain notion of value constantly under revision and reconsideration (Champagne & Christin, 2012). Agents are oriented towards capital accumulation to position themselves prominently in the field.

Practice theory has gained prominence for its attention to agency and the relational performance of somewhat subordinated (Hamati-Ataya, 2018a, p. 302)

actors (Knappe, 2021, p. 434), including their efforts to maintain ties across borders (Neumann, 2002) and to attain international recognition (Basaran & Olsson, 2018; Eagleton-Pierce, 2011). The relational fields offer opportunities to engage in capital transactions (Strydom, 2021, pp. 36–37). The enquiry that follows, in its epistemic dimension, attests to the multifaceted implications of these relational ties (Bueger, 2014a, p. 50).

The study of the field of bureaucracies and other actors has a prominent position in the contemporary scholarly enquiry into the multifaceted aspects of European integration (Michel, 2022). Going beyond the study of the European Commission and its internal field dynamics (Georgakakis, 2009; Georgakakis & de Lassale, 2007, 2008), structural changes of the ERA and the FPs trickle down to the implementer level as thematic constellations and managerial configurations to be respected by the aspiring applicants for funding and project implementers assigned with specific roles (Schögler & König, 2017). The international collaboration patterns displayed by the projects constitute a symbolic and social process that builds alliances and mobilises resources (Cetina, 1992, p. 115; Hoenig, 2017; Perret, 2025, p. 1126). This article's exploration of these patterns provides a more fine-grained picture of the connections that incorporate the ESN-based entities into the ERA. Contemporary practice theory that is built upon the reinterpretations of Bourdieusian elements is an excellent foundation to put research-intensive projects on the radar. Contemporary practice scholarship provides a lens through which to explore the full complexity of the EU actorness and its "multiple voices" (Novak, 2014). Prior findings on "nodes," "hegemonic" and "oligarchic" patterns across the ERA and opportunity structures offered by the ERA are a sound basis for studying the contemporary strategies chosen for capital acquisition (Cassi et al., 2008, p. 669; Chessa et al., 2013; Heilbron et al., 2018; Wanzenböck et al., 2020, p. 1146). Specific capital acquisition approaches and strategies evolve along with the development of policy steering and planning modalities in the ERA framework field. Thus, these logics of centrality aspirations must be continuously studied to be aware of the continuing trends and shifts in relational pursuits.

It is noteworthy that specific scientific capital is not a universally transversal capital. For example, although inter- and transdisciplinarity are increasingly welcomed, the overall receptiveness to it remains mixed (Cuevas-Garcia, 2021, pp. 247–248; Kontar et al., 2021, p. 3; Laffan, 2021, p. 202). This could be one of the aspects that contribute to some degree of the non-transversality of capital between scientific domains, not to mention broader contexts, such as those associated with the third mission of academia. A researcher's standing in one field may not prove equally influential and authoritative in another.

The existing literature on various Bourdieusian capitals juggles scientific capital to be understood, among other things, as symbolic capital (Tampakis, 2016, p. 817), symbolic capital more broadly (Bortolini & Cossu, 2020, p. 330), and social capital (Melkers & Kiopa, 2010). Unfortunately, on most occasions, there

is a lack of a more nuanced explanation of how each of these types should be distinguished from one another. This article overcomes this ambiguity by considering capital as a general notion of value without introducing a rigid structure of types. The identified issue in the existing body of literature is too grand to be addressed in this manuscript. This research thread should be dealt with separately, namely, in a dedicated manuscript. Instead, the generic approach to capital allows translating an EU-funded project into a capital acquired by its associated parties. The project serves as a space where further capital transactions may occur with further implications on the recognition and status of agents involved. Long-term collaborations are sustained by various funding acquired for both formal and informal cooperation and research mobility, among other considerations (Ulnicane, 2015, p. 445). Lasting collegial ties beyond institutional encounters may also play a role (Murakami, 2019). Therefore, EU-funded projects should not be considered one-off interactions among consortium members. Instead, those might serve as platforms for capital transactions and consultative ties sustained over a more extended period. A project is only one of the elements of the overall opportunity structures offered in the Mediterranean setting (Lopez-Vega & Ramis-Pujol, 2011). Thus, this article studies a particular type of capital transaction support structure, not a universal one.

