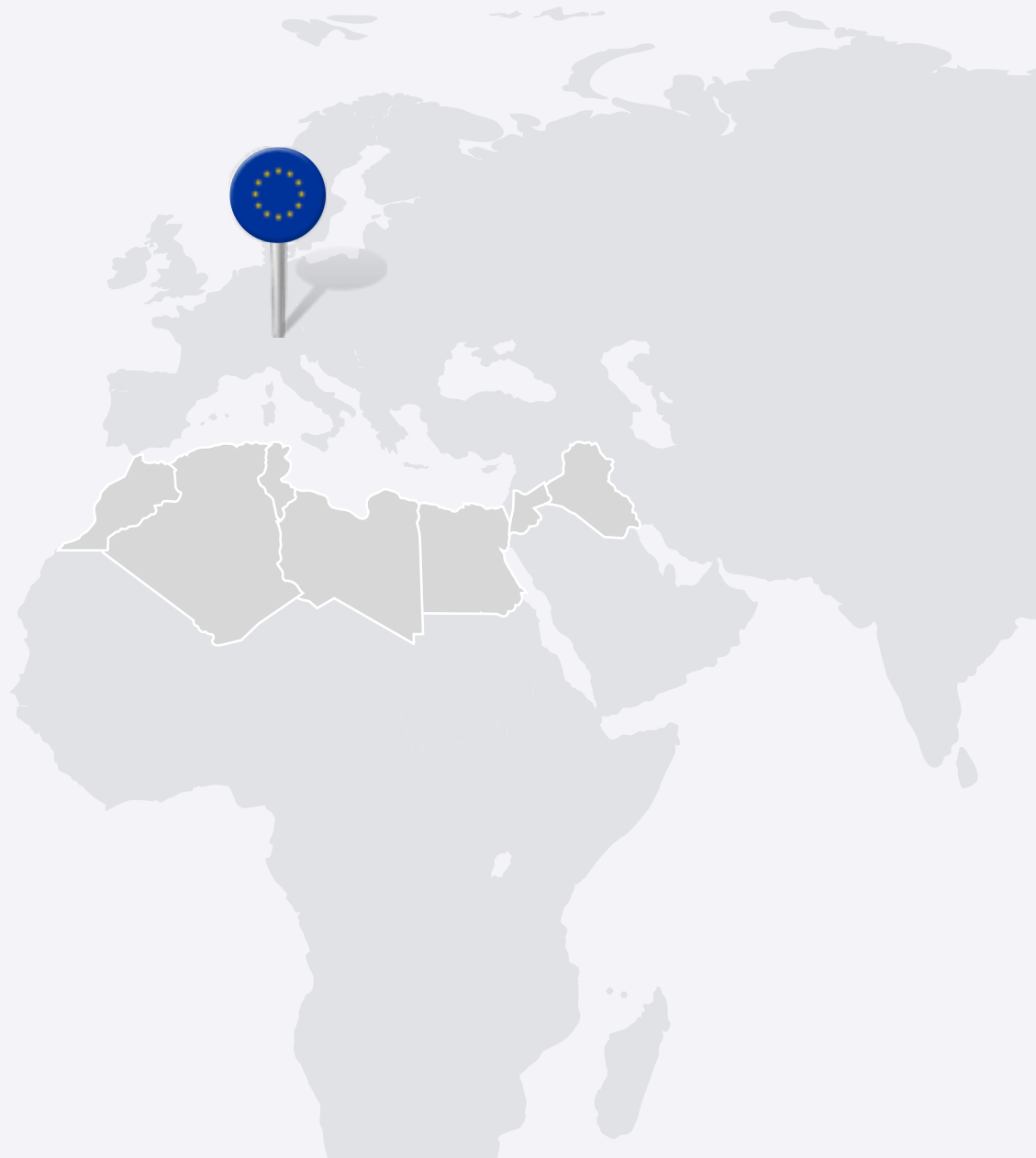


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The EU's Policy Response to the Uprisings

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Abstract:

The EU claimed it would learn the lessons of the Arab Uprisings with a ‘qualitative step forward’ in its approach to development, democracy, and security. However, an examination of the conceptual structure of revised EU Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) suggests EU policy changed little, and that in later incarnations it displayed a retrenchment towards conventional notions of democracy, development, and security, prioritising the latter over the former two. The Union seems to have failed to re-examine its approach to democracy, development, and security, falling back on approaches to all three which have been tried – and have failed – in the past.

