How the EU can adopt a new type of democracy support

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›› In the aftermath of the democratic uprisings in the Middle East, the European Union (EU) has taken a long hard look at its democracy support initiatives.[1] This is driven in part by the severe embarrassment suffered by the EU for its continued tolerance of autocrats in the region prior to the uprisings. It is also influenced by recent reports which suggest that the EU's democracy support activities in its trade policy, its neighbourhood policy and even its civil society support leave much to be desired. Prompted by these developments, EU institutions have made significant efforts to respond to criticism of their democracy policies. This working paper examines these reform efforts. It finds that the EU has made modest changes to its democracy support, but still requires more fundamental reform to its policies.

The EU is a unique kind of a democracy promotion actor. The conceptual foundations of its democracy support activity are uniquely 'fuzzy'. More precisely they are of a 'fuzzy liberal' nature. Unlike more ideologically clear-cut 'liberal' democracy supporters such as the US, the EU has been reluctant to pin down very specific ideological orientations for its democracy support. It is often unclear, when the EU promotes democracy, whether it wishes to advance the cause of 'liberal democracy' or whether it has in mind a more 'social democratic' or 'European social model' vision of democracy. Reflecting political pluralism within the Union, the EU's ideas about *what kind of democracy* it wishes to support have remained fuzzy and uniquely non-committal.

While at the forefront of shifting democracy support away from self-evidently liberal 'one-size-fits-all' approaches, the EU's fuzziness has some downsides. Notably, it has led to some contradictions appearing in EU democracy support. It also masks some stubborn 'neoliberal'[2] rigidities in EU approaches.

This conceptual uniqueness of EU democracy support is crucial to reflecting on current reforms to EU democracy support. A reform in what the EU means by democracy, rather than the mere modes of operandi of its democracy support, is important today in the context of the financial crisis. Today, not only methods of delivery but also the very ideological underpinnings of democracy support are increasingly being questioned. This paper assesses current EU efforts to modify the conceptual foundations of democracy support. It suggests a number of ways in which the EU should push the extent of these reforms beyond merely cosmetic additions to its 'fuzzy liberalism'. ›››

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EU understandings of democracy

›› Democracy promotion has long historical roots in liberal internationalist ideas. Yet, democracy advancement has not always been a *straightforwardly* or *singularly liberal* ideal. While the role of liberal democratic ideals has often been taken for granted by academics and practitioners of democracy promotion, interesting variations in the ideological meaning of democracy and even liberal democracy exist. The concept is capable of being interpreted in either a more 'liberal' or a more 'democratic-majoritarian' fashion. Such a lack of subtlety in the analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of democracy support is worrying. It glosses over the historical, and also contemporary, oscillations and disagreements on the exact meaning of democracy among democracy supporters.[3]

A historical perspective on US democracy promotion reveals that earlier in the 20th century democracy's advancement by the US was tied to what might be called 'reform liberal' or 'social democratic' principles.[4] It was only in the late-1980s and early 1990s that US democracy support lurched to the 'right' towards strongly 'liberal' democratic principles. The end of the Cold War bolstered the belief in this liberal interpretation of democracy. Yet, history teaches us that even when we think contestation over democracy's meaning has ended, it often re-emerges. This is because this essentially contested concept refuses to be tied to a singular meaning. There are high political and economic stakes for political actors in how we define the concept, its core values and its core institutions.

Indeed, already the triumphalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s has waned in the international order, affecting also the fortunes and models of democracy support. By the late-1990s the liberal internationalist dream at the heart of 1990s 'liberal' democracy support had suffered a number of hard hits. The liberal ideals of multilateralism, international institutionalisation and democratisation of undemocratic states, are now increasingly questioned and side-stepped even by the key 'liberal actors' as they increasingly seek to protect their security and economic interests. At the same time, democracy support rhetoric has been adjusted to backlashes against democracy support. While the 1990s triumphalism entailed confident advancement of liberal principles, today's democracy support discourse is rife with 'contextualist' assumptions: demand for local ownership, emphasis on locally-engendered civil society support and recognition of multiple possible variations on democratisation in different societal contexts. It is now acknowledged – almost as a new mantra – that democracy can take various different forms in different societies and that democracy promoters must understand and encourage this diversity.

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3. For more detail see M. Kurki, 'Democracy and Conceptual Contestability: reconsidering conceptions of democracy in democracy promotion', *International Studies Review* 12/3, (2010), pp. 362-386. See also C. Hobson and M. Kurki, *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion* (London: Routledge, 2011).
4. S. Berman,'The past and future of social democracy and the consequences for democracy promotion' and T. Smith, 'From Fortunate Vagueness to Democratic Globalism: American democracy promotion as imperialism', in *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion,* edited by C. Hobson and M.Kurki (London: Routledge, 2011).

