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Agents of Change or Subjects? EU Youth Engagement in the MENA Region: A Critical Examination of How EU Policies in the MENA Region Function as Mechanisms of Neoliberal Governmentality

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Abstract

This thesis critically analyses the European Union's (EU) youth policies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) using a Foucauldian neoliberal governmentality framework. Through discourse analysis of EU policy documents, the research demonstrates that the EU's rhetoric of youth empowerment often masks governance strategies rooted in neoliberalism, development, and security. The study finds that MENA youth are constructed as both vulnerable and valuable, yet their agency is constrained by EU priorities. Instead of fostering genuine participation, EU policies tend to reproduce power asymmetries and promote a limited model of empowerment aligned with EU interests. The thesis concludes that EU youth engagement in the MENA region functions more as a mechanism of neoliberal governmentality than as support for independent youth agency.

Keywords:

European Union; MENA; youth policy; governmentality; neoliberalism; discourse analysis; empowerment; agency; power asymmetry

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List of Abbreviations

EEAS	European External Action Service
EIDHR	European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
Euromed	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
EYY	European Year of Youth
FDA	Foucauldian Discourse Analysis
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIP	Erasmus+ Multiannual Indicative Programme
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
YAP	Youth Action Plan in EU external action 2022 – 2027

1. Introduction

In recent years, youth participation and engagement have become more of a central theme within the European Union (EU). The EU frames youth as critical actors in shaping the future, not only within member states but also in its external partnerships, including in its engagement with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) youth. As stated in a recent Youth Policy Dialogue with HR/VP Kaja Kallas

> "Young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow but the *changemakers of today*. Our voices, ideas, and energy are critical to driving meaningful action." (European External Action Service, 2025b, p. 1)

The EU's focus on youth empowerment through policy initiatives suggests that there is an evolving governance strategy. Yet, as this thesis will argue, there are significant contradictions within these youth policies. While the EU publicly commits itself to empowering youth, its programmes and discourses often frame them simultaneously as threats and targets of intervention. This raises important questions about whether EU initiatives genuinely empower youth or whether they primarily use youth as instruments to advance broader geopolitical goals.

Existing academic literature on the EU's external action has largely focused on the EU's identity as a normative power, its democracy promotion strategies, and its evolving response to crises in neighbouring regions. The specific impacts on youth in this external action have received far less attention. In particular, there is a gap in research using a Foucauldian neoliberal governmentality lens to examine how empowerment, participation, and entrepreneurship discourses may operate as tools of governance in the EU's youth policies towards its neighbours. This thesis addresses that gap by analysing the discursive and practical mechanisms through which the EU youth policy constructs and governs MENA youth.

Since this thesis adopts the neoliberal governmentality framework, the main research question is: *How do EU youth policies in the MENA region function as mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality?* Important sub-questions this thesis will address include: *How do EU youth policies impact youth agency and participation in political and social processes, and to what extent do they limit or promote agency for youth in the MENA region? How do EU youth policies reproduce existing power asymmetries in EU-MENA relations?*

To answer these questions, the thesis uses Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) of EU policy documents, focusing on the construction of youth agency, the rationalities underpinning youth

engagement, the tools and mechanisms used to govern youth and what kinds of youth subjects these policies aim to produce. By unpacking these logics, the thesis contributes to both critical youth studies and broader debates on power in EU foreign policy.

Chapter two reviews the academic literature on EU external power, focusing on key debates about the EU's identity, democracy promotion, and the strategic shift toward youth engagement in foreign policy. It then introduces the concept of Foucauldian governmentality, explores its application in studies of EU foreign policy and critical youth studies, and explains EU-MENA youth relations and conflicting narratives. Chapter three will explain how this thesis interprets the main concepts of governmentality and presents the analytical framework, based on Dean's (2010) frames. Chapter four presents the case-study justification, methodology, and outlines how EU policy documents are systematically analysed to answer the research questions. Limitations and Challenges to the thesis will also be discussed. The fifth chapter contains the empirical analysis, organised around the four analytical frames, namely visibility, rationalities, interventions, and subject formation. Here, the thesis examines how youth are presented, governed, and positioned within EU policy discourse and practice. The final chapter will conclude a synthesis of the main findings and discuss their implications for understanding EU-MENA power relations and youth agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The EU: What Kind of Power?

It is understood that the EU has a unique kind of power in the international system. The debate on the EU's external role began with Duchêne (1972), who coined the concept of *civilian power*. According to him, Europe had little influence on military issues, and, therefore, its role as a global actor was primarily characterised by its non-military influence and commitment to peace, democracy, and human rights. This early conceptualisation has brought about a larger debate, with many scholars contributing to the discussion on what kind of power the EU is. One of the first critiques was Bull's (1982) Realist critique, arguing that the EU lacked the material and military capacity to act as a true global power. Therefore, the EU's power is mostly found at the individual member state level, as they control their own foreign and military policies.

These early discussions on the EU's power in the international system laid the groundwork for different conceptualisations that moved beyond civilian and military power. The most influential among these is Manners' (2002) concept of *Normative Power Europe* (NPE). Drawing on critical social constructivism, he argues that the EU's sui generis influence as an external actor is, instead of imposing its will through force, based on the diffusion and normalisation of core norms such as peace, liberty, the rule of law, human rights, and democracy, Over time, these norms have become fundamental to the EU's identity, making it distinct from traditional state actors (Manners, 2002). As Diez & Manners (2007) note, the normative power debate has a double purpose, it actively constructs a self-image for EU actors to unite around while promoting a change in behaviour of others to conform to the EU's norms.

Building on or responding to NPE, different scholars proposed alternative frameworks to capture other dimensions of EU power. *Ethical Power Europe*, introduced by Aggestam (2008), shifts the debate toward the moral dilemmas and ethical responsibilities of EU foreign policy. Because material interests and ethical considerations are often connected, the EU ends up having conflicting goals. Damro (2012) introduces *Market Power Europe*, focusing on the EU's regulatory influence in global economic governance. He argues that the EU's foreign policy often functions as an extension of economic integration strategies rather than an end in itself. Wagner's (2017) *Liberal Power Europe* views the EU not as a unique normative actor, but as one shaped by liberal internationalism, where norms and material interests interact. He

emphasises the ambiguity of EU norms and the conflicts between these norms and interests. Börzel and Risse (2009) focus on how this EU identity is operationalised into concrete foreign policy tools, and introduce *Transformative Power Europe*. They argue that the EU tries to diffuse ideas and promote political change beyond its borders through mechanisms such as socialisation, persuasion, and conditionality. This framework offers a more empirical approach to analysing EU foreign policy, particularly to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Börzel & Risse, 2009).

While these frameworks have broadened the conceptual understanding of the EU's power, they remain focused on defining what the EU is and do not question the assumptions behind the EU's normative agenda. Diez (2005) shifts the debate by examining how the EU becomes what it claims to be. Through a post-structural lens, he reveals how the EU's normative identity is not intrinsic but constructed through Eurocentric discursive processes. This process not only constructs the EU's normative identity, its 'self', but simultaneously constructs its external 'other'. This *Othering* process uses Europe's historical experiences as the global standard. The EU's position is framed as part of a broader 'civilising mission', as the 'other' is positioned as lacking this standard. Building on this argument, Diez and Pace (2011) argue that NPE is a "discursive construction rather than an objective fact" (Diez & Pace, 2011, p. 210). According to this perspective, the EU's power lies less in actual normative influence and more in its self-image as a *force for good* it tries to construct. Drawing on Foucault, they highlight that power is not inherently negative but productive, accepting some realities while limiting others. Therefore, this identity-building reproduces problematic dynamics of *Othering* by portraying external actors as passive receivers of EU norms rather than contributors to the creation of shared norms, reinforcing existing hierarchies (Diez & Pace, 2011).

Cebeci (2012), building on post-structural and postcolonial critiques, goes further by drawing attention to how EU foreign policy research itself contributes to an idealised and uncritical image of the EU. Her framework, *Ideal Power Europe,* deconstructs both academic and institutional discourses that reproduce the self-image of the EU as a normative actor. She argues that these discourses are embedded in a broader normative structure that reinforces Eurocentric assumptions about power that position others as passive receivers of reform. The dominative aspects of EU foreign policy are masked by concealing the underlying hierarchies and power asymmetries. These critical perspectives help move the debate from asking what kind of power the EU is to examining how that power operates through discourses.

2.1.1. Power in EU-MENA Relations

The EU's relation with the MENA region, shaped by geopolitical, economic, security, cultural, and historical concerns, is a critical case to examine the nature of EU power. Although colonialism and European imperialism had a significant influence on the development of the EU's norm promotion, they are frequently overlooked in the NPE debate. This section reviews key critiques that reveal the disjuncture between the EU's normative self-image and its actual foreign policy, especially during transformative moments like the Arab Uprisings.

Understanding how the EU's normative claims are challenged in the MENA region begins with theoretical critiques of NPE, particularly those grounded in postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. Bicchi (2006) critiques the export of the EU norms, arguing that NPE should not be applied universally to all instances of EU foreign policy, especially not in the MENA region, as it has a unique relationship with the EU. This unreflexive and top-down export of EU internal institutional models, something she calls the EU's *Civilising Power,* assumes that 'our size fits all'. She argues that there is "a thin line between 'giving voice to' and 'speaking for'" (Bicchi, 2006, p. 289), suggesting that the EU often oversteps this line and, in doing so, disregards local differences. NPE should only be used when the EU actively involves external actors in the creation of its policies, critically evaluates the effects of these policies, and changes them in response to feedback. Building on this critique, Del Sarto (2016) questions the claim that the EU acts normatively simply because of its unique historical development. She reconceptualises the EU's power as a *Normative Empire* by arguing that the EU's use of normative discourse legitimises its strategic goals. As EU policies apply different norms depending on how 'close to home' a region is, the export of norms and practices to neighbouring states advances EU interests while preserving a self-image as a promoter of universal norms. This framing allows practices such as migration control and market expansion to appear cooperative and norm-driven, even though they reproduce imperial hierarchies. Cebeci (2022) argues that the EU systematically constructs the Middle East as 'Europe's other', based on perceived differences in cultural, political, socio-economic, and security characteristics. This construction portrays the MENA as 'imperfect', as opposed to Europe's 'ideal', which has successfully achieved regional integration, universal norms, and advanced socio-economic standards. The discursive hierarchy between both regions legitimises what Cebeci calls the 'asymmetrical and securitised approach' towards the MENA region.

