

## Roundtable Conference

# Democracy promotion East and South after the Arab Spring: Re-evaluating the EU's Engagement with Authoritarian Regimes

Brussels  
1/2 December 2011

## CONFERENCE REPORT



# VENUE

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# Draft Conference Report

**Thursday, 1 December 2011**

## **Panel 1: 'EU relations with authoritarian regimes: One voice or several?'**

The first panel dealt with the EU's past track-record in democracy promotion in authoritarian countries in its Eastern and Southern neighborhood. The aim was to evaluate the consistency and effectiveness of the EU's democracy promotion policy and to outline its weaknesses and limitations. The speakers agreed that the EU's past track-record in democracy promotion in authoritarian countries is at best mixed. Although democracy promotion is among the stated aims of EU external action, the impact of the EU's democracy promotion activities in the Eastern and Southern neighborhood has been rather weak. The 'color revolutions' in the East have mostly failed. Meanwhile, the EU and its member states have long maintained favorable relations with authoritarian regimes in the South and have not exerted real pressure for political reform.

The lack of consistency and effectiveness of the EU's democracy promotion activities was attributed to several factors. First, there is no intra-European consensus on the importance and means of democracy promotion. There are wide discrepancies between the member states in terms of financial contributions to democracy promotion activities. Furthermore, as the Libyan case has shown, there is no agreement on the use of force as a means of democracy promotion. Second, the EU has a multitude of democracy promotion instruments but lacks an overarching strategy. Finally, the effectiveness and consistency of the EU's democracy promotion policy crucially depend on the political and economic power of the authoritarian regime in question. The EU's energy dependence was mentioned as a decisive factor.

The keynote speaker described the EU's past relations with authoritarian regimes in the South as a 'silent pact' whereby the EU and its member states refrained from exerting political pressure in exchange for security and energy-related interests, the most salient thereof being energy supply, migration control, and counter-terrorism. The 'Arab Spring' disrupted this silent pact and led to fundamental changes in thinking: The fact that the quest for democracy and liberal values came from within the Arab societies put the whole concept of external democracy promotion into question. Furthermore, the relative absence of the EU as a role model in the Arab debate on democratic transition challenges the assumption that the EU is 'leading by example'.

The speakers agreed that the EU's democracy promotion policy is in need of a fundamental re-shuffling. In order to be more effective, the EU will need to dedicate more financial resources to democracy promotion. Furthermore, the EU should take into account the views of civil society when deciding on projects in the field of economic cooperation. The EU and its member states will have to re-balance their relationship with post-authoritarian regimes in the Southern neighborhood and change their language and attitude towards them accordingly. Finally, the events in Syria call for an intra-European discussion on the use of military force as means for democracy promotion.

The speakers also pointed towards some implications of the 'Arab Spring' for research. There is a need to re-evaluate old conceptualizations of the EU as an international actor and to break with traditional dichotomies such as the apparent contradiction between values and interests. In order to analyze the developments and potential impact of the transitions in the Arab World, researchers are advised to draw on the comparative political science literature on revolutions.

## **Panel 2: 'EU relations with authoritarian regimes in the MENA region'**

The second panel dealt with the “EU relations with authoritarian regimes in the MENA region“. It focused on the EU’s relations with authoritarian regimes in the MENA region and future prospects for democracy and successful democracy promotion in the region. The keynote speaker outlined the consequences the EEAS has drawn from the Arab Spring. These are guided by the acknowledgement that the EU needs to include civil society more into democracy promotion, for which it is a crucial actor.

One speaker drew a more positive picture of the EU’s activities in the course of the Arab Spring, giving the example of the EU’s election monitoring mission in Tunisia, while reminding that changing someone is not the aim of diplomacy. By applying research conducted in Eastern Europe, speakers tried to reply to the question, what the prerequisites for democratization were, and whether concepts unsuccessful in Eastern Europe could show more success in the MENA region. The three most important reasons for the failure of democracy promotion in Eastern Europe were the pro-authoritarian culture based on customs, the counter powers including the Army and post-regime activists as well as suitable political and economic alternatives to democratization, namely post-Soviet Russia combined with the lack of a membership perspective, all three of which he does not see present in the MENA region.

