

**EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN A POST-ARAB SPRING AGENDA:  
CAUTIOUSLY DOES IT...***Hélène Michou\**

The uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) require a response from the EU which encompasses a genuine shift in its approach to its Mediterranean littoral. Without entirely discarding the institutional foundations of previous policy mechanisms, the EU is helping to forge a new policy matrix. Steps taken so far have been cautious, and rightly so. Caution is imperative, especially in a region where anything resembling overt support is deemed foreign meddling. The EU must show faith in the normative values it has sought to embody and promote from its inception. Recognising that its support for autocrats and their ostensibly stable regimes has tainted its image, the EU is now in the process of determining its role in a continually changing region. Critics of EU responses to the Arab Spring would do well to remember that the European External Action Service (EEAS) must find its own direction before pointing the way for others.

The EU's MENA policy framework to date has seen several airings, all with room for improvement. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) promised domestic reform at the bilateral level but did not follow through; the heterogeneous Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) promoted multilateral economic cooperation in a vacuum of political context. Some argue that the policy documents published since the start of the Arab uprisings – A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean (March 2011), A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood (May 2011), and the more recent proposition of a European Endowment for Democracy (EED)<sup>1</sup> are mere repetitions of previous policy instruments.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note, however, that together they represent a notable effort to re-examine European foreign policy in light of a seismic shift in its southern neighbourhood.

Taken with the evolving nature of the EEAS, the review of the ENP (undertaken in 2010; not exclusively post-Arab Spring) shows a body conscious of its ontological and structural lacunae. For instance, certain posts remain vacant in the EEAS organisational matrix; others are unforeseen creations. High Representative Catherine Ashton is still trying to balance responses to ongoing events with longer-term

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1. For more on this initiative, see: National Endowment for Democracy—Idea, Functioning and Lessons for the EU, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin No. 31 (248), 24th March, 2011.

2. Previous EU policies include the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) proposed in 1995, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) developed in 2004, and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) created in 2008.

reform initiatives, assessment criteria, and implementation mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> The appointment of Bernardino León in July 2011 as the EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean Region shows, on the one hand, the EU caught off guard by events and, on the other, its flexibility of response. As Ashton's cabinet finds its mark in Brussels, so its articulations of EU foreign policy will become more consistent and better delineated.

The first outcomes of the ENP review in March 2011 were tentative but positive. A senior EEAS official has called the Partnership "a clear mea culpa on behalf of the EU."<sup>4</sup> The EU appears to have recognised that humility is the name of the game, and is intent on avoiding the impositions of blueprints in transitioning states. As one expert argues, "assistance is requested; interference is eschewed."<sup>5</sup> The Partnership includes references to a "differentiated approach," a "joint commitment to common values," and revisions of assistance based on the legitimate aspirations of the local populations. Respect for the authenticity of the local transition process must be expressed by ensuring local ownership and implementation.

In June, Ashton expressed support for a European EED, "flexible, non-bureaucratic, free of imprint of government and free of EU bodies, which can help countries find their democratic voice." But as an expert questions in a comprehensive overview of EU democracy support mechanisms, how will the proposed EED add value to, rather than duplicate, existing EU instruments such as the Governance Facility and the EIDHR?<sup>6</sup> Rhetorical statements of intention must be accompanied by actions to a similar tune. The EU should not sacrifice its overarching normative values as the common conduit behind a differentiated approach. Whilst a "customized formula" sounds apt for the different geopolitical realities of the MENA, it could just as well be the latest disguise for inaction and stalling in the face of purely cosmetic reforms. The EU cannot afford to revert to double standards: gradually throttling Syria under sanctions whilst turning a blind eye to the ongoing abuses in Gulf States looks dangerously like the "short-termism" which Commissioner F le sagely warned against.<sup>7</sup>

The compromise between differentiation and normative values is evident in the debates over conditionality. Just as recent policy reviews indicate that the EU is beginning to lay its cards face up on the table, so transitioning states would do well to mirror such a move. Both Arab and European publics

3. Ana Echagüe, Hélène Michou and Barah Mikail, "Europe and the Arab Uprisings: EU Vision versus Member State Action", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2, July 2011, pp. 329-335.

4. Remarks at FRIDE seminar, "Reshaping the European Neighbourhood Policy", Madrid, 7th April 2011.

5. Roel von Meijenfeldt, A European Foundation for Democracy: What Is Needed, "FRIDE Policy Brief", September 2011.

6. Nathalie Tocci, State (un)Sustainability in the Southern Mediterranean and Scenarios to 2030: the EU's Response, "MEDPRO Policy Paper", No. 1, August 2011.

7. Stefan F le, Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, speech in the European Parliament, Brussels, 28th February 2011, available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/press/ReleasesAction.do?reference=speech/11/130>.

are politically astute and increasingly willing to hold their government to account should conditions not be set or indeed, met. Member state relations with repressive monarchies such as those ruling Bahrain, Saudi and, to a lesser extent, Morocco and Jordan will likely come under closer inspection. For now, these autocrats are breathing a sigh of relief that attention has been deflected onto their Levantine and Northern African counterparts. Avoiding the limelight, they are busy implementing what once again can be termed disappointing cosmetic reforms, whilst benefiting from the hike in oil prices resulting from instability in Libya. Having until now been particularly lax on conditionality, even with the very countries under Association Agreements, the EU would do well to demand greater efficiency in the implementation of its revamped policy matrix. In turn, a mechanism other than people power is needed to hold EU member states to account in their promises to be on democracy's side.