Sen (2022) builds on these critiques by arguing that the EU's self-image as a 'force for good' is not ideologically neutral, but shaped by its colonial legacy. This legacy continues to shape its contemporary foreign policy, especially in the MENA region. Because of these Eurocentric assumptions, Europe is seen as the source of universal norms, while its partners lack these norms. This ideological framing legitimises the EU's interventions as moral responsibility, rather than as interest driven. Staeger (2016) critiques NPE from a decolonial Pan-African perspective by arguing that it is not a neutral, post-imperial concept, but a neo-Kantian, Eurocentric construct that excludes African agency. He argues that it reinforces colonial hierarchies by imposing European norms under the guise of partnership. Instead, he calls for the recognition of the plurality of normative frameworks that exist around the world.

These theoretical concerns become visible in the EU's response to the Arab Uprisings, which reveals how underlying Eurocentric assumptions shaped this response. As Hollis (2012), Pace (2014) and del Sarto (2016) argue, the EU prioritised its economic growth and security instead of upholding and spreading European democratic norms in its response. Hollis (2012) emphasises this disconnect by arguing that "EU policies have actually betrayed the professed European values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law rather than exporting them. And they have prioritized European prosperity and stability at the expense of both in the Arab world." (Hollis, 2012, p. 94). The EU's initial silence during the early stages of the Uprisings reflected this prioritisation of economic and security interests. When it eventually responded, its actions largely reproduced existing power dynamics and old colonial logics, rather than genuine support for democratic movements (Del Sarto, 2016). The EU's interpretation of the Uprisings was often shaped by underlying biases, assuming that Arab societies were inherently resistant to democracy and change. This limited perspective prevented the EU from understanding the real concerns of people in the MENA region and engaging with grassroots movements, thus also from responding effectively to the demands for change (Pace, 2014). As a result, the EU fell back into its old policies, even when masking them as renewed, such as the revised ENP. This led to a mismatch between the idea of NPE and the EU's activities, ultimately undermining the credibility of EU initiatives both within Europe and among its neighbourhood. Therefore, it reflected not only a lack of commitment to understanding the concerns of MENA people but also the continuation of a top-down, technocratic approach that failed to understand the complexity of the Arab Uprisings (Pace, 2009, 2014).

Hollis (2012) went even further by arguing that EU policies actively contributed to the socio-economic conditions that sparked the Uprisings. Throughout two decades, EU programmes

such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and the ENP reinforced relations with authoritarian regimes and neoliberal economic models. The result of this was political stagnation and a growing socio-economic divide in the region. Therefore, the EU's role in the Arab Uprisings should not be seen as a failure of its normative power, but as an actor complicit in the perpetuation of authoritarianism in the region, betraying the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights. Because of this mentioned mismatch, these authoritarian governments have been able to take advantage of EU policies by presenting themselves as exceptions to EU norms. They manipulate the policies by connecting their goals to the security and stability goals of the EU (Pace et al., 2009).

The failures and contradictions evident in the EU's response to the Arab Uprisings reinforce the postcolonial critiques of NPE, revealing not only a disjuncture between normative claims and strategic interests but also the EU's unwillingness to confront its postcolonial legacy and its tendency to view the region through Eurocentric lenses. Therefore, Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013, 2021) call for a *decentering agenda* in EU external action. In its approaches to foreign policy and the significance of the influence of its norms promotion, the EU institutions and discourses lack reflectivity on their Eurocentric biases. Important to their argument is their concept of the EU's *virgin birth*. With its creation as an imagined community, the EU has deliberately distanced itself from the colonial histories of its member states. By doing this, the EU conceals its pre-World War colonial past, allowing it to export its normative goals without the burden of these colonial legacies (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013; Staeger, 2016). Barbieux and Bouris (2024) adopt this decentring agenda and argue that EU foreign policy includes *colonial amnesia*, a concept similar to the virgin birth concept. This allows the EU to present itself as a 'teacher' of universal norms and best practices, promoting the narrative of European moral superiority. The teacher-student dynamic, also eluded to by Cebeci (2022, p. 74), in which MENA states are expected to follow European models of governance, economy, and society, under the assumption that European standards are universally applicable, reinforces the dismissal of Southern agency and marginalises local contexts.

There has been a growing consensus in the literature that the EU's pragmatic goals overshadow its normative goals. Combining this with the unacknowledged colonial legacies shows that EU engagement in the MENA region is often contradictory to its professed role as a global actor. Therefore, this specific region not only reflects limitations in the NPE framework but also challenges the EU to rethink its foreign policies and its role in the post-colonial international order.

2.2. EU Democracy Promotion

Since the 1991 Development Council resolution, democracy promotion has become a central pillar of the EU's external action. This was formalised through the Maastricht Treaty and marked a shift in the EU's foreign policy goals, positioning support for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as core priorities in its engagement with third countries (Youngs, 2002a). The relevance of constructivism and international norms theory is central to understanding the EU's democracy promotion agenda, as it also serves to construct the EU's self-image as a normative power (Manners, 2002; Youngs, 2002a)

To operationalise its commitment to democracy promotion, the EU developed a broad range of instruments, ranging from coercive instruments like conditionality clauses to positive instruments like the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) (Kurki, 2011; Youngs, 2002b). While early EU democracy promotion strategies followed a top-down approach, targeting state institutions through conditional incentives aimed at strengthening formal governance structures (Kurki, 2011; Youngs, 2002a). More recently, the EU has shifted to a bottom-up approach, supporting civil society actors in what Kurki (2011) calls a 'soft-edge' strategy. This development reflects the EU's move away from state-centric models and broadening its democracy promotion policies to include new partners.

However, the practical application of these democracy promotion commitments has been contested. Building on the arguments in the previous section, Sadiki and Saleh (2022) argue, there remains a gap between the EU's democracy promotion rhetoric and its actual practices. They highlight that, "Democracy promotion remains faulty so far as it is secondary to an EU more interested in 'stability and security'", which is often at the expense of genuine support for democratic transformation (Pace et al., 2009; Sadiki & Saleh, 2022, p. 254). The following section explores youth as one of the new partners in democracy promotion.

2.2.1. Strategic Shift Towards Youth

In recent years, youth participation and engagement have become more of a central theme within the EU. In response to political instability, migration, and socio-economic challenges, the EU frames youth not just as beneficiaries of aid or education, but as strategic actors in advancing its broader policy goals. Youth are increasingly seen as critical partners in shaping the future and promoting democratic values. This shift is clear both within EU member states

and in its external relations, particularly in neighbouring regions. Key recent moments include the European Year of Youth (EYY) in 2022 and the EU Youth Policy Dialogues, especially the one on EU Foreign Policy with High Representative Kaja Kallas in March 2025 (European External Action Service, 2025). In this context, youth engagement policies are no longer limited to social or developmental concerns but are a strategic pillar of EU external action. This section traces this strategic shift towards youth and lays the groundwork for the governmentality analysis that follows.

An important aspect of the EU's strategic shift toward youth is the evolution of its internal youth policies. At the European level, the European Commission and the Council of Europe have played key roles since the 1980s and especially after the 2001 White Paper. Its scope expanded beyond the initial focus on non-formal education and mobility to include employment and participation. Chevalier and Loncle (2021) analyse how this change has been made possible across European, national and subnational levels of governance. While these institutions lack binding authority over Member States, they have jointly developed frameworks, training programs, and research initiatives, such as the Youth Partnership, to promote shared principles in youth work. These EU-led initiatives influence national and regional approaches as part of processes of horizontal Europeanisation (Chevalier & Loncle, 2021; Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003). Youth policies have moved from guaranteeing employment or support to promoting individual activation and self-entrepreneurship. This paradigm shift, as exemplified by Italy, reflects a broader trend within EU youth policy (Raffini et al., 2021). Despite this institutional rhetoric, youth policies remain uneven across member states and regional levels (Pohl & Cuconato, 2021). Wallace and Bendit (2009) argued that, despite different national perspectives, framing youth as either vulnerable or political actors, the EU continues to present itself as an actor promoting youth empowerment and participation at a supranational level.

However, scholars such as Emilsson and Mozetič (2021), Longo (2021) and Papadakis et al (2022) are critical of the EU's role in promoting youth empowerment based on actual labour market conditions. Even highly educated youth in the EU experience uneven labour market outcomes, job insecurity, and underemployment. Instead of restructuring the labour market to accommodate them, youth are expected to adapt. These circumstances show the EU youth policy's limitations in achieving genuine social inclusion, especially when it downplays the role of structural inequalities and uses labour market-centric reasoning. Another important

aspect of EU youth policies is its focus on participation. However, as Walther & Lüküslü (2021) argue, formal, institutionalised forms of youth participation do not teach students how to question politics and encourage critical voices, but how to reproduce the *adult citizenship habitus* and fit into adult expectations.

These internal shifts are increasingly mirrored in the EU's external action. As Huber (2017, p. 115) notes, "the EU's frame of youth as an asset for the creation of a shared community of values in the Mediterranean is deeply related to its framing of youth within the Union itself." The roots of the EU's external engagement with the MENA youth can be traced to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed), which started in 1995. The EU's goal was to cooperate with the MENA states through bilateral agreements and initiatives. In 1998, the Euro-Med Youth Programme was established to promote dialogue, cultural exchanges, and democratisation. Programmes such as the Commission's Euro-Mediterranean Youth Action and cooperation with the Arab League to combat prejudices and stereotypes emerged (Murphy, 2021). The 2004 ENP expanded the EU-MENA relationship, focusing on political and economic cooperation, but also on reforms in governance, the rule of law, and human rights. Within these frameworks, youth policies began to emerge, particularly in response to challenges arising from youth unemployment, migration, and political instability in the MENA region, as "Europe was aware of the impending youth crises on its own back doorstep" (Murphy, 2021, p. 424). However, these youth policies before the Arab Uprisings received limited political attention, only reaching a small, privileged and bilingual part of the MENA youth and were implemented through state-controlled structures that prioritised politically compliant youth. Therefore, the programmes lacked broader impact (Bossuyt et al., 2024; Murphy, 2021).

