EU Democratisation of the Southern Neighbours Since the "Arab Spring": An Inherently Inadequate Approach

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Abstract

This Article draws on the analysis of historical relations between the European Union and the Southern Mediterranean countries and highlights the main initiatives and consequences of the adopted practices of democratisation in the region following the Arab Uprisings. The main focus is on the continuity and limited changes in the new approach. One of the main findings is that the limited reform of the EU approach primarily resulted from the inherited political constraints. The net result was a set of structured security-orientated relationships that will continue to repeat earlier mistakes before 2011. The mechanisms of democracy promotion including conditionality remained inherently full of contradictions. The double standards in applying the conditionality principle in addition to the lack of significant leverage rendered the EU democratisation approach of the Southern neighbours inapt. Despite the 2011 ENP review promise of a substantial change in the EU democratisation approach, it seems that the EU's initial euphoria following the "Arab spring" has waned as it seems to repeat the same old approach of liberalisation and securitisation of the Southern Mediterranean region rather than democratisation.

Keywords: EU; Democracy; Arab Spring; Arab Revolutions; European Neighbourhood Policy; Southern Mediterranean

Introduction

For many decades the European Union (EU) has relied on its profound economic, social, and political ties with the Southern Mediterranean states to influence their stances on democracy. The establishment of democratisation as a major objective within the framework of the agreements between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean states was a further step in the EU's normative power approach (Börzel, 2021).

Since the Barcelona Declaration (1995), the EU has extensively refined its approach and repeatedly adjusted the outline and substance of its policies relating to extra-European relations. The EU has certainly succeeded in creating a European-orientated cooperative relationship with many of the region's autocratic regimes, which endorsed the EU's idea of a "ring of friends", with the stability agenda as the main force behind this newly formed community (Börzel, 2021, p.8). Over the years, both parties were able to harvest the fruits of this "stable partnership", which served the interests of the EU (i.e.

stability) and the Southern Mediterranean socio-economic development support for its people, and financial support and political legitimacy for its autocratic regimes (Dekanozishvili, 2017).

However, the Arab uprisings and conflicts following the proliferation of what has become known as the Arab Spring has changed the status quo. Some long-standing and relatively new EU partners were toppled, while all regimes were forced to alter their agenda regarding democracy, at least in terms of lip service to reform.

Overall, the uprisings not only have effectively ended the comfortable configuration of EU policy with the Southern neighbours since the mid-1990s, but it also revealed the limitations and contradictions of the democracy promotion agenda. The multiplicity of the objectives and the security dilemma in addition to the constraints of the conditionality principal application rendered the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) unfit to achieve any substantial political reforms in the Southern Mediterranean. In search for more effectiveness and hoping to improve stability and to recover its normative identity as a people-friendly force for positive change, through its support for the transition process, the EU responded by announcing a paradigm shift in its approach towards the Southern neighbours through the ENP review (European Commission, 2011b). An approach based on differentiation, sustainable and inclusive growth, further socialisation with a greater role for civil society, and enhanced conditionality (European Commission, 2011a).

This article assesses whether the EU's new approach is a quantitative step forward in enhancing political reform in the region, ten years on. The answer seems to be that there is a strong feature of the EU's continued methodology before the uprisings. A particular concern is that the EU is continuing to maintain support for strategies that are causative in the grievances underpinning the Arab Spring, such as the inequitable political economy. The article sets out by evaluates the implementation of the democratisation in the Southern Mediterranean, which detected many inherited obstructions to the effectiveness of the EU's democracy agenda in the region. It starts with an overview of the EU's double standards in applying its conditionality principle. It then examines the limits of the incentives offered and whether it can outweigh the costs of political changes required. Third, this article assesses the prioritisation of economic liberalisation versus democracy. Fourth, it discusses the negative impact of economic liberalisation. The last part evaluates the prioritisation of the security agenda instead of the democratisation policy. This article concludes that what emerges after a decade, is not just that the EU failed to reform its democratisation policy substantially, but despite its rhetoric, it has consistently prioritised its security and economic interests over the democracy promotion objective.