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Arab Spring, Arab Uprisings, European Union, Democratization, Democracy Assistance, Survey Research

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Introduction

The EU claimed it would learn the lessons of the Arab Uprisings with a “qualitative step forward” (European Commission, 2011b, p. 2) in its approach to development, democracy, and security. However, an examination of the conceptual structure of revised the Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) suggests EU policy changed little, and that in later incarnations policy documents display a retrenchment towards conventional notions of democracy, development, and security, prioritising the latter over the former two.

The EU Policy Response to the Uprisings

The EU has from its inception been committed to the ‘ever closer union’ of European peoples, and understood this expansion under the rubric of democracy. Seeing itself at least partly as a ‘normative power’, the EU claims these values also frame its strategic posture, including towards ‘Neighbourhood’ countries for which membership is not a prospect. That said, the EU’s pre-Uprisings track record on strengthening the prosperity, stability, and security had been “less than stellar” (Whitman & Juncos, 2012, p. 153) making little progress towards democracy (see also Bicchi, 2009; Roth, 2012). After the Uprisings, many welcomed the Union’s call to jettison old policies – particularly support to dictatorships (Roth, 2012) – acknowledging that “by its actions the EU has favoured regimes and practices that ultimately proved intolerable to a broad stratum of Arab society” (Hollis, 2012). Indeed, former ENP Commissioner Štefan Füle admitted as much, stating that the region’s people’s “courageous stand to defend their rights and to introduce democracy and social reforms” calls on the Union to “rise to the challenge” of recognizing that “it has often focused too much on stability” and that “[n]ow is the time to bring our interests in line with our values. Recent events in the South have proved that there can be no real stability without real democracy” (Füle, 2011: 1).

Europe’s initial response to the Uprisings was less actually than enthusiastic. Only once protest threatened regional regimes was support for protesters forthcoming. With Ben Ali and Mubarak gone and several countries swept by protest, the EU’s self-assigned challenge became to rethink the ENP generally – and policy towards MENA autocracies specifically – in terms of tactics and instruments, in its goals, its methods, and in the notions of democracy, development, and security which provide the ENP’s conceptual underpinnings. This claimed paradigm shift is contained in a series of documents (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013, 2014). However, although “never before did the EU produce as many strategy documents on the ENP in one year as it did in 2011” (Whitman & Juncos, 2012), the EU has not achieved its sought-after ‘qualitative step forward’.

The EU’s first response to the Uprisings was the *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity* (PDSP), published on March 8th, 2011 (European Commission, 2011b). PDSP epitomises the EU response: although it presents the strongest break with pre-Uprisings policy, it ultimately remains within the pre-Uprisings ENP paradigm

in two ways. First, it accepts the liberal assumption that democracy is generated by a balance between a virtuous civil society and an authoritarian state. Thus, PDSP focuses on capacity-building creating a ‘supply of democracy’ from inside a state (European Commission, 2011b; e.g. 2, 5-7) while simultaneously supporting civil society in counterbalancing the state’s authoritarian impulse (European Commission, 2011b, e.g. 2, 6). This approach contradicts extensive scholarship showing civil society is often co-opted by regimes (e.g. Abdelrahman, 2004; Camau, 2002; Cavatorta & Durac, 2011). Second, while socio-economic factors are treated as relevant, unlike the case of civil and political spheres, their connection to democracy and democratization it is relegated to a secondary role with respect to civil and political rights. This ‘demotion’ is visible in at least three dimensions of PDSP and other post-Uprisings documentation. First, PDSP recognises the connection between social justice, economic growth, and democratisation, but it focuses on privatisation and free markets. These instruments were the cornerstone of pre-Uprisings policy, and their effectiveness has been widely criticised. Second, despite being crucial to the Tunisian and Egyptian Uprisings, and other failed attempts (e.g. Bahrain, Yemen), trade unions and labour-focused CSOs are ignored. Thirdly, while civil-political rights are always presented as crucial to democracy, PDSP systematically refers to socio-economic issues as matters of *development* and economic policy, but not as *rights* (Teti, 2012, 2015).