As the "Uprisings had created a new political environment which seemed to welcome the democratic language and objectives of European policies" (Murphy, 2021, p. 427), and youth seemed to have a crucial role in this. During this time, the EU-MENA cooperation had a new emphasis on youth inclusion in broader goals, such as education and unemployment and began to recognise youth as critical agents and changemakers (Bossuyt et al., 2024; Murphy, 2021). Returning to the European norms, in the area of "Human Development, good governance and the rule of law", Flagship 1 of the EU's Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (European Commission, 2021c) discusses support to social sectors, education, skills and health to support youth. This growing focus on youth in the EU's external action is particularly

relevant for MENA states, as they have the highest unemployment rates and the lowest participation of young people in the job market, particularly for young women (Giordano, 2021). These conditions are not only socio-economic issues but also political ones, as they contribute to widespread youth disengagement.

A key instrument in the youth participation framework is the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027). Within this framework, the Erasmus+ programme aims to "enable dialogue between youth in the EU and in Southern Mediterranean countries" (European Commission, 2018, p. 5). Through this programme, the EU hopes to increase the employability of MENA youth while simultaneously educating them about European values and tolerance (European Commission, 2018). Such initiatives operate within the EU's democracy promotion strategy, exporting its norms through education and engagement.

2.3. Foucauldian Governmentality

To understand how the EU governs youth, this section introduces the concept of governmentality as developed by Michel Foucault. It first outlines the origins and key elements of governmentality, explores how neoliberal variants of this logic operate in EU foreign policy, and highlights why youth are key subjects to be governed. It lays the groundwork for analysing EU–MENA youth relations next.

In his 1978–1979 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault explored a new field of study he called 'governmental rationality', which is where the idea of *governmentality* first emerged (Gordon, 1991). Despite limited access to the full lectures initially, the concept has greatly inspired research in history and the social sciences (Bröckling et al., 2011). With this concept, Foucault challenges traditional views of power by showing how modern states extend the logic of household management to governing populations. Governmentality refers to forms of power on the micro-level, targeting the lives of subjects, shaping their thoughts, desires, bodies, and actions (Kurki, 2011). This involves introducing economy into political practice and promoting self-regulation through various institutions and rationalities (Foucault, 1991a). Governmentality, as Foucault explains and as is the most common definition, refers to the 'conduct of conduct'. Therefore, it is a term that encompasses 'governing the self' to 'governing others' (Kurki, 2011; Lemke, 2001).

Rather than relying on sovereign power, which functions through the control of a ruler, or disciplinary power, which aims to train and correct individuals, governmentality aims to

encourage self-regulation in subjects by operating through institutions, norms, and knowledge systems. In this way, power operates not only through violence or law, but also through a wide range of techniques, institutions, and forms of knowledge that work to shape and manage populations. This mode of power reflects the emergence of government as the dominant authority in the modern West, giving rise to what Foucault (1991a, p. 102-103) calls the *governmentalised state.*

Foucault coined the term *biopower* to describe a new form of power that targets populations not through laws or violence, as in sovereign and disciplinary power, but rather through managing life itself, it is *biopolitical* power. He first introduces this concept in relation to reproduction and sexual conduct, but biopower also extends to the governance of health, culture, and population management more broadly (Dean, 2010; Gordon, 1991). This kind of power treats people not just as individuals, but as members of a population, intending to improve, optimise, or regulate their lives. In his lectures, especially *the Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault revisits and develops his idea of biopower and connects it to governmentality. Modern political systems, he argues, increasingly treat life itself as something to be governed (Gordon, 1991; Lemke, 2001).

Governmentality is a way to understand power that goes beyond traditional philosophical and legal images of a sovereign state. The modern state has power over its subjects not only through state apparatuses, but also through non-state actors, experts, and even the governed subjects themselves, who participate in what Rose and Miller (1992) call 'action at a distance', without using coercion directly. Therefore, when understanding the ways in which subjects are being governed, understanding the rationalities, technologies and materials behind making the subjects governable is important. These subjects are formally free and not repressed, but should internalise norms and govern themselves in line with political and economic rationalities (Gordon, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992).

2.3.1. (Neo)liberal Governmentality and Entrepreneurial Subjects

According to Foucault, the transformation of power towards governmentality has historically coincided with the emergence of liberalism and political economy (Foucault, 1991a). While biopolitics primarily focuses on regulating populations, neoliberal governmentality introduces an additional layer of economic rationality, shaping populations as entrepreneurial subjects. Foucault's 1979 lectures were focused on this study of liberal and neo-liberal forms of government (Lemke, 2001). In Foucault's interpretation of liberalism, it is not only a political

or economic doctrine, “but a style of thinking quintessentially concerned with the art of governing” (Gordon, 1991, p. 14). Therefore, it can extend beyond economics into areas like education, health, and youth development.

Foucault’s lectures made an important distinction between classical liberalism and neoliberalism. While classical liberalism advocated for limited state power, the absence of interference and the protection of negative freedoms, neoliberalism reverses this relationship. The market is not something that should be protected, but it’s the principle through which the state itself should be governed. Instead of limiting itself because of the idea of natural liberty, the neoliberal state actively constructs itself and its subjects into entities that have market logics integrated into all spheres of social life, and its ‘mainstreaming’ into subjects’ psychology and social interactions (Kurki, 2011). Individuals in these neoliberal societies are not ‘free’ to act but are shaped through governance technologies that manipulate their environment and encourage rational choice behaviour. Therefore, the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism was a shift towards the use of liberty itself as a tool, making governance seem more participatory while embedding self-regulation and normative expectations within civil society (Burchell & Foucault, 1991; Gordon, 1991; Kurki, 2011; Lemke, 2001).

This form of neoliberal governmentality, as explained by Lemke (2001) in his analysis of Foucault’s lectures, draws on two different but overlapping intellectual traditions. Ordo-liberalism, influential in shaping post-war West Germany, does not see the state as a threat to liberty, but as essential to creating the correct environment for economic freedom. Through political intervention in legal and institutional frameworks, the state upholds the conditions for market competition, thereby legitimising its role (Lemke, 2001). The Chicago School extends economic rationality to all areas of life, softening the line between the economic and the social. It involves applying market-based analysis to fields such as education, punishment, and family. This transforms government into an enterprise tasked with universalising and maximising competition. A central feature is the theory of human capital, viewing individuals as self-entrepreneurs responsible for their own development, and therefore, it promotes individualism (Lemke, 2001).

Governed subjects are expected to be independent and flexible, with qualities like empowerment and participation serving as technologies of governance rather than merely development goals. By creating what is called the ‘activating state’, which is dependent on ‘activated subjects’, the dynamic between people and governments is changed (Bröckling et

al., 2011). This shift from a liberal rights-based system of governance to a neoliberal system of governance moves the responsibility and burden for managing social and economic insecurity from institutions to individuals. They are responsible for their own risks and development, while they are 'free' to adapt, compete, and optimise their human capital (Foucault, 1991b; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). Thus, the lines between freedom and control are blurred as citizens are encouraged to govern themselves following market logics, internalising responsibility for success and well-being (Bröckling et al., 2011). The next section examines how this logic extends into EU foreign policy.

2.3.2. (Neo)liberal Governmentality and EU Foreign Policy

As mentioned by Lawrence (2020, p. 66), "European foreign policy has been a particularly productive area of governmentality scholarship". While most of the literature using a governmentality framework is limited to studying the EU's internal workings (Muehlenhoff, 2019), some scholars have used the governmentality lens to examine the rationalities, techniques, and effects of EU foreign policy in various MENA contexts. As Tagma, Kalaycioglu, and Akcali (2013) argue, neoliberal governmentality is an appropriate lens for interpreting EU democracy promotion and social policy in the Arab world, especially following the Arab Uprisings. They find that the EU actively promotes neoliberal policies aligned with its norms and objectives, but often overlooks the realities of most Arab citizens, lacking "a real touch of the Arab street" (Tagma et al., 2013, p. 388). This disconnect helps explain the EU's failure to engage productively with public sentiment in the region. Kurki (2011) argues that the EU's democracy promotion, particularly through the EIDHR, uses neoliberal governmentality by constructing civil society actors as entrepreneurial and self-regulating agents. Rather than promoting political contestation, the EIDHR promotes technocratic, project-based engagement. This approach prioritises activity-centred, entrepreneurial and state-challenging behaviours over aid-dependent, politicised, or structural-reform-oriented engagement. This results in a subtle depoliticisation of democracy promotion, aligning civil society with market-friendly neoliberal governance (Kurki, 2011). İşleyen (2015) extends this analysis beyond civil society projects to institutional partnerships, such as the EU's Twinning programmes in Tunisia and Egypt. These practices "are illustrative of a neoliberal governmentality agenda with which the EU aspires to circulate market principles and logics into the minds, choices, habits and actions of individuals and public institutions" (İşleyen, 2015, p. 673). This case is used by İşleyen to show a broader EU agenda to use neoliberal logics in governing practices across domains. As shown by these scholars, the EU uses technical tools to shape behaviour as

seemingly depoliticised processes, concealing underlying power dynamics by presenting its governance as neutral while subtly advancing EU norms and market-oriented logics.

Malmvig (2014) shifts away from these technical instruments and adds that EU democratic reform policies in the Arab world are framed as "voluntary partnerships based on local demands and ownership" (Malmvig, 2014, p. 293). She examines how liberal governance works not through coercion but through 'contractualisation' and claims not to be involved with power. The normative expectations and power asymmetries behind the EU's actions are disguised, as these reforms still have to "be externally evaluated, rewarded, and sanctioned by European reform managers" (Malmvig, 2014, p. 307). Arab actors may quietly challenge liberal governmental technologies without openly rejecting them. Huelss (2017) extends this focus on the subtle technologies of governance strategies by analysing EU women's empowerment programmes in the post-Arab Uprising MENA region. These programmes claim to promote gender equality and emancipation through the neoliberal governmentality logic of functional freedom grounded in economic development. Women are empowered not to challenge structural gender hierarchies but to become competitive, self-optimising subjects, which he argues is a form of biopower. Therefore, the women's empowerment programmes align with broader neoliberal strategies of managing populations and economies. While these articles show how the EU has used governmentality rhetoric in its foreign policy, there remains a need for research on its practical impact. As Muehlenhoff (2019, p. 22) notes, "existing research on the EU's governmentality stays on the level of policy documents to identify governmentality but hardly studies its consequences on the ground."