A helpful heuristic component for a study of projects as temporary institutions of the ERA framework field are two (of the overall five) types of *agencements*. An *agencement* is an arrangement “endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration” (Bueger, 2011, p. 176). Acting is brought into the picture not as a process studied but as a direction towards establishing or maintaining specifically defined relational ties for a certain period. Within the limited scope of this article, the interlinks found during the analysed projects as collective attempts with a research-intensive resilience-building potential display traits of inquiry and laboratory. Inquiry is a type of *agencement* that “is guided by the desire to find refined and expanded problem-solving procedures to master a distinct problem” (Bueger, 2011, p. 178). Laboratory “refers to the creation of certainty and the stabilisation of facts by scientific procedures” (Bueger, 2011, p. 178). Both *agencements* display certain traits of capacity-building, a widespread component of research-intensive projects.

Moreover, both *agencements* are highly compatible with the chosen taxonomy of science diplomacy – “science for diplomacy” – referring to the way scientific outreach supports diplomatic goals (Šime, 2021, pp. 12–13). The saliency of the chosen taxonomy is founded on the fairly recent introduction of its variant, “science impacting diplomacy.” This line of reasoning solidifies the influential role that science exerts in the conduct of resonant diplomacy (The Royal Society, 2025, pp. 24–25). Structural diplomacy refers to interactions with other parties tailored to develop or maintain lasting patterns across various policy domains that are in the interlocutor’s domain of responsibility (Šime, 2023b, p. 5). Furthermore, the

introduction of structural power to the practice theory-centred framework follows the concise remarks made earlier on the overall power debate (Guzzini, 2020, pp. 5–6; Mbatia, 2014) and echoes of structures in the contemporary thinking on habitus (Jeon, 2019). Structural diplomacy brings more texture and pattern to the study of the field. Building on recent remarks on diverse scholarly threads that have the potential to enrich EU science diplomacy (Šime, 2023b), the project coordinator takes centre stage in this article as a head of a temporary institution formed by a multilateral consortium. This position is chosen to explore the EU structural diplomacy as a means to advance the EU structural power (Šime, 2023b, pp. 4–5). This enquiry revolves around the question of how structural diplomacy is weaved by the elements that constitute the ERA framework field.

### 3. Methodology

It is commendable that the proponents of practice theory develop their own methodological approach and carve out a toolbox informed by the references to praxiography. Nevertheless, the limited literature and the overall nascent phase of the said inquiry are obstacles to an elaborate methodological approach. Moreover, some elements of praxiography seem to resonate with more established and nuanced methodological literature (Bueger, 2014b). Therefore, the methodology for this article is formed based on elements that are widely adopted, broadly discussed, and recognised as conducive to crafting the emerging character of praxiography (Bueger & Gardinger, 2018).

Following the process tracing in its rich entirety (Demetriou, 2012), this study captures an explaining-outcome approach. The explaining-outcome approach builds “a minimally sufficient explanation” of a particular case outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 16–18). The hypothesis captures a hoop test aimed at obtaining more insights into the dynamics shaping the ERA framework field, what facilitates the attainment of ERA goals, and motivations for incorporating ESN-based entities into it. “Hoop tests involve evidence that is certain, but not unique; failing a hoop test disqualifies an explanation, but passing it does not greatly increase confidence in that explanation” (Bennett et al., 2015, p. 17). This attempt to perform a hoop test should be viewed in the context of process tracing being an interpretative process with “seeing” certain elements corresponding to an active identification process, not a mere technical registration (Guzzini, 2017, p. 754). It echoes the recognition that academic writing in itself is a practice (Bueger & Gardinger, 2018, p. 156). Thus, academic writing entails a considerable component of subjectivity and perspective.

The conceptual foundations are laid following the core logic of a semi-systematic or narrative review. This literature review type “is designed for topics that have been conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines and that hinder a full systematic review process” (Snyder, 2019, p. 335). It aims to inform the crafted practice theory approach in sufficient depth about the latest findings tied to the European integration policy dynamics without claiming full applicability of conclusions drawn based on one EU policy area towards the others.

Following the explaining-outcome approach, an interview template was constructed to identify mechanistic evidence, namely various pathways for the causal mechanism to unfold through linking causes to outcomes (Beach & Pedersen, 2018, p. 838). The cause is the ERA and ENP goals. The outcomes are the attainment of these goals through project-generated results. In line with the recommendation to lay sufficient grounds for interviews (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955), semi-structured interviews were organised after completing the initial stages of analysing open calls for project applications and the composition of project consortia that were coordinated by a Europe-based manager and entailed at least one consortium member from Morocco and/or Tunisia. The selection of projects was guided by 2014–2017, including projects funded by the Framework Programme 7 (FP7) and Horizon 2020 (H2020).<sup>1</sup>

The goal of H2020 to consolidate the ERA and its delivered research excellence deserves more analytical attention through a more qualitative enquiry into relational dynamics stirred by projects (Rodríguez-Navarro & Brito, 2018, p. 727). Therefore, the movement into synthesis draws on the theoretical underpinnings elaborated in the previous section and combines it with multifaceted analytical findings devised on the basis of the empirical material captured by the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and secondary literature (Galletta, 2013, p. 150; Šime, 2024b; 2026). Thereby, this study builds on the complementarities of the examined sources and completed research threads in pursuit of a thorough answer to the research question (Yin, 2009, p. 265).