The EU has led the effort to adjust democracy support practices. This is reflected in the fact that the EU's democracy support has become increasingly flexible in its conceptual and ideological contours. The EU has in its democracy support moved away from the perceived 'hyper-liberalism' of the US towards a diversity-accommodating and complexity-appreciating democracy support language. Not only is democracy support now integrated into various different policy agendas, but crucially, the EU argues it does not promote a single model of democracy. The EU's democracy support, it is argued, reflects the EU member states' diverse experiences with democracy: the EU promotes, if anything, '27 different models of democracy'. The EU offers for target states a pluralistic smørgås-board of democracy advancement – or so it claims. Crucially, not only liberal but also seemingly social democratic preferences for social justice and service delivery, and even occasional language of 'participatory democracy' pepper the EU rhetoric of democracy promotion today.

Such a seemingly more open and 'pluralistic' approach to democracy's meaning in democracy promotion is of course understandable in the EU context: achieving ideological agreement on what kind of democracy should be promoted would be difficult between 27 member states. There is no singular experience of democracy in Europe and hence democratic identities and value systems are broader than those of the more straight-forwardly liberal US. Yet, this 'pluralism' is not self-evidently beneficial. It is also problematic in four respects.

First, the EU's current form of pluralism could also be referred to as 'fuzziness'. This is because pluralism and context-sensitivity are in fact based on a 'fudging' of the meaning of democracy in EU documents and democracy support. Some core liberal democratic ideals are referred to in the policy framework but it lacks any clear ideological or conceptually precise reference to specific models of democracy, political contestation over democracy's meaning, or, indeed, any unique EU experiences with different models of democracy. Thus, how the liberal ideals fit with the ad hoc social democratic or participatory ideals which are also made reference to is not clarified. There is a distinct lack of clarity on the exact principles which underpin 'pluralistic practice' and thus 'fuzzy liberalism' is at best the most accurate description for the EU's conceptual approach.

Second, given the lack of a clear model of democracy to advocate, the normative justifications of EU democracy support remain unclear. As it is not clear what is being promoted, it is unclear on what normative grounds democracy (in whatever form) is promoted. The classical liberal model of democracy comes with a universalist normative justification for democracy support – it is about the defence of the universal principle of individual equality. Yet, other models such as social or participatory democracy can be rather hostile to universalist promotion of liberal rights at the expense of sovereign rights of communities, socio-economic equality and democratic controls on economic freedoms. If movement away from a liberal model has taken place, on what moral or normative grounds is it really promoted?

Third, the fuzziness of EU discourse on democracy leads to some inherent contradictions in the EU's democracy support. While development aid agencies may prioritise social welfare ideals of social justice and equality, the Directorate General for Trade's preference is for strongly liberal forms of economic and political transition in target countries. Incoherencies exist in EU democracy support (and between policy

agendas) because of the lack of conceptual agreement on democracy's meaning. Given the search for policy consistency and coherence within the EU, it is important to consider whether ideological fuzziness of the EU as democracy promotion actor renders this an unrealistic aim.

Fourth, paradoxically, fuzziness on models leads to a concomitant de-politicisation of debate over what is meant by democracy. This can lead to hidden ideological assumptions and rigidities in EU democracy support.[5] There are some curiously 'depoliticised' ideological commitments that can emanate from the rhetorically pluralistic but simultaneously technocratic democracy support instruments of the EU. Just because rhetoric is pluralist, this does not necessarily mean that democratic ideologies or leanings disappear. They may simply start to take new forms. Neoliberal ideological tendencies run deep within the EU's managerial functions, economic priorities and hence understandings of how democracy 'fits in' to the EU's broader agenda. This means that despite rhetorical commitments to the 'European social model', in fact the practice of EU democracy support often veers towards a neoliberal model, within which democracy fits in as little more than an encouragement for entrepreurialism of individuals and civil society actors within a market liberalising 'modernising' liberal state.

Despite these issues, however, the EU is a relatively successful democracy support actor. Even if not always consistent in its 'high political' interventions in defence of democracy, the EU has through its 'low politics' interventions in technical standards, institution-generation and civil society assistance encouraged institutional, economic, legal and governance reforms in many countries. In its more implicit or indirect democracy support, the EU has gained some success, even if the democratic content and meaning of these reforms remains somewhat unclear.