Beyond these empirical studies, several scholars draw on broader Foucauldian analyses of power, subjectivity, and the construction of normality to examine the contested nature of EU foreign policy and reveal how it shapes what is considered acceptable or governable. While the NPE framework portrays the EU as a global actor that promotes universal norms, both poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques argue that this portrayal overlooks the underlying governing logics embedded in the EU's approach to norm promotion. As Merlingen points out, many critiques in the broader NPE debate "fail to acknowledge the dominative dimension of European foreign policy that arises from the EU's exercise of post-sovereign normative power" (Merlingen, 2007, p. 438). He argues that EU foreign policy, while framed as promoting democratic norms and empowering individuals, often ends up limiting their agency by subtly imposing EU norms through epistemic violence, technical governance, and arbitrary

administration. This makes EU foreign policy a form of control that wants to create governable, self-regulating subjects aligned with European norms (Merlingen, 2007).

Building on this critique, Staeger (2016) analyses the epistemic foundations behind EU foreign policy through a Pan-African dimension. He argues that EU foreign policy practices are rooted in Eurocentric assumptions that universalise European norms and marginalise non-European agency and knowledge. While recognising the limits of Foucault's universal applicability, Staeger argues that "Foucauldian thought allows unpacking European discourses toward the non-European." (Staeger, 2016, p. 983) Complementing the governmentality framework, Staeger shows that EU subject formation is not only shaped by neoliberal logic but also by colonial and epistemic hierarchies that determine which forms of agency and knowledge are made governable.

This literature shows how Foucauldian concepts add extra dimensions to traditional ways of looking at EU power. Rather than promoting democracy as such, the EU exports a model of governance that favours stability, efficiency, and market logics. These governmentality practices are rooted in the uneven power relations between the EU and the MENA region, but are neither uniform across the whole region nor uncontested by local actors. They might adapt, resist, or strategically use EU rationalities, resulting in sometimes contradictory outcomes. The governmentality framework thus provides a relevant tool for critically analysing the (micro) power dynamics evident in EU external action.

2.3.3. Critical Youth Studies

To understand the critical perspective on youth policies, the next section will discuss the existing literature from the field of critical youth studies. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, it examines how power shapes youth through policies, institutions, and discourse. Some scholars have used this concept to challenge traditional assumptions that portray youth as unimportant, careless and passive recipients of policy. Instead, they reinterpret youth policy as a form of power that creates specific kinds of subjects that are in line with neoliberal goals. Although these studies are not EU-focused, they offer important insight into how governmentality shapes youth policies.

One of the foundational contributions to this field comes from Bessant (2001, 2003), who examines youth participation and the 'youth at risk' discourse within policies. She argues that it does not simply name a social problem but functions as a technology of governance. Existing

research often blames youth for their problems and justifies policies that make them responsible for resolving their own situations (Bessant, 2001). This form of controlling youth is even apparent in programmes promoting their participation, such as the Commonwealth government youth documents, which uses the "idea of youth participation to extend the governance of young people" (Bessant, 2003, p. 88). Though framed as empowering, these policies view youth negatively and encourage them to manage themselves in ways aligned with government aims. Bessant argues that participation is used to extend control, not share power.

Besley (2010) critically explores how the concept of risky subjects in youth justice and education systems is used to justify surveilling youth and managing their behaviour. Youth are framed as free and independent when in reality, they are being told to adhere to specific rules. The youth policies often portray them as both vulnerable and dangerous, especially if they are seen as disengaged or not fitting in. Anderson (2018) builds on the discussion by applying Foucault's genealogical method to trace the historical roots of youth participation discourse. She questions the assumption that current youth policies indicate a positive shift from the past. Instead, they seem to continue the 19th-century liberal logics of self-regulation and moral character formation. This historical reading reveals that participation policies are less about empowering youth and more about producing self-governing subjects aligned with neoliberal norms. This is also clear in EU youth policies, as seen in Walther & Lüküslü (2021).

While much critical youth policy research focuses on Western contexts, Ansell et al. (2012) expand the discussion to a transnational level by analysing youth policies in Malawi and Lesotho. International Organisations such as the UN promote policies that construct youth both as a resource and as a threat. However, their analysis reveals partial and uneven applications of governmentality. This shows the difficulty in examining youth policies and the need for "resistance, critique and alternative youth policies and practices to emerge" (Ansell et al., 2012, p. 55). These critical youth studies show that youth policies are not just programmes to support youth, but also a regime of power. They are used in ways to govern youth by shaping how they should act, especially through ideas like participation, risk, and empowerment. An important takeaway is that "in examining youth today, we need not only to actually speak with them to gain their perspectives, but also to listen for the little narratives" (Besley, 2010, p. 542).

2.4. MENA Youth as Subjects to be Governed

As Murphy (2021) notes, youth in the MENA region are aware of the gap between the EU's normative rhetoric and reality. The EU's self-image as a normative power is increasingly

contested and seen as a failure, especially when its economic policies, migration controls, security strategies, and support for authoritarian regimes contradict its professed commitment to democracy and human rights. In this context, youth are often either portrayed as a threat to be managed or as potential agents of change (Murphy, 2021). This section explores the existing literature on the empirical case study of MENA youth and discusses the gap in understanding how EU policies and discourses construct youth as policy subjects.

2.4.1. MENA Youth and 'Youth Bulge'

The MENA region has received much attention both in academia as well as in public discourses due to its 'youth bulge'. This is a demographic phenomenon where states or regions have a high proportion of 15- to 29-year-olds in their population composition. Several scholars, such as, Al-Jabri et al., (2022), Giordano (2021) and Schomaker (2013), have identified this demographic occurrence as a critical driver for the recent political and social instability in the region. This is explained by these scholars by pointing out that when a disproportionately large youth population enters the labour market during a time with limited economic opportunities, it often leads to high levels of unemployment, growing frustration, and a greater vulnerability to radicalisation. The empirical research shows that youth bulges, particularly in contexts with poor governance structures and weak institutions, as is often the case in the MENA region, significantly increase the risks of civil unrest, violent extremism, and social instability (Al-Jabri et al., 2022; Schomaker, 2013). Al-Jabri et al. (2022, p. 1063) find a strong negative correlation between democracy and instability, especially where youth bulges and unemployment exist. This shows that democracy consistently stabilises youth-driven political unrest as it offers peaceful outlets for youth expression, while autocracies face higher risks of instability.

Despite the impact of this bulge, MENA governments often fail to adequately respond. Examples of this are Muphy's (2017a) critique of Tunisia's positive development approach under the rule of authoritarian president Ben Ali. She argues that the government used youth policy in a strategic sense, rhetorically aligning itself with foreign donors, such as the EU. In practice, "Youth policy becomes the vehicle for establishing segregation and control, as well as a means of distracting attention from the deeper structural failings of national economies and the political regimes which rule them" (Murphy, 2017a, p. 2). This critique is also clear in the Power2Youth project by Calder et al. (2017), which analyses the marginalisation of youth in six MENA states. Their findings are structured around the idea that youth marginalisation is

caused by fundamental structural flaws rather than shortcomings of the youth themselves. It is argued that policies of the MENA states often make these challenges worse by emphasising supply-side solutions while ignoring demand-side concerns.

All these problems have resulted in activism. The most prominent form of youth activism in the MENA region occurred during the 2010-2012 Arab Uprisings. Murphy (2017b) and Colombo (2016) explain how youth-led movements contested popular perceptions of youth disengagement both during and after the Arab uprisings. Despite being spread out and having different objectives, these groups often emerged in response to failing government structures. However, these protests have not effectively brought about a change in the struggles youth face in the MENA region. Youth in the MENA region continue to face obstacles to taking part in institutional decision-making and elections, making formal political engagement still unattainable. Important to remember is that "the problems will only grow as today's youth mature and the next generation comes behind them demanding new and better ways of doing politics and enacting social justice" (Murphy, 2017b, p. 353).

2.4.2. EU–MENA Youth Relations: "MENA Youth as Threat"

In the years following the Arab Uprising, the EU increasingly perceived youth in the MENA region not only as agents of change but also as potential sources of instability. The policies towards youth in the MENA region have long aligned with the broader neoliberal development strategies. With the correct EU policies, "youth could be transformed from an economic challenge to a civic and economic asset" (Huber, 2017, as cited in Murphy, 2021, p. 424). The MENA youth became a challenge to the European foreign policy agenda after the Arab Uprisings, as they were seen as a youth bulge, needing help to prevent future civil unrest in the region (Huber, 2017). As the EU's concerns about terrorism, irregular migration, and regional instability increased, so did this securitised framing of MENA youth, often portraying them as risk factors rather than as political subjects. Such narratives are not only discussed in academic discourses but are rooted within the structure of EU external action. Therefore, MENA youth are treated as something to be fixed, they are seen as a "threat" (Colombo, 2016; Giordano, 2021; Murphy, 2012, 2021).

Some scholars call for a shift from this securitised narrative and want the EU to actively engage MENA youth at the centre of the policies surrounding them. Daffron (2016) calls for an integrated plan to engage MENA youth, focusing on the youth bulge, economic development,

environmental reform and educational issues. By doing this, the threat of terrorism, especially by ISIS, is diminished. This contrasts with the current policies, which, as explained in the literature, focus mostly on migration, terrorism and regional instability. Similarly, the Power2Youth project (Calder et al., 2017) highlights the importance of engaging with youth on their terms while attempting to change the systemic causes of marginalisation.

While there is a growing body of literature on EU-MENA youth policies, critical engagement with this topic remains limited. Most of the existing literature is empirical and descriptive, with limited focus on theorising how EU discourses and governmental practices shape youth as governable subjects. Although scholars increasingly recognise governmentality as a useful framework for analysing EU foreign and youth policies, there remains a significant gap in combining these two perspectives. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more nuanced and theoretically informed understanding of EU-MENA youth relations.

