The Rhetoric and Realities of Democracy Promotion: The EU Response to Arab Spring Uprisings

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Introduction

The tense relation between interests and moral values might be one of the oldest and most profound questions in political science. Foundational thinkers, modern academics and practitioners of all ages have struggled with questions of how to navigate between idealism and power politics – and which ought to take preference when they conflict.

The European Union seems not to be exempt from this state of affairs. While often described as being transformational in international relations norms (Manners, 2012, p. 252), transcending the power politics of previous eras (Orbie, 2006, p. 124), and being the realization of a peaceful, 'postmodern paradise' (Kagan, 2002, p. 25), there remains a tension between the demands the EU poses upon itself as a 'normative power' and the everyday reality of a world in geopolitical flux.

In recent years, the so-called 'Arab Spring' has given rise to new instances of such a dilemma. While the EU is nominally supportive of democratization, liberalization, and human rights diffusion, the turbulence by which many revolts in Arab countries have been accompanied creates a new series of tensions between shorter-term regional interests and the far-off vision of a democratic European neighbourhood.

This thesis will explore the EU's navigation between the rhetorical ideals and practical realities with regards to democracy promotion by answering the following question: ''To what extent has the EU's response to the Arab Spring been determined by value-driven or interest-driven concerns?'' The research will proceed by analysing both the EU's discursive reaction as well as its on-the-ground response to the uprisings in their initial stage. What I will show is that, while the EU initially responded with democratic enthusiasm, both the development of the situation in the region and the practical limitations of financial aid have given rise to a gap between rhetoric and reality.

Interests and values

As mentioned in the introduction, the tension between the way politics *ought* to be and how political entities *do act* is one of the oldest in societal thinking. In modern IR, however, it can be traced back to the 'Great Debate' between the self-styled Realists and the so-called Idealists, which supposedly occurred near the foundation of the discipline (Hoffmann, 1977, pp. 43-44). According to the narrative, Idealists were caught up in lofty fantasies of

international peace and harmony, with the Realists there to call them down to the violent realities of conflict in the real world.

Regardless of that story's validity, the present-day paradigm is both more diffuse and complex. Broadly speaking, there are still two sides to the debate on interests and values, but the content has become more explanatory and less normative. On the one hand there are *rationalist* theories of political action, such as Realism and Liberalism, which posit that states pursue their own relatively obvious and objective self-interest – be it through different means, depending on the theory picked (Wendt, 1992, pp. 391-392). Alternatively, there are *constructivist* theories of action, which hold that entities – not necessarily states – construct their own intersubjective identities, and form their pursued ends from such interpretative acts, leaving more room for 'subjective' interests and the pursuit of values (Wendt, 1992, pp. 403-407). While there are conceivably other approaches to explain the drivers of EU foreign policy (such as institutionalist approaches), for the choice between interests and values examined here, rationalism and constructivism will be used as 'representative' theories because of the dilemmatic nature of the question.

What rationalist theories of choice have in common, is that they all account for political behaviour on the basis of several assumptions, which were conveniently restated by Caporaso et al. (2003, pp. 11-13). First, it is assumed that the individual is the most elemental unit of choice (methodological *individualism*). In the context of IR this could be readily interpreted as a focus on individual states' behaviour. Secondly, it is assumed that these individual actors are primarily *selfish* and concerned with their own interests – from which follows also the third assumption, that they are *only secondarily concerned with the interests of others*. Finally, the assumption is made that individuals (or states) *optimize* the means chosen for their desired ends. If, for example, security is the goal, the most efficient method towards the maximum amount of security for oneself will be sought. However, some prominent scholars within the rationalist framework have allowed for the possibility of miscalculation by the actors themselves (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 38) or have suggested the individual's 'bounded rationality' (Faber, 2010, pp. 308-310).