This relative success reflects the fact that the EU has successfully adjusted itself to changes to the liberal world order. Today's liberal world order is shakier and 'less big-L liberal'. Non-ideological pluralist rhetoric works. It generates less contention and less controversy to fudge the ideological premises of democracy support and to focus on technical matters in democracy support. When target countries protest about undue ideological influence over their political matters in 'high politics', the EU's expertise in 'technical' reform of legal, political and economic structures provides an important alternative avenue for democracy support. Despite its high profile failures in sanctioning autocrats or incentivising democratic forces, the EU is a far more successful 'liberalising' democracy support actor than is often recognised.

So, against this background, how should we understand some of the EU's recent reform attempts? Four key reform attempts have been forwarded in recent years: the Council Conclusions of 2010; the new ENP structures responding to the Arab Spring; the reform of trade conditionality; and the plans for a new Endowment for Democracy.

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5.   M. Kurki, 'Governmentality and EU Democracy Promotion', *International Political Sociology* 5/4 (2011), pp. 349–366.

Evaluating reform attempts

›› *The Council Conclusions.* An important review of democracy support took place in the EU in 2009-2010. It was considered important for the EU, and the Council, to review where EU democracy support stood in the context of the various challenges to this agenda on the global scene in the late 2000s and given the decade long experience in active democracy support. In November 2009 and again in December 2010 the European Council published its resolution on this review process, instigating appropriate changes and adjustments to EU democracy support. The key conclusions of this review and the discussion process that followed were as follows:

- The Council called for a firmer commitment to consistency in democracy support. Some contradictions and incomplete commitments were identified in specific target countries and with specific instruments.

- The Council advocated a continuation of the local ownership-based 'non-imposing' approach to democracy support. The dialogue and partnership based approach to democracy support of the EU was considered a strength.

- The Council also called for some opening up of the funding streams attached to democracy support. A more 'political' approach was to be adopted, entailing inclusion of political foundations within the remit of EU democracy support to non-state actors.

- An Agenda for Democracy was instituted which included six areas of emphasis to be featured in future democracy support of the EU.[6]

Despite these adjustments, the Council conclusions argued that *no major shift in approach should take place in EU democracy support.* Strategically, conceptually and politically EU commitments were deemed adequate and changes at the margins only were considered necessary.

These conclusions were important in sustaining and stabilising the EU's niche and reputation in the market of democracy support as a listening, context-sensitive and pluralistic democracy support actor. Playing for a part of the recipient market that had become sceptical of US forcefulness and ideology-driven democracy support was deemed an important aim. Despite tweaking democracy support policy at the edges, the EU concluded that it was broadly doing things right in its democracy support. While some problems of policy inconsistency and funding structure rigidity remained, the core commitments were considered to be along the right lines, and only changes at the margins were considered necessary.

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6. EU practitioners should keep in mind: 1) a country-specific approach to democratisation, including co-ordination of activities of the EU in the individual countries; 2) the commitment to dialogue and partnership as basic principle in engagement with targets; 3) coherence of EU action as key aim; 4) mainstreaming of democracy support in areas of action; 5) international co-operation with other actors and 6) visibility of democracy support as part of EU activities.

Of course, these conclusions now look rather complacent in the light of developments in the Middle East. Crucially, they did not take into account any of the core problems that emerged with the Arab Spring: the double standards in EU democracy support, the weaknesses of the existing structures in pushing for democracy, and the continuing rigidities in the EU's civil society support. As the European Parliament's De Keyser report powerfully argued, the recent shifts in world politics were not anticipated by these conclusions and, as a result, they have been 'overtaken by the events in North Africa'.[7]

Revisiting the Neighbourhood Policy in light of the Arab Spring. So, how then has the EU responded to events in North Africa? One of the key commitments the EU made in response to the Arab Spring was a reframing of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This was to deal with the weaknesses in the EU's long term approach to the region as well as its short term lack of response to shifts in the MENA region. At the same time, the reforms within the ENP demonstrated the shift in thinking within the EU about how to engage in democracy support.

The European External Action Service, having received a lot of criticism for its slow reaction to MENA democratisation efforts, has revamped the ENP to engage the MENA democratisation processes and actors in a more active and comprehensive manner. Instead of prioritising stability and security – key commitments of the previous ENP engagement – the aim is now to ensure better budget controls of current aid and to make sure aid reaches the people it is meant to reach. The new ENP is an important *mea culpa* on the part of the EU, and is likely to lead to a re-think of the consequences, short and long term, of EU aid engagements in the region.

But what do the reforms consist of and have they really shifted the foundational assumptions of EU democracy support?