3. Conceptual Overview

3.1. Governmentality and Neoliberalism

This thesis applies Foucault's concept of governmentality to critically analyse how EU youth policies function as mechanisms of neoliberal governance in the MENA region. This approach is especially relevant for analysing youth policy, where subjects are constructed as active, responsible, and self-managing. By using this theoretical lens, EU policies can be questioned beyond the surface-level intention to empower youth, but as a mechanism of control. Foucault introduced governmentality to describe the various ways in which power is exercised beyond traditional state sovereignty. Governmentality refers to the "conduct of conduct", meaning "a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons." (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). Therefore, this thesis applies it to describe the way in which individual and collective behaviour is shaped and managed by securitising apparatuses and social institutions, the EU, that aim to secure health, wealth, and productivity (Foucault, 1991a). By using a governmentality lens, this thesis can not only evaluate the stated objectives and outcomes of EU youth policies but also critically analyse how institutions, discourses, and practices behind these policies guide and shape the conduct of MENA youth.

Power in a governmentality framework does not work through coercion, but by producing subjectivities and defining what behaviour is seen as normal. Therefore, power is seen as productive rather than merely repressive (Lipschutz, 2005; Muehlenhoff, 2019). Central to this is *biopower*, which refers to how modern governance regulates populations by managing all aspects of life, health, and productivity. State power is not just exercised from the top down in formal settings, but is embedded throughout institutions and social systems, targeting governable subjects through specific systems of knowledge, shaping both the conduct of others and the conduct of the self (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991a; Gordon, 1991; Muehlenhoff, 2019). While this thesis primarily focuses on how power is exercised through policies and institutions, it is important to note that power is always relational and accompanied by the potential for resistance. Therefore, governmentality involves shaping the conduct of those subjects who have the potential for resistance (Walters & Haahr, 2005).

It is important to distinguish between liberal and neoliberal forms of governmentality. Liberal governmentality focuses on the creation of free subjects that have legal and economic rights through regulation. It believes in limited state intervention, arguing that economic exchange is

a naturally regulated domain. Liberal governmentality technologies include security, normalisation, and the social governance of health, family, and economic exchange (Lemke, 2001; Muehlenhoff, 2019). Neoliberal governmentality, instead, blurs the line between economic and social life, as it applies market logic to all areas of life and constructs individuals as 'self-entrepreneurs'. Government intervention, thus, becomes less about protecting rights and more about enabling the subjects to be responsible for managing their own risks and the optimisation of their human capital (Lemke, 2001; Muehlenhoff, 2019). As the shift from liberal to neoliberal rationalities is evident in the EU's youth policy discourse, this thesis adopts a neoliberal governmentality framework to answer the research question. This framework gives the appropriate critical tools to analyse how empowerment and participation are used as technologies of governance, positioning youth policies as instruments of biopower. Within this thesis, biopower is understood as integral to neoliberal governmentality, where life itself is governed through market-oriented logics and the production of entrepreneurial and self-responsible subjects.

Governmentality operates through what Rose and Miller (1992) term *technologies of government*. These technologies are the "the invention and assemblage of particular apparatuses and devices for exercising power and intervening upon particular problems" (Rose, 1999, cited in Walters & Haahr, 2005, p. 14). Therefore, they are understood as the practical tools through which neoliberal governmental rationalities are turned into action. They include a heterogeneous range of instruments such as administrative procedures, professional practices, ways of measuring and calculating, and systems for training or assessment. Rather than just imposing control from above, these technologies operate through a complex mix of legal, architectural, financial, and professional means. Together, they shape and regulate the decisions and actions of individuals, groups, and populations according to established norms and standards (Rose & Miller, 1992). Studying these technologies allows scholars to "defamiliarise the taken for granted," and to recognise governmental practices as "exceptional, rare and historical" (Veyne, 1997, cited in Walters & Haahr, 2005, p. 14). Practices that seem natural or timeless are products of specific historical regimes of thought and practice (Walters & Haahr, 2005). In EU youth policy, these might include training or mobility programmes and entrepreneurship initiatives. These technologies do not support youth in a neutral way but play a key role in the way that the youth see themselves.

3.2. Analytical Framework

To operationalise the neoliberal governmentality framework to actual EU governance practices, the following section presents the analytical framework that translates these theoretical insights into concrete tools for examining how power operates through EU youth policies in the MENA region. The analysis is structured around four main analytical frames, inspired by Dean's (2010) influential 'analytics of government'. This framework provides a structured framework for examining how power and subjectivity operate through EU youth policy discourses. Similar analytical frames have been used in studies of EU external action (Huelss, 2017; İşleyen, 2015; İşleyen & Kreitmeyr, 2021; Kurki, 2011; Merlingen, 2007), or in critical youth studies (Besley, 2010; Bessant, 2003).

The first analytical frame, *visibility*, is explained as the "characteristic forms of visibility, ways of being" (Dean, 2010, p. 33). In this case, it examines how youth, particularly MENA youth, are made visible and governable within EU policy discourse. These visibility mechanisms not only describe youth but actively construct them as a distinct and problematised category concerning issues like labour market integration, participation, and social cohesion. By coding policy documents, this analysis explores how MENA youth are framed, often backed up by data, as either vulnerable, threatening, or full of potential, thus legitimising specific interventions. Discourses explaining the youth's challenges, such as radicalisation, exclusion, or the demographic bulge, that justify EU involvement, are therefore relevant. The central question here is: *How are MENA youth represented in EU policy? What problems are made visible?*

The second analytical frame, *rationalities*, is explained as the "distinctive ways of thinking and questioning, relying on definite vocabularies and procedures for the production of truth (e.g. those derived from the social, human and behavioural sciences)" (Dean, 2010, p. 33). In this case, it examines the underlying epistemological rationalities, what Dean (2010, p. 42) calls the 'episteme', that shape how MENA youth are governed in EU policy. These reflect broader political and economic ideologies, such as neoliberalism, securitisation, development, or risk management, that define what is seen as a problem and what types of solutions are fit. This frame helps in analysing the reasoning that places youth as relevant actors to EU priorities such as stability, democracy promotion, migration control, and economic growth. The central

question is: *What rationalities are behind EU engagement with MENA youth, and how do these justify the categorisations of problems and solutions?*

The third analytical frame, *interventions*, is explained as the "specific ways of acting, intervening and directing, made up of particular rationality ('expertise' and 'know-how'), and relying upon definite mechanisms, techniques and technologies" (Dean, 2010, p. 33), or as he calls it, the 'techne' (Dean, 2010, p. 42). In this case, it examines the instruments through which the EU governs MENA youth. These interventions are often implemented in the name of development, security, or resilience. These interventions are not neutral, as they reflect specific assumptions about what youth need and how they should behave. This frame helps in analysing how these interventions are legitimised and operationalised in practice by identifying the funding, tools and actors. The central question is: *What are the concrete tools and techniques used to govern MENA youth?*

The final analytical frame, *subject formation*, is explained as the "characteristic ways of forming subjects, selves, persons, actors or agents" (Dean, 2010, p. 33). In this case, it examines how EU policies construct MENA youth as governable subjects within a framework of neoliberal governmentality. Youth are positioned as entrepreneurial subjects, expected to manage economic uncertainty by taking responsibility for their futures. They are also framed as empowered and engaged citizens, but without demanding systemic change. This reflects the broader neoliberal rationality that shifts responsibility from institutions to individuals. Simultaneously, youth who fall outside these norms may be implicitly viewed as failed, risky, or in need of correction. The central question is: *What kinds of youth subjects are EU policies seeking to produce, and how is MENA youth identity shaped through these processes?*

4. Research Design

The analysis will move beyond stated policy intentions to answer the research question: *How do EU youth policies in the MENA region function as mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality?* It will examine how youth are constructed as both resources and risks, which forms of agency are promoted or limited, and how power operates through language, programme design, and implementation (Foucault, 1991a; Kurki, 2011). By applying governmentality as an analytical lens, the logics and consequences behind EU engagement with MENA youth might be revealed. In doing so, it critically assesses the extent to which EU youth policies both allow and limit youth agency, and how they contribute to the reproduction of existing power asymmetries in EU–MENA relations.

4.1. The Case of Youth Policies in EU-MENA Relations

The case of EU youth policies in the MENA region is relevant for analysing the contemporary dynamics of neoliberal governmentality in EU external action. The growing importance of youth policy, as exemplified by the EYY and Youth Policy Dialogues, reflects broader shifts in the EU's governance approach, both internally and externally. From the early days of the Euro-Med Youth Programme to recent frameworks, youth policy has moved to the centre of EU-MENA relations. The case of MENA youth is particularly relevant given the region's unique demographic realities, the youth bulge, with some of the highest youth unemployment rates and lowest levels of youth participation globally (Giordano, 2021).

This case is analytically significant because it shows how internal EU youth logics, such as employability, activation, and participation, are exported to the MENA region under the guise of development or cooperation. The growing awareness among MENA youth of the gap between EU rhetoric and practice, which will influence the future relations between both regions (Murphy, 2021), makes this case relevant. Analysing this case, therefore, answers questions about the broader debate on EU power and the workings of neoliberal governmentality on an international scale.

As mentioned by McGregor (2015), Foucault's governmentality is the most widely used theoretical lens in youth work literature for examining how power and managerialism operate. It is used to "understand the various technologies, techniques and mentalities necessary to govern young people as well as professional conduct" (McGregor, 2015, p. 45), highlighting the relevance of a Foucauldian lens to analyse youth policies.

While Foucault's framework is not a decolonial tool per se, as argued by Staeger (2016, p. 983), it remains valuable for unpacking European discourses toward the non-European. This makes it especially relevant for critically analysing EU discourses to non-European youth in the MENA region, where issues of power, representation, and Eurocentrism are particularly evident.

4.2. Data Collection

This thesis uses a qualitative research approach, with the principles of governmentality guiding the selection of sources for this thesis. As governmentality connects discourse to the historical practices and rationalities of governance, it emphasises the importance of examining formal, institutional, and technical sources that reflect how power operates through policy. This contrasts with common discourse analyses that often look at public statements made by government actors, media or popular discourse. These texts are not merely descriptive but actively contribute to constructing social realities, particularly in the behaviours of subjects they want to shape. Therefore, focusing on official policy documents ensures that there is direct analytical access to the political rationalities behind EU youth governance strategies (Walters & Haahr, 2005). This primary data consists of official EU documents, including policy reports, strategic frameworks, guidelines, and communications. Particularly those from the European Commission, Parliament, Council, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Union for the Mediterranean, relevant EU Commissioners and the High Representatives are relevant for the analysis.