Among the rationalist theories, the most salient division is probably that between Realism and Liberalism. Realism tends to emphasize the self-help nature of the international system and the necessity to strive for relative power by whatever means necessary (Dunne & Schmidt, 2017). Liberalism often emphasizes the possibilities for extensive cooperation, spontaneous order, and the win-win mediation of interest disputes through international mechanisms

(Dunne, 2017). Although these are in themselves significant differences, for our purposes, they are merely different means towards the same type of ends: ‘’The debate between these schools is primarily over the content of preferences assigned (…) States as-actors and state preferences are still assumed, not problematized.’’ (Finnemore, 1996, p. 9). Therefore, in this view, interests are assumed to be fixed and said to be the main motivators of state behaviour.

Constructivist theories, on the other hand, emphasize the intersubjective creation of interests. According to Caporaso et al. (2003, pp. 14-15), there are two assumptions within this approach: first, that the environment in which agents act is not only material, but also social; second, that this social environment can influence the way in which agents perceive their own interests, which is called ‘constitution’ (Caporaso et al., 2003, p. 14). Consequently, interests are neither inherently fixed nor by definition the main motivator of state behaviour: rather, what a state pursues as its objective is determined by the values it takes from interaction with its environment.

There are also scholars who have attempted to bring interests and values into a dialectic with one another. Rather than positing that they are completely different and incompatible things or that interests are merely values in disguise, a third approach has been to evaluate the way in which the strategic logic of interests has been used to advance pre-existing values or vice versa. Youngs (2004, pp. 421-431) has argued persuasively that the ideational and strategic dynamics can co-exist, and points to the case of human rights norms being used in such a way that they serve the EU’s geostrategic interests.

Finally, because the research proposed here centres on the specific case of the Arab Spring revolts, one other concept should be included in the interest-value literature: the tendency to promote democracy abroad, which often results in an active pursuit of regime change. To explain this, Miller (2010) introduced a distinction between *defensive liberalism* and *offensive liberalism*, based on the goals and means of security policy in liberal democratic states. In effecting regime change, offensive and defensive liberalism agree with each other (and differ from realism) on the goal: they seek to change the other state’s intentions and character, instead of shifting the balance of capabilities. However, the liberalisms differ on the means: defensive liberalism seeks indirect means to spread democracy – often multilaterally – whereas offensive liberalism attempts to impose democratization – often militarily (Miller, 2010, pp. 567-573).

The EU as an international actor

For the question of how the EU relates to interest pursuit and value diffusion, it is relevant to conceptualize what kind of entity it is. There are various views regarding the matter. Some scholars (particularly Realists) would be inclined to see the EU as nothing more than an elaborate international organization, serving the interests of its constituent member states - particularly the large ones (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 222). Others claim that the EU is a political system that has entirely transcended old ideas of power and sovereignty, representing some new form of political association (Orbie, 2006, p. 124). Both views will be briefly elaborated below.

If we regard the EU as just another intergovernmental bloc, the various aspects of international organisations as described by Hurd (2014) offer an insightful way to look at its actorness. Hurd (2014, pp. 28-36) identifies three ways to look at an international organization: as an actor, as a forum, or as a resource. As an *actor*, the organization ‘’requires some kind of social recognition plus some kind of capacity for action’’, through which it can pursue its own objectives in the world (Hurd, 2014, p. 29). This would entail a recognition of the supranational elements in the EU’s internal structure.

As a *forum*, the organization is primarily viewed as a meeting place for states ‘’to discuss interests and problems of mutual concern’’ (Hurd, 2014, p. 30). In EU terms, this perspective entails the intergovernmental model: the Union has no objectives or capacities besides facilitating the member states’ negotiation of their own respective interests.

Finally, Hurd identifies a possible use of international organizations as *resources*. Whereas in a forum states deliberate and look for consensus on a topic of mutual concern, states can also choose to utilize the organization to augment their own position: ‘’States use the statements, decisions, and other outputs of international organizations as materials to support their own positions.’’ (Hurd, 2014, pp. 31-32). In the context of the EU, this can be related to the oft-heard argument that membership of the Union serves to increase rather than decrease the member states’ global influence and shaping power, and that the EU should be viewed as an extension of the most powerful member states’ interests (Wong, 2017, pp. 146-147). Such is a view which is mainly intergovernmental in decision-making, but which also recognises a collective capacity for action once the decision has been reached.