Faced with the realisation that EU support so far has met with limited results, the EU has called for more flexibility and more 'tailored responses' in dealing with the reform needs of partners. The new 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity' focuses on the need to achieve a 'deep democracy'. What is meant by this is a democracy which lasts and is socially and institutionally embedded in the target states. It is also a model of democracy which comes with inclusive economic development, including not only trade enhancement but also the narrowing of social inequalities, recognised to be of primary concern to MENA populations.[8] Crucial for the response in defence of deep democracy has also been the emphasis on the differentiation of EU responses across countries as well as the incentivisation of target states through the idea of 'more for more'.

But does this new term 'deep democracy' really entail a shift in democracy support, and do the reforms envisaged imply a paradigm shift in EU democracy support? What does deep democracy really mean and does it involve a shift to promotion of

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7. V. De Keyser, *Democracy Support: Seizing the moment, shifting the paradigm!* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2011).

8. For polls on how MENA region populations understand the priorities of democracy vis a vis employment and economic development, see for example IRI's recent Egyptian Public Opinion Survey. April 14 – April 27, 2011. http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/Egyptian_Public_Opinion_April_14-27_2011.pdf

something different from before? Is there a move to promote non-or extra-liberal models of democracy?

Despite changes in rhetoric, the actual vision of democracy that the EU promotes has not changed as a result of the shift in focus to the idea of 'deep democracy'. It seems that the core ideals at the heart of what is proposed are still 'fuzzily' liberal democratic in nature. The focus is still on: 'free and fair elections; freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and the right to a fair trial; the fight against corruption; security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces'.[9] Despite increased recognition of the role of the police and militaries in democratisation, no 'deep-level' shift towards a deeper or broader understanding of democracy is evident. Liberal democracy is still the reference point.

Thus, alternative models of democracy – for example participatory or social democratic ideals – are not systematically argued for. There is no sign of a deepening of democracy towards a 'dual track democracy' with wage earner representation and economic democracy, or participatory democracy which would entail locally derived agendas over national and international policies. Instead, standard liberal ideas are argued for: elections alongside media freedoms and civil society activism, and basic social provisions which allow for a 'responsive' state to deliver 'effective' governance for the people. These assumptions were already part of the EU rhetoric since the mid-2000s and form a core characteristic of 'fuzzy liberal' democracy support.

The significance of 'social welfare' assumptions in 'fuzzy liberal' democracy support has been that they have created the appearance of the EU as a more 'social democratic' democracy supporter. The reality in this regard, however, does not live up to the rhetoric. True, some EU money does go to civil society organisations working for the inclusion of vulnerable groups in democratic decision-making, to work with women, street children or Aids victims in improving their access to decision-making – especially through the EIDHR. Yet, there are problems in reading the EU's role in such service delivery or welfare oriented democracy support as characteristic of 'alternative' politico-economic models, or certainly of 'social democracy'.

First, the EU can and often does undermine any social welfare support with its own sectional interest in pro-business state policies and legal regulations. It can promote basic labour rights in defence of its own interests – to stop local production undercutting EU goods produced with higher wages and standards. Funding social organisations does not necessarily count as the promotion of social democracy: funding basic welfare and accession rights is also consistent with an 'embedded neoliberal' model[10] which incorporates the promotion of pro-market policies and competition together with basic education and welfare concerns. This is in order to embed and stabilise effective market   »»

9. European Comission and EEAS, *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy Brussels: Joint Communication by the High Representative of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy and the European Commission* (Brussels: European Community, 2011), p. 3.

10. B. van Apeldoorn, 'The Struggle over European Order: Transnational Class Agency in the making of 'embedded neo-liberalism', *in Social Forces in the Making of the New Europe: The Restructuring of European Social Relations in the Global Political Economy,* edited by A. Bieler and A. Morton (Basingtoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), pp. 70-92.

society. Further, we must remember that funding social welfare work of NGOs can also undermine a social democratic state: it can weaken its service delivering functions by outsourcing what should be governmental functions while thus strengthening a liberal pro-market, limited state. The EU then may be a promoter of 'embedded neoliberalism' rather than consistent social democracy. And the EU's move to the language of 'deep democracy' has done little to change the contours of EU strategy in this regard.