The scope of the data collection will include different sources of information that provide insight into EU youth policies and their application in the MENA region. The main focus will be key EU youth policy documents, especially those surrounding the Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022 – 2027 (European Commission, 2022), and subsequent official EU communication about youth empowerment and governance in EU-MENA relations. More general MENA policies, such as the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours (European Commission, 2021c), will also be used. Specific youth-related initiatives, structures, and programmes within the EU-MENA relationship, especially those involving the participation and empowerment of youth, will be used. Examples of these are Erasmus+ Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP), the UfM Regional Platform on Employment and Labour and its 2022-2025 Roadmap for Action, EU@UN youth delegates programme, Young Mediterranean Voices, and the Youth Policy

Dialogue on EU Foreign Policy (European Commission, 2021a, 2022, 2025; European External Action Service, 2025a). These Documents will be found primarily on EUR-Lex, the EU's official legal and policy document platform. Scholarly articles, books, and reports that analyse EU youth policies and EU engagement in the MENA region will serve as a basis for the data analysis. Reports from EU agencies give insights into the effectiveness, progress or challenges of youth engagement initiatives in MENA.

4.3. Methodology: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)

Methodologically, research related to governmentality typically emphasises detailed, micro-level analyses of discourses to identify and examine government practices. Therefore, governmentality approaches frequently employ techniques derived from discourse analysis (Lawrence, 2020). While most discourse analyses, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, focus on spoken or written language or symbols, the type of discourse analysis based on governmentality focuses mostly on the material and institutional aspects of discourse. This reveals how discourses influence what can be said, done, and thought within a specific historical context or area. By doing this, it reveals the mechanisms of power, which changes the behaviours of both groups and individuals. Central to this kind of discourse analysis is a critical examination of the normative assumptions embedded within the analysed political rationalities, the type of knowledge that legitimises power and the type of discourses through which governmental activities are expressed (Arribas-Ayllon, & Walkerdine, 2017; Lawrence, 2020). As these features fit well with the case of governing young people, the thesis uses this FDA to analyse the discussed data.

As this type of FDA is situated within a post-structuralist epistemological framework, the thesis does not seek to find universal truths. In this framework, knowledge, truth, and subjectivity are produced through specific historical and discursive contexts. Therefore, there is no given framework or guide on how to conduct an FDA (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). However, the governmentality framework provides tools which can be applied to discourses to identify political rationalities, and these have been "particularly popular among those aligned with social constructivist, reflectivist, and post-structuralist schools of international relations theory" (Lawrence, 2020, p. 64). These tools are grounded in the works of Foucault and subsequent governmentality literature (Dean, 2010; Joseph, 2009; Merlingen, 2011; Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992, 1995). In line with the governmentality approach, the analysis in this thesis is organised around a genealogical component, as integrated into the literature

review, where the emergence and transformation of EU youth policy discourse in the MENA region is traced and contextualised. The empirical analysis then focuses on the structural and power dimensions of the discourse, using the tools provided by Dean (2010) to conduct the FDA. The four analytical frames are found and analysed with the help of ATLAS.ti, the software used for the systematic coding of PDF versions of the EU policy documents. This software makes it possible to break down texts into micro-level analyses (Arribas-Ayllon, & Walkerdine, 2017; Lawrence, 2020; Powers, 2013).

4.4. Limitations, Challenges and Reflexivity

As the scope of this thesis is analysing EU policy documents to understand how youth in the MENA region are constructed and governed, it does not address the perspectives or agency of youth themselves. By focusing on official discourses, this research cannot account for how young people interpret, respond to, or contest these policies in practice. Incorporating local perspectives or youth voices, whether through surveys, interviews, fieldwork, or alternative sources, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these dynamics work on the ground and would give MENA youth more agency in the analysis of EU policies and their effects.

While the analysis draws on a wide range of EU policy documents, it cannot account for the continuous evolution of EU approaches to youth in MENA contexts. Many policies reference youth only as one of several target groups, and relatively few focus exclusively on youth issues. This can lead to an over-reliance on a limited number of youth-specific documents, such as the YAP (European Commission, 2022), which may not fully represent different perspectives or recent developments. Furthermore, policy frameworks are continually revised and reframed, especially those produced after the scope of this thesis, may not be reflected here.

The use of FDA provides valuable insights into how youth are constructed and governed in EU policy texts, but it "has some drawbacks in that it is more concerned with theory than method. The absence of an explicit technique for researchers to follow is a striking constraint for new researchers" (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 7). This means that different researchers may arrive at different conclusions when analysing the same texts. Without standardised procedures, the analysis may reflect the researcher's own assumptions or priorities, making the findings less easily replicable or generalisable to other contexts.

Future research could complement the discourse analysis with comparative case studies, such as analysing internal EU youth policies or those directed toward other regions like the Eastern Partnership, which could further analyse similarities and differences in how youth are governed across different contexts.

As this thesis is written from the perspective of a European shaped by Western academic traditions, I recognise the importance of reflexivity. Reflexivity involves continually reflecting on how my background and context shape the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Accordingly, I to remain open to alternative interpretations or challenges to my analysis. I recognise that my use of Western concepts and frameworks, such as governmentality, is not neutral and may not fully capture local realities.

5. Empirical Analysis

5.1. Visibility

In EU foreign policy, the visibility of youth is never neutral or merely descriptive; it actively shapes both the problem that needs to be solved and, therefore, the rationale for governing the youth. EU institutions repeatedly stress that

> "young people are *important change makers and essential partners"* (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 2)

Yet, the policy discourses make MENA youth visible through mechanisms that construct them as both a risk and a resource to the EU. This contrast reinforces the biopolitical logic of EU youth policy. On the one hand, youth are seen as a demographic at risk of unemployment, marginalisation, political radicalisation, and migration. They are made visible as vulnerable subjects who "*bear the brunt of crises* and instability caused by armed conflicts, rising inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation" (European Commission, 2022, p. 1) and "too often confronted with important challenges including poverty, socio-economic and political exclusion at all levels." (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 3)

On the other hand, they are simultaneously constructed as a strategic resource to the EU, a "valuable *demographic dividend*" (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 2), with the potential to drive development, stability, and modernisation. This framing is not neutral, but reflects, in Foucauldian terms, biopower, where youth are made governable by being defined in terms of their economic and demographic value. This framing, which is evident in the EU policy discourses, serves not just a rhetorical purpose, but it also actively legitimises interventions by constructing MENA youth as simultaneously vulnerable and full of potential. Youth are strategically made visible as both a justification and a mechanism for intervention. In line with this perspective, EU policy documents emphasise that:

> "*Investing* in young people and children should be at the heart of our cooperation. *Empowerment, participation and involvement of young people as agents of change* is key to achieving the priorities of the Agenda 2030." (European Commission, 2022, p. 5)

The rhetoric of empowerment and participation is used to reinforce the EU's broader goals, making youth visibility a key tool for advancing its external policy agenda. Repeated

quantitative references to their economic and political marginalisation, such as statistics and infographics, help frame these youth as at risk. This visibility of youth as a governable demographic is further reinforced, thereby legitimising specific forms of EU action.

> "It is estimated that, within the next 15 years, *some 375 million young African people* will reach working age." (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 2)

These quantifications, together with references to categories like NEETs, a category that simultaneously identifies their marginalisation and suggests their needs, do more than describe social realities. By presenting youth as vulnerable through quantitative data, the EU positions them as a strategic target for intervention, grouping them as a global category in need of governance. This is especially clear in specific policies framed towards education, such as the Erasmus+ programme. In its MIP, the Commission explains:

> "With approximately 60 per cent of the overall MENA population under the age of 30, more than 105 million people are transitioning to adulthood (OECD). The phenomenon of *young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)* is growing." (European Commission, 2021a, p. 19)

Crucial to the visibility frame is not just the descriptive act of presenting youth issues, but how visibility itself becomes a technology of governance. The visibility is never simply about recognition or inclusion of youth, but a mode of governance. As Dean (2010, p. 41) notes, regimes of government create a selective "field of visibility," illuminating certain objects while obscuring others. In this way, EU policy actively highlights youth aspects, such as employability or risk of radicalisation, while leaving out more inconvenient realities, thus making youth knowable and governable within specific policy objectives. What is particularly relevant is the form of knowledge used to make youth visible. The use of data (e.g. unemployment rates) creates an impression of neutrality and objectivity in the EU's policies. This neutrality is then strategically linked to the claim that local governance is inadequate, thereby legitimising the EU's role in offering both technical and normative support. For instance, EU strategic documents such as the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood highlight that

> "Significant economic and gender inequalities persist, and *governments struggle to meet the aspirations of today's youth*" (European Commission, 2021d, p. 1)

The EU's power position is made possible by this visibility strategy, which thus enables intervention to address this potential waste. This creates both moral and strategic imperatives for the EU to act. This framing is reinforced through the portrayal of youth as vulnerable in crisis contexts. The Commission states that in the context of the COVID-19 crisis:

> "The EU has and will continue to provide swift and *substantial support* to alleviate the *disproportionate burden* of the crisis on the most *vulnerable and those at-risk*, including youth and women." (European Commission, 2021d, p. 4)

5.2. Rationalities

The logic underlying EU engagement with youth in the MENA region is never straightforward. Rather than following a single logic, EU policy is shaped by several overlapping and sometimes conflicting rationalities: development, neoliberal, and security. These rationalities describe not only what youth engagement should look like but also why and how it must be done, often justifying EU intervention. As Dean puts it, the focus is on "what forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of calculation, or rationality are employed in practices of governing" and how these create "specific forms of truth" (Dean, 2010, p. 42). These overlapping logics are evident even in early policy statements, such as the European Commission's 2004 articulation of the ENP, which was

> "designed to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and to offer them the chance to participate in various EU activities, through greater political, security, economic and cultural co-operation." (European Commission, 2004, p. 2)

Here, development ambitions, neoliberal ideas of participation, and security concerns are merged, demonstrating how EU youth policy is governed by a complex mix of rationalities.

