

THE EU EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY PROMOTION POLICY IN THE ARAB SPRING REGION: BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL

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Abstract

Throughout history, the EU has often sought to establish and present itself as a normative power spreading its norms beyond its borders, as well as a main interlocutor in the domain of democracy promotion; particularly in its South of the Mediterranean neighborhood.

Despite this fact, the reform/democratic deficit in that neighborhood showed that the EU efforts to promote democracy have not been up to the aspirations of the countries of the region.

Moreover, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring events, many analysts argued that the political transformations that took place in the Southern Mediterranean region have been another visible failure for the EU democracy promotion efforts and its projections for the entire region, as the EU neither anticipated nor had a role in the formulation of these political transformations.

Alternatively, and in order to swiftly meet this new reality, the EU immediately launched a quick series of incentive – based democracy promotion policies that pledged to refocus on building deep democracies, promoting inclusive growth, advocating for more concrete reform measures, and developing civil society partnerships with its neighbors. The EU also advocated for a paradigm shift in its approach to promote democracy beyond its bureaucratic frameworks, policies and tools which - in many cases- proved as being inefficient.

The paper examines the development of the EU incentive-based external democracy policy towards the Arab Spring countries of the Southern Mediterranean region and examines the elements of continuity and renewal in such policy as a result of the events of the Arab Spring.

The paper concludes that the elements of continuity were more evident than the elements of renewal, particularly since the EU relied heavily on revisiting and re-labelling its democracy promotion discourse to meet with the arising challenge of the Arab Spring events.

Keywords: EU, Democracy Promotion, Arab Spring

PREFACE

Since the end of the year 2010, political unrest and demands for democratization in the Arab region -South of the Mediterranean -have spelled out after years of political and socio-economic stagnation. Such demands

have fundamentally altered the socio-economic and political outlook of the region and its relations with the EU.

Many analysts argued that the political transformations in the entire region, have been a visible failure of the EU projection in that region. The EU as well as many powers such as the US were caught by surprise with the events. As such, the EU had no alternative but to react swiftly to the new phenomena and adopt a discourse that is based on deepening the so called "Arab reforms".

Despite its efforts to foster genuine partnerships with its neighborhood, many voices have called for a paradigm shift in the EU approach in supporting reforms and promoting democracy beyond its bureaucratic frameworks, policies and tools; which in many cases proved to be inefficient and not up to the expectations.

This paper will examine the EU's role as a "normative power" spreading its norms beyond its borders and also its commitment towards democracy promotion especially after the spell out of the Arab Spring events.

Prior to that, the paper will examine the mainstream approach advocated by the EU as well as other global Western players concerning external democracy promotion; which is primarily a post-colonial approach.

Then the paper will also highlight the series of "incentive – based policy" initiatives proposed by the EU for supporting the reform and the inclusive democracy in the Arab region – South of the Mediterranean, while assessing the effectiveness of such policy as well as the elements of continuity/renewal in that policy.

1. THE POST-COLONIAL APPROACH IN UNDERSTANDING THE EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION EFFORTS

Throughout history, the EU has often sought to establish and present itself as an influential actor and a main interlocutor in the domain of democracy promotion and consolidation. To put this vision into action, the EU has been advocating rhetoric of a normative power; as its discourse has been largely focused on promoting norms and values beyond its borders.

The methodology relied upon in this paper will include examining the EU's political discourse/rhetoric on democracy promotion against its actions in support of the democratic transformation in the Arab Spring region.

The paper will look into the subject matter from a **post-colonial perspective** as a mainstream approach explaining external democracy promotion efforts. It argues that the post-colonial approach provides an innovative angle into the analysis of democracy promotion techniques and can help in explaining hidden rationales of the European democratization policy.

Democracy has been increasingly perceived to be a property of Western imperialism. Using the post-colonial lens of analysis suggests that the EU is thinking of its democracy promotion efforts as a "**Civilizing mission**", as the EU believes that by developing and civilizing its neighborhood through democracy, this will help such countries generate economic growth and stability that will eventually ease the pressure for illegal migration to Europe.

In fact, from the EU perspective this post-colonial approach has been often presented as a renaissance approach. While in fact, it still embedded in its core values an imperialist stance from southern neighbors who are often sought to be less civilized or in the course of development.

It is still worth noting that despite this fact, the EU; as a global player - with great obsession with documents, resolutions and communications - relied in its post-colonial discourse on a less aggressive tone. It relied on a "soft" discourse that emphasized notions such as " partnership, co-ownership, mutual accountability...etc., however these were still notions on documents that weren't reflected entirely on ground in the several policies that were initiated by the EU.