The EU is not the only international player seeking to redefine its policy towards the region. The US State Department has opened a so-called Middle East Transitions Office. China has yet to align its response to the Arab Spring with its pragmatic needs to protect its investments in the region.<sup>8</sup> In President Barack Obama's 19th May speech on the Middle East, he promised to work on establishing enterprise funds for Egypt and Tunisia, in a similar vein to the proposed expansion of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The latter is to take a lead role in the French-proposed Deauville partnership<sup>9</sup> as it extends its lending mandate from former Communist countries to encompass states affected by the Arab Spring.

In this context, the EU should be wary of overly strengthening its bilateral policy mechanisms at the expense of multilateral outreach. An appropriate synergy of vertical and horizontal processes must take priority over attention-grabbing headline loans. For an EEAS mired in criticism this will undoubtedly present challenges. General publics – both Arab and European – are far more likely to appreciate tangible results over theoretical reviews of policy. And so the temptation for EU member states to garner public approval (both at home and abroad) increases. The border controls (re)introduced by France and the “hero's welcome” received by Sarkozy and Cameron on their 15th September visit to Libya are cases in point. The irony is that the French President's insistence on intervention in Libya comes across as over-compensation for his initial reactions to events in Tunisia and Egypt and his support for their now-ousted leaders. Spain has proved equally fickle in its response; initial silence (due to close relations with several of the region's dictators) later gave way to disproportionate praise for the semi-

8. See, for example, Raffaello Pantucci and Jonas Parellø-Plesner, China's Janus-Faced Response to the Arab Revolutions, “ECFR Policy Memo”, June 2011.

9. The Deauville initiative was set up in May 2011 under France's G8 presidency to help MENA states foster democratic reforms by making aid and development credits conditional on political and economic reforms. The G8 has since pledged \$38 billion to financing Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan 2011-11, doubling the \$20 billion pledged at Deauville.

reformist Moroccan and Jordanian regimes.<sup>10</sup> British Foreign Minister William Hague vouched in 2010 that “human rights are at the heart of British foreign policy,” but has since seen his country discredited as the bank of choosing for the pilfered billions of certain dictators, Gadhafi first amongst them. Germany, steadfastly against intervention in Libya, has since attempted to portray its abstention as tacit approval.<sup>11</sup> But the damage was done: the European heavyweight broke ranks with its European allies at a time when a united front was essential in contributing to the legitimacy of the intervention.

It is only by presenting a united front that Europe will be able to carve a name for itself in post-Arab Spring transition processes. By seeking to redress the “gaps” between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean,<sup>12</sup> whilst also exercising caution in unconditional support for emerging democratic regimes, it can avoid the equal malaise of Euro-centrism and Euro-irrelevance. The EU has done well to avoid throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater; criticism and near-stalling of the UfM has not led it to discard the concept of co-membership inherent to the Barcelona spirit nor the bilateral policies of the ENP. In this vein, the proposition for “mobility partnerships,” a “common economic space,” and “an area of shared values of democracy, good governance and human rights” in the ENP review augurs well for the future of a region whose fate directly impacts on that of Europe.

Closer relations with regional bodies such as the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, the GCC and the African Union are essential in shoring up the legitimacy of European support.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the context of evolving dynamics within an EEAS still finding its feet should be taken into account before branding EU foreign policy incoherent, inconsistent or inefficient. If crises have traditionally been the driving force behind the creation of the EU and the new pact for the Euro; then the Arab Spring has the potential to be the impetus for a cemented EEAS, a revamped ENP, and a role proportionate to Europe's size in a shifting global order. As Durão Barroso said in his speech on the Commission's priorities for the autumn: “The challenges we face are great. But so is our determination to rise to them.”<sup>14</sup>

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10. Spain is still slightly off track in its articulations of policy towards the region: at a time when the EU is placing its bets on the revamped ENP, Foreign Minister Trinidad Jiménez recently reiterated her support for the UfM to Youssef Amrani (Secretary General of the UfM).

11. German public opinion was divided over the matter, as certain scathing attacks on Merkel's decision prove: Welt am Sonntag labelled her decision “condescending, stubbornly isolationist, and strategically confused.” At least in 2003, prior to intervention in Iraq, Germany was backed by France in its non-interventionist stance.

12. For more on the demographic gap, economic gap, and a digital and technological gap, see *The Arab World in Transition: Prospects and Challenges for a Revitalized Relationship between Europe and North Africa*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, May 2011.

13. Tensions currently dominate relations between certain bodies, namely the fact that South Africa has still not recognised the Libyan TNC.

14. José Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission, speech on EU priorities for the autumn, Brussels, 31st August 2011, available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/573>.