5.2.1. Development Rationality

In the EU's external youth policy discourses, the rationale behind engaging them is consistently framed in developmental terms. Throughout EU documents, investing in youth is rarely about them enjoying their individual rights, but it is tied to producing collective outcomes like economic growth, social cohesion, and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This logic is clear in the YAP, as:

> "The YAP aims at promoting the *engagement of young people* as strategic partners, supporting their *empowerment* and harnessing the demographic dividend, to build more resilient and inclusive societies and make progress towards global commitments such as the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*." (European Commission, 2022, p. 2)

Here, empowerment is linked to global policy goals, positioning youth not as ends in themselves but as a means to achieve the SDGs. Empowerment is measured by contribution, which emphasises a logic of conditional relevance; youth only matter when they produce measurable outcomes aligned with the EU's priorities. This developmental logic is biopolitical as youth are managed, civilised, and steered towards goals that go beyond their own. This development rationality guides youth agency toward objectives that are set externally.

> "The overall objective of the Fund is to foster the *contribution of young people to the SDGs* in their communities." (European Commission, 2022, p. 14)

This is in line with the Foucauldian governmentality framework, as the rationale behind the governance operates not through direct coercion, but by shaping the aspirations and behaviour of individuals in line with EU objectives, such as the SDGs. The European Consensus on Development is particularly relevant in this context and reiterates that

> "Responding to the educational needs of children and youth is crucial to *promoting responsible citizenship, developing sustainable and prosperous societies and boosting youth employment."* (European Institutions, 2017, p. 9)

However, this discourse also frames it oppositely, as

> "Global demographic growth and demographic shifts, combined with economic, social and environmental changes, offer *opportunities for and pose serious challenges to sustainable development*." (European Institutions, 2017, p. 9)

In this frame, the biopolitical rationalities are made clear, the youth are seen here as both a resource and a risk. While youth in the discourses are often seen as a potential to contribute to development, they are also more subtly framed as a destabilising factor. Linking the youth to this development rationality justifies governing them.

However, while the discourses mention empowerment, the discussed youth are not empowered to question the structural inequalities they face, but rather to reproduce the development frameworks that have already been established by the EU. In this way, the youth are expected to be useful to the EU's agenda by promoting

> "the meaningful *participation* of young people in the *development and implementation* of climate strategies" (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 7)

This disregards the youth's own political agency. Empowerment in this sense becomes conditional on supporting EU priorities of development, rather than supporting the independent youth voices. Empowerment is thus a means to achieve the end goal of Sustainable Development.

5.2.2. Neoliberal Rationality

Behind this development discourse is a neoliberal rationality that emphasises youth unemployment and employability as one of the region's biggest challenges. EU policy consistently positions these challenges at the centre of its analysis, interpreting them through an economic lens. As the European Commission observes,

> "High *unemployment rates*, especially among young people and women, remained one of the *main regional problems*" (European Commission, 2015a, p. 11)

Within this framework, youth are primarily valued for their potential to contribute to economic growth.

> "Women and youth, who are key actors in the transition, have a major *contribution to make to the economy and society*" (European Commission, 2014, p. 11)

This neoliberal rationality is clear in the policies' focus on individual responsibility to compete in the global markets. The language of *skills*, *employability* and *entrepreneurship* is evident throughout all policy documents. Behind this language is the neoliberal belief in an entrepreneurial subject that is independent, flexible, creative and risk-taking. This perspective is reinforced in sectoral strategies focused on the private sector and the labour market. The policy language stresses

> "*human capital development* targeting in particular youth *employability*" (European Commission, 2014, p. 14)

But also, repeatedly points to high unemployment as a central problem, especially for youth and women. As a result, youth are constructed as individuals who are expected to contribute to national economies by staying relevant to the labour markets, or as noted:

> "Enormous *positive returns* could be brought by creating prospects for young people in their country by preventing brain drain and creating decent *employment* for all." (European Commission, 2021d, p. 11)

This neoliberal logic shapes the design of programmes and funding priorities. The focus on upskilling, vocational training, and mobility is less about helping the youth for their own sake and more about producing employable subjects who can navigate both local and global labour markets. In this sense, youth are not constructed as 'agents of change' but as resources that can be mobilised for economic modernisation. Within the Review of the ENP, the priorities for cooperation in employment and employability are explicitly centred on youth, with a focus on "jobs and skills" and "new alliances of private sector, EU, Member States and IFIs supporting strategies for growth, jobs or youth" (European Commission, 2015b, pp. 9–10).

The focus on funding for upskilling, vocational training and employability becomes especially clear within the Erasmus+ MIP discourse as the programme focuses on capacity-building projects which aim to

> "increase the access and quality of inclusive *higher and vocational education* as well as relevance and *employability* of the graduates in line with our bilateral dialogue and a green economy and digital tools." (European Commission, 2021a, p. 19)

This leads to a broader goal of supporting political and economic stability in the region so it can have a more prosperous relationship with the EU.

> "the fundamentals are strengthened for the long-term political, economic and social stability and a prosperous relation with the EU, which supports the *human capital development for social and economic growth*, engages with youth." (European Commission, 2021a, p. 19)

MENA youth are thus not actually regarded as agents of change but as subjects who must adapt to the realities so the EU can prosper. By focusing on the youth's entrepreneurial and market-oriented qualities, this rationality risks increasing the very inequalities it claims to address. Here, empowerment becomes a question of individual responsibility, rather than promoting systemic changes, as the EU pushes youth to manage their own challenges within neoliberal frameworks that are strongly influenced by global economic factors. This logic reflects Foucault's broader critique of neoliberal governmentality by shifting responsibility for problems such as unemployment into the "domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of 'self-care'" (Lemke, 2001, p. 201)

5.2.3. Security Rationality

Both overlapping and contradicting the development and neoliberal rationalities is a security rationality within the EU youth policy discourses. Youth are not only framed as labourers or development partners but also as potential sources of instability. The analysed discourses frequently explicitly connect youth marginalisation with issues such as migration, terrorism, and regional instability. This frames youth as a potential threat to European security and prosperity, as highlighted in the Renewed Partnership:

> "The threats of *terrorism, organised crime and corruption* continue to feed *instability* and stifle prosperity." (European Commission, 2021d, p. 1)

Youth empowerment is instrumentalised as a means to prevent instability and control migration flows. It suggests that the EU addressing youth challenges is less about genuine empowerment, but more of a way to mitigate risks through what Foucault called the *apparatus of security* (Foucault, 1991a), the technical means such as institutions, techniques, and knowledge designed to regulate populations and anticipate risks. In the EU's discourses on migration, stated goals are to:

> "address the root causes of *irregular migration and forced displacement*, through *conflict resolution* and by addressing the socio-economic challenges exacerbated by COVID-19." (European Commission, 2021d, p. 16)

Here, youth policies are directly tied to migration control and geopolitical stability, therefore becoming security mechanisms that are designed not just to help young people, but to shape

their behaviour in ways that minimise perceived risks to the EU. Even access to healthcare is linked to counter-terrorism, as UfM initiatives argue that youth health services

> "will *prevent radicalisation and extremism*." (Union for the Mediterranean, 2021, p. 20)

Even positive-sounding humanitarian or rights-based initiatives are framed through a logic of stabilisation and risk management, rather than giving the youth agency. For example, specific policies aimed at youth participation are not just for the sake of participation, but more as a tool for securing regional stability and preventing unrest, as is evident in initiatives focused on:

> "strengthening the role of women and young people in *peacebuilding*" (European Commission, 2021d, p. 16)

The security rationality in EU youth policy is not only articulated at the level of EU institutions, but is actively reinforced by Member States themselves. EU Member States play a significant role in shaping and advancing this agenda, as stated in recent policy

> "EU Member States stressed the need *to actively and inclusively engage* young people in efforts to build lasting peace, contribute to justice and reconciliation and *counter violent extremism*." (European Commission, 2022, p. 8)

These examples show how youth governance in the MENA region is increasingly framed in a security rationality, where governing the youth is tied to preventing broader threats to the European way of living. As the Commission notes in the review of the ENP

> "Tackling broader issues such … youth unemployment … will all also be part of a wider *de-radicalisation effort*" (European Commission, 2015b, p. 13)

Within this logic, the youth programmes thus serve a double function, while they offer support, they also operate as tools of control, tying youth prospects to broader goals of regional security and stability.

5.2.4. Coexisting but Contradictory Rationalities

These rationalities do not exist in isolation from each other, but are deeply interwoven, positioning youth at the intersection of economic, political, and security goals.

> "Open markets and growth, inclusive economic development, and in particular the prospects for youth, is highlighted as a key to *stabilising* societies in the neighbourhood." (European Commission, 2015b, p. 3)

The EU justifies governing the MENA youth by combining these rationalities. The UfM 2030 Youth Strategy explicitly makes this connection, claiming that

> "Unemployment is not the only challenge for young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It is intertwined with other equally urgent and pressing obstacles that are related to access to higher education of good quality, mobility, environment, inclusive growth, economic development, and *prevention of radicalization*" (Union for the Mediterranean, 2021, p. 9)

The same subject within this youth framework is expected to be politically active and support the developmental goals, while also being economically productive and ideologically compliant so as not to become a threat. This combination produces an idealised youth subject. However, it is unrealistic to expect the youth to express entrepreneurship, political engagement, and liberal values all at once. Therefore, these rationalities behind EU youth governance create a limited range of acceptable subjects. By normalising these rationalities, EU interventions seem inescapable, therefore legitimising them and hiding the asymmetries of power that shape EU-MENA relations. These rationalities, therefore, allow the EU to engage with the youth to reach its goals while avoiding harsh criticism.

5.3. Interventions

In the EU's policies towards the MENA youth, interventions are implemented through many different programmes, partnerships, monitoring mechanisms, and institutional structures. These *technologies of governance*, as explained by (Rose & Miller, 1992), turn the rationalities into action, aiming not just to support the youth, but to shape their behaviour and aspirations. Through these interventions, the MENA youth are more likely to align with EU norms and

A key intervention is Erasmus+, which is designed to promote international mobility, virtual exchanges, and partnerships with the MENA countries. The tools associated with this programme target inclusive growth, employability, and social stability. The stated objectives, such as "adapting the future workforce", "activate youth to find employment," and "participate

in open and democratic societies" (European Commission, 2021a), show that youth policies are designed to create adaptable, market-oriented, and governable subjects. Therefore, these technologies are not neutral and help with enacting the EU's development, neoliberal, and security rationalities.