As mentioned before, however, there are also those who posit that the EU is something fundamentally different. This is the concept of the EU as a ‘*sui generis* actor’, that is to say

unique in its kind and unlike any conventional form of international organisation seen thus far (Wunderlich, 2012, p. 654). Based on this view, it would be impossible to make any meaningful statements on EU action based on the regular dynamics of international organization: one needs to study the EU *as* EU. One particularly popular conception of this sort is 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE), according to which the European Union can best be regarded as exercising international influence through the setting of norms and standards which subsequently become leading in the world. Such a view rests heavily on the assumption that 'new principles' can be deliberately introduced by an actor in order to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the international system, and proponents of NPE argue that the EU is one of the (if not *the*) foremost norm-setting international actor (Manners, 2012, pp. 240-242).

Bengoetxea (2011) describes how the inevitable ambiguity in categorising the EU derives from different ways to look at its identity (pp. 447-450). There are constitutionalist and functionalist strains of thought: within constitutionalism one looks solely at the treaties to determine the EU's institutional arrangements and the conclusion is quickly drawn that the EU is less than a federation and therefore an organization. Functionalist thinking, on the other hand, lays emphasis on the transcendence of formal constitutional arrangements to reach effectiveness beyond sovereignty, which view quickly leads to a *sui generis*-type classification (Bengoetxea, 2011, pp. 457-463). This distinction mirrors the ambiguity of the EU's 'internal' identity as either an intergovernmental organization or as a supranational institution – or an interplay of both elements (McCormick, 2015, p. 22). Ultimately, the theoretical question regarding the EU's actorness remains fiercely debated and difficult to answer in a general way, although it might be clearer in some competences than in others.

The EU between interests and values

How the EU is perceived to navigate between power politics and idealism is likely dependent on one's perspective on international politics and the classification awarded to the EU. Whether actors have predetermined or constituted interests, and whether the EU is an actor in its own right or the sum of its parts, will both influence the way in which the EU is viewed to behave. As has become apparent above, we can broadly distinguish two kinds of approaches to how the EU deals with questions of power: a 'traditional' approach looking at hard power, and several kinds of 'new' approaches centred around supposed forms of non-military power.

The traditional view on power is still present in studies of EU external relations. According to it, the EU is commonly described as being either a potential superpower given its vast cumulative resources (Moravcsik, 2017) or a weak and paralyzed institution unable to effectively project military power and political influence abroad (Kagan, 2002; Wallace, 2017).

This method of power politics has come under increasing criticism, however, which is why in recent decades new conceptualizations of EU influence in the world have been proposed. Notable among these and relevant for the present subject are 'civilian power Europe', which emphasizes the EU's soft, non-military means of influence, such as economics, diplomacy, and institutions (Manners, 2012, pp. 236-237; Orbie, 2006); 'normative power Europe', which emphasizes the EU's significant role in international norm transformation and diffusion (Manners, 2012, pp. 240-245); and 'liberal power Europe', which emphasizes the conflictual nature of norms and interests – both with each other and among themselves – and hence conceptualizes EU policy as the outcome of pluralist bargaining among liberal democracies (Wagner, 2017, pp.1401-1404).

Neorealists would respond to these shifts towards *soft power* with the observation that they are still employed in the service of determined, state-bound ends. Hyde-Price (2006) has analysed EU foreign policy in this light, arguing that it is a ''collective attempt at *milieu shaping*, driven primarily by the Union's largest powers'' (p. 222). *Milieu shaping* refers to the fact that states – and particularly large states – have an interest in the stability of their environment ('milieu'), because of which they will be more inclined to exert themselves for peace and stability there (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 222; pp. 226-227). In this view, the EU's engagement with its neighbourhood should not be seen as an attempt to spread its values unconditionally, but rather as a means to ensure its own flourishing in a stable environment.