EU Conditionality Approach: The Double Standards

(Freyburg et al, 2015, p. 32) argued that if conditionality was founded: "on rules that are clearly defined… and coherently applied by the Union as a whole, their compliance pull is said to be strong. Alternatively, if double standards became perceptible in the actor state-target-state relationship, conditions would fail to exert the same leverage". Under this rule, the application of democracy conditionality is subject to persistent criticisms, due to EU double standards, as it appears to be "arbitrary and lacks transparency" (Teti et al, 2020, p 84), subject to the political bargaining power of the EU institutions and EU member states. As some "partners" who are more strategically important, politically, and economically, are dealt with more softly than others. A discriminatory approach which does not encourage the promotion of democratic principles.

Egypt is a prime example of this discrepancy. Despite the massive interference of the armed forces in political processes and oppression, the ousting of the democratically elected president, and the subsequent bogus election, the EU response was muted, before congratulating the new dictator on his carefully orchestrated win, with 96.9% of the vote (Moran, 2018, p.6). The EU statement prompted

immediate and universal criticism from democracy promotion organisations, including Michele Dune of the Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East, who stated that the "EU should be embarrassed by the first sentence of its statement" by declaring that "the holding of the presidential elections marks an important step in the implementation of the constitutional roadmap towards the transition to democracy in Egypt" (Dune, 2021, p.1). The EU knew the absurdity of this declaration concerning its purported identity as a champion of democracy; thus, it clearly views its strategic interests in Egypt as being more important than democracy.

This is not to say that the EU is indifferent to democratisation. The ideal scenario would be democratically elected governments that conform in all respects with EU interests and objectives. In the absence of such an idyll, the democratic principle is just one of many different considerations that guide EU foreign policy towards the Mediterranean Basin and the world in general, and this simple observation may clarify the inconsistencies of EU democracy approach (Notorski, 2016). Furthermore, EU foreign policy has an inherently complicated structure, with member states continuing to play an essential and formative role in its agenda. Hence, it is not surprising that the degree of conditionality depends to a large degree on the status of neighbours' relationships with the EU's member states, as well as its institutions. The strongest member states' agendas related to EU foreign policy are French and UK interests (before Brexit) in the Francophone and Commonwealth countries, which gives them disproportionate clout in the EU foreign policy context. Indeed, (Börzel & al, 2015) stated that post-colonial Mediterranean countries that were formerly colonised by France or the UK, or which are of strategic import to the EU, are less likely to be treated severely. Countries that are not part of either category are vulnerable to more stringency from the EU and consistent reprobation. For example, during the Tunisian uprising, France was eager to muzzle any strong EU criticisms of the regime despite its public support for the notion of democracy in the Southern Mediterranean region (Cavatorta, 2017), hence double standards and hypocracy can be noticed not only in relations to different countries but also to a single one, as member states may seem to embrace a policy (e.g. democratisation) publicly, at the European level, while actively resisting it secretly, at the bilateral level(Cavatorta, 2017, p. 53).

The EU double standards in its application of conditionality are evident. For instance, the EU is not willing to use negative conditionality with its near neighbours (Diez & Tocci, 2017), however, such measures have been heavily applied when it comes to countries of less economic or political importance to EU member states. For example, citing democratic principles and human rights violations, the EU slapped heavy financial sanctions on Venezuela (Council, 2017), while egregious democratic principles delinquents in North Africa enjoyed increased financial and political support (e.g. Morocco and Jordan receive extensive EU aid) (Jonasson & Mezagopian, 2017). These examples appear to confirm the conception of double standards. As (Schimmelfennig, 2015, p. 4) indicated: "the link between development and democratic principles of good government has become the accepted and inevitable face of North-South relations; the degree to which this conditionality is supervised and sanctioned remains variable, almost idiosyncratic". This inconsistency raises questions about the EU democratisation process and the underlying intentions and objectives of the Union in the region. In this context, (Börzel & al, 2017) argued that the overall distribution of the EU trade and aid provisions did not to any significant extent correlate with democratic criteria. Moreover, positive conditionality, the "carrot" to encourage the Southern Mediterranean states to adopt more liberal political changes, was "adopted on an ad hoc basis, and not pursued with any coherence or vigour" (Börzel & al, 2017, p.22).

