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## **Chapter 10: Conclusions: Learning from Listening? Why the EU Failed to Learn from the Arab Uprisings and Why that Matters**

In this book we have shown why the EU's claim to be a 'normative actor' in the Southern Mediterranean does not stand up to the evidence, and have explained how and why EU democracy promotion fails in the region. It fails because the EU promotes the wrong kind of democracy and the wrong strategies for economic growth – wrong both in the sense that these approaches do not work in this context, and in the sense that they are not what people want. This double failure highlights a paradox of EU democracy promotion: while nominally an emancipatory endeavour, in practice it undermines those very emancipatory transitions to democracy and to inclusive development which it claims to pursue. In detailing these failures, we have compared conceptions of gender, democracy, and human rights. The limits of EU policy, both in theory and in practice, match up precisely with the areas which SMCs citizens consider priorities and in which they wish to see both their own governments and the EU intervene. It is this mismatch – shown in detail in the contrast between the first and second halves of the book – and the failure to address it seriously which continue to erode the EU's reputation in the region and continue to constrain the effectiveness of its policies. The 'gap' between the EU's image of itself and of what people in the region want on the one hand, and populations' actual desires on the other explains negative perceptions of the EU, why the Union's 'normative power' and its regional influence are undermined, and how the EU's own narratives make regional populations 'the Other', open them up to narrowly-conceived securitisation, and thus legitimising the EU's interventions to 'normalise' them. This gap has serious consequences, not only as an obstacle to achieving the EU's own objectives in the region as well as people's own preferences, but also inasmuch as it sustains the structural tensions which continue to drive instability, insecurity and migration in the region.

The book began by tracing the evolution of the EU's self-image as a normative power, what it sees as good and successful in its own creation which should be exported as the model of society to which others should aspire. Our analysis showed that while the EC/EU's history has been driven by regional economic integration and Keynesian macroeconomics, its contemporary narrative about achieving peace and prosperity in post-WWII Europe draws heavily on narrowly conceived, procedural 'democratic values' – eschewing socio-economic rights and social justice – and on development driven by market liberalisation.

This construction of the EU's own identity has several consequences, one of which is the 'culturalisation' of democracy and – consequently – of its promotion. With this shift, democracy becomes more about the presence or absence of 'fundamental values' – those very same values which are set out in the Lisbon Treaty, which also

mandates the Union to promote them in international affairs – and more about the willingness of individual people or countries to ‘adopt’ those values, and less about the political institutions, the rights, and the economic policies designed to both give people political representation and afford them the possibility of exercising their rights in practice. In turn, this cultralisation of democracy provides fertile terrain for viewing EU-Middle Eastern relations through a renewed Orientalist lens, of conceiving the ‘export of democracy’ almost as a kind of latter day *mission civilisatrice* and at the very least responsabilising the Arab ‘Other’ for the lack of democracy in the region, and thus placing the blame for the failure of democracy, of development or indeed of security on those Others while ignoring the international political context which is so crucial in supporting authoritarian regimes’ resilience to popular demands (for a discussion of the implications for Democratization Studies, see Teti, 2012). Another correlate of the EU’s self-image is the centrality and normalisation of market democratization in both its domestic and external policy design and practice, of which several chapters have noted aspects.

In particular, after the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and the supposed triumph of liberal democracy, the EU envisaged “an Euro-Mediterranean Partnership” (European Commission, 1994: 2) intended to create a zone of peace and prosperity built on “democracy, good governance and human rights” with the ultimate aim of ensuring Europe’s security. While adding to its nascent claim to a normative ‘external action’ a focus on democracy, this policy was also intended to pursue earlier foreign policy aims in relation to energy security, migration and political violence. Political and economic reform were intended to absorb pressures from Arab states’ high level of unemployment and large youth populations. The 1995 Barcelona Conference formally launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The ‘Barcelona Process’ aimed to promote economic and political liberalisation in the belief that these would facilitate democratization in Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs) through political dialogue both at the state level and directly with CSOs. To achieve its objectives, the EMP was structured around political, economic, and cultural ‘baskets’ and adopted parallel pathways to integration: vertical integration between the EU and MPCs, and horizontal integration between the MPCs themselves. The neoliberal economic strategies which the EU promoted did stimulate growth but also mostly benefited the EU and increased inequality. In addition, while in principle Association Agreements’ ‘democratic conditionality’ allowed the EU to both reward positive progress on democratisation and apply punitive measures – from suspending aid to cutting off relations to freezing the Agreement itself – if partners fell short, in practice the EU never implemented such sanctions. Instead it prioritized short-term, narrowly conceived stability over long-term security, *de facto* propping up autocrats distrusted and disliked by their populations, while South Mediterranean governments opposed direct EU engagement with civil society and rejected pressure for democratization.