The Arab Spring events and the demise of the autocratic regimes that had been supported by the EU for the sake of stability and the fear of Islamist extremism have challenged and refuted this post-colonial approach. Events have shown that the Arab Spring people can bring regime changes and overthrow autocracies. These regimes cannot be regarded as old colonies of Western powers anymore.

2. THE EU EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY PROMOTION POLICY PRIOR TO THE ARAB SPRING

The historic commitment of the EU in the field of external democracy promotion is majorly based on the agreement to an international norm stating that the promotion of democracy is a necessary and accepted component of a state's behavior in the international system. For this reason, the EU has been often committed to promote democratic norms and practice as part of its foreign policy.

Prior to the "Arab Spring" events and throughout its discourse, the EU has continued to place great emphasis on concepts such as reform, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. There has been an explicit intention to promote such values in the countries of its 'neighborhood', particularly since democracy promotion has been thought to help such countries to generate economic growth that will eventually ease the pressure for illegal migration to Europe.

Despite the absence of the 'carrot' of full membership to the countries South of the Mediterranean, yet the rationale of the EU was entirely different regarding this region. The main drivers have been the EU's perception of the Mediterranean region as a source of fundamentalism, as well as its belief that democracy and political reform are the best means of attaining both stability and security in this region.

In light of this fact, the EU has - over the past two decades - designed a portfolio of reform and democracy promotion policies that can be perceived as a sort of compensation for the lack of the EU membership carrot for two key reasons:

The first; is the EU's attempt to offer a more attractive democracy promotion model than the one offered by the United States which relied mainly on tactics of negative conditionality or the 'stick doctrine' such as sanctions and aid reductions. In this regards, the EU has often sought to create influence and tied links in countries on its borders. For the EU, that has often constituted a legitimate rationale for an important aspect in its foreign policy.

The second; is the EU's security/stability dilemma. For the EU, the area of the South of the Mediterranean has always constituted a source of conflict and tension. The EU has often feared Islamic fundamentalism as well as illegal migration from the south.

Against this background, **the EUs relations towards its Southern neighbours prior to the Arab Spring revolts** were mainly framed by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, 1995-2008) -which was later upgraded through the Union for the Mediterranean Initiative (UFM, since 2008)- and afterwards the European **Neighborhood** Policy (ENP).

The EU's Mediterranean Policy, neither in its form as Euro-Mediterranean Partnership nor as Union for the Mediterranean was never perceived as particularly successful.

Although the partnership achieved considerable progress in the economic, trade and cultural spheres, progress in the political and security spheres has been very limited especially that the democracy component of the partnership was undermined in relation with other components; where it was only confined to "dialogue" on the issue without specifying concrete measures for putting democratic practices into action.

Even the Association Agreements of the partnership include a human rights' clause which stipulates a commitment to democratic reform, and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Theoretically, Mediterranean partners have been obliged to endorse and abide by this clause; while in practice serious human rights' abuses have been committed without any suspension of agreements or withholding of aid by the EU.

As for the Neighborhood Policy, it was clear that the notion of democracy was upgraded in comparison with that of the partnership. Thus, while the EMP placed the democracy notion under 'political dialogue', the ENP upgraded the discourse and went beyond 'dialogue' to explicitly place it in the framework of 'political dialogue and reform'. The Action Plans of the policy even emphasized a differentiated approach when dealing with countries according to their pace and progress level. Despite this fact, no concrete change was evident when it comes to real implementation and monitoring of democratic progress.

Although, the EU succeeded in assuring stability for itself through the control of irregular migration and assurance of constant energy supply, yet it mainly failed in its aspirations to contribute to democratization and higher human rights standards. However, soon it became clear that attempts to "transform the region

into an area of peace, democracy, stability, and prosperity” did not only fail, but even worse, the EU had made authoritarian regimes in these countries even stronger. (Durac/Cavatorta, 2009, p.3).

Instead, serious demands for political reforms have been postponed “with the fear that rapid democratic transformation would most probably lead to instability through violent upheaval and civil war, bringing anti-Western Islamist parties to power and perhaps causing a rise in terrorist activities.

2. THE EU RESPONSE TO THE ARAB SPRING EVENTS: A TRADITIONAL RESPONSE TO AN UNTRADITIONAL EVENT

The events of the Arab Spring have been a main visible failure of the EU projection - as well as other players - as it did not have any role in shaping or, at least, orienting what happened there though the spring happened on its southern Mediterranean borders.

The EU and its member states were also reluctant in supporting the Arab revolts in its early days. However, at a later stage, the EU expressed its endorsement to the Arab revolutions and expressed willingness to support the Arab countries in their democratic transformation. Therefore, it was quite understandable why, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the EU has been very keen to set the deepening of the Arab reforms as a key objective of its development cooperation policy towards the region.