The double standards and incoherence are not noticeable in the reward-based approach only, but as well in the negative measures, which are intended to be used as the "sticks" due to the violations of the normative principles. As Youngs noted, "the EU may overlook persistent autocratic government's abuses of democratic principles, while it reacts promptly to massive human rights violations… Democratic conditionality has not been systematic" (Schimmelfennig, 2012, p14). Perhaps the reason for such double standards is that some violations, especially those related to democracy became the norm, while others, such as human rights abuses are more attention-grabbing among the press and subsequently European

public opinion. Hence, to enhance its public image, the EU is eager to be perceived as an exemplary human rights crusader. In line with this argument, the EU have imposed political, financial, and even military sanctions on Libya and Syria, However, such sanctions were based on human rights violations and not democratic shortfalls (Nuruzzaman, 2015).

In this context, some scholars suggested that the double standard is a permanent feature of the EU approach in its normative quest. (Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017) conducted a statistical analysis of the suspension of development cooperation based on democracy and human rights violations, finding that the level of respect for human rights or regime type was not significant for the granting of EU development cooperation, and that the EU was less likely to impose sanctions on countries with which it has institutionalised cooperation. Such statements confirm the desolate status of conditionality, as despite the reversed trend in the democratic improvements in many Southern Mediterranean countries, there is a lack of substantial EU sanctions. The latter case is a small caveat in a conditionality approach rigged with double standards, which subsequently hindered its effectiveness.

Overall, the conditionality principle of democracy promotion appears to be patchy, as the EU response to the violations of democratic principles is rarely characterised by any serious degree of consistency or credibility (Harwood, 2020). Phrased sympathetically, the EU commitment to democratisation in the region is branded as a policy "with considerable variations in focus and intensity" (Jubulis, 2018).

Incentives Offered: Outweighing the Costs?

Other than offering financial support to its Mediterranean partners, the EU also offered them the possibility to partially participate in the EU. This was with the proviso that they reformed their legislation to correspond with the EU and developed "participation in a number of EU programmes and improved interconnection and physical links with the EU" (European Commission, 2014b, p 11), which the Commission previously called "everything but institutions". The necessary reforms were mainly economic, and hardly any democratic reform was expected or implemented. Other than internal factors in Southern Mediterranean states, this can be explained by the size and composition of the incentives presented. For the regimes to accept the changes, the political and economic gains should outweigh the costs, and the required changes must be realistic to be achievable (Schimmelfennig, 2017).

From the financial support perspective, The EU offered its partners €15 billion for 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2017), in addition to increased lending from the European Investment Bank. However, no spending stipulations were made concerning such assistance (e.g. budgets for democracy promotion). Considering the competing normative principles, as well as security and liberalisation, it is doubtful whether any substantive amount will be specifically channelled into democracy promotion. Generally speaking, taking into account the number of ENP member states, the financial incentives presented is well too small and below anything that could realistically motivate the authoritarian regimes into meaningful reforms. The lion's share of ENP aid goes to the European continent, and Sub-Saharan Africa receives more than the Southern Mediterranean "neighbours" (Dunay & al, 2016). The majority of EU Northern members prefer to allocate aid to poor and least-developed countries rather than middle-income Mediterranean countries, ignoring the fact that not all Southern Mediterranean countries are oil exporters, and poverty still exists in this region (Gasiorowski, 2016). The EU has little to offer other than cash; the two ultimate incentives of EU membership and free movement are impossible for MENA countries, although the 2015 ENP review introduced some changes to simplify the Schengen Visa process for many countries, including Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco (Infantino, 2016). Moreover, the EU's financial incentives seem to be dwarfed by other competing normative actors, whether by the European member states' programmes or the USA (Asderaki, 2021). In this context, access to the European internal market is undoubtedly the biggest incentive, as it can generate profitable trade deals. However, the design

of this incentive is problematic, due to its approximation to the acquis. While it may be suitable for Eastern partners that yearn to join the EU, Southern Mediterranean partners have a different outlook (Stroetges, 2013).

