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EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Introduction

International democracy promotion has always been contentious – today perhaps more than ever. Examples from the European neighborhood testify to this: analysts argue that democracy promotion is one of the key reasons for the worsening of relations between Russia and the West after 2011. The successive achievements of externally promoted so-called 'color revolutions' (in Serbia 2000, Georgia 2003 and Ukraine 2004) rattled Russian President Vladimir Putin, in particular after the post-election anti-government protests in Russia in 2011-2012. Putin viewed these protests as a direct threat to the current Russian political system and, importantly, as orchestrated from the West (McFaul, 2014). In 2014 he stated that "we see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to. For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia" (cited in Korsunskaya, 2014). A second example comes from the Southern Mediterranean: after the Arab uprisings Europe was roundly criticized for its lip service to democracy in the region. In fact, the European Union (EU) had combined democracy assistance programs with solid support for authoritarian leaders such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Mohammed VI of Morocco (Hollies, 2012). Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), admitted as much: "We must show humility about the past. Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region," he stressed in early 2011, adding that Europe should be standing with pro-democracy demonstrators and not "dictators" killing their citizens (Füle, 2011).

Given such controversies, it is not surprising that democracy promotion has received extensive attention in the academic literature. Before focusing on the specific topic of EU democracy promotion in the Southern Mediterranean, it is important to have a clear understanding of what democracy promotion is and of the EU as a democracy promoter generally.

What is Democracy Promotion?

Democracy promotion is here taken to include positive and negative democratic conditionalities, and democracy assistance. ***Positive and negative democratic conditionalities*** are carrots such as increased aid, closer economic ties, etc., on the one hand, and sanctions of various kinds, on the other. The most powerful positive conditionality in the European context was (and to a certain extent still is) the prospect of EU membership. This prospect is, however, missing in the southern neighborhood, with the possible exception of Turkey. A potential negative conditionality is the so-called 'essential elements clause', which since 1995 has been systematically included in cooperation agreements between the EU and third countries. Such clauses state that the respect for human rights and democratic principles constitutes an essential element of the agreement in question (see EEAS Treaties Office, 2016). However, in practice, the possibility of suspending cooperation on this basis has so far never been used in the Southern Mediterranean. Negative conditionalities also include sanctions, such as travel bans, arms embargos and diplomatic sanctions. Again, these are rare in cases of breaches of democratic rules generally.

Democracy assistance/aid is concrete aid programming mostly in the form of grants with the strengthening of democratic norms, institutions and behavior as its main aim. It includes support for elections, parliaments, political parties, and civil society. It encompasses aid aimed towards strengthening the independence of the media and the judiciary, human rights, the public administration and decentralization. Its perhaps most visible aspect is election monitoring, where the European Commission (EC), in collaboration with the European Parliament, has been very active. Drawing the boundaries of what should be classified as democracy assistance is not always straightforward. Does for instance support for NGOs that promote LGBT rights fall under democracy promotion? A quick glance at the political and legal situation in the Western democratic "core" states during the first four post-WWII decades suggests that this is not necessarily the case: these states were considered consolidated democracies even though LGBT rights were at best patchily respected. However, such support is now part and parcel of democracy promotion as defined by governments. Likewise, decentralization is routinely included in democracy assistance programming. However, for instance France started decentralizing only in the 1980s but was, needless to say, classified as democratic long before that. For the EU, support for the battle to abolish the death penalty is a core part of democracy assistance. However, unsurprisingly, this is not the case for the other main democracy promoter globally, the US. This is a problem with what Schmitter and Brouwer call a "predominantly 'phenotypic' definition of DPP based on stated actor intentions", i.e. when aims defined by democracy promoters are taken at face value (Schmitter & Brouwer, 1999, p. 12).[1]

[1] This definition excludes *covert* assistance to topple undemocratic rulers. It also excludes economic and social aid (aimed to ensure high levels of employment, growth and education for instance) even though its indirect effect may well be to help stabilize democracy. Moreover, the definition leaves to the side so-called contagion/demonstration effects, which have been much discussed in the academic literature. Although such effects are important in explaining how democratic waves occur, there is no "promoter", no agent, involved. Instead, the overthrow of one non-democratic regime – quite unwittingly – inspires others: witness how the Tunisian uprising had ripple effects all the way to Bahrain.

The EU as a Democracy Promoter

The EU institutions are the second largest provider of democracy assistance globally, after the US. US commitments of democracy aid have averaged approximately USD 3.4 billion yearly over the 2012-17 period, while those of the EU institutions have amounted to some USD 2.7 billion (calculated from OECD, 2019). However, as EU officials routinely point out, the EU is the largest donor if the democracy assistance of EU member states is added to that of the EU institutions. Among EU states, the largest democracy aid donors are Germany, the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark. There is thus a clear North-South divide, with in particular France and Italy rather unenthusiastic about the democracy promotion agenda, which they perceive as poorly anchored in international law and potentially against national interests. This divide, as we shall see, has some implications for EU support for democratization in the Southern Mediterranean.

The EU institutions are present with democracy assistance projects across the globe. It is active in all main areas of democracy aid as described above. Funding is given through a large number of different instruments – both global thematic instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED)[2] and through regional development funding envelopes, including the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.