Additionally, this article distances itself from the negative connotations associated with the field work as a technical extraction of prioritised data from a distant geographical area (elaborated on by Richmond et al., 2015). However, “field” notes taken directly after each interview, in other words, virtual encounter, in order to keep a record of noteworthy features of the interview and ideas that it sparked for further consideration form an intrinsic part of this article (Adams, 2010, p. 20; Salmons, 2015, p. 123). Thereby, the article builds on a combination of extant and elicited data (Salmons, 2015, p. 32). The chosen approach stresses

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<sup>1</sup> Further details about the project selection criteria are explained in the earlier analyses of consortia (Šime, 2021, p. 9; 2024a, pp. 20–21).

the fluid quality of field work. It is an ongoing process of reflections and analysis rather than a collection of static impressions (Poopuu & van den Berg, 2021).

Moreover, what forms an intrinsic component of the overall analytical process that shapes this article are the generative process captured by the earlier conclusions about the specific preconditions defined by the European Commission in the open calls for project applications and actual collaborative research patterns that integrate the ESN-based entities into the ERA realm (Šime, 2021; 2023a; 2023b; 2024c). In sum, the more comprehensive research project defines each interview's overall pace and thematic avenues (Kvale, 2006, p. 484). Following the praxiographic logic, interviews facilitate obtaining more nuanced background knowledge (Bueger, 2014b, p. 400). This article adopts an interview-data-as-resource approach to explore how interviewees perceive their project experiences (De Fina & Perrino, 2011, p. 5). Following the theoretical notions of the agent's positioning in the field, attention is paid to the stance elaborated by the interviewee, meaning the manifested public act of the individual offering details about relationality towards objects and subjects (Baynham, 2011, p. 70). Positionality and reproduction of narratives associated with specific institutional stances has proven a salient topic in earlier studies on the European project (Kaiser, 2017; Kaiser & McMahan, 2017, p. 150; Maricut, 2017, p. 162; McMahan, 2017, p. 245). The transcripts capture the narrated events through an interactional text that acknowledges the considerable role of the interviewer and interviewee in shaping the unfolding and contents of each encounter (De Fina, 2011; Modan & Shuman, 2011, p. 23; Wortham et al., 2011). There is a level of uniqueness associated with the structure and project-relevant highlights offered by each interviewee.

Analysis of the interviews echoes the constructivist conceptions about "the situated practice of interviewing, and a disbelief in conceptions of data as stable nuggets to be mined by the interviewer" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 78). The situated knowledge shared by interviewees cannot be detached from the social and historical context and a temporary understanding of the social world (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 36; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 146, 165). It echoes the fluidity reasoned by the praxiography (Bueger, 2014b, p. 391).

This study addresses the "community, organisation or institution" level defined by Salmons (2015, p. 31). The study on this level is conducted through encounters with a vast pool of people who "operate within some shared set of parameters" defined by the ERA framework field, though with some minor differences. Namely, some of the interviewed representatives of the project coordinating institutions are ornated with "the Marie Curie brand" (Wirtén, 2015, p. 163) through the implementation of the H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions that entail mobility of individual researchers.

To incorporate the suggestion to choose empirical material with sufficient fingerprints of the studied mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2018, p. 858), 25 invitations for interviews were issued. The selection criteria was (primarily but

not exclusively) institutions positioned as explicit science diplomacy centres of competence or institutions located in countries that have defined their stance on science diplomacy. The institutions invited for interviews should have at least one or several (reoccurring) engagement(-s) with the Morocco- and/or Tunisia-based institutions. France and Spain are examples of countries with a clear science diplomacy stance (Curbatov & Pavlidis, 2016, p. 6; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013; Šime, 2023b).