Moreover, since the 2011 ENP review, the Commission has promised that democratic reforms should be rewarded with specific recompenses, tailored for the needs of each neighbour. The progress will be assessed based on national reform programmes, and the reward will be in proportion to those who make the most progress in political reforms (Dandashly, 2013). The EU intended to create competition between the Southern Mediterranean neighbours to enhance and speed up the reforms, in a similar fashion to the EU approach in the Eastern and Central European enlargement (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017). However, little of this notion enduring by the end of the planning and the beginning of the implementation phase. The lack of a specific relationship between the nature of the reward attributed and the kind of reforms required created some ambiguity. The EU justification for this anomaly is to maintain some discretion and flexibility (Bicchi, 2018). Nevertheless, it reflected widespread agitation about the notion of conditionality. Hence, many Southern European countries, particularly France, opposed the use of political reforms as criteria to determine aid allocation (Krüger& Stahl, 2018).

The ENP reviews enhanced the financial size of the rewards, which could improve the impact of positive conditionality. Under the new plan "the governance facility" would create additional funds in response to reforms (Simão, 2018). However, the newly allocated funds are unlikely to be dispersed to genuine democratic reforms, but rather to politically expedient recipients undertaking "anodyne governance reforms" (Simão, 2018). Certainly, the change of the plan name from "democracy facility" into "governance facility" adds support to this rationale. Instead of presenting profound engagement as an incentive for reforms, the EU's attitude seems to be based on the "philosophy of front-loaded aid", cooperation, and diplomatic relations (Fiedlschuster, 2018). It subsequently relies on the engagement process to persuade Southern Mediterranean regimes to commit to reforms. The dissimilarity between the EU and USA approaches was observable following the 2013 Rabaa "disturbances" in Egypt (Bouchet, 2016). After the crackdown on protesters and the imprisonment of political activists, the USA halted negotiations on free trade with the regime, while the EU increased its negotiation of Action Plan cooperation (Badarin& Schumacher, 2020).

It seems that the EU has oversold the incentives at its disposal to convince Southern Mediterranean states to adopt democratic principles. Even the more modest goal of EU Common Market access is impossible for the Southern Neighbours, especially in sections where they are on competitive terms with EU member states. In retrospect, many informed EU officials recognised that it might have been an error basing the EU approach on "the notion of offering a scaled-down version of enlargement" (Youngs, 2006). From the outset, the EU raised false expectations in the Southern Mediterranean through its self-orientated approach. The Director-General of the Commission's External Relations stated that "continuing to view our neighbourhood from an enlargement angle is an unhelpful distraction… The real question which we should all be working on instead is how we can support the transition, as a goal in its own right" (Landaburu & al, 2006). Hence, bilateral application of the EU policy on encouraging democratic development through incentives could be counter-productive, creating a Brussels-orientated "hub and spoke" approach (Biscop, 2012).

Liberalisation Prioritisation v Democracy

The pursuit of the EU's political agenda through its multiple policies in the Mediterranean region tended to be problematic from the outset. The EU endorses economic liberalisation through practical adjustments and incentives, including additional access to the European common market. Such policies are generally unpopular and onerous for the poor in Southern Mediterranean countries (e.g. reducing food subsidies), increasing the tendency toward political control and oppression. Simultaneously, the EU

pursues political normative goals, including support for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law development, contrary to the *modus operandi* of the regimes tasked with implementing its economic agenda. The EU discourse purports to paint a picture of complementary objectives in the quest for "a zone of prosperity and friendly neighbourhood" (European Commission, 2015), but in reality, its overriding priority of "prosperity" (mainly for European interests) trumps all other concerns.

EU promotion of reforms in the Southern Mediterranean region was designed to stimulate simultaneous progress in different areas, but it studiously avoided direct agitation for basic democracy in terms of "one man, one vote" (Howell, 1880). Reinvigorating self-determination rights by enhancing the control of citizens over their democratically elected governments has taken a back seat, along with specific political and legal policies. The EU's relentless pursuit of more liberalisation and economic reforms is at odds with the democratic principles the EU is arguing it intends to develop. The nature of the economic regime should be based on citizens' preferences and not be dictated by external institutions based on their philosophical delineation. Otherwise, instead of developing democracy, the EU seems to entrench dictatorship.