In addition, these authors would stress the '*second-order*' nature of many idealistic goals a state (or union of states) might pursue. The biggest priority is said to be self-interest in general and survival in particular: a normative agenda might be pursued, but will always have to give way if it conflicts with fundamental interests (Hyde-Price, 2006, pp. 222-223; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 31; Navari, 2016 p. 52; Pin-Fat, 2005 p. 232).

The Arab Spring and regime transition in theoretical perspective

It is worthwhile to give a brief account of the initial Arab Spring uprisings and their place in scholarship, seeing that those revolts are at the receiving end of the interaction around which this article is structured. The Arab Spring is commonly said to have begun on the 17th of December 2010, when a Tunisian merchant self-immolated out of protest against the conduct of the Ben Ali regime (Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, p.27; Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012, p. 112). In solidarity with the merchant, widespread protests against the regime commenced, which had ‘’a distinct snowball characteristic’’ and spread to other countries in the region (Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, p.38). Countries notably included in this development are Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen (Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, p. 27).

Before that time, authoritarian regimes – mostly inherited from the decolonisation period around the 1950’s – had ruled here more or less uninterruptedly. These regimes had either a ‘praetorian’ character, in which the leader was propped up or removed according to the fancies of a privileged military unit (mostly some type of ‘republican’ or ‘revolutionary’ guard), or they were ‘sultanistic’ in being more specifically centred around one leader, often involving high degrees of dynastic nepotism and a personality cult (Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, pp. 34-35). What each of the pre-2010 regimes had in common, however, was that there was competition between a small number of elite groups, in which the ruling elite had certain economic and career benefits that set them apart from the population at large (Bauer, 2015, pp.32-33). Furthermore, in the years leading up to the first uprisings, many of these regimes had enacted certain policies of economic liberalisation and (ostensible) political reform to undercut domestic voices of dissent, so-called ‘authoritarian upgrading’ (Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, pp. 36-38; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012, p. 127).

These developments gave rise to two dominant paradigms in the study of Arab authoritarian regimes. There was the so-called ‘democratisation paradigm’, according to which post-monarchical authoritarianism was merely a ‘step on the way’ towards the full democratization that would arrive eventually, and there was the ‘authoritarian resilience’ paradigm, which viewed moderate reforms as a convenient tool for the rulers to hold on to their power and consequently expected little change underneath the façade (Bauer, 2015, pp. 31-34; Greffrath & Duvenhage, 2014, pp. 36-40; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012, pp. 126-130). Generally speaking, the end of the Cold War produced a surge in expectations for the democratisation paradigm, while a long lack of transition despite reforms bolstered the authoritarian resilience paradigm

– that is, until the revolutions starting in 2010 demanded a re-evaluation of both (Bauer, 2015, pp. 29-32).

Foreign military and diplomatic involvement has been said to play in important role in determining the outcome of civil conflicts and revolutions (Al-Anis & Hamed, 2013, pp. 82-83). In the case of the Arab Spring, no less than in others, it is therefore reasonable to expect that outside powers will play an active role in shaping these political transitions. Earlier authoritarian regimes were often actively supported by Western powers (the United States in particular), partly as a legacy of Cold War containment policies, partly because of more recent strategic interests, such as regional positioning or cooperation in the War on Terror (Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012, pp. 110-112). Previous authors have identified ambiguities in United States foreign policy as a result of the uneasy oscillation between idealism and realities on the ground (Atlas, 2012; Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012). In the following sections, that uneasiness will be researched in relation to the EU.

Concepts

It first becomes necessary to more precisely define the terms 'interest-driven' and 'value-driven' in order to make them useful for the present purpose. As discussed above, there are foundational and philosophical debates about whether interests are independently given or socially constituted, and to what extent values should actually be considered interests (or vice versa). However, to ascertain whether EU action is based on ideals or strategic calculus, it would be unhelpful to define one in terms of the other – as philosophically grounded as that might be. Rather, a more promising approach would be to define interests and values as their respective predominant schools of thought would have them defined. This means that I will employ a realist account of interests and a constructivist account of values.