But what of the claim that the EU has now learned to engage in dialogue with pro-democracy actors? What is notable about the latest proposals is that the EU insists that it 'does not seek to impose a model or a ready-made recipe for political reform'. Yet, despite this statement, it is curious that simultaneously EU documents insist that 'each partner country's reform process reflect a clear commitment to universal values that form the basis of our renewed approach'.[11] No rethinking of models of democracy emerges despite the heavy interest of MENA region populations in socio-economic development and equality as key democratic aims, alongside any demands for individual political rights.[12] Also, little reflection on the need to recalibrate justifications for democracy support have followed. It is simply assumed that universalist justifications for democracy's advancement by external actors stand, despite the potentially differing aspirations on democracy's meaning in target countries. Deep democracy is not matched by deep reflection on what democracy means or how its promotion can be justified. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

This is also the case with the economic reform agenda of the new ENP. EU documents contain some shifts in economic priorities and rhetoric, but continue to specify similar kinds of economic reforms as were envisaged in the 2000s. Indeed, the reform agenda specifies what counts, for the EU, as economically sustainable economic and political reforms for target countries to move towards. There is to be no dialogue on these! More focus on SMEs as a labour-generating force is called for but the rest of the economic reform agenda is by and large in line with the previous agendas of the neighbourhood framework: trade liberalisation, public sector reform, rule of law to facilitate investment and business friendly environments.

Despite the reference to 'deep democracy' in the latest reforms, little then has changed in terms of the EU's conceptual approach: a generically liberal, albeit fuzzy at the edges, democratic capitalist model still forms the core of the efforts to build 'deep democracy'. The ENP Review shows awareness of the need to contextualise liberal democratic reforms in the context of security and governance reforms, but does not propose to shift or change the conceptualisation of the meaning of democracy. Economic reforms too, while reflecting a renewed emphasis on SMEs in provision of work and hence stability, push for an economic vision of an embedded neoliberal state, as they did before.[13]

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11. European Commission and EEAS, *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood,* pp. 2-3.

12. Indeed, polls show that democracy in the MENA is not simply understood as an idea which should improve political representation but is called for because it is seen as an ideal which can bring better economic development and equality. See for example F. Braizat, 'What Arabs think', *Journal of Democracy,* 21/4 (2010).

13. V. Reynaerts, 'Preoccupied with the market: the EU as a promoter of 'shallow' democracy in the Mediterranean', *European Foreign Affairs Review,* 16/5 (2011). S. R. Hurt, K. Knio and J. M. Ryner, 'Social Forces and the Effects of (Post)-Washington Consensus Policy in Africa: Comparing Tunisia and South Africa', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs,* 98/402 (2010): 301-317.

The reform plans certainly show that EU policy-makers have been thinking about what went wrong before; how to encourage more locally sensitive reform attempts; as well as how to take account of the need for more political and economic stability alongside democratisation. Yet, the plans stop some way short of a 'paradigm shift'.[14] The new programme still assumes that the EU 'knows best' regarding what constitutes acceptable 'modernising' economic or political reform in target countries. There is no real effort to engage in dialogue or debate on democracy's meaning, for example with the variety of different potential models of democracy that the Middle Eastern context often raises.[15] Indeed, alternative models are often hindered and blocked, even if inadvertently. As business-friendly social reforms are expected, not only is social democracy made more unthinkable, but real participatory control over democratic agendas and economic processes is disabled. We get, it seems, more of the same: promotion of a 'social model' which is more neoliberal than social democratic in orientation.

Tightening up trade clauses. Another area of weakness that has been highlighted in recent years has been the EU's trade conditionality. The EU claims to exercise democratic conditionality in its trade preference systems. The Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) offered by the EU is an important such instrument. Yet the Commission does not actively enforce the conditionality frameworks which are in place in EU trade treaties for the benefit of democratisation in target countries. The European Parliament has called attention to this – the EU should not allow its trade conditionality clauses to go unexercised in cases where it could have an effects on target countries.

Following these criticisms, a revamp of the EU's GSP framework has taken place. The results, announced in May 2010, are controversial. The key controversy surrounds eligibility for GSP status: the Commission proposes to exclude non-low income countries from eligibility for GSP status. This eligibility issue aside, another development in the reforms to the GSP+ framework is of concern here. The EU proposes that in the GSP+ framework it is for target states to prove that they stick to and support the values prescribed and that it is not the EU's role to measure and monitor whether states qualify. The 'burden of proof' is reversed. The Commission will report to the Council and Parliament every five years on the GSP+ list. To qualify for the list, each state has to show that it meets the criteria and the reporting requirements attached.

These reforms demonstrate that the EU (at least on paper) cares about the monitoring of rights claims, even when in fact it has historically had very little interest in exercising its monitoring role. Under the proposed reform, the EU can demonstrate its interest in monitoring while 'outsourcing' the monitoring to target states themselves. This lowers the expectations over what EU should actively do in terms of monitoring and investigating, while making sure that a procedure is in place for countries to be withdrawn from GSP+ if they do not conform to EU-specified standards.