To study the ESN particularities comprehensively, the targeted higher education and research institutions were chosen in an attempt to strike a balance between geographic representation of both North and South of Europe, thus striving toward a balanced input of recollected experiences feeding into the empirical analysis (Maxwell, 2009, p. 221). Invitations issued to entities in non-EU states were consistent with the vast reach of the concentric circles of European integration and the EU external governance (Eriksen, 2020, p. 743; Gstöhl, 2014, p. 19). However, among 15 responses (referred to as I1-I15 further in the text), there was no significant responsiveness from non-EU countries. Among the interviewees were individuals with various designations used to refer to their key position, such as “project leader,” and other representatives of the management team hosted by the project coordinating institution. “Project manager” is used as a generic term to refer to all these designations chosen by the studied projects to present roles and responsibilities to the wider public. In addition, interviews with coordinators benefit from hand-written notes taken during an anonymised round table with consortium members from Europe and several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region of one project concluded in January 2023.

Overall, the situatedness of obtained insights is skewed towards southern European considerations elaborated in more detail in the subsequent section of the article with a focus on four themes – nodal position, science diplomacy, EU structural diplomacy, and *agencements*. The themes resulted in a pursuit grounded in narratology to identify points of thematic convergence. Such operationalisation does not refer to strict distinction or classification of each interview according to one theme. On the contrary, the identified four themes are cross-cutting and threads of these themes are manifested in multiple interviews on one or several occasions.

The outline of the methodology strives to give fair credit to concerns, recommendations, and conclusions made in the existing literature that guided the research process (e.g., Cooper et al., 2009, p. 352; Massaro et al., 2019, p. 47). However, responsiveness to all issues raised in the academic literature is virtually impossible within an article-length manuscript. Therefore, this is a balancing act between explicitness and the optimal length and proportion of contents in a standard academic article format.

## 4. Dynamics of the ERA Framework Field

### 4.1. Preliminary Remarks

Interviews with project managers are chosen to study how the core dispositions of a policy and programming of the funding are echoed in individual experiences and accounts. The narrative analysis confirmed that many Europe-based coordinators of an FP-funded project welcomed Moroccan and Tunisian institutions to the consortium because the coordinating institutions might benefit from improved centrality in the ERA. This motivation is not always explicitly acknowledged by the interviewed agents of the ERA framework field. However, four thematic threads manifested in the interviews attest to passing this hoop test. While some references to building a profile of a well-interconnected node are limited to the ERA, others refer to the international research landscape more broadly. Each of those – nodal position or centrality, science diplomacy dimension, promotion of EU structural diplomacy, *agencements* – deserves more attention and is elaborated on in the subsequent subsections.

### 4.2. Nodal Position

A truly international consortium is an asset. The ERA is the framework field and social space governed by supranational rules shaping the ever-evolving configuration of agents and hierarchical constellation among them. The ERA habitus entails a repertoire of supranationally fostered actions for consortium leaders and members to follow. A project is considered a time-bound encounter for capital transactions among consortium members. The mapped projects attest to the diversity of capital and recognition that FPs-funded projects offer. An international, not just European, consortium makes the project manager feel in charge of a truly diverse group whose members provide distinct added value that stems from their expertise originating from various geographical areas (I2; I10; I14). The value is the network (I15). Partnering with ESN-based entities strengthens the positioning of the Europe-based institution as a hub of Mediterranean-specialised or issue-specific research. The ambition of a Europe-based project manager to foster an international consortium is beneficial not only to the professional or institutional aspirations towards prestige and status of that particular entity. Hosting such international networks benefits the ERA as an intellectual space that increases its attractiveness along with the vast pool of expertise and capital it houses through project-funded consortia.

Lessons learned about the best collaborative approach with ESN entities were used by Europe-based project managers on other occasions, not only in different EU-funded projects. One example is using prior experience in project-based col-

laborative approaches while working with the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change (MedECC) (I3). It hints at the transversality of the capital obtained in the ERA to other fields with a similar thematic orientation.

However, the role of ESN-based entities should not be overestimated. One of the projects did not benefit from the involvement of ESN-based participants (I11). On the contrary, the project was hampered by administrative and content-delivery issues due to the lack of cooperative engagement of the ESN-based participant. Methodologically (Beach & Pedersen, 2018, p. 863), this is considered a deviant pattern with no substantial attainment of the ERA and ENP goals through this project encounter between Europe- and ENP-based entities.