Interests therewith become Morgenthau's 'interests defined in terms of power' with all its derivatives (Good, 1960, p. 604; Navari, 2016, p. 53). There are two aspects to such a definition. The first is that the pursuit of 'interests defined in terms of power' is twofold: there are so-called 'logically required' or 'vital' interests, which follow from the necessity to maximize power; and there are 'variable' or 'secondary' interests, which might still imply some form of cultural or ideological commitment (Navari, 2016 p. 52; Pin-Fat, 2005 p. 232). Vital interests would include ''maintaining the nation's territory, its culture, and its political institutions,'' that is to say, security in a broad sense (Pin-Fat 2005, p. 232). Secondary

interests would include values, which is why I will exclude them from the definition of interest-driven concerns employed here.

The second aspect of interests defined in terms of power is that, since they imply *self*-interest vis-à-vis another actor, they are concerned with the advancement of a parochial cause rather than a universal moral standard. One scholar formulates it in the following way: ‘’For realists, the key policy question is always: is this in *our* best interest?’’ (Atlas, 2012, p. 355, italics added). The distinction thus appears to be whether policy is aimed at *the* good (in universal terms) or *one's own* good (in particular). Given these reasons, I have come to define interest-driven concerns as follows: a concern with one's own maintenance or advancement in terms of power and security.

The contrary can therewith be deduced about value-driven concerns. In a value-driven concern, the actor would then be concerned with *the* good in an absolute and unqualified sense, rather than its own particular interest: it would pursue the good of the other simply because it is the right thing to do in the actor's normative world view. Operationally, therefore, these two terms would mean that an interest-driven concern relates itself to what is good *for Europe* (e.g. in terms of security, stability, or growth), while a value-driven concern looks after the good of the other in an ideational sense (e.g. the establishment of democracy, good governance, or human rights *for the sake of the country in question*).

Methodology

Methodologically, this research calls for an investigation of two things: rhetoric and policy. Scholars have repeatedly noticed that there is often a gap between what leaders high-mindedly declare *ex cathedra* and the actions they actually take (Atlas, 2012, p. 363; Bauer, 2015, p. 30). As such, in order to uncover the degree to which this gap exists in the EU's response to the Arab uprisings, it is necessary to compare what senior EU figures have *declared* with what their institutions have subsequently *implemented*. In the following, the general methodological approach will be outlined first, followed by a further specification of how it applies to the present case.

Two methodological approaches will be combined in order to uncover this relationship: qualitative content analysis and a form of process tracing. Qualitative content analysis is concerned with ‘’exposing the meanings, motives, and purposes embedded within a text’’ in search for its latent meaning: it is an interpretive approach to analysing something that has

been stated in political, cultural, or textual documents (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 345-346). Process tracing, on the other hand, seeks to reconstruct a chain of events to uncover which causal mechanisms influenced which path was ultimately taken (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 247-248).

Gläser and Laudel (2019) have shaped a theoretical precedent in combining content analysis and process tracing into a single method, which they call 'extractive qualitative content analysis'. In our case also - although in a slightly different way than Gläser and Laudel had imagined - aspects of both are useful because they allow us to investigate a concern with interests and values in the EU's response. Content analysis will allow us to interpret the meaning of what was said by EU leaders, while process tracing enables us to place said meanings in the appropriate context. However, it must be kept in mind that a detailed reconstruction of events 'on the ground' in the Arab world is not the main objective of this research: ours is not the historian's task. A picture of the chronological chain of events serves to illustrate the backdrop to which EU statements and policies were expressed and enacted – and is thereby a necessary condition to uncover the possible motivations of both, but not the aim in itself. Using a similar design, Pinho Ferreira Pinto (2012) has conducted an illuminating study of the Obama administration's response to many of the Arab uprisings, tracing official statements by White House officials and discussing them in relation to the actual measures taken 'on the ground' – always keeping the focus on the political dynamics in Washington. In effect, the aim here is to methodologically emulate that research, but with specific reference to the EU case.