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14. V. De Keyser, *Democracy Support.*
15. L. Sadiki, *Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counterdiscourses* (London: Hurt & Co, 2004).

Another key change relates to the temporary withdrawal rule. It is now stated that '[t]ariff preferences under the special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance should be temporarily withdrawn if the beneficiary country does not respect its binding undertaking to maintain the ratification and effective implementation of the conventions.'[16] This is important; yet, interestingly, it goes alongside other new rules on raw materials; these are to be traded in a manner favourable to EU industries if the country wishes not to be withdrawn from the trade preference system. It is not just in relation to democratic criteria then that such value commitments are enforced. Overall, the EU is adopting a stricter, if partly self-management, stance. This explains why the EU will save money on the GSP programmes as a result of these changes.[17]

Some obvious issues arise here: while the reforms place an emphasis on monitoring as required by the European Parliament and other critics, they leave the judgments on the reports still with the EU. Hence the reforms are unlikely to solve the problem of lack of will in terms of exercising withdrawal. All these changes ignore an important aspect of EU trade policy and democratisation: *the increasingly implicit role of democracy support in EU trade conditionality.*

The expectation here is that the main method of EU democratisation through trade in target countries is actually through the conditionality of the GSP or GSP+. This is a mistaken assumption. Not only have these conditions not been enforced – and it would seem that the proposed changes do not add anything substantive in terms of ensuring monitoring and conditionality is strictly observed – but much of the democratising effect of EU trade has come through *implicit* means: through the regulatory and legal changes that the EU asks from participating countries, especially those which share Economic Partnership Agreements or Free Trade Agreements with it.

If indeed the real democratisation prospects of the EU trade system lie in implicit trade negotiation rules and agreements on public procurement or business culture, what is the significance of democratic and human rights conditionality? Less than important, one would assume, and exercised in only extreme cases.

The reforms in this area miss the real locale of EU's democratising actions. This is not to say that the reforms instituted are not welcome and do not show some effort by the EU to face up to the weaknesses of its façade of democracy promotion through trade. It is unlikely that much will change in practice in EU democracy support through trade as a result of these changes.

European Endowment for Democracy. The latest reform attempt that emerged from the EU's response to the Arab Spring has been the revival of the European Endowment for Democracy idea. This has been around for some years already and has been advocated by many NGOs as well as some member states. Recently it has re-emerged on the agenda because of concern that the EU democracy support agenda is overly rigid and

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16. European Commission, *Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council applying a scheme of generalised tariff preferences* (Brussels: EC, 2011), p.9.
17. European Commission, *Proposal for a regulation,* p.3.

bureaucratic. The EU has also been slow in responding to windows of opportunity in target regions. The belief is that something akin to the NED in the US will solve the problem in lessening bureaucratic procedures and in allowing more strategic and also more flexible strategic thinking to shape democracy support. This bodes well, NGOs think: such a structure allows them to shift from framing their projects as 'efficient delivery projects' to more genuinely 'democratising' projects.

It is true that the EED offers great potential advantages. It would make EU democracy support less rigid, more responsive and arguably potentially re-politicise, the EU's democracy agenda, which has been reduced to a rather technical affair in recent decades. But there would be important limitations to an EED.

First, there is the PR-problem that any EED is bound to suffer from. An EED would inevitably be compared to the highly politicised US NED. Considering that one of the strengths of the EU agenda in democracy support has been that it is not tied to specific interests or ideological preferences, the EED may end up generating distrust amongst recipients.

A deeper problem underlies the EED proposal in the European context. One of the key reasons that NED works as well as it does is that a consensus underlies the workings of its various institutes. In the EU, consensus is of a considerably more 'fuzzy' nature. Indeed, it is premised on depoliticising the debate on democracy and what it stands for, contrary to the US's universalist approach. In such a context unifying, politicising and strategising democracy support may be near-nigh impossible.

Also, it should be noted that the kind of problems that already characterise EU support to civil society actors may not disappear. Some have accused EU democracy support of being subject to hidden depoliticising, neoliberal and de-radicalising tendencies. Thus, the clashes of rights claims, the role of radical democratic aims and non-liberal approaches to democracy, let alone anti-EU civil society, have not been recognised. Would the EED really solve this problem?