Chapter 3 traced the roots, rationales, and evolution of the EU’s pre-Uprisings external relations in its Southern Neighbourhood, examining the discursive structure

of EU policies in the run-up to Arab Uprisings in three key areas: democracy, development, and delivery. The EU's conception of democracy was shown to be narrowly procedural (focusing on elections, civil-political rights) while paying scant attention to 'difficult' civil-political rights (association, protest) or indeed to social and economic rights. Pre-Uprisings policy also aimed for 'sustainable and inclusive growth' through economic liberalization, combining political and economic reform in a single model of 'market democratization'. Finally, conditionality was presented as the EU's main instrument for leveraging progress on human rights and democracy, and while pre-Uprisings delivery was framed in terms of both 'positive' and 'negative conditionality', in practice, as noted above, the latter was used exceedingly rarely. The EU's external relations with its Southern Partners have faced broadly similar challenges since the 1990s and indeed earlier, in its aim to create an area of democracy and shared prosperity which it sees as requiring reforms which lead to both political and economic inclusion, with the EU as the ingredients of long-term stability, prosperity and peace.

In 2010-11, 15 years after the Barcelona Declaration, protesters across the Arab world famously chanted 'the people want the downfall of the regime' (*ash-sha'b yureed isqaat an-nizaam*). What they wanted, as we have shown using public opinion poll data, was and is economic as well as political inclusion: social justice and responsive governments, the substance as well as the mere form of democratic government. What the EU promised in response was a 'step change', a paradigm shift in its policy objectives, strategy and instruments, acknowledging that before the Uprisings these had been fundamentally flawed.

However, an examination of the discursive structure of the ENP's policy revisions between 2011 and 2017 detailed in Chapter 4 betrayed the full limits of the EU's claims to a political 'step change' in the wake of the Uprisings: instead of a paradigm shift, the EU reproduced the same market democratization framework that characterised its pre-Uprisings policy, merely increasing the level of aid, loans and investment, and broadening the scope of free trade agreements. The EU's conception of democracy remained focused on narrow, procedural conceptions prioritising civil and political rights necessary for elections but systematically ignoring more politically controversial 'first generation' rights such as right to free association or to protest and redefining socioeconomic rights as issues pertaining to material outcomes of macroeconomic policy.

In 2015, the Union's revised RENP downplayed democracy, supposedly in favour of focusing on building 'stability' by making SMCs a place where citizens want to stay (European Commission, 2015) but in practice again failing to recognise and act upon Europe's own role in facilitating precisely the structural socioeconomic dislocation which drives migration as well as political instability. Beyond this, in 2015 the EU admits that its attempt to "foster stability, security and prosperity in the countries closest to [its] borders" had failed, requiring a "new approach, a re-prioritisation and the introduction of new ways of thinking" (European Commission, 2015: 2). Here,

resilience is preferred to democracy as the basis for stability, recognising that societies and their citizens need to be able to withstand crises, disruption and shocks. Furthermore, in the 2016 Global Security Strategy (European Commission, 2016) the promotion of democracy is not mentioned at all as an EU policy and 'principled pragmatism' is adopted as the guide for policy implementation (8). However, the promotion of values and interests including democracy and human rights remains an integral part of the revised ENP meaning that the EU retains a liberal development model. This shift undermines the EU's claim to be a normative power and leaves it open to accusations of hypocrisy as pragmatism challenges the universality of the values that it aims to promote on the basis that they are universal. Furthermore, while the EU claims to support local ownership, South Mediterranean partner countries will still be expected to conform to 'universal' liberal values including democracy, human rights, good governance, free markets, etc.