Moreover, EU policy goals are erratic. Economic conditionality has mainly been applied to encourage normative reforms in Southern Mediterranean states, including democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The financial incentives are theoretically instituted to support the EU efforts in promoting this normative agenda (European Commission, 2011a). However, it appears that the economic reforms are an end objective in their own right, as evidenced in the 2011 review policy (European Commission, 2011b), and regional reports. Indeed, the normative democratic reforms were subsidiary to the economic reforms. For example, a Joint Communication in 2011 declared that "in the medium to long term, the common objective… is the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area" (European Commission, 2011b). Under this review, economic reform (i.e. liberalisation) appeared to be the main objective, and financial support was predicated on such reforms.

Taking into account the promotion of democracy as a normative goal, the concurrent objective of economic reforms seems to be in contradiction. The notion of democracy requires full authority by the democratic governments to choose whether to be committed to a particular economic model. The decision should be based on different and contrasting variables, including social justice, poverty, and competitiveness, yet the EU appears to be indifferent, as it maintains its agenda regardless of any disapproval. It may be argued that the EU is fostering an attitude of "differentiation and flexibility"(European Commission, 2017) to support economic and social development, as well as increasing the sense of co-ownership, as the decision is taken collectively. Some may welcome the imposition of externally enforced reforms, despite this being in opposition to the concepts of democracy and self-determination (Sadriu,2020), including the adjudication between contrasting issues. Others will undoubtedly oppose EU-enforced prognoses, given the enormous cost of the liberalisation process paid by many Southern Mediterranean countries (or rather, their peoples) to satisfy EU requirements (Szigetvári, 2020). It should be noted that the EU has previously denied the enforcement of political and economic reforms without the acceptance of neighbouring countries (Magrini & al, 2020). However, even if we take this claim at face value, the EU is developing its agenda in conjunction with authoritarian regimes, hence even though it may not be enforcing its agenda on the unelected governments, the result is enforcing it on the un-asked citizens.

In either case, the fact is that the reform objectives are undoubtedly European requirements, in contrast with the EU rhetoric of the co-ownership and mutual decision-making process. For instance, under the ENP review of 2015 (Joint Communication, 2015a), "the new generation of Action Plans" included some essential requirements, such as "the improvement of investment climate and regulatory convergence with the EU acquis" (European Commission & HR, (2012b). Hence, as part of the economic reforms, and to commit to the Action Plans, the Southern Mediterranean states were required to introduce further economic liberalisation into their domestic markets and to eliminate trade tariffs in the relations

with the EU. However, such commitments were obtained in the absence of any democratic mandate. Considering this anomaly, it seems that democratic principles are at odds with the economic ones. In this sense, the EU is shooting in the dark by developing conflicting objectives.

The Negative Effect of the Economic Liberalisation

Other than political reforms, economic liberalisation was the predominant feature of the EU approach. Since the Barcelona Agreement, the hope to create a free trade area in the Mediterranean was the most significant aspect, with the substantial expectation that economic reforms spilling over into political liberalisation over the long term (Khakee & Youngs, 2017). Indeed, the EU concluded that Southern Mediterranean countries' retarded path to democratisation is due to their limited engagement in the world economy. Hence, the EU applied a degree of political force to encourage its Southern Neighbours to introduce some economic structural adjustments.

Ever since the EU applied constant pressure on the Southern Mediterranean states to achieve more far-reaching economic liberalisation, its approach was perceived to be heavy-handed, and it attracted harsh criticisms from observers. Even though many recognised the potential positive impact liberalisation can have in the development of the Southern Mediterranean countries' national economies (Schumacher, 2016), the EU has been berated for its approach, which some claimed was self-serving, and neo-colonial. The double standards of EU economic liberalisation concerning agricultural products are notorious (Youngs, 2017). The economic reforms were intended to facilitate democratisation by two means:

− Economic growth and the reduction of poverty would reduce the volatility and instability in the region, which is believed to be unfavourable in developing a viable democracy (Corrado & de Castro, 2016).

