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European Union Democracy Promotion in the Mediterranean Arena

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ROBERT MAY, SEP 27 2011

“Stop philosophizing about what a good man is and be one”

Marcus Aurelius, 121-180 CE[1]

Just as the good man should stop thinking about how to be good and simply act good, so an entity such as the European Union (EU) or a state government should cease to wrangle about what is rightful and just and simply act in a rightful and just manner. When it comes to democracy and the promotion of democracy in foreign territories, then Marcus Aurelius' maxim becomes particularly pertinent for the EU to keep in mind. Article 130U of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in 1992 grants the EU a mandate to promote democracy in third countries[2], a mandate which continued after the Lisbon Treaty updated the TEU in 2009.[3] Yet in practise EU democracy promotion has been much criticised; from the shortcomings of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to the limits of its foreign policy capabilities in general, the EU continually finds it difficult to move beyond expressing an ideal state for third countries' democratic credentials.

Criticisms of policies aside, the actions of the EU in promoting democracy in third countries need to be examined in greater detail. The tangible support (financial, logistical or otherwise) the EU gives to pro-democracy social movements can help us assess just how much the EU acts, or is limited in acting, to promote democracy abroad. In short – if the EU gives direct, meaningful support to such social movements, it could be said to have stopped 'philosophizing' and begun to act. This is particularly important to assess given the recent developments in Libya and Syria (and in other countries along the North African coast) where pro-democracy social movements have directly contested the standing governments, and have experienced violent recrimination and human rights abuses as a result. Rightfulness and justice have never been needed more in foreign policy frameworks than in 2011.

The first section of this article sets up a short context of the current policy framework by which the EU attempts to promote democracy, with a brief outline of some criticisms, to provide an analytical basis for the analysis in the second section. This second section makes a case study of EU responses to Libyan and Syrian pro-democracy social movements in 2011; declarations of the EU's intent are outlined, and compared to the reality of the EU's actions in supporting social movements within each country. The questions to be asked are these: Are the realities of the EU's actions living up to the declarations? Can the EU's support for social movements overcome the difficulties of promoting democracy experienced in established policies such as the ENP? And can support for social movements be considered valuable to the promotion of democracy by the EU as a whole?

Mission Creep: Contextualising EU Democracy Promotion

When discussing democracy promotion undertaken by the EU, it is important to keep in mind that the EU's 'mission' is to externalise the success of European integration in creating peace and stability by exporting its model across the world.[4]^[5] In doing so the EU hopes to incur three particular benefits: increased security, construction of identity, and increased economic growth.

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The promotion of democracy is recognised by the EU as a supremely effective means by which to enhance member state security by increasing *global* security.[6] Therefore, democracy promotion and the corrections of failed states were included in the 2003 European Security Strategy[7] to guide the objectives of the growing European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP or CSDP). In fulfilling this desire to export security and stability via democracy member state support for democracy promotion at the EU level required the creation of a Common Foreign and Security Policy. The commonality of this foreign policy necessarily imprints a feeling of unity and identity upon the EU—creating a single voice out of many. The EU's strong identification with and normative export of democratic values also fosters economic growth; EU officials, institutions and member states believe that strong economic markets required democracy and vice versa. The development of market economies would lead to democratisation; therefore market reforms are identified as a key principle for democracy promotion.[8] In fact, market reforms were given greater priority than support for social movements throughout much of EU democracy promotion's history – PHARE aid between 1990 and 1996 gave just 1% to NGOs and Civil Society groups, as compared to extensive economic support for the host states.[9] It is this priority for market reforms over civil and political society support that characterises democracy promotion by the EU.

The EU's use of economic leverage is a well-documented and clearly accepted principle; as Fraser Cameron puts it, the “*bigger the EU carrot on offer, the greater... [the] results*”.[10] Enlargement is considered the biggest carrot to attract a third state. Gaining full membership of the EU grants several boons to the new member state: free access to one of the world's strongest markets; access to a labour market of comparatively well-educated EU citizens; a shared identity with some of the world's most prominent international actors, and many more lucrative benefits. To gain access, an accession candidate must ‘Europeanise’ by directly importing EU economic and political models of governance, as well as the EU's normative values. Yet enlargement is motivated strongly by security concerns, and controlled entirely by member states; not all states in the European neighbourhood can accede and Europeanisation is somewhat limited.[11]

In response to the need for a policy not based solely upon possible membership to promote democracy in third states, the EU developed the European Neighbourhood Policy(ENP) with goals of constructing and implementing economic and democratic systems in third countries along with the transmission of EU values including the protection of human rights, good governance, and freedom of speech.[12]^[13] However, the ENP requires the third country to subscribe to costs of lengthy and expensive reform with few of the incentives of membership, and the acquisition of values somewhat alien to the nation importing those values.[14] The transmission of democratic values is also of far lower priority than traditional goals of military security and economic well-being of EU member states[15] leading to a mixed record of success and negative credibility of EU democracy promotion via the ENP.[16]