The Southern Mediterranean comes to be conceived not as a space of democratic possibility but as a place where there is "conflict, rising extremism and terrorism, human rights violations and other challenges to international law, and economic upheaval [resulting in] major refugee flow" which threatened EU security and energy supplies (2). Whatever its commitment to democracy in the past, the EU now takes "stabilisation as its main priority" (2). Ironically, while signalling the 'demotion' of democracy and of universal values as a priority or indeed as a tool for stability and prosperity, the EU promotion of economic openness is included as a universal value for the first time. It is perhaps also thanks to a surprising obduracy that while the EU recognises that it must "comprehensively address sources of instability [...]. Poverty, inequality, a perceived sense of injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and lack of opportunity particularly for young people [which] can be roots of instability, increasing vulnerability to radicalisation" (2-3) it then claims to do so by drawing on precisely those same neoliberal economic instruments which had failed both before and after the Uprisings: structural adjustment and market reform, technical and vocational education, labour deregulation, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), transport and connectivity infrastructure upgrades and Mobility Partnerships (Compacts) that will supposedly improve security.

Despite the EU's claims to have responded to the demands of citizens in the aftermath of the Uprisings and then to have revised policies again in 2015, its practices remain much the same. The EU continues to support authoritarian regimes rather than local demands for democracy, it prioritises its security (conceived of in narrow terms merely as lack of change in its authoritarian neighbours), it continues to block migration to Europe regardless of human cost, it continues to prioritize counter-terrorism over the promotion of democracy and human rights, and continues to work with pro-Western elites – however authoritarian – rather than local pro-democratic civil society. Its toolbox remains relatively unchanged although post-2015 it implicitly abandons the enlargement toolbox. RENP does not mention conditionality and abandons the reporting framework modelled on the one used during the

accession process. It abandons the 'one-size-fits-all approach' replacing the EU's top down approach with a bottom up approach. Rather than starting with the EU's offer the process will start with partner country's needs and elites' expectations, with countries selecting those parts of the EU's offer that they think fit their needs.

The EU's ambitions for creating the South Mediterranean in its own image have been all but abandoned. The very basis of its policy for creating peace, stability and economic security has been abandoned in the revised ENP. It is not only that the EU now acknowledges that it will collaborate with authoritarian rulers if that is what is necessary to create peace, stability and economic security, but that it has adopted a differentiated policy. It not only anticipates that some countries will want to move faster towards integration with the EU (everything but membership), but that not all partners share the goal of close integration with the EU. In doing so, it abandons the rationale underpinning the Barcelona Process that the way peace and prosperity could be achieved in the region was by creating a union of countries based on the EU model, a common market of the South Mediterranean, made up of democratic countries with liberal market economies closely integrated with the EU.

The extent of the mismatch between EU policy 'supply' and the 'demand' emerging from the massive protests of 2010-2011 is starkly revealed in the second part of the book, in which we examine in detail conceptions of democracy, development, gender, and perceptions of the international environment and of the EU in particular. The EU and its Member States lack an understanding of local needs and dynamics and of the general dissatisfaction with the EU especially – but not only – in its democracy promoting policies. Or at least they are unwilling or unable to formulate policy on the basis of such understanding. The EU's top-down unilateral approach leaves little space for local actors meaning that the EU's policies are not meeting the needs of local people. On the contrary, insofar as its approach 'Others' local populations, those populations become passive targets of welfare, of aid, of European 'generosity' – of policies to 'rescue' them from authoritarian rulers and patriarchal structures – rather than recognising those peoples as rights-holders, with independent agency, and with rational demands, who should be supported in claiming their rights. South Mediterranean countries, as well as their citizens, are constructed as having deficits, defined by their lack of 'Europeanness', which EU policy will help to rectify.

Analysis of public opinion survey data shows that citizens see socio-economic factors and corruption – itself inextricably both economic and political – as the main drivers of the Uprisings and the main challenge still facing their respective countries since those Uprisings. Democracy is seen as the best system of government and compatible with Islam, and what people want, by and large, is a 'social democratic' system which adds to the centrality of civil and political rights in liberal democracy, a recognition and guarantee of socioeconomic rights and social justice. Many also want a religiously rooted democracy which is informed by values framed by religious narratives and a legal system that incorporates shari'a. They see democracy as

compatible with their faith. Data on the conception of democracy and on people's concerns for themselves all the way up to their priorities for their countries systematically show the inescapable importance of social justice. For some, democracy is not necessarily seen as the *only* type of government that can deliver on their demands, but it is certainly *compatible* with those demands, presenting policymakers with an opportunity, should they have the will and the courage to take it. In addition, respondents show systematically low levels of trust in their governments, and in their governments' promises that they will deliver on people's priorities. The discontent that drove the Uprisings is still clearly evident, suggesting that the same factors which caused the mass protests in 2010-11 are still affecting people's political conceptions, identities, and likely future practices.