− The free trade agreements would inspire national elites to seek more influence to participate effectively in the process of economic reforms, which would eventually spill over into the political domain.

However, in the latest reviews, the EU has claimed that it is aware of the negative impact of the unbalanced process of economic liberalisation. Hence, it intends to apply a flexibility approach, affirmed under the ENP review in 2015, in order to mitigate the social costs of liberalisation (Mansouri & Armillei, 2016). Subsequently, some structural reforms in countries going through a transitional period, such as Tunisia, have been granted extensions (Mari, 2017). Although the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) support to neighbourhood partners has been decreased since the 2011 ENP review, concerns over the social costs of liberalisation adjustment still linger. This elicited some European flexibility, including from the Commission, which expressed the intention to enhance the poverty reduction development approach (Kourtelis, 2018). However, the lack of EU market access in specific sections of the economy continued to attract criticisms of the EU's liberalisation approach. The EU's strategic deficiencies must be recognised as encompassing the simple lack of flexibility in the allocation of tariff quotas, and its faithfulness to an exaggerated hypothesis that liberalisation would ultimately lead to democratisation, without any comprehensive engagement to catalyse this process. There is little evidence of the intricacies linking political power and the transformation of control over economic assets (i.e. liberal-economic and political reforms). In fact, the evidence suggests the contrary: that liberalisation and economic reforms reinforce the regime-controlled networks of patronage (Cassani, 2017). Chinese liberalisation without democratisation is an obvious case (Kingsbury, 2017). The main argument is that the middle class do not always have a real incentive to push for democracy. The modernisation theory explained the distinction between the "unilinear" and the "contingent" approaches: the former indicates that there is a positive relationship between the middle class and democratisation, implying that "the rising middle class

represents the main thrust of the democratisation movement" (Hattori, Funatsu &Torii, 2003, p 129); while the latter assumes that the relationship between the two variables is much more complex.

The attitude of the newly created middle class towards democratisation depends on various factors, including national socio-economic status, the degree of dependency, and the possibility of political unrest (Hattori, Funatsu &Torii, 2003). The Chinese middle class are unlikely to rise for political reforms, such as freedom of expression, or for institutional democratisation, such as free and fair elections. This can be explained by the fact they are well dependent on the regime, which is capable of intervening in any economic section, and removing any advantages which they enjoy (Chen & Lu, 2011). In "stalled democratisation", if the regime has adopted a strategy "that gives unions financial and organisational support in exchange for political loyalty and self-restraint" (Bellin, 2011, p 18), people tend to reject rebelling against the state due to "fear of biting the hand that feeds" them (Bellin, 2011). Moreover, the middle class tend to be satisfied with their socio-economic status, hence they may not be strident in demanding political changes for their own sake. Accordingly, as long as the regime keeps protecting national stability and delivering socio-economic growth (at least for a critical mass of the population), the existing political status quo is unlikely to be changed. The situation in the Southern Mediterranean states is analogous to China in these respects. While the economic liberalisation process has been succeeding to some extent, democracy still lags behind. The economic situation in many neighbouring countries shows that only the elites close to the regimes will benefit from such liberalisation, and only a small amount of wealth is trickling to the rest of the society (Baumann, 2017). Hence, the result is defeating the purpose.

The conclusion is that the EU's liberalisation process is mainly based on its own liberal philosophy. The relationship between economic liberalisation and democracy is not evident, but it is questionable whether the EU can move beyond its doctrinaire commitments and adopt a genuinely new and realistic approach.

Democracy V Security: Is This Debate Still Relevant?

Under the Barcelona Agreement, the EU purported to promote political and economic reforms with the conceived objective of conflict prevention and security building. While democratic principles are an integral part of the EU's approach, there were no explicit measures pertaining to democratic governance and the security sector (Bauer, 2016). The EU usually refers loosely to "common values" that should govern the EU-Southern Mediterranean relationship. Nevertheless, following the Arab Spring and the ENP reviews, it became clear that there is a clear connection between the two concepts. The ENP allowed neighbouring countries to pursue a differentiated approach, however, securitisation and democratisation remained an integral part of tailor-made reform packages, based on joint-ownership (Zardo, 2020). In theory, the two concepts are described as complementary, based on the EU's strong conviction that normative principles lead to stabilisation and economic development, which eventually create a secure region. However, an empirical assessment of the two notions within the EU approach gives a picture of two concepts that are frequently in competition with one another.