Another interviewee recognised that the lack of continued interest in cooperating with the ESN-based consortium member beyond the project time frame is motivated by the cumbersome administrative processes at the partnering institution and relatively slow responsiveness in the delivery of project inputs (I12). Among the mapped projects that were approached with an interview enquiry but did not result in responsiveness was MEDIGENE. The project coordinated in France received a Europe-oriented award. Remarks on this prestige-enhancing occasion commend the vital contribution made by several consortium members in the successful project implementation, none of which were based in Morocco or Tunisia (Grigorescu, 2017). This episode is taken as another complementary evidence that not all Moroccan and Tunisian institutions are equally praised by the Europe-based project coordinators. However, the positive remarks are much more widespread than the absence of any comments or criticism of the performance of ESN-based project members.

### 4.3. Science Diplomacy

Being informed and knowledgeable about science diplomacy and the experience with “science for diplomacy” activities among project managers was measured by exploring their exposure to explicit science diplomacy initiatives, by determining whether they conducted their own explicit science diplomacy activities, or by detecting any professional routines that could have exposed them to implicit science diplomacy routines. Most of the interviewees were aware of science diplomacy. Out of 15 interviewees, 11 were informed about science diplomacy. The level of expertise in science diplomacy was of a vast range. The head of the Centre for Science and Commercial Diplomacy, located in Denmark, represented the most pronounced professional experience in science diplomacy (I15). Other experts had performed extensive prior professional work for the United Nations or its affiliated structures with diverse science advisory services (I7; I15). Some were familiar with explicit science diplomacy initiatives, such as the Barcelona Science and Technology Diplomacy Hub, or events such as the

workshop “Increasing Awareness of Science Diplomacy in the Mediterranean” of the Union for the Mediterranean (I4; I7; I8). Meetings with the national diplomatic corps to share insights about the research performed during the project in question or other initiatives are other examples of how interviewees relate to science diplomacy in their routine work (I1; I9; I12).

To one interviewee’s surprise, the project was mentioned (by an unidentified authority) as an example of science diplomacy without the project itself being positioned by its implementers as an explicit science diplomacy action (I13). This is an episode of potential instrumentalisation of a project by science diplomacy advocates. Thereby, the project context is amplified by other entities along the lines of their reasoning and interests.

The science advisory aspect in exploiting the full potential of project results was performed by the coordinating institution writing a policy brief for the European Parliament and international non-governmental organisations using the project-generated data for their advocacy (I13). Indicative of the minimum level of awareness, two interviewees performed a quick desktop search of the term “science diplomacy” before the interview (I2; I10). In most cases, interviewees could relate to the core thinking of science diplomacy as being manifested in some of their work in an implicit form, not an explicit goal of their project implementation and primary professional duties. These are promising grounds for further work on the contextualisation of science diplomacy as an EU implicit practice with a considerable stock of lessons learnt and accomplishments.

It is noteworthy that the EU-funded project was one avenue for interviewees to become familiar with science diplomacy but far from the only one. Several project managers could relate to science diplomacy because of their professional ties through former or most recent engagements outside the scope of the EU-funded project. The same patterns of long-standing specialisation were shared during the roundtable with one project consortium. Besides inputs provided to the work of national authorities, among consortium members were experts familiar with science diplomacy discussions of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Thus, considerations related to the value-added of scientific engagements are not emanating solely from the EU-funded initiatives. This highlights the complementarities and cumulative effect of various arrangements, not a decisive role of the ERA in highlighting science diplomacy as a pathway for solidifying some outreach or international positioning ambitions of the represented institution. However, in a somewhat implicit manner, the ERA benefits from all this vast expertise accumulated by project implementers outside the scope of the EU-funded consortium. When crafting project deliverables, they bring years of national and international experience to the table. None of the interviewees related science diplomacy to capital acquisition strategies and relational approaches to increase their nodal position within the ERA framework field or internationally. Similarly, science diplomacy is not associated with a distinct habitus. Instead,

science diplomacy is viewed as a set of activities or potential additional quality of their research engagements that scientists choose to undertake or defer from participation. Thus, there might be some capital acquisition potential in attuning research activities to science diplomacy considerations. But no clear strategies in this regard were voiced during the interviews.