Data and case selection

In order to make a precise selection in the available material, it must first be made clear who or what is meant by 'the EU'. As described in the theory section, there are intergovernmental and supranational views of European politics. The present analysis will proceed from the supranational viewpoint. This means that it will leave aside the member states and look directly at the European institutions. More specifically, the European Commission, being the 'guardian of the treaties' and binding its Commissioners to represent European rather than national interests (McCormick, 2015, pp. 168-173), will be the focus of this research.

The period under consideration is the beginning of the Arab Spring. This coincides with the year 2011. Back then, the second Barroso Commission held office, containing two central

figures who dealt with the international realm: the President of the Commission himself, José Manuel Barroso, and the High-Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton (European Commission, 2014). Based on the official statements and speeches these figures gave about the Arab uprisings in their first year, the EU's rhetoric will be evaluated. It must be noted that the amount of key figures in the EU was at that point larger than two: there were also, among others, the President of the Council and various national leaders who commented on the situation. As mentioned previously, however, the focus of the present research will be on the EU as represented by the (supranational) Commission, leaving its intergovernmental aspects to future research.

All on-the-record speeches and press releases by European Commissioners are available online at the so-called 'Press corner' (ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en). Searching and sorting the year 2011 for the above-mentioned Commissioners has delivered an inventory of 17 documents (of varying kinds) which expressly and significantly address the Arab Spring situation. Of these, Ashton is the author of 12 statements, whereas Barroso accounts for the remaining 4. However, not all statements are equally relevant to map the unfolding situation: some statements brought more 'news' to the table than others and are therefore qualitatively different. Consequently, the analysis proceeds more selectively than a quantitative measurement of indicators would have been. The table below displays the selected documents in chronological order, detailing their use in the following analysis.

Table 1: EU Commission statements on the Arab Spring in chronological order and their uses in this research.

Date	Author	Title	Use
January 10th	Ashton	Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Füle on the situation in Tunisia.	Discussed.
February 2nd	Ashton	Remarks on Egypt and Tunisia.	Discussed.
February 23rd	Ashton	Remarks at the Senior officials' meeting on Egypt and Tunisia.	Discussed.
February 23rd	Barroso	Statement by President Barroso following his meeting with Navi	Omitted.

		Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.	
February 24th	Barroso	Statement of President Barroso following the meeting with the European Commission with the Russian Government.	Discussed.
March 2nd	Barroso	Statement by President Barroso on the situation in North Africa.	Omitted.
March 9th	Ashton	Speech on the situation in the Southern Neighbourhood and Libya.	Discussed.
March 14th	Ashton	Remarks after the meeting with Secretary General of [the] Arab League, Amr Moussa.	Omitted.
March 22nd	Ashton	Remarks at the AFET Committee.	Discussed.
May 11th	Barosso	Statement by President Barroso following the extraordinary meeting of the European Council on the Southern Mediterranean.	Omitted.
May 11th	Ashton	Speech on main aspects and basic choices of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence policy.	Discussed.
July 6th	Ashton	Speech on North Africa and the Arab world.	Discussed.
July 12th	Ashton	Remarks on "The EU Response to the Arab Spring".	Discussed.
July 14th	Barroso	Partners in Freedom: the EU response to the Arab Spring.	Discussed.
September 27th	Ashton	Address to the European Parliament on the United Nations General	Discussed.

		Assembly, the Middle East Peace Process and the Arab Spring.	
October 12th	Ashton	Statement on the situation in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.	Mentioned.
December 13th	Ashton	Speech on Syria.	Omitted.

Having determined the contents of speech to be examined, the second part of this data selection consists of the policies enacted. One scholar examining the European Neighbourhood Policy in response to the Arab Spring has identified three key documents which have ''sketched the EU response to the crisis'' (Bicchi, 2014, p. 31). The first document was published by the EEAS and European Commission in March 2011 and is called *A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*. The second communication, published in May 2011, is titled *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood*. Both lay out a new approach to democratic reforms in the region. The last key statement is the launch of the Support for Partnership, Reforms, and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme in September 2011, which entailed conditional financial support to reforming countries on a 'more-for-more' basis' (Bicchi, 2014, pp. 31-32). The policy contained in these documents in relation to the qualitative contents of speech mentioned earlier will give an adequate picture of the EU's policy action in the first year of the Arab Spring.