In particular, the case of Tunisia was discussed, including a small historic background, the major mistakes made by both by both Tunisia and the EU sides and some small suggestions for the future. The events, which surprised Dictator Ben Ali as well as the international community, were based on external and internal factors such as frustration, poverty, unemployment and political oppression. While some speakers demanded faster action by the EU others asked for more patience with the developments in Tunisia comparing them to the French Revolution, which in fact comprised 3 smaller revolutions. Considering that the EU glossed over the fact that it had accepted undemocratic regimes, a more transparent and accountable policy to the Arab world and a more open and tolerant approach instead of one guided by suspicion and fear as was the case after 9/11, should be pursued.

In the following discussion, most questions aimed at understanding who would be responsible for the European Endowment for Democracy in the future and how to include civil society with its religious identity. Comments referred to the problem of acquiring a common position of all 27 member states.

The first day was rounded up by two dinner speeches held by HE Roland Schäfer, Deputy Head of political affairs, Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU on the one hand and MEP Jacez Sariusz Wolski on the other hand. Both gave some general observations on the goals of the revised European Neighbourhood Policy not without voicing some criticism on how this policy was conducted so far. They especially emphasized the argument repeatedly voiced during both days of the conference of including a wider spectrum of actors, most notably civil society in the EU policies for democracy promotion.

## **Friday, 2 December 2011**

### **Panel 3: 'EU relations with Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation'**

The presentations in the third panel outlined the drawbacks in the EU policies towards Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation and provided recommendations regarding the EU’s relations with countries in Eastern Europe and with Russia.

The speakers highlighted that the European Union is losing its influence eastwards. The latest development trends in Ukraine since Viktor Yanukovich came into power (labeled as a pro-Russian

President) have brought Ukraine in the unique situation of being sandwiched between two regional integration projects, having the option of adhering to two customs unions – either one with the EU or one with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In the last two years, the democratic development has worsened in Ukraine. President Yanukovich initiated a number of reforms and laws proving that democracy has been deteriorating. A key indicator of this development is the Timoshenko trial that revealed that the current Ukrainian government is not seeing any need to comply with the European leadership's negotiations. Ukrainian experts now underline the substantial regress in the implementation of the EU-Ukraine political dialogue priorities while the EU is not taking a stronger role.

When it comes to Belarus, an emphasis has been made on several paradoxes in the EU policies towards this country. Since the end of the cold war, the EU did not have much of a policy, as all former Soviet Union countries were approached on a group basis. Moreover, to find an expert on Belarus was rather difficult. Then, the EU chose a policy of isolation till 2002-2003, when the ENP was coming into place. Only in 2007 a policy of critical engagement was launched. However, most efforts of democratization of Belarus ever since have rather been put on paper than translated into action. Even though it seems there is a huge amount of funding going to Belarus via the EIDHR (the European Instrument for Human Rights and Democracy), in reality it only equals to 2% of the whole EU funding. The speakers stressed the following facts: The EU prefers to work with trusted partners (with German funds for instance); in the EU there is no clear vision of what civil society is and the preference goes to selecting pro-European civil society representatives thus creating further division in Belarus; the goal of EU policy is not clear since sanctions are never really imposed in case of HR violations. Finally, the youth of Belarus could contribute to the democratization process in Belarus if EU support was provided in a timely fashion.

In all cases, options for EU policy and actions were recommended. The DCFTA, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the visa-free travel prospect form the key incentives for Ukraine and simultaneously the EU's main leverage providing the EU with additional policy tools of democracy promotion. It was also argued that engaging solely with the government/parliament in these countries is not enough. The EU should intensify cooperation with civil society representatives and engage other non-state actors, thus targeting and promoting change at the grassroots level. In the case of Belarus in particular, developing relations with a broader range of civil society representatives and opening youth exchange programs would be highly beneficial.