The EU as a Democracy Promoter in the Southern Mediterranean[3]

A long-standing goal of the EU neighborhood policy, further reinforced in the 2015 ENP review, is to create a ring of stability and prosperity around the EU's borders. The rhetoric has remained constant: market economies and democracy brought stability to Europe and can have the same effect in the neighborhood. In other words, the ultimate goal is stability, and democracy is seen as *one way* of achieving this. This means that, in practice, the EU has supported democratic change when it has been in line with its broader geopolitical aim of stability. Today, this has meant that in the Southern Mediterranean, only Tunisia's democratization is supported in a relatively steadfast manner. In other countries, the Union's stability aim militates against a prioritization of profound democratic change.

Tunisia is a more important exception than is perhaps always understood. Indeed, it is a real novelty that the EU strongly and unequivocally supports democracy in a country in its southern neighborhood – unlike in the East, where democracy has been a goal stretching back to the Cold War. During the Cold War, rivalry in the Southern Mediterranean, unlike in Eastern Europe,

[2] The EED is, strictly speaking, not an EU instrument, but an independent foundation. The vast majority of the funding has so far been provided by the European Commission and EU member states, however.

[3] This section is largely based on Khakee and Youngs (2018) and Khakee (2017).

was not about promoting Western-style democracy. The most important East-West agreement pertaining to civil and political rights of the time, the Helsinki Final Act, exemplifies this: its Mediterranean dimension makes no mention of citizen rights. The geopolitical disinterest in promoting democracy in the region continued after the end of the Cold War. European reactions to the Algerian elections in 1991 and the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006 are oft-cited examples, but there are others, such as King Hussein of Jordan's failed attempt to convince Western governments to re-open their aid coffers after the end of the Cold War by holding the first elections in decades and introducing a liberalized media law (Kassaym, 2002).

The *de facto* EU preference for the authoritarian status quo – reinforced by the already mentioned French and Italian resistance to the agenda – had an impact on the shape of democracy assistance programs in the region before the Arab uprisings. As already mentioned, negative conditionalities remained non-operational in practice; the same was true for positive conditionalities. Democracy assistance projects largely focused on less central and less contentious issues and the EU kept Islamist parties (including the most moderate) at arm's length, even though such parties held the key to their countries' democratic future. Some of this has changed with the Arab uprisings: there are some new mechanisms, most notably the EED, and already existing instruments such as the EIDHR have received more funding. Priority has been put on strengthening EU relations with civil society actors. In addition, some elements of positive conditionalities (the so-called 'more for more' principle) have been introduced, even though inconsistencies remain (Youngs, 2014, pp. 97-99).

However, the tensions created through the juxtaposition of democracy assistance, on the one hand, and support for the status quo, on the other, are still present in much of the region. The effects of such half-hearted aid programming have increasingly been studied: the case of Morocco is illuminating in this respect. The EU is quite satisfied with the status quo in Morocco, as the King is an important economic partner and ally in containing terrorist threats and migratory flows. Morocco is a hybrid regime, meaning, in a nutshell, that democratic elements are inserted into an otherwise authoritarian system.[4] In such a system, institutions usually associated with democratic rule partially serve functions different from those they fulfill in a democratic context. Thus, analysts have stressed that the Moroccan parliament, political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs), for instance, help structure the monarchy's negotiations with various societal groups, thereby *de facto* playing a role in controlling and co-opting important segments of society. What happens when such institutions are given democracy aid? In recent years, analysts have stressed that insensitive strengthening of, for instance, political parties and CSOs may lead to a ***strengthening*** of the hybrid regime in power, including in Morocco. An example will serve to illustrate the argument (which, together with others, is

[4] For a more detailed discussion of hybrid regimes, see Morlino, 2009.

discussed at greater length in Khakee [2107]): scholars such as Abdeslam Maghraoui and Myriam Catusse have argued that the technical and a-political focus of international anti-corruption measures has helped to obfuscate the deeper problem of corruption in Morocco, which is tightly linked to the monarchy and the patronage networks underpinning monarchical rule. Maghraoui notes that internationally supported anti-corruption efforts over a decade and a half have been accompanied by a *worsening* of Morocco's position on international corruption indices. His explanation is that the monarchy has been able to use the technocratic emphasis to shield another reality: that in recent years the royal family and the Makhzen have managed to increase their role in the Moroccan economy by non-transparent means. Thus, the internationally-sponsored legal changes, piecemeal administrative reform and the creation state oversight mechanisms have gone hand in hand with a strengthening of the monarchy's domination over the Moroccan economy through not always fair economic maneuvers. Moreover, the example thus set has not necessarily led to more probity across society.

Conclusion

The tensions built into much of the EU democracy promotion agenda in the Southern Mediterranean are evident. They are also not unique: state interests of stability are ubiquitous and not specific to the EU. Half-hearted programs in countries such as Morocco, as we saw in this paper, run the risk of inadvertently strengthening the hybrid regime in place. The question thus becomes: should states and the EU as ultimately representing states promote democracy? Or should it be left to social movements, dissidents and committed citizens? Are there dangers to the credibility of the democratic agenda as a whole when inconsistencies are evident and numerous? What would be the trade-offs of abandoning democracy promotion in cases where the quest for stability leads the EU to *de facto* support authoritarian rule? And what happens if human rights and democratic values are entirely taken out of foreign policy? These are thorny questions to which no easy answers can be found.

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