#### 4.4. EU Structural Diplomacy

The EU structural diplomacy manifests itself in the work of project managers through their responsibilities to steer a project aligned with the overarching goals of the ERA and, on certain occasions (implicitly or explicitly), also the ESN. Most project managers feel comfortable limiting their remarks to the project plan and core scientific deliverables. At the same time, several interviewees (e.g. I4) with long and diverse international experience are willing to estimate how the project has advanced broader policy milestones. Among tangible examples of the ERA promotion was the participation of ESN-based consortium members in the European Researchers' Night (I1).<sup>2</sup> Another project facilitated the dissemination of specific European research approaches across Africa to address the needs of vulnerable groups. Tunisia hosted this school (I5). Furthermore, ESN-based experts organised a webinar for interested audiences from across Africa about the research approach central to a project, thus significantly broadening the overall awareness of expertise generated throughout the EU-funded project (I5). Another way project findings are brought forward and disseminated beyond the consortium is through training programmes hosted by the coordinating institutions (I5; I7). One such training event established a new connection between Europe- and ESN-based institutions for new project cooperation (I7). This is a promising episode for illustrating how the EU-funded research initiatives can reach and go beyond the framework field of the ERA and its agents.

Another practical benefit contributing to integrating the ESN into the ERA is that a project served as a capacity-building measure for the ESN beneficiaries to improve their understanding and management capacity of EU routine procedures (I3; I8). The project was a suitable means to introduce ESN-based entities to the ERA's routine functioning, which includes organising activities between industry and academia, setting up a research agenda, and participating in project development (I4). In another project, the consortium obtained a nuanced understanding of each other's expertise and capacities and built confidence (I6). A consortium serves as a space for socialising ESN entities to the ERA habitus.

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<sup>2</sup> It is an annual event taking place across the EU and elsewhere aimed at increasing awareness among the public about scientific advancements and how those contribute to society.

Good collaborative experience in one EU project with a substantial number of prepared research publications and other research outputs stimulated cooperation in a new, ongoing EU project or prompted an application for a consecutive project (I1; I6; I8). This is one episode clarifying how fruitful cooperation increases the nodal role of the EU-based project manager as the facilitator for ESN-based entities to obtain further collaborative opportunities within the ERA framework.

EU-based project managers are interested in increasing ties with ESN-based entities (I2). On certain occasions, such interest for potential future collaboration is guided by criteria based on previous cooperation with ESN-based entities (I13). Thus, it is estimated to be a promising context for future integration of the ESN into the ERA, including the potential to increase the centrality of some of the interviewed experts in acting as the ERA nodes offering future EU-funded collaborative opportunities. However, this overall enthusiasm must be qualified by full appreciation that this plethora of options for jointly implementing cherished research objectives also requires patience towards the pace of the administrative procedures in the ESN countries (I9). While ESN may be incorporated into the ERA, this participation does not tear down some core bureaucratic considerations that may be relatively time-consuming.

The ERA accomplishments do not come solely as intangible assets accessible to ESN entities. Some projects result in very solid outcomes, such as a research station based in one of the ESN countries (I9). Thus, the ERA continuously facilitates joint work towards establishing research infrastructure objects of various dimensions in Europe and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the terrorism threat is one of the restrictive factors for extending the EU structural diplomacy and its effects on the ground through European presence and first-hand familiarity with the challenges faced by the ESN. One project had to cancel a field visit to ESN area due to a recent terrorist attack and the worsening security situation that came along with it (I8). The re-occurring volatilities limit the options for European experts to circulate freely within all countries involved in the ERA. The free circulation of expertise and individuals across the ERA applies to European countries, not all involved countries of ESN.

Perspectivism in these findings on the EU structural diplomacy is manifested in the overall pool of interviews by an overwhelming proportion of interviewees from Spain and France. To a considerable extent, the empirical findings mirror the solid positioning of the project managers and their institutional affiliations in the ERA framework field. As a piece of helpful background information, it should be added that many Mediterranean cultures value interpersonal relationships as opposed to pure result-oriented transactionalism. Since most interviewees were from Mediterranean countries, this cultural trait should not be left entirely outside the analytical scope (Ester & Nispen, 2013, pp. 32–33). The interview (I6) and consortium round table attested to the long-standing collegial ties spanning more than a decade as a solid competitive point during the project application stage because

involved experts were sure about each other's expertise and capacities to implement the project plan. Looking beyond this project example, such a disposition towards long-term contacts might influence the propensity to maintain collegial connections outside the project implementation time frame. Consequently, Spanish and French stances as positioning in the ERA framework field are carefully evaluated against the insights provided by interviewees from other parts of Europe.

#### 4.5. *Agencements*

Inquiry *agencement* is observable in projects that seek to deliver a research-intensive solution to a particular challenge. This type of *agencement* echoes the emergence of “new models of knowledge production” to address wicked problems (Akerlof et al., 2022, p. 352) and scholarly recommendations for the EU to promote a comprehensive resilience-building (Levallois et al., 2021, p. 18). A skilled project manager displays inquiry *agencement* through problem-solving achievements. A project is the attainment of co-creation and joint efforts aimed at resilience-building (I8). An intangible benefit of one project was the mutual realisation that the Mediterranean region shares a common background and problems that need to be addressed by jointly tailored approaches and solutions rather than unilaterally defined ones (I4). It is progress towards overcoming dividing lines and considering ESN as a joint endeavour, not a one-directional management of interdependencies.