The *New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood* (NRCN) (European Commission, 2011a), published in May, presents itself as an attempt to generalise the lessons of the Uprisings to the whole ‘Neighbourhood’. Cornerstone of NRCN’s claim to conceptual innovation is its emphasis on ‘deep democracy’, democracy “that lasts because the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and armed forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service – and other civil and human rights that many Europeans take for granted, such as the freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (European Commission, 2011a). A more formal definition also defines the criteria for benchmarking the ‘more for more’ approach: “1. strong and lasting commitment on the part of governments [to] free and fair elections; 2. freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; 3. the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial; 4. fighting against corruption; 5. security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces” (European Commission, 2011a, p. 3). NRCN does seem to provide the space for a broader conception of civil society, extending EU funding availability to “non-registered NGOs and trade unions” (European Commission, 2011a, p. 4). This would be significant if translated into action. On the other hand, as with PDSP, notably missing from this picture of democracy are social and economic rights. Although social and economic *issues* are not entirely absent (cf. European Commission, 2011a, p. 2), they are never described as *rights*. Additionally, they are absent from definitions of ‘deep democracy’. In addition, NRCN shies away from EIDHR’s commitment to fund CSOs directly, implying funding should receive government approval (European Commission, 2011a, p. 4 emphasis added).

The EU's third post-Uprisings ENP strategy paper, *Delivering on a New European Neighbourhood Policy* (DENP) (European Commission, 2012) presents itself as an interim assessment of the new ENP. Here, the main rubric associated with democracy remains 'human rights' (European Commission, 2012, p. 3) (European Commission, 2012, p. 4) (European Commission, 2012, p. 8); (European Commission, 2012, p. 18) although DENP does not indicate whether it views socio-economic rights as central to democracy or whether it refers to civil-political rights alone. Either way, DENP hardly signals an intention to change definition of democracy to reflect popular protest against socio-economic and political disenfranchisement.

Working towards a Stronger Partnership (European Commission, 2013) presents a less optimistic view. Invoking domestic constraints and geopolitical rationales, it continues NRCN's retrenchment. WTSP suggests domestic constraints – including domestic security factors (European Commission, 2013, p. 7) – on its claimed democratising action: “[b]uilding democracy in partner countries is in the hands of their citizens and their elected politicians. The ENP can support, but not replace, this process” (European Commission, 2013, p. 4). It also invokes averse geopolitical conditions, pointing to “Turkey, countries of the Gulf and organisations such as the Arab League [which are] promoting their economic and political interests more [...] offering an alternative model of political and economic development to integration with the EU” (European Commission, 2013, p. 22).

Democracy does remain a WTSP *Leitmotiv*: for example, WTSP provides a clear linkage between the domestic values – “freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law” – upon which the Union and its external relations are built: “Only if the whole societies, not just the political elites or certain parts of the political spectrum, makes this choice and adheres to the universal values referred to above, will the process [of forging ‘ever closer relations’] be sustainable and ultimately successful” (European Commission, 2013, p. 20) (see also pp. 14, 21). However, WTSP's conception of democracy remains focused on civil-political rights and on a balance between state and civil society, with the latter providing the virtuous “driving force” playing “a key role in all aspects of democratic and socio-economic reform, in advancing women's rights, in supporting the freedom of expression and association, in advocating environmental protection and generally in striving for greater social justice” (European Commission, 2013, p. 3). Nowhere are trade unions or even government policy mentioned. And while social and economic issues are mentioned – indeed “Significant socio-economic disparities persist [...] If not dealt with, these factors will continue to jeopardise future social stability and the transition towards democracy” (European Commission, 2013, p. 8) – they are never presented as questions of rights, merely of uneven development.