Analysis: tracing rhetoric and practice in the European response

The Arab Spring protests began on the 17th of December 2010 with the self-immolation of a Tunisian merchantman. The first statement issued by the European Commission was a joint statement by HR/VP Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Füle on the 10th of January 2011. In it, the EU calls for ''restraint in the use of force and respect of fundamental freedoms'' (European Commission, 2011a). Despite the protests having already lasted for several weeks, and deploring the killing of several civilians at protests turned violent, the EU issued no unequivocal condemnation of the Ben Ali regime. In fact, the statement reads that the EU ''calls on the Tunisian authorities to investigate the recent events'' and exhorts all parties to ''engage in dialogue with a view to finding solutions to the problems raised by demonstrators'' (European Commission, 2011a). Ben Ali was ousted from the country four

days after, driven more by the unstable situation of his regime than by any form of international pressure (Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012, p. 112).

An important observation follows from this first instance of popular uprising in the MENA-region. Apparently, the EU was neither counting on the end of the Ben Ali regime, nor aiming at it. The fact that the statement calls on the very same authorities people were protesting against to investigate the matter where the situation turned violent, indicates a high degree of confidence in the incumbent Tunisian government, which would be incongruent with a goal of democratic transition. Furthermore, the idea of a ''dialogue'' for finding solutions to ''problems raised by demonstrators'' shows that the protests were initially interpreted by the EU as a 'regular' expression of socio-economic grievances to which a legitimate government would have to respond. There would not be any sign, based on this statement alone, that the situation on the ground had a profoundly revolutionary character and was directed towards the overthrowing of the old order.

In the wake of Ben Ali's flight, protests rapidly spread around the region: the surrounding peoples were apparently emboldened by the Tunisian success in ousting an incumbent leader (El-Anis & Hamed, 2013, p. 85; Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012, p. 112). This was seized upon by the EU as an opportunity to challenge the status quo of Arab autocracies. In a speech to the European Parliament on the 2nd of February, Ashton commented boldly on the phenomenon of the uprisings: ''The message is clear – their political systems have reached a point of no return, and change must come now'' (European Commission, 2011b). In contrast to the earlier statement – which was perhaps issued in the uncertainty of a brief, single case – the regional spread of protest apparently served as a signal to the EU that this was more profound than a regular strike.

Ashton's interpretation of the events in Egypt therewith markedly differs from the initial response to Tunisia: these were ''anti-government protests'' with ''demands for regime change and respect for fundamental human rights'' (European Commission, 2011b). In contrast to the previous case, a clear position was taken *before* the eventual transition took place: ''Time has come for an orderly transition and a peaceful and far-reaching transformation'' (European Commission, 2011b). The declared motivation for this stance seems to have been support for further democratization of the world: ''The EU is a union of democracies – we have a democratic calling'' (European Commission, 2011b). This would mean that the EU response in Egypt's case was primarily value-driven.

The closing remarks at this speech, however, reveal a second intention behind the praises of democracy and popular self-determination. Ashton declared: ''We have a shared interest in peace and prosperity in the Mediterranean and Middle East region'' (European Commission, 2011b). This event was not only seen as a chance to promote the EU's values, but also as something connected to the (economic) interests of both sides – including that of the EU. An active policy towards these tumults in the neighbourhood could therefore also be seen as a form of *milieu shaping* and an interest-driven concern.

However, the degree to which this is the case must be nuanced. A statement by Ashton on the 23rd of February took great pains to reaffirm that the EU ''should offer help but not dictate outcomes or impose solutions (…) the future lies firmly in the hands of the Tunisian and Egyptian people'' (European Commission, 2011c). There seems to have been a fairly quick realisation that too much initiative in determining the direction of the Arab Spring could cast doubt on the legitimacy or effectiveness of the revolutions. Hence, the EU stressed the domestic character of the uprisings: ultimately, it should come down to the peoples themselves to shape their future. Accordingly, the EU should only play a supporting role when requested to do so. This speaks somewhat against a very active pursuit of self-interest.