Laboratory *agencement* employs the scientific method to clarify and stabilise facts. The badge of honour and capital associated with an accomplished laboratory *agencement* stems from the project's analytical rigour and high-quality data delivery. This type of *agencement* aligns with the furthering of the EU structural power across the ESN. As examples, several projects have generated findings and promoted European good practices and legal acts to encourage ESN countries to make their policies more consistent with the European approach (I7; I8; I13).

To conclude, it is challenging to argue whether one or another of the four themes discussed in the fourth section “Dynamics of the ERA Framework Field” is more prevalent in the interviewees' accounts. The proportionality and intensity were not paid attention to during the tracing exercise. Instead, the elements were grouped according to four themes irrespective of where in the interviews they appeared or the examples through which they were illustrated. A key aspect of the process was how engagement interactions between Europe-based managers and Moroccan and Tunisian institutions occurred, especially whether there was some broader context of collegial ties which played a role in composing the project consortium.

## 5. Discussion

Looking at the findings more broadly, it should be noted that passing the hoop test does not significantly increase confidence in the explanation. Fifteen interviews with a significant proportion of interviewees located in southern European countries restrict generalisation. However, despite these limitations, the findings retain analytical relevance. It is plausible that other interviewees might offer different accounts. The most significant limitation towards generalising the findings could arise if most respondents came from countries other than Spain and France. As some of the quantified citation preferences demonstrate, France-affiliated publications have the biggest influence on life science and biomedical research output in Morocco and Tunisia (Gu, 2025, pp. 11, 18). Morocco's most active co-publishing is linked to France and Spain (Bouabid & Martin, 2009, p. 209). These are two examples of how valuable the French and Spanish studied accounts are. France and Spain are overwhelmingly influential sources of reference for researchers in Morocco and Tunisia. The research and collegiality routines characteristic of these countries are highly representative of the prevailing relationality practices involving Morocco and Tunisia in various international initiatives.

As the epigraph of this article suggests, the EU strives to speak not with one voice but with all voices singing the same song (Mogherini, 2016, p. 10). It remains an open question whether project managers from the countries that were not represented in the pool of interviews would argue along the same lines. Overall, despite these limitations and unknowns, the strength of the findings is that they are based on empirical material with sufficient fingerprints of the studied mechanism.

This is a qualitative, rather than quantitative, study with a limited pool of accounts. It does not strive for far-reaching generalisations. However, these accounts' highly informative and insightful character should not be underestimated. The pronounced qualitative angle goes beyond the often-times too quantitative approach to studying projects. This practice-theory-guided enquiry clarifies that consortia are not just relational patterns. Behind those patterns are context-rich intellectual developments and very diverse, fluid, and evolving dynamics.

What is more, an element that is not addressed in this article but forms an essential part of the research ties with the ESN is individual research mobility of the romanticised hyperflexible or attachment-free jet-setters (Davies, 2021, pp. 216, 226; Mula et al., 2021, p. 2). As stated earlier regarding Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, research mobility forms a considerable share of the analysed projects. Individual choices of prestigious research stays may imprint the overall collaborative patterns, specialisation, and propensity towards particular relational ties through collaborative projects (Berndtson, 2016; Schönbauer, 2021, p. 291).

Specific personal characteristics and career directions captured by such analytical attempts as three ideal types of academic habitus could play a role in how multilateral cooperation unfolds, including the incorporation of the ESN entities into the consortia (Matthies & Torka, 2019, p. 364). Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (corresponding to the projects of I1; I2; I6; I9; I10; I14) are far from the only funding source facilitating individual mobility. The role of research mobility deserves to be addressed separately.

Following references to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation expressed among interviewed experts, multiple identities and their implications on the foreign policy directions should not be forgotten. The analysis crafted about the strategic interlinks that involve Morocco and Tunisia in the ERA leaves out the complex and multi-layered identities and the diversity of foreign policy directions pursued by both countries (Karawan, 2002, p. 156; Saideman, 2002, p. 184). It looks at these countries as adjacent areas of Europe with long-standing interaction patterns (Motadel, 2021). Consequently, the study of EU science diplomacy remains a one-sided enquiry. It does not uncover how other funders of “science for diplomacy” type of initiatives attain their goals and affect Morocco and Tunisia.