Neighbourhood at the Crossroads (NatC) (European Commission, 2014) reprises tendencies evident in WTSP such as the identification of regional and global geopolitical and geo-economic factors presented as obstacles to democratic convergence. Rather than emphasising the interconnectedness of democracy, development, and security, it identifies as objectives “security, prosperity and good neighbourliness” (European Commission, 2014, p. 2). The domestic, regional, and

global geopolitical environment is presented as blocking the achievement of political objectives (democratisation) and economic objectives ('reform') (e.g. European Commission, 2014, p. 2) (European Commission, 2014, p. 4) (European Commission, 2014, p. 16). Democracy is discussed separately, listing a familiar combination of elections, 'fundamental freedoms', freedom of assembly and association, freedom of speech, the rule of law, the prohibition of torture, elimination of corruption, and respect of the rights of vulnerable groups, and the equally familiar picture of civil society in relation to democracy (European Commission, 2014, p. 8). Again, democracy, human rights, and 'fundamental values' are linked to the process of regional integration or convergence (European Commission, 2013, p. 15). Similarly, social and economic rights are never mentioned as rights, only as economic issues. By contrast, 'free trade' agreements are presented as trailblazers to both economic growth and political democratization, as supposedly they "can, beyond liberalising trade, be powerful tools in improving transparency and the regulatory framework in general" (European Commission, 2014, p. 9). Civil society becomes the force capable of alleviating any deleterious effects of such economic policies: "civil society plays a key role [...] in the implementation of social programmes funded by the EU" (European Commission, 2014, p. 9).

The *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (RENP) (European Commission, 2015) is the latest document in the EU's ENP revision. It continues to present of a 'thin' procedural definition of democracy, and displays the return discernible in previous documents towards conventional conceptions of security, which it also increasingly prioritises over democracy. RENP statements about democracy present the conventional 'market democratization' model (European Commission, 2015, p. 8) and link internal EU democracy to domestic MENA democratization and to regional integration (European Commission, 2015, p. 2) (European Commission, 2015, p. 6). RENP then relegates democracy to one factor among others, with no particular position of privilege either as a negotiating item ('an agenda item') or as a causal factor in broader regional political dynamics (e.g. 'shared prosperity').

In addition, the role of democracy in producing a Neighbourhood both safe and prosperous is constrained by conventional security priorities, for example stating that "the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political priority" (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). Other statements suggests that universal values, among which democracy, are a subset of, and subservient to the EU's 'interests' (e.g. European Commission, 2015, p. 2). Throughout, security – 'stabilisation' – is presented as a causal prerequisite of both political and economic reform.

The definition of civil society and its relation to democracy displays no major innovation compared to preceding documents, being described as 'supporting' reform agendas (European Commission, 2015, p. 5). RENP also reiterates the commitment to bolstering regional CSOs (European Commission, 2015, p. 5) and outlines a consultative role for CSOs in policy-making (European Commission, 2015, p. 3); (European Commission, 2015, p. 7); (European Commission, 2015, p. 18) (European Commission, 2015, p. 21). However, despite RENP emphasising "the universality and indivisibility of all human rights" (European Commission, 2015, p. 6) – and therefore

presumably also social and economic rights, socio-economic issues never treated as matters of rights, merely as questions of economic fact.

Conclusions

The impact of EU Democracy Assistance in the Southern Neighbourhood depends on several factors: 1) the EU's power as *attractor* (economically, culturally, and politically); 2) the *quality and effectiveness of the intra-EU and trans-Mediterranean institutions* designed to elaborate and implement policy; 3) the *ability to respond* to MENA populations' 'demand for policy'; 4) the design and consistent implementation of policy *conditionality*; and 5) the permissiveness of the *international context*. Clearly, the EU has varying degrees of control on each factor, but its efforts on those factors it *can* control has fallen decidedly short. EU policy reform has not matched the demand for a more rounded democracy which pays attention to socio-economic rights and social justice with a corresponding policy supply. Instead, the Union failed to re-examine its approach to democracy, development, and security, falling back on approaches to all three which have been tried – and have failed – in the past.

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