The panel presentations further called attention to the fact that it is important to consider the EU's relationship with the Russian Federation when the Eastern neighborhood is concerned. EU-Russia relations, as the speakers reiterated, focus more on material interests like energy supply and member states' bilateral trade relations with Russia than on democracy promotion. Emphasis was put on the fact that the focus should not only be on the EU as a democracy promoter, but also on the EU as a recipient of Russia's activity in its Eastern neighborhood. Russia is trying to play the role of a regional leader and to influence its regulatory sphere. It offers a virtual integration for these countries, using terminology that is well known in the EU but with a different frame in mind. What the EU needs to consider, as one of the speakers argued, is that these countries have embraced a different type of democracy with partial elements of democracy (partially free and fair elections or partially free media). Since the EU does not have credible sticks or tasty 'carrots' to give away and, in the process of democracy promotion, only talks about sanctions but never really imposes them, it needs to learn how to relate to these countries. There is definitely change taking place in these countries, but reality shows that these changes are not an equivalent to democracy so far.

Last but not least, the EU's efforts of democracy promotion in Russia were discussed. The lack of success in pushing Russia to adopt democratic standards according to EU principles, as argued by one of the speakers, is due to the fact that the decision-making process in the EU involves 27 member states that have different historical experiences with Russia (trade-relations, energy-imports etc.), which affect the kind of policies the EU wants to pursue. Moreover, as one of the speakers explains, the EU's internal problems evolving from the divergent opinions of its member states are not seen as the core problem in the EU-Russia relationship, which is rather the question of the EU's nature: is the EU a trade-power, a

normative power, or a soft power etc.? Therefore, it is problematic to try to convince Russia to become more like the EU when the EU's image in the Russian media coverage is about the financial problems of the EU's member states and Russia as the knight in shining armor offering to rescue the EU from its financial crisis. Hence, the political elites in Russia are not willing to pay the price for change, which would be too high both internally and externally. Without Russian willingness to change from inside and a stabilization of the EU's shaky image, the EU plays a limited role in the Russian democracy promotion process. Taking this into consideration, a rhetoric question was launched by one of the speakers – is Russia a potential recipient of EU democracy promotion efforts? Or should the EU rather focus on relations with Russia as a competitive neighbor?

#### **Panel 4: 'EU relations with the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia'**

The main focus of the fourth panel discussions was on achievements and limitations of EU policy towards Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. The experts put a special emphasis on the extent to which the normative agenda has been promoted by the EU and provided recommendations on how to increase EU's actorness in the regions.

The speakers agreed that the EU's democracy promotion agenda in both of the regions was rather limited and has not born the fruit expected. Speaking about Southern Caucasus, one of the experts admitted that EU democratization efforts in the region have failed. As an example, the low scores of all three countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – on the Corruption Perceptions Index and Good Governance Indicator were named. Moreover, in Azerbaijan, for example, the authoritarian regime has rather been consolidating throughout the years. It has also been noted that the EU's approach towards the neighboring countries currently promoted which offers 'more for more' is fundamentally wrong: the less democratic transformation is observed, the more efforts are to be made by the EU for democracy promotion. As outlined by one of the speakers, in terms of strategy, the EU's approach towards the Southern Caucasus states can be criticized for being too 'universal' which means that no reflexivity vis-à-vis the performance of these states in regard to human rights promotion, rule of law, and media freedom has been in place.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Georgian Rose Revolution in 2008 can be considered a spark of EU's tactical involvement in the democratization of the region, it is evident that in the past couple of years the EU's rhetoric has become more strategic: the EU acknowledges the role of Georgia as an important energy transit country and considers Azerbaijan a 'commitment partner' that will continue to provide the EU with energy supplies in the near future (despite the deteriorating human rights situation that could be observed in Azerbaijan). The emphasis of the speakers was put on the fact that even when the EU has the leverage to foster democratic improvements through inclusion of civil society and non-state actors, this opportunity is not used in case of self-sufficient economies like Azerbaijan. In this light, all participants admitted the existence of a fundamental clash between norms and values in the Southern Caucasus region. Thus for the EU to become a credible actor in the region it needs to develop a clearly designed and strictly evaluated democracy promotion strategy, and moreover to introduce quantitative indices for the measurement of the performance of each state. Last but not least, it seems that inter-institutional coherence within the EU itself should be increased for the EU to have more say regarding normative agenda in its neighborhood.