The EU, then, swiftly proposed a series of European policy initiatives with deep democracy and political reforms at their heart. This started in March 2011 by proposing the “**Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean**”. In this partnership, the Commission outlined a new vision to guide its policies in the region that placed a central focus on the ongoing democratic transition processes. According to the Commission, this new partnership represents a fundamental change in the EU’s relationship with those partners that commit themselves to specific, measurable reforms. (European Commission, 2011a, p.5)

The proposed partnership is thus an incentive-based approach based on more differentiation (“more for more”) than in the previous policies. The partner countries that go further and faster with reforms will be able to count on greater support from the EU. Support will be reallocated or refocused for those who stall or retrench on agreed reform plans.

Moreover, in its discourse, the partnership explains what the EU has done in order to address the short-term consequences resulting from the recent events in the Arab Spring region. It then spells out the EU’s approach to the longer term process where it emphasizes that a radically changing political landscape in the southern Mediterranean requires a change in the EU’s approach to the region.

The document referred to the main pillars of the EU immediate response to the revolutionary events which were primarily: supporting humanitarian aid especially on the borders of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, facilitating consular cooperation and evacuation between all EU member states in case a massive influx of migrants from North Africa was to materialize, establishing the Frontex joint operations to help deal with possible new inflows of migrants and refugees and finally promoting democratic transitions in the Arab Spring countries.

Despite being the first EU initiative launched, examining the essence of the partnership, one can easily note that the democracy promotion element was the weaker part of the discourse. The partnership placed great emphasis on the security aspects of its response to the Arab Spring particularly to address its fears from the possible influx of migrants. It then referred to the necessity of supporting democratic reforms without highlighting concrete steps to support such reforms.

The partnership was then followed by the revisited European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The revisited policy was announced in May 2011 under the title “**A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood**” . The core element of the revisited policy- as stipulated in its text - was the notion of “deep democracy” which emphasized on a “more for more” approach and an extended positive conditionality. The revisited policy defines three different priority areas for partnership: (a) democratic transformation and institution building, (b) partnership with people, and (c) sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development (European Commission, 2011b, and p.16)

Again, looking into the essence of the democracy promotion element, one can note the same drawbacks of

the partnership. Although titled "A New Response", there was nothing new or innovative in terms of its substantial content and procedures. The revisited policy still relied on the existing ENP programs and tools.

No concrete benchmarks against which democratic progress can be assessed was introduced under this new response. As regards the financial allocations for the revisited policy, the EU has allocated €5.7 billion for the period 2011-2013, plus availing additional funding of €1.24 billion that has been transferred from other external resources in support of the revisited ENP. It is also important to note that these amounts of resources were allocated for the entire southern Mediterranean region. There hasn't been any proper rationale or justification for the allocation of funds or any concrete mechanisms to monitor the real progress achieved. It was unlikely that a country like Egypt with a harsh economic status could be dealt with as part of a package of the Arab Spring countries when compared with Tunisia for example.

Despite the fact of frequently flagging the "EU's **differentiated approach**" for dealing with its partners, the EU politicians did not address the support to the Arab Spring countries in a differentiated manner. Still, the offered support is considered peanuts to achieve real democratic transformations.

The third EU response took place through "**The Support to Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth – the SPRING Programme**" which was adopted in September 2011 with the main aim to respond to the pressing socio-economic challenges that partner countries of the Southern Mediterranean region are facing and to support them in their transition to democracy. The SPRING programme aimed to specifically address two of the priority areas that were identified in the revisited ENP ; particularly area (a) democratic transformation and institution building, and area (c) sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development. (European Commission, 2011c, p.3).

The programme was the first attempt by the EU to provide support to Arab Spring countries in a tailored manner, based on the needs of each country, and the assessment of its progress in building democracy. A 'More for more' approach was also advocated within this programme; the more a country progresses in its democratic reforms and institutional building, the more support it can expect from the SPRING programme. The total amount for the programme was 350 million Euros for the entire Arab Spring region, again without identifying any means or basis on how such amount will be allocated on the targeted countries.

Against this background, one may say that the EU's response to the Arab Spring events especially with regards to the democracy promotion aspect was not up to expectations of the events. "*A traditional response to an untraditional event*".

Generally speaking, the EU's new democracy promotion approach in the aftermath of the Arab Spring provides greater flexibility than before and puts some additional resources at the disposal of its Mediterranean countries. However, despite these rather positive innovations, there is **an absence of a paradigm shift in EU foreign policy**. Neither the aims nor the methods of the EU action have fundamentally changed as a result. Too many documents, partnerships and policies with no real difference in terms of content or means of support.