Compounding these issues are several realities which undermine effective democracy promotion through the ENP framework. A consistent, vigorous policy of democracy promotion through the traditional ENP framework requires EU member state unity[17], with partner countries' performance in complying with democratic normative values depending upon the EU's commitment to and willingness to push for and monitor implementation.[18] Yet member state unity over democracy promotion is difficult to achieve. EU institutions will often limit their role when a strong member state has special interests and traditions at stake[19] and allow that member state to take leadership on a foreign policy initiative. Even when there is no strong member state to take leadership, the position adopted is the result of a lengthy, non-transparent bargaining process involving multitudinous divergent actors. [20] Generally the result is that positions are often the product of lengthy compromise with many policies the result of a ‘lowest-common-denominator’ dynamic adopted to minimise member state divergence. Compromise is rendered less valuable still by the fact that EU competencies are often complementary to member state competencies; either the EU is sidelined by a strong member state, or worse has to compete for leadership with member states and international institutions.

The resulting positions on democracy promotion are given a low priority when it comes to traditional security concerns,[21] such as threats to the stability of the neighbourhood. Often, the EU will abandon pursuit of democracy, such as in 1992 when the Algerian military carried out a coup d'état. The EU, unwilling to allow for an Islamic fundamentalist party to take power (even democratically) for fear of insecurity in North Africa, abandoned its democratic rhetoric and offered direct support for the Algerian military's coup d'état .[22]

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Not only does the EU consciously undermine its democracy promotion aims but the ENP also allows for deviation. The ENP's regionalist, 'one-size-fits-all' approach often meant that non-democratic behaviour went unpunished, with no leeway within the framework allowing for punishment of an individual member.[23] For example, Syria had gained considerable benefits from an association agreement under the ENP despite failing to live up to the human rights and democracy clauses;[24] but the EU had never ended an association agreement on evidence of human rights abuses until 2011.[25]

As a result of these realities democracy promotion via the ENP is difficult to implement past the level of public declaration[26] and Spence and Spence state that "*political declarations are still the main vehicle*"[27] for foreign policy, and therefore democracy promotion, of the EU. To counteract this problem, the EU began to directly support civil society efforts in the former Soviet republics of Central and Eastern Europe to bring them more in line with European standards as part of their accession criteria[28]; 90% of democracy promotion aid went to NGOs and civil society groups.[29] Subscribing to the failing ENP or the enlargement process is of little relevance to pro-democracy social movements, but considering the EU's rhetorical support for democracy promotion those social movements should expect strong, tangible support from the EU.

Trapping the Mad Fox: EU Support for Pro-Democracy Social Movements in Libya, 2011

In this section, EU declarations of support for the 2011 Libyan pro-democracy social movement are compared to the realities of its support with a view to assessing whether the EU was able to surpass Spence and Spence's conclusions stated at the end of the previous section. Avoiding an extensive history of the 2011 Libyan conflicts (dealt with in greater detail by various news agencies such as the BBC[30] and no doubt by academic historians with the virtue of hindsight) it is enough to state here that after significant government repression of pro-democracy protests in Libya, when legal basis for regional support of and international involvement with anti-Gaddafi policies were established, the EU declared wholehearted support for the Libyan pro-democracy movement.[31] Further declarations stated the EU's main aims in resolving the crisis: to protect civilians; to support democracy via self-determination, assertion of popular control & recognition of the Benghazi interim council;[32] and a direct call for Gaddafi to relinquish power.[33] Yet the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973, imposing a no-fly zone upon Libya in response to international condemnation, severely limited direct support for social movements on the ground to a declaration of intangible support to citizens and the imposition of a no-fly zone and security backing to enforce such a zone.[34]

Further limits were placed on the capacity for the EU to promote democracy through social movement support in Libya by a member state decision, through the Council, to realign the EU institutions' mission to deal with humanitarian aid; the EU's responsibilities were deferred to the UNSC, International Criminal Court (ICC) and member state for command and control of security action.[35] The sidelining of the EU by member states was completed by a statement made by the President of the Council and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, in which the EU was declared to implement UNSCR 1973 within the mandate given to the EU.[36]

So despite its increasing support for social movements and civil society in lieu of the ENP's failures, the EU succumbed to a previous reality to its democracy promotion: a sidelining of EU institutions by strong member states. While the EU institutions managed the member state-declared sanctions, arms embargoes, visa bans and asset freezes[37]-[38],[39] the direct co-ordination of security action was left to NATO; and apart from targeted bombing of pro-Gaddafi threats, there was no extra level of support granted to social movements by either the EU or other international organisations.