The EU's security agenda contiguous to the Mediterranean region has been a constant feature since the EMP agreement (Fawcett, 2018). The securitisation feature entrenched in the EU's comprehensive approach seems to be paradoxical. What is holding back democratisation in the region? For instance, there is an interconnection between political liberalisation and security, but the latter is not commonly defined. Security for Southern Mediterranean countries is in principle associated with regime stability and national security, while the EU's definition reaches beyond their understandings, being perceived essentially in terms of regional stability, based on the normative principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Horst, Jünemann & Rothe,2016). The EU's understanding of security was profoundly shaped by 9/11, the War on Terror, and the "Arab Spring". Contemporaneously, Southern Mediterranean regimes used these events to abjure the failing political structure in the region and stressed

a "conspiracy theory" orchestrated by foreign regimes to eliminate "undesirable regimes" (Farha, 2016). While the Arab Spring uprisings generally transported some understanding between the two parties concerning what can constitute a security threat, this does not imply agreement on how to tackle such threats.

The current security threats in the region have largely influenced the democratic discourse in the ENP reviews. The EU intended to create a dynamic of stability through "change within continuity" (Pridham, 2016), which is labelled as "differentiation" (Cebeci & Schumacher, 2017), which can be understood as restrained, versatile, but ambiguous tactics, to promote security and democracy simultaneously. Under this approach, Southern Mediterranean regimes have the flexibility to adopt democratic principles without implanting them beyond the discursive level and foster the political modifications required only to the extent that does not endanger their stability (Fawcett, 2018). The Southern Mediterranean self-managed political reforms may allow some political participation, yet it will remain restricted to prevent elements that may cause the destabilisation of the regime. Hence, this ambiguous and delicate approach may be further exploited by the regimes, which can lead to added suppression of political rights and freedoms, and further delays in substantive reforms.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the EU's effort has contributed enormously to the growth of civil society in the region. The political load in the Southern Mediterranean states is too heavy for these entities to carry, as they possess neither the experience nor the financial resources to seriously drive institutional changes. They also lack the political will or interest to attempt such reform, due to regime control and manipulation of formal political processes. The implementation of the ENP process noticeably illustrated the conflict between the stability requirement and democracy promotion, which in due course affects the democratisation process. Indeed, under the Association Agreement, the Egyptian Ministries implement the regulations reforms required by the Action Plans themselves. In addition, due to security concerns, EU funding to national Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) can only be distributed through the government (Brechenmacher, 2017). This is essentially how security and stabilisation issues can prevail over democratisation, as governments rely on such mechanisms to eliminate support for CSO's, and subsequently for democratisation.

Thus, the EU's strategy has been marked by democracy versus the stability dilemma, both of which are central objectives (Faustini-Torres, 2020). The EU's practice is flawed in two approaches. Primarily, it gives unprecedented power, in comparison with other agreements, to the authoritarian regimes at the expense of organisations promoting national democracy (Buzogány, 2016). Secondly, it overemphasises the importance and prioritisation of stability and security, to the detriment of democratisation. The long-term democratisation of the Southern Mediterranean has continually been trumped in EU prioritisation by the more attractive short-term stabilisation of dictatorships in the "ring of fires" (Schumacher, 2016). Notwithstanding the EU's rhetoric on supporting democratic reforms, concerned parties detected "gaps between discourse and practice" (Paciello & Huber, 2020), and highlighted the lack of evidence suggesting that the EU's discourse can live up to its expectations regarding democratisation. Hence, the security threats (many of which originate from instability related to illegal immigration, terrorism, and energy) and the EU's discourse seem to undermine the democracy promotion agenda, and subsequently, the coveted long-term security and stability desired by the EU.