Survey data also help to illustrate citizens' views on development and on the extent to which their governments are meeting their demands for an inclusive economy, decent employment, and fighting corruption. The data show that citizens are generally dissatisfied with how governments manage the economy and provide basic services, although there are differences between countries. In particular, people are concerned about a lack of employment opportunities and job quality, and they do not think that their governments are fighting corruption – which was the single factor most closely associated with both passive support for and active participation in the Uprisings. Such economic factors are also the most significant drivers of migration, particularly among educated young to middle-aged men.

Finally, the Arab Transformations survey contained a unique battery of questions concerning perceptions of international political actors in general and of the EU in particular, its development cooperation programmes, its promotion of democracy, the appropriateness of its response to the Arab Uprisings, and the perception of the EU as an international actor. These data again show that public opinion in the Arab states surveyed prioritises social justice and socio-economic inclusion, while it is sceptical of the EU's programmes for 'democracy assistance'. And while people are generally sceptical of the EU because of its track record – including its support for autocrats posing as democratic reformers – survey data suggest populations may welcome its interventions *if* it addressed the Uprisings' root causes. This completes a triptych of evidence of the mismatch between EU supply and Arab populations' demand for democracy: on the one hand, discourse analysis reveals the EU eschews socio-economic rights and promotes policies which increase economic precarity and inequality, on the other hand survey data shows people prioritise social justice and economic inclusion, not just as national priorities but also in their conception of democracy and, finally, specifically in relation to what they think should be the focus of EU policy. This mismatch helps explain the EU's poor reputation in the region and the fact that it is not regarded as a 'normative actor'. It is not a question of populations 'not understanding' democracy and the fundamental values that go with it; they simply have a different conception of democracy than the one

contained in EU policy documents – one that, ironically, is much closer to the ‘European Social Model’ than the continent’s political leadership acknowledges.

The Arab Uprisings afforded the EU a window of opportunity to revise its policies towards its ‘Southern Neighbourhood’ accordingly, to recognise that there was a clear disjuncture between what ‘The People’ demanded and what the EU had been promoting. It was clear – and not only from survey data – that protesters were not demonstrating merely for civil and political rights and for formal democracy, but that social justice and the substantive dimension of democracy was crucial for them. It was also clear that, despite its claims and aspirations, the EU was not widely respected as a normative actor, that sovereignty was and is an important principle for citizens and that people’s low tolerance for foreign powers telling them what they should be doing is diminished further if those powers are viewed as acting – if not speaking – in terms contrary to perceived national interests.

While the EU, in response to the Uprisings, claimed it was recognising popular demands in the region, in practice it failed to understand and/or act upon the people’s primary frustrations. It assumed that what people wanted was *liberal* democracy and thus failed to recognise that in addition to civil and political rights guaranteed in theory (though rarely in practice) people wanted responsive governments that treated all citizens fairly and provided decent jobs, adequate welfare benefits and good public services. Given the strong economic drivers of the Uprisings, the negative impact of neoliberal economic policies in the 1990s, and not least the centrality of the ‘European Social Model’ to the EU’s own self-identity, it might have been expected that the EU would have strengthened the social component of its development assistance, and particularly of its trade agreements. By doing so it would have been able both to avoid the impression of political interference and simultaneously to meet popular aspirations. In addition, by ensuring that the programmes the EU supported were implemented according to the rule of law, it could have supported this more generally and thus also facilitated transition to democracy. However, despite its claims, the EU did not amend its policy to address the popular demands which had become apparent during the Uprisings and so produced little change in practice. In brief, the EU continued to prioritise security (particularly counter-terrorism and migration control) rather than the promotion of democracy, and to work within a thin definition of democracy which stressed a specific, more easily pursued subset of political freedoms rather than the social and economic rights people also demanded. In fact, by 2015 it had returned to supporting authoritarian regimes in the name of a short-term conception of stability. Not only does this reversal belie the Union’s claims to being a ‘normative actor’, but the limitations and drawbacks of this new/old approach had been precisely the subject of the Union’s own hand-wringing self-examination early on in 2011, of which Štefan Füle’s 2011 speech remains exemplary.