## 6. Conclusions

This article explores project-based modalities of how research cooperation help to achieve the overarching goals of the ESN Policy and the ERA. It contributes more qualitative insights into the prevailing quantitative body of literature. Insights obtained primarily but not exclusively during fifteen interviews with Europe-based project managers passed the hoop test. Findings confirmed that many coordinators of an FP-funded project welcomed Moroccan and Tunisian institutions to the consortium because the coordinating institutions might benefit from improved centrality in the ERA. However, taking into consideration the generic feature that passing a hoop test does not significantly increase certainty in the identified explanation, a more extensive exploration of expert views from other parts of Europe would be useful to further argue about the reliability of the findings.

The most noteworthy contribution of this article to the existing body of literature is the finding that these aspirations to increase professional or institutional nodality in the ERA framework field or internationally do not serve only the immediate interests of project managers to enhance their standing and prestige and acquire additional capital. This striving for outreach facilitates access of the ESN entities to international expert circles and advanced research resources. Additionally, the interest of Europe-based coordinators to increase their position

as a nodal point for domain-specific or Mediterranean research serves the ERA goals to remain a remarkable intellectual space of international expertise and an international point of gravity attracting the brightest minds and facilitating cutting-edge research to tailor specific solutions for challenges encountered in Europe and its neighbourhood.

Science diplomacy is widely known among European project coordinators. However, its role in their considerations tied to project implementation is secondary. Experts with longstanding international experience see science diplomacy as an intrinsic element of professional engagements but not a primary concern. Priority is given to the quality of the research. Thus, science diplomacy considerations are not prominent in the recent practices of capital acquisition among key beneficiaries of EU project funding. This is a slightly surprising finding because most respondents came from Spain and France, countries with explicit science diplomacy positioning defined during the years when the examined projects were implemented. These national developments did not have any impact on the EU-funded project implementation. An attempt to detect the potential change in the role and weight of science diplomacy in agents' strategies for navigating the ERA and pursuing prestige-enhancing projects could be to discuss the role of science diplomacy with project managers from Spain and France after the Council approval of the European Union framework for science diplomacy (DG RTD, 2026). Perhaps this guidance document will bring new considerations to how project coordinators master their capital acquisition strategies and value the ERA habitus in their future pursuits of consortia and aspirations towards centrality in the ERA framework field.

The devised practice theoretical foundations prove their worth to offer an immersive overview of the ERA as a single space and internationally accessible ecosystem for a seamless and well-curated circulation of impactful ideas and thriving talent. Project managers are agents of the ERA who advance the EU structural diplomacy. They do so by introducing ESN entities to the intricacies of the ERA habitus, such as project planning, financial reporting, crafting of research deliverables, and the latest research techniques and approaches favoured in Europe for addressing societal challenges. This structural power is not ad hoc. Despite some challenging encounters between Europe-based project managers and ESN-based entities, many interviewed agents of the ERA associated with prominent higher education and research establishments in Europe confirm interest in cooperating with ESN institutions or specific colleagues in the future and actively seek or have already found appropriate project calls to apply and receive EU or other funding. Such continuity in the EU structural power projection potential is attested not only among Europe-based Mediterranean research hubs with long-lasting collegial ties to the southern shores of the sea. It is also expressed by project managers located in other parts of Europe. It is expected that the ESN will continue benefiting from access to diverse hubs of expertise in

the future. However, research on Horizon Europe projects would provide more definitive answers to this detected potential.

By bringing into the conceptual picture not only established practice theory elements – field, capital, and habitus – but also more recently crafted *agencements*, it is possible to discover the role of specific actions and deliverables of the project and how the approach chosen by the project manager contributed to their implementation in cooperation with ESN entities. Along the lines of the inquiry *agencement*, ESN colleagues or European managers have contributed to the co-creation of research-intense solutions to some of the most pressing challenges faced in the Mediterranean setting. Following the logic of laboratory *agencement*, ESN consortium members provided data and research input to clarify some scientific standpoints on societally salient topics.

The chosen research design is very Europe-centred. As attested by the vast experience of interviewed experts, ESN strategic orientations are not restricted to research alliances fostered by the EU. Additionally, the considerable proportion of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions represented among the interviewed project managers and insights obtained during these consultations attest to the importance of paying more attention to the role that researcher mobility plays in crafting institutional collaborative pathways and the composition of consortia.

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