Yes, one might think, in that at least the bureaucratically generated unintentional biases which characterise the EIDHR's work can be challenged and room for strategic support to social democratic actors or trade unions, and their very distinct working practices, can be safe-guarded. Yet, is the role of non-liberal, non-mainstream actors, for example, much improved by this institutional revolution? For example, are radical democrats or anti-EU (but pro-democracy) actors in a position to be any better supported by the EED? This is unlikely. If what we hope for is a paradigm shift in who is funded and how, the EED is unlikely to herald such a breakthrough.

At the same time we should not forget that these reforms go hand in hand with the EU pushing for economic reforms favourable to business environments, SME's and macro-economic financing.[18] Given this is the case, civil society activism presumably should fit within rather than go against such reforms. Indeed, civil society activism should stabilise rather than destabilise economic reforms which, the EU admits can   ›››

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18. EC and EEAS, *A New Response.*

be 'politically challenging'.[19] More than previously, reform is to take place in 'co-ordination' not only with the EU but also with international financial institutions (IFIs). As we know from experiences elsewhere, democratisation in the context of economic liberalisation dictated by IFIs is far from a consensus-building exercise for target states. Activity in civil society then presumably will galvanise support or at least channel critical political activity in ways which make it compatible with the EU's aims. The EED's role is important in facilitating this, just as it has been for the NED. Political flexibility and strategic intervention capacity in this regard are helpful to have; yet, let us not pretend that a new era of ideologically and politically pluralist, non-EU-driven, soft and locally attuned form of democracy support is about to arise.

Conclusion

>> What should be done then in rethinking EU democracy support? Alternative ways forward include:

The EU should *embrace* rather than avoid dealing with the ideological nature of democracy promotion. The Arab Spring – and the financial crises – call for political and ideological awareness, dialogue and debate; not more technical 'EU knows best' responses. The EED is an opportunity in this regard, but this would require that the EU take a more strategic and politically driven approach to debating as well as promoting democracy. EU policy makers should be willing to reflect on and make decisions about what kind of democracy they would like to promote, and why. Normative justifications for the EU's approach and how it links to those of other actors should be openly acknowledged. Instead of working with a 'fuzzy' rhetoric that confuses target states and also on occasion disguises neoliberal tendencies within EU action, the EU should openly debate the politics of democracy support in reflection of its own history and identity. This would mean going beyond the rather meaningless '27 models of democracy support' line or the equally vague rhetoric on 'deep democracy'. EU instruments and activities should be informed by some idea of which models of democracy it wants to promote, within what limits and why. This would help the EU develop a much more strategic, plausible and attractive democracy support platform on the basis of which to engage third countries. While the fear of politicisation of democracy is understandable, the EU needs to come to terms with the fact that democracy promotion is an *inevitably* ideological policy field and that it necessitates debate and toleration of diverse ideas as part of the agenda. Facilitation of democratic debate on democracy's meaning is a crucial requirement in any democracy-aspiring community.

19. EC and EEAS, *A New Response*, p.8.

The EU should reflect on and consider normatively committing to a range of models of democracy in its democracy support. It should consider *classical liberal democracy* alongside systematic reflection on *reform liberalism* and *social democracy* and what exactly it would mean to promote these models. This is where the EU could make a unique contribution to democracy support; and could also meet the expectations of democracy actors for more social democratic EU democracy support.[20] Not all models of democracy – participatory, radical or cosmopolitan – need be promoted by the EU but if it seeks to seriously build a niche for itself, it needs to think about what constitutes a reform liberal or social democratic alternative to democratisation and how best to support it in ways which do not veer into overly neoliberal practices. At present the move in this direction is partial and often counteracted by tendencies towards neoliberal preferences. It is true that social democracy and reform liberalism can be easily mistaken for what are in fact 'embedded' forms of neoliberalism but these models are far from coterminous or compatible, let alone reflective of the EU member states' rich and diverse experiences with models of democracy.

Besides accepting a multiplicity of possible models, the EU should recognise the possibility that hidden contradictions exist in its – and other actors' – approach to democracy support. The EU must be prepared to allow for the fact that clashes may exist between various liberal democratic models, reform liberal models and social democratic models.[21] Fundamentally, it needs to accept that clashes between normative frameworks on democracy's meaning are normal – and even desirable in facilitating democratic debate. Instead of pretending to be 'consistent' and 'coherent' in democracy support, the EU should forget the search for consistency and openly commit to the possibility that democracy promotion may involve encouragement of opposing or contradictory models, ideals or visions. This way, not only proper debate on the meaning of democracy could be maintained in the system, but also the views and contentions of target populations can be more readily taken into account.