Indeed, the EU’s failure to live up to the standards Füle, Barroso and others recognised in 2011 questions the fundamental objectives and methods of its

Mediterranean policy, its failure to recognise the unsustainability of its pre-Uprisings approach, rather than merely repackaging old tools and concepts, meant that it continued to both fail in facilitating transitions towards democracy in the region and fail in building and exercising its 'normative power'. 'Neoliberal' economic policies did nothing to improve target countries' economic situation or create decent jobs to absorb precariously, under-, and unemployed people, including younger generations. This situation, combined with the region's geopolitical instability, fuelled a migration crisis: although migration is by far a greater problem in the region – particularly in countries bordering conflict zones like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya – than it is for Europe, the increase in both conflict and economic migrants trying to reach Europe was seized upon by resurgent far right populist political parties – and sympathetic media in the EU –, and presented as an 'invasion' that threatened the security, jobs and very identity of Europeans. This representation, along with the decades-long erosion of social justice, welfare, and socio-economic rights in Europe itself and the unwillingness of most political leaders to face up to the need to reverse these toxic conditions, turned migration and security into a decisive election issue in Europe. The rise of Europe's new far right had a negative impact on the EU's internal cohesion and aggravated its focus on SMCs' short-term stability by seeking simply to block migrants above and beyond long-term cohesion. By stark contrast, addressing the structural causes of migration and conflict would clearly be in the best interest of Europe's own populations themselves.

The EU needs to recognise that its existing approach of 'market democratization' has no realistic prospect of working and it must therefore rethink its strategy for achieving democracy, development and security in the region. The continuing failure to achieve these goals and the lack of societal resilience and cohesion this produces may have propped up regional autocracies providing the appearance of stability, but only at the price of turning those regimes into 'sinkholes of insecurity' and an ongoing source of economic and political instability – and thus migration – across the region (Teti et al., 2017).

In brief, the EU has failed to act normatively in the Southern Mediterranean, it has failed to live up to its own 2011 promise to listen to the region's people and support their ambitions – hearing instead what it wanted to hear–, and it has failed to act in its own people's interests; all of which would have required addressing the geoeconomic and geopolitical structural causes of instability in the Mediterranean.

The Union has the opportunities to reverse these failures. It has the *means* to understand what SMCs populations actually want from their governments and from the EU, what their priorities are, what drove/drives dissatisfaction and protest and how they conceive of democracy. It has a wealth of expertise it could draw upon which suggests the advantages of an evidence-based long-term approach to 'external action' in the region. It has the *motivation* to do so, insofar as failing to adapt EU policy will leave untouched the causes of instability which led to the Uprisings and which continue to provide fertile terrain for political radicalisation.

While regional regimes' ability to repress dissent conveys a false sense of stability, these regimes are in fact *insecure*, brittle and vulnerable in ways not evident until it is too late, as the Uprisings themselves spectacularly demonstrated. Finally, the EU has a political *opportunity* insofar as our findings show that the region's 'adaptable autocrats' have failed across the board in their own citizens' eyes – not just in specific sectors or alienating particular groups – while for decades they painted authoritarianism with a democratic façade.

Ironically, these challenges to achieving real democracy in the South Mediterranean resonate more than a little with the challenges Europe itself faces. Both in the South Mediterranean and within Europe, avoiding populist radicalisations of all political stripes will rest on achieving true, 'deep' and effective democracy – delivering on democracy's substantive promises as well as its formal guarantees. This requires recognising the indivisibility of human rights, both civil-political and socio-economic, and their centrality to democratic practice as well as principle. Giving populations an effective political voice, reducing inequalities and ensuring social justice alongside civil and political rights will stabilise the politics and security on both shores of the Mediterranean.

Instead, thus far, the EU has accepted its role in a kind of pseudo-democratic ballet, dancing with its partners around democracy without facing up to the responsibilities of seriously supporting it. The real danger of this staged performance is that so long as autocrats continue to peddle the trappings of democracy as fig leaves of repression, and so long as the EU encourages this, both those authoritarian regimes and the EU itself undermine not only their own reputation, leaving untouched the causes of instability and insecurity in the region, but potentially undermine the credibility of democracy itself as an ideal. The European Union ignores these consequences at its own peril.

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