In co-ordinating humanitarian assistance, the EU was also given the mandate to create Operation EUFOR[40] in which an ESDP/CSDP framework would provide humanitarian assistance. Given the frailty of the decision-making procedure leading to and the text of UNSCR 1973 (which does not technically allow for the use of ground military by non-Libyan actors) neutrality is key for providing humanitarian assistance on-the-ground via troops and security actors. Yet the EU's neutrality has been undermined by member states using the EU to act as a common voice in expressing their own interests – a case of the EU losing effectiveness in policy implementation after having won a

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hard-earned common identity. Operation EUFOR is also a reiteration of a previously-outlined reality of EU democracy promotion: one of its primary aims is to stem immigration to the EU member states from stricken North African territories such as Libya, a key security policy set out in the European Security Strategy. Finishing off the flaws in the operation, EUFOR requires United Nations and/or Security Council mandate to even begin – a clear deferral of power and responsibility away from the EU.

What Uprising? – The EU's (lack of) Support for Social Movements in Syria, 2011

The repression of the pro-democracy movement in Syria, despite being bloodier than, more violent than and yet equally as well-publicised as the Libyan repression, has garnered little international attention. In fact, the response to Syrian repression shows a marked difference to the response to the events in Libya. There is neither consensus nor legal basis for action to take place and (for the EU at least) security concerns could be increased by the invasion of Syria – Iraq, Iran and even Turkey could object and conflict with the EU and its member states. The lack of concrete action so far could be attributable to the EU's fear of provoking a rapid escalation of conflict, or the increase in Islamic fundamentalism, in North Africa. So far, there have been few declarations and fewer concrete actions taken to support social movements in Syria.

The EU has condemned the use of force, and called for justice to be taken against those responsible for the repression[41], with a desire for restrictive measures also announced.[42] Ironically, the EU also 'reminded' Syria of its obligations to democratic reform and human rights protection under the ENP[43] – the same obligations that Syria had summarily ignored in the decade previous.[44] The realities of EU actions so far include a visa ban and assets freeze of those considered most responsible for the repression, along with arms embargoes on the state as a whole.[45]

Further, the EU has ended its association agreement with the country – an action of little value to efforts to either support the social movement or promote democracy in Syria. In spite of the aforementioned fact that Syria has never lived up to its democratic obligations under ENP, a significant failure of the policy, only 1% of MEDA funds under the ENP Southern Neighbourhood policy went to Syria – as Youngs states, *'Where democracy assistance was most needed, no significant work was undertaken'*. [46]

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, three questions were posed: Are the realities of the EU's democracy promotion living up to the declarations? Can the EU's support for social movements overcome the difficulties of promoting democracy experienced in established policies such as the ENP? And can support for social movements be considered valuable to the promotion of democracy by the EU as a whole? Using the analysis set up via the short case studies on Libya and Syria, one can answer these questions.

It is clear that the actions that the EU takes to support democracy via social movement support in Libya and Syria do not match the declarations, nor have the EU's methods of supporting social movements in these countries overcome the problems encountered in its previous attempts to promote democracy. Despite declaring the political primacy of the Libyan people, no direct support of the Libyan pro-democracy movement has been granted owing to divergent member state positions, the deferral of the EU to stronger member states and the complementary nature of the EU's competencies. The security of the EU member states is prioritised above the urgent needs of repressed protesters in Syria, with the stability of the wider North African/Middle Eastern neighbourhood considered more important than the self-determination of democracy in Syria. Furthermore, the visa bans, assets freezes and arms embargoes matter little to a regime which has little need to travel, spend money or arm itself to continue its repression of pro-democracy protesters. Moreover the ending of the association agreement is far from an adequate tool to support the social movements on the ground – the ENP in Syria and the Southern Neighbourhood was barely a 'carrot' to begin with, and could hardly turn into an invaluable 'stick' because of this.

It's difficult to assess, however, the value of EU support for social movements as a facet of democracy promotion. Were it not for member state divergence and EU deferral of responsibility a more tangible, direct approach to the

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social movements in Libya and Syria would have been made; especially given the EU's experience in supporting social movements in Central and Eastern Europe during the 2000s. Yet as it stands there is very little tangible support given to social movements in Libya and Syria by the EU – and it is far less difficult to judge a failing of a policy than an absence of a policy. To wit, the EU could be said to have finally learnt how to act good – it has just been unable to show that it can.

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[8] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.143

[9] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.136

[10] Cameron, European Foreign Policy, p. 185

[11] Fröhlich, ENP, p.84

[12] Fröhlich, ENP, p.75

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[13] Cameron, European Foreign Policy, p.184

[14] Fröhlich, ENP, p.84

[15] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.131

[16] Fröhlich, ENP, p.84

[17] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.133

[18] Fröhlich, ENP, p.81

[19] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.141

[20] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, p.133

[21] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, pp.133 + 142

[22] Olsen, EU:Ad Hoc, pp.140 – 142

[23] Fröhlich, ENP, p.82

[24] Fröhlich, ENP, p.82

[25] Cameron, European Foreign Policy, p. 184

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