The EU should seriously think about the problems of current pluralism in rhetoric. Even pluralistic democracy support can hide rigidities, leanings and ideological orientations, especially when bureaucracy is involved. Any reform attempt is likely to be influenced by a persistent bureaucratic agenda. It also matters that the ways of delivery are what they are: neoliberal technocratic criteria and reporting requirements can undermine any real social democratic alternatives or participatory rhetoric which policy-makers wish to push.

The EU should seriously think about the politico-economic aspects of democracy support. Too often an essentially naïve liberal line dominates: democracy is simply about the political system and economic liberalism can be promoted 'alongside' it. This is not the case, certainly if one rejects the classical liberal separation of economics and politics, which even liberals today find difficult to accept. The structure of the economic system influences the meaning of democracy and vice versa. To recognise what it is that the EU does in democracy support (vis-a-vis economies as well as   ›››

20. International IDEA, *Democracy in Development: global consultations on the EU's role in democracy building* (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2009).
21. S. Bowles and H. Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (London: Routledge, 1986).

political systems) and to understand the full effects of its democracy support (through economic trade agreements for example) the inter-sections of the economic and the political need to be taken into account.

The political economy of democratisation should not be thought of merely in terms of sequencing – that is the relationship between economic development and democracy. It also needs to be thought about in terms of politico-economic visions of democracy that are to be promoted. It is not apparent that the politico-economic model democratisation should aim for is clear today and this means debate on democratisation should not be limited to debate on what should come first, liberal democracy or liberal economics. The very models at the heart of the agenda need to be subjected to debate.

This is made even more pertinent by the financial crisis that now engulfs the eurozone and the poverty of democracy and democratic controls over markets that it demonstrates within Europe. The EU's credibility as a democracy promoter has been severely hurt by the current crisis and hence, not only should it be willing to be less pushy in its democracy support but also it should focus on building credibility for its own action. To do so it has to show humility and reflect on the kinds of debates and positions that are possible in thinking about what politico-economic models of democracy countries should commit to. Debate about democracy's meaning within the EU is as important as it is in democracy support contexts.

How could these recommendations be taken into account? They could be discussed in different forms in at least three different key fora. First, there could be debate within the Commission between different Directorate Generals on democracy's meaning, what conceptions of democracy exist and which the EU should, can and wishes to promote. This should be informed by adequate engagement with democratic theory and various possible 'models of democracy' and what they mean. The issue could also be openly discussed in the European Parliament where contestation over democracy's meaning can perhaps be best revived and appreciated. Political foundations and NGOs, too, as the legacy-bearers of 'political' or 'partisan' democracy promotion have an important role to play in these debates and should be turned to for views and guidance, not feared for their partisanship. New Council Conclusions could be the end point of this process; and conclusion with a different more humble line of analysis, which takes into account the effects of the eurozone crisis on democracy support. This process within the EU would ideally go hand in hand with further consultation with the 'demand' side of democracy support. The EU should ask whether and what kind of democracy support civil society movements and actors in the target countries would wish to see. Also, the EU should not forget the contestation over democracy's meaning among the European publics as part of reviving the debate on new democracy support practices. The views expressed on the 'European Street' as well as the Arab Street on democracy's meaning matter.

The recommendation here then is for more dialogue on democracy's meaning – inside and outside European borders. Democracy support is not a technical and apolitical agenda but a deeply ideological project which structures power relations in target countries and often between donors and recipients. For this reason the EU should lead the way in re-politicising democracy support – to the extent that it can – and crucially in pluralising – in a meaningful way – debates on democracy and democracy

support. This will demand responsible and productive argumentation by advocates of different democratic ideals – holding democracy promotion up on political differences is not desirable (nor is it likely – for political foundations for example while arguing for different ideals also recognise the importance of competing ideals). Nor does it necessitate discarding (liberal) democracy promotion or belief in Western ideals and debates. Debating and exploring – rather than telling and demanding – may be the best defence of democratic ideals – liberal or otherwise – in a world where democratic rights and aspirations are as numerousy as they are rich. Instead of pretending that consensus on liberal democracy can be enforced in the context of the financial crisis and the Arab Spring, the EU should more fully and more consistently push for a real paradigm shift in democracy support, one in which democracy's meaning is no longer fixed, where democratic debate is embraced rather than feared and where true commitment to the value of democracy rather than its utilitarian effects for other ends is appreciated. This is not a call for isolationism or irrelevance, but a call for owning up to the basic demands necessitated from democrats as well as democracy promoters – acceptance of differences of opinion and political contention, and willingness to listen and to learn. In such a context, thinking seriously and reflexively about the conceptual underpinnings as well as practical detail of democracy support is likely to help rather than hinder.

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