> "Erasmus+ programme provides an opportunity to contribute to a sector wide approach on *basic education, higher education, youth and vocational education and training*." (European Commission, 2021a, p. 19)

As with the Erasmus+ programme, at the beginning, most other programmes also focused on education and mobility, such as the "YOUTH programme", "Erasmus Mundus", "Tempus", "eTwinning", and "Marie Curie" (European Commission, 2004, p. 20, 2011a, p. 10, 2011b, p. 15, 2013, p. 10, 2014, p. 3). The focus on NEETs, the prioritisation of digital skills, and the engagement through programmes like these all help shape these youth to be governable subjects. Beyond mobility, the EU more recently started using capacity-building to institutionalise its preferred models of governance in local institutions. This is done through youth-focused programmes such as the "EU4YOUTH", "Shabab Live", "Youthroom", "Safir", "Thaqafa", "Med4Jobs", "Hiwarouna", "Youth Employment in Ports of the Mediterranean", "Goodwill Ambassadors in the Southern Neighbourhood" and "Young Mediterranean Voices" (European Commission, 2021b, p. 4, 2021e, pp. 93–94, 2022, p. 6), which are designed to teach leadership and "21st century life and work skills" on topics such as "civics, climate change, environment, media and cultural literacy" among others (European Commission, 2022, p. 11).

These interventions are not just technical; they are concerned with the construction of youth subjects and the diffusion of European norms. These interventions thus become a way for the EU to export its neoliberal democratic ideals across its borders, operating through soft power and institutional normalisation. While these seemingly generous initiatives may expand opportunities for youth, they also restrict the terms of participation of MENA youth, ensuring that youth engagement aligns with the EU's strategic and normative priorities. This is done through different programmes laid out in the YAP, such as "Youth Advisory Boards", "EU@UN youth delegates programme" and "EU platforms for regular dialogue" (European Commission, 2022, pp. 4–5). These programmes constitute a *technology of governance* and are based on the EU's norms, as they:

> "draw on the *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy* that stresses the need for equal, full and meaningful participation of young people in public and political life" (European Commission, 2022, p. 2)

The underlying asymmetry in goals is especially apparent in the Erasmus+ policies. Mobility is not just about the exchange of education, but also about the goal of diffusing EU norms. Through mobility, youth are exposed to and expected to internalise a specific vision of what it means to be a productive, responsible, and governable subject. This is explicit in the MIP, which states that expanding Erasmus+ in the MENA region aims at

> "reflecting the *rapprochement to EU values*." (European Commission, 2021a, p. 19)

These underlying goals are also evident in how funding is allocated in the MIP. Over half of the MENA regional budget from the Erasmus+ policy is allocated to International Credit Mobility, which explicitly has the goal to

> "Be an important tool of *public diplomacy* within Erasmus+, promote the EU's fundamental values and build a *positive image of Europe* around the world beyond participants" (European Commission, 2021a, p. 29)

The focus on measurable engagement, such as skills training and short-term participation, can overlook structural problems. As a result, youth agency in the policies is framed less about them having a voice in political or structural changes, and more as a technical matter of improving employability and participation rates. Collectively, these policies and mechanisms establish a system of governance. These interventions don't operate in a vacuum but are deeply embedded in broader geopolitical dynamics. They project the EU's rationalities behind youth governance. In this way, EU interventions are both technical and political, producing not just opportunities and skills and opportunities but also governable subjects aligned with EU priorities (Foucault, 1991a; Kurki, 2011; Lemke, 2001; Rose & Miller, 1992).

5.4. Subject Formation

Across the different policy discourses, youth are framed as future economic actors, responsible for their personal development and employability. This process of subject formation is deeply intertwined with the rationalities and technologies already described. However, it deserves specific attention as the recurring discourses are never neutral but actively shape the

expectations, opportunities, and constraints that MENA youth encounter in their daily lives. It is at this stage that abstract policy ideas are translated into concrete realities, directly shaping how these youth understand their role in society. This is reflected by the Commission's statement in the YAP

> "*youth empowerment* is closely linked to creating quality jobs, fighting precarious and volatile incomes, and having *self-employment and entrepreneurship* opportunities, while promoting gender equality and non-discrimination, also with a view to limiting brain drain." (European Commission, 2022, p. 12)

In this context, empowerment does not mean political engagement or being critical of power structures but rather is equated with the formation of qualities that make youth subjects more economically productive and locally secure. These qualities are aligned with the EU's broader neoliberal governmentality tactics. Similarly, the EU's emphasis on youth as productive economic actors is evident in its goals for "*promoting their participation* in local economies" (European Institutions, 2017, p. 13). This logic is also echoed in the UfM's call to

> "empower young women and men to become *self-reliant, responsible, and co-partners* in decision making and policy making." (Union for the Mediterranean, 2021, p. 7)

While these discourses seem inclusive, they frame participation and empowerment as conditional on the internalisation of the European neoliberal norms. Youth are valued as 'partners' and 'agents of change', but only to the extent that their actions align with institutional priorities and existing power structures. The subject formation is reinforced by concrete initiatives that encourage young people to promote EU values within their own communities

> "The development 'Friends of Europe' clubs and alumni networks for those who have participated in EU activities, and where possible develop networks of 'youth ambassadors'" (European Commission, 2015b, p. 21)

In the policies, the EU constructs the ideal MENA youth as entrepreneurial, resilient, and adaptable, which are traits valued for both individual success and broader social and economic stability. This focus is reinforced by stating that

> "decent work and *entrepreneurship* opportunities for youth are key to lifting young people out of *poverty* or vulnerable *employment* and provide youth with incentives to pursue opportunities locally." (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 3)

By framing youth problems as matters of self-responsibility and management, EU policies can undermine the structural political and economic inequalities that produce exclusion in the first place. This assumes that these issues are to be solved through inclusion into the labour market, rather than addressed through structural reform or political dialogue with the youth. It assumes that the EU's neoliberal values are universally applicable and will solve issues of non-European actors. This highlights a deeper tension in the logic of EU governmentality, where youth agency is managed in ways that reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power structures.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The EU increasingly sees youth as 'agents of change' and with this logic, has placed youth engagement at the heart of its foreign policy, especially towards the MENA region. This shift was a response to persistent social, economic, and political challenges, as highlighted by the Arab Uprisings. Youth activism started challenging narratives of disengagement and demonstrated the youth's potential to drive political change (Colombo, 2016; Murphy, 2017b, 2021). As a result, the EU now frames youth as key partners in its regional strategies, claiming to empower them for their benefit.

However, while the rhetoric of partnership and empowerment has become central in the EU's external engagement, the reality is more complex. The empirical analysis has demonstrated that EU youth policy towards the MENA region is shaped by intertwined logics of development, neoliberalism, and security, each of which contributes to the formation of youth as a specific group to be governed. The visibility of MENA youth in EU policy is not neutral or purely descriptive. Through data, quantification, and risk framing, youth are actively constructed as both vulnerable and valuable, reinforcing a biopolitical logic that makes them governable and useful to EU strategic interests, which justifies EU involvement. The rationalities underpinning these policies coexist and often contradict one another, requiring MENA youth to embody different roles. They are expected to be entrepreneurial agents driving development, responsible citizens who safeguard stability, while also being compliant with security goals. This tension is not incidental but fundamental to EU foreign policies aimed at MENA youth, as it permits a broad range of policy instruments governing the youth under the guise of empowerment and participation, while ultimately serving EU priorities.

The interventions, used as technologies of governance, such as mobility projects and capacity-building projects, translate the rationalities into practice. While these programmes appear to benefit MENA youth, they often prioritise spreading EU norms and values, sometimes at the expense of real youth agency or deeper structural change. Participation and empowerment are conditional, measured by how well youth internalise and reproduce the EU-defined priorities. The dynamics behind subject formation show that EU policies actively shape how MENA youth understand themselves and their possibilities for action. By framing youth primarily as future economic actors and responsible subjects, the EU translates its abstract neoliberal policy priorities into the daily realities and ambitions of youth across the region. While EU discourses

appear inclusive and supportive, they ultimately encourage conformity to a particular set of norms rather than allowing youth to articulate their own visions of change. Empowering MENA youth is, thus, less about encouraging critical political engagement or supporting youth to challenge existing power structures, and more about encouraging traits, such as self-responsibility, adaptability, and entrepreneurship, that align with EU-defined neoliberal visions of progress and stability.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the EU's youth policies towards the MENA region function as mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality, as they operate as a subtle but powerful tool for governing youth. The forms of participation and empowerment promoted by EU policy are closely tied to a wider logic of governance. The EU governs these youth not only through direct intervention but also by shaping subjectivities, ambitions, and acceptable forms of participation. These policies do not simply respond to the needs of the youth, but they actively produce the terms through which youth can be visible, recognised, and supported. Youth agency is promoted only when it falls within EU priorities or norms.

Regarding the impact of EU youth policies on youth agency and participation, the analysis shows that opportunities for genuine agency are limited. Participation and empowerment are conditional upon adopting EU norms, leaving little room for youth to define to shape or express their own ideas of social and political change. Thus, EU interventions often limit rather than expand real agency, as youth are guided into embodying roles that fit the existing power structures. Finally, the reproduction of power asymmetries in EU-MENA relations is evident in both the rationale behind and the implementation of youth policies. By presenting youth challenges as technical issues to be solved through market integration or alignment with EU norms, the EU reinforces its position as a self-imagined normative external actor and a superior moral authority. In doing so, these policies reinforce existing power dynamics and EU influence, while the real structural and political challenges, they claim to address, persist.

Ultimately, the EU's approach to youth in the MENA region reveals more about the exercise of power than about a commitment to supporting youth on their own terms. To move beyond these limitations, future policy must recognise youth as genuine and independent political agents, capable not only of contributing to the EU's goals but also of challenging and changing the structures that shape their lives.

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