Moreover, many commentators argued that the democracy promotion agenda has crumbled due to its consequences. These include the advancement of political Islam and the consequences of conflicts, especially in Libya and Syria (Dalacoura, 2013). Hence, security concerns have hindered political reforms and democracy in particular, despite there being a necessity for safeguarding stability and security in the region, according to the EU's understanding of security. Indeed, the security issues and democratisation have become "mutually dependent"; the establishment of regional security requires sincere political reforms, yet such reforms can only be achievable when there is no threat to stabilisation (Moore, 2015). The implementation of the European policies clearly illustrates how the conflict between the prerequisite

for democratisation and the aspiration for peace in the region ultimately negatively affected the democratisation process.

Other than ambiguous allusions and rhetoric, the EU's approach lacked a serious intention purposely conducive to its normative agenda. The EU's ambiguous discourse aptly reflected its dithering democratic reform agenda, including limited funding for democracy development, and the prioritisation of security issues (such as crisis management) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in general under the ENP. In sum, behind "the apparent reformist approach of the EU there is a revisionist trend" (Schumacher, 2016, 18). The EU declared that it is reforming its policies to achieve its normative goals and strategies, but this does not help fortify its principles or improve policies.

Conclusion

The most pertinent conclusion of this article is that the changes that took place under the ENP review, while limited in scope, may have a detrimental effect on the normative principle of democracy. The EU may have reached with the southern neighbours some socialisation but not democratisation, taking into consideration its unscrupulous dealings with the Mediterranean Basin region (Schimmelfennig, 2017). The ENP review displays the waning favour of democracy in comparison to other priorities. In practice, the EU relied heavily on positive conditionality, whether financial support "more-for-more", political support, but never used negative conditionality to apply or even threat of sanctions to countries that violate democratic principles (Costello, 2020). Meanwhile, the application of positive conditionality remained unclear, as the Action Plans lacked any substantive form of considerable evaluation criteria and assessment mechanisms. The absence of criteria opens the doors to arbitrary political expositions, which may result in indecisive and vague interpretations of democratic principles (Cierco, 2016). Moreover, the lack of EU concessions on agricultural products and legal immigration further reduced its bargaining power towards political reforms. Generally, the whole process lacked consistency and value-based operationalisation. The different elements of the process remained rigid and lacked real sequencing, as it does not support a gradual approach on how the normative values including democracy can be promoted and supported.

The democracy process became inextricably bound up with security issues. Indeed, the EU jettisoned democratisation in the interests of stability. While the strategic principles of stability, prosperity and normative values have remained imperatives, the strategies to develop them have undergone shifts and alterations. Originally, the EU intended to create a "ring of friends" in the region, expecting to promote EUs like the framework of the regional organisation (Hamzaoui, 2020). Instead, the EU ended up with a highly insecure, authoritarianism-packed region, with exceedingly differentiated relations, and distant horizontal connections through the EU (Ovádek, & Wouters, 2017). Meanwhile, the strategy of political reforms became ever weaker, due to the principle of co-ownership, despite the EU's rhetoric of a tailor-made approach.

Other than these problems, the EU approach remained subject to many more restrictions. The EU's democracy discourse tends to be ambiguous due to the cluster of normative principles. It ostensibly promotes liberal democracy, which is not by any means a suggestion that the EU has developed a uniform opinion of what democracy is. Indeed, the EU has never been forthcoming in defining democracy (Bevir & Phillips, 2017). Furthermore, it is evident that democracy promotion is serving as a model of the EU norms, but some have described it as a neo-colonial project, especially when the EU applies conditionality. However, such conditionality is rigged with double standards and incoherence. The fact is that the democratic principle is just one of many different considerations guiding EU foreign policy in the region, which may explain the inconsistency of democracy conditionality (Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017). The EU has relied heavily on liberalisation to encourage Mediterranean neighbours to foster political reforms. However, political liberalisation may have only created a sham but not substantive democracy,

and the relationship between economic liberalisation and democracy is particularly loose in the case of MENA countries. In the end, it seems that the political instability and its consequences in the region have dramatically influenced the ENP review, with regional stability being the overriding priority in the EU's Southern Mediterranean partnerships. The overall change can be summed up by stating that the EU has shifted from its enlargement-like process into a more conventional paradigm of international cooperation (Tulmets & Kratochvíl, 2017).

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