Moreover, many analysts still believe that such policies will not be that effective for the time being because still the pursuit of democracy promotion measures remain as before, shaped by conceptions of western civil societies, highly dependent on the ability and willingness of each country concerned.

3. ELEMENTS OF CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL IN THE EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION APPROACH: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the paper concluded that the conceptual foundations of the EU's "New" approach to support democratic transformations in the Arab Spring region remain extremely fuzzy and incoherent. Rather than representing a "fresh start" and "new thinking", they amount to little more than a readjustment of the EU's previous goals and priorities. (Behr, 2012).

Without clear goals and the ability to translate these into action, the EU policies are likely to remain ineffective offering nothing but documents and communications. As such, some policy recommendations are suggested to ensure an effective democracy promotion approach that can be summarized as follows:

3.1. It is not a “one model that fits for all”

The EU has often dealt with the Arab region as an entire block, despite its efforts to emphasize its differentiated approach, there is still more work to be done. In one of its communications, the EU commission emphasized the “need for greater flexibility and more tailored responses in dealing with rapidly evolving partners and reform needs” Recognizing the differences between the Arab Spring countries and designing policies accordingly is crucial and will eventually help in downsizing of the EU’s grand ambition of creating a one coherent democratic European Mediterranean.

3.2 Nationally owned reform agendas

In order to ensure a nationally owned reform agenda, the EU needs to go beyond the top-down model for supporting reform in the Arab Spring region. A more nationally driven agenda should be the guiding document for any EU policy towards its partner countries. More information concerning the local culture is still needed to design an effective policy that can engage with the society. That’s because the democracy promotion policy must be adjusted to cater to the local population needs of the economic, political and social rights. This suggests that more civil society engagement is indispensable during the design and implementation of the EU activities. In addition, there has often been a gap with regards to the perspectives of the EU as a donor and that of the partner governments as recipients of development assistance. While the EU focuses on a number of issues such as the speeding up of democratization and consider these as priorities believing that it is thought to help the country generate economic growth that will eventually ease the pressure for illegal migration. Some Arab governments such as Egypt for instance, is more geared towards receiving support that would help it eradicate poverty, improve social protection programs & build infrastructure.

3.3 Security versus the democracy promotion interests

There is a critical need to prioritize interests is one of the main challenges that impede the EU in its role as a democracy promoter. Members such as France, Italy or Spain enjoy close relations with their Mediterranean counterparts. In light of their security and trade interests, these countries would be more reluctant to pressure the Mediterranean countries for real reform. The case is entirely different with member states such as Germany, which is much more concerned with the countries of Eastern Europe (El Molla, 2009, p.10). In this regards, the EU must be consistent in its rhetoric on the Arab Spring governments when violations of democratic principles and human rights occur.

3.4 The Need for Compatible Funding Allocations

One of the controversial issues for the South of the Mediterranean countries is the EU’s spending priorities. EU funding reveals a bias towards some issues, especially illegal immigration, terrorism and education. In other words, the spending pattern of the EU reflects the EU’s interests. Political reform and democratic transformation allocations do not seem to be at the top of the EU funding list. This issue is crucial since it affects the EU’s credibility and image as a democracy promoter in the region and needs to be revisited accordingly.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper concluded that despite the EU’s positive efforts and innovations in the domain of democracy promotion, there is **an absence of a paradigm shift in its foreign policy**. Neither the aims nor the methods of the EU actions have fundamentally changed as a result of the Arab Spring events. Too many documents, partnerships and policies with no real difference in terms of content or means of support.

Moreover, many analysts still believe that such policies will not be that effective for the time being because still the pursuit of democracy promotion measures remain as before, shaped by conceptions of western civil societies, highly dependent on the ability and willingness of each country concerned.

The paper emphasizes ***that the elements of continuity were more evident than the elements of renewal, particularly since the EU relied heavily on revisiting and re-labelling its democracy promotion discourse to meet with the arising challenge of the Arab Spring events.***

The conceptual foundations of the EU's "New" approach to support democratic transformations in the Arab Spring region remain extremely fuzzy and incoherent. Rather than representing a "fresh start" and "new thinking", they amount to little more than a readjustment of the EU's previous goals and priorities (Behr, 2012, p.17).

Without clear goals and the ability to translate these into action, the EU policies are likely to remain ineffective offering nothing but documents and communication.

Finally, in the years to come, the paper suggests that Europe needs to behave more like a global democracy promoter and less like a big NGO in its dealings with post-revolutionary Arab Spring countries.

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