When it comes to Central Asia, there are hopes that democratic consolidation in the region may be achieved in the future; however, as one of the speakers emphasized, it is still too early to make predictions. Factors similar to those which lead to the Arab Spring – among them corruption, economic decline, undemocratic governance – can be found in today's Central Asia. The main challenge of democracy promotion in Central Asian states is the lack of demographic memory and tradition in their political culture. In this regard, one of the speakers pointed to the rather limited EU engagement in the

region after the collapse of the USSR mainly because of its distant location outside the Union's borders. However, given the increased geostrategic importance of Central Asia after the beginning of the military operation in Afghanistan in 2001 and the acknowledged necessity to develop a comprehensive strategy towards the region, the EU developed such a strategy in 2007 with dialogue and engagement being the major instruments.

However, while it appears to be a good strategy on paper, in reality limited normative effect can be achieved from cooperation with undemocratic regimes through dialogue. Moreover, it seems that when the EU wants to have constructive engagement with the region despite its rather undemocratic political culture and practices, this undermines its normative standing and casts a veil of double standards onto its normativity. Nevertheless, as one of the experts explained, to foster democratic changes in Central Asia, constructive engagement should be used as a major instrument instead of imposing conditionality which already proved inefficient to promote liberal norms. Crucially, as has been reflected by the ENP, there is promising potential of democratic governance promotion through functional cooperation; however, funding which is a lot more limited in Central Asian region compared to the neighboring countries has to be increased.

In both cases, it is evident that the fundamental dilemma between energy/security interests on the one hand and value-based approach on the other hand hampers the EU's image and effectiveness of EU's policy engagement in the region. Sectoral cooperation may not be a sufficiently competitive 'carrot' offered by the EU to win over Russia or China with their agendas in the region. On top of that, the economic crisis in the EU hampers its image of a 'democracy promoter' and does not make it a role model for these countries. Taking this into consideration, the major question raised by the experts was whether the EU's image of a democracy promoter can be sustained when it does not have a robust policy towards Central Asia and Southern Caucasus with actions matching words.

## **Closing speeches**

The closing speeches focused on the broader trends in the EU's relations with autocratic regimes in its neighborhood. The speakers outlined a number of pressing challenges EU democracy promotion faces in East and South in the future and highlighted the need to renew current research agendas.

The Arab Spring can be regarded as a watershed for EU as it challenges the core of its foreign policy. The EU often emphasizes the importance of human rights and democracy as core objectives of its policies (inter alia in the Lisbon Treaty). In turn, these objectives provide the EU with legitimacy and an identity as an international actor, even though question marks remain over the consistency with which the EU has applied these principles. The Arab Spring has clearly exposed the limits of Europe as a normative power, and therefore existing academic conceptualizations of Europe have to be revised or changed.

Apart from the Arab Spring, two other critical junctions will fundamentally change the discourses and identity politics of Europe in relation to the new governments in the MENA: The consolidation of a multipolar world which demands from the EU to exercise and negotiate its power in the neighborhood with other powers such as China, Russia and Turkey, and the current financial crisis. Taken together, the current critical junctions have led to a 'crisis of the EU's identity as an international actor'. Once the hub, or the avant-garde, of transformation, Europe is now only recognized for its material, rather than its ideological credentials. The EU has become very silent: it does not speak up, despite the recent establishment of the European External Action Service. Instead, it has become pragmatic.

The speakers agreed that new research agendas should have to be developed to make sense of the new pragmatism of the EU. Scholarship had focused for too long on the normative identity of the EU and on the EU influencing the world. Thus, research should rather focus on alternative analyses of the

EU's power, either in terms of power politics or the constructed nature of power in the relations between the EU and neighboring states.

Besides the need to move beyond the narrow debates on the EU as a normative power, the speakers underlined the importance of broadening and further contextualizing scholarly and think tank analysis of EU policy more generally. Firstly, research should have to go beyond the narrow geographical focus on the European Neighbourhood Policy to account for the diversity in EU foreign policy towards third states. Secondly, research should no longer take EU rhetoric at face-value and instead investigate what the EU does on the ground, and thirdly, research on EU foreign policy should include the EU's various sector policies which are often overlooked.

The speakers also criticized the rather naïve assumption in a lot of research that the EU pursues its norms in an altruistic manner and that there was or could be such a thing as 'the right decision'. Greater attention should therefore be paid to the reasoning and justifications behind EU policy and the choices and dilemmas facing EU policy-makers. Research on EU foreign policy should also be more attentive to 'what the EU can actually do', and to that end, more exchanges should take place between researchers and practitioners with knowledge on the ground.