The day after, Commission President José Manuel Barroso made brief remarks on the situation, condemning the breaking up of peaceful demonstrations by force, especially in Libya. In that country, the situation was getting increasingly out of hand. The Gadhafi regime had been more stubborn in resisting change from the beginning, more so than Ben Ali and Mubarak, who initially attempted to quell the unrest with promises of reform (El-Anis & Hamed, 2013, p. 92). As a result, brutal crackdowns ensued, prompting almost immediate condemnation by the international community. The day after his first statement on the matter, Barroso issued a statement calling the conduct of Libyan authorities ''completely unacceptable'' and declaring himself in favour of regime change: ''It is time for him [Gadhafi] to go and give the country back to the people of Libya, allowing democratic forces to chart out a future course'' (European Commission, 2011d).

On the 9th of March, Ashton held another speech in the European Parliament on the neighbourhood, with special attention to the increasingly hard-pressed Libyan situation. Starting from the region at large, Ashton reaffirmed the basis for EU policy: ''Our actions should be rooted in our core values and interests (…) The emergence of democratic societies will help build sustainable security and shared prosperity in our neighbourhood'' (European Commission, 2011e). This was in effect a symbiosis of the earlier motivations hinted at.

According to this vision, values and interests could not be separated because they were one and the same: democracy is both desirable and conducive to (European) security and trade.

Turning to Libya, Ashton announced that there were two priorities: to address the humanitarian crisis that was unfolding for Libyan civilians, and ''to ensure that the on-going violence stops and that those responsible are held to account'' (European Commission, 2011e). Such strong language had not been used in any of the previous cases, even when violence did occur. Apparently the severity of the Libyan case was such that it demanded all options to be on the table. The mission statement hinted at imminent external involvement: ''The EU will remain at the forefront of international efforts to restore peace and stability in Libya'' (European Commission, 2011e). Again, however, it was also stressed that the EU should and would not dictate the outcome, but merely manage the process: it was a careful balancing act between showing respect for Libyan self-determination and maintaining the option to intervene in case of catastrophe.

In the same period, the EU announced the *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*, a communiqué containing plans for a revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the wake of the Arab uprisings. In a speech to the European Parliament on the 22nd of March, Ashton characterised its approach with the so-called 3 M's: Money, Market Access, and Mobility (European Commission, 2011g). In essence, the idea was to present an ''incentive-based approach'' based on a ''more for more'' conditionality: the more neighbouring (and especially Arab) countries would live up to the expectations of a democratic transition, the more cooperative benefits they would receive in each of the three policy areas (European Commission, 2011f).

Here something needs to be said about support programmes in the context of the ENP. Bicchi (2014) has persuasively argued that developments within the ENP and the nature of government (and especially EU) financing have significantly hampered the effectiveness of the European response to developments in its region. Firstly, she argues, the shift of emphasis away from regional structuring and towards bilateralism has lessened the degree to which Europe can exercise its own initiative on developments – of which the passive 'more for more' conditionality would be a sign (Bicchi, 2014, pp. 28-32). But besides that, there is said to be a gap between pledged budgets ('commitments') and actually spent sums of money ('disimbursements'): political unrest and a rapid turnover of actors has made it difficult to match rapid developments with equally rapid aid, and the more-for-more conditionality alluded to earlier has often backfired when conditions could not be met, leading to the

paradoxical conclusion that ''while more has been promised, less has been delivered'' (Bicchi, 2014, pp. 33-39). Thus, as far as the implementation of such aid programmes are concerned, there is a clear ''gap between rhetoric and practice'' (Bicchi, 2014, p. 33), and this observation applies as much to the *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity* as the other two programmes implemented in response to the Arab Spring.

On the 11th of May, Ashton addressed the European Parliament on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The opening tone of the speech seemed less certain and determined than previous statements: ''None of us in this house know where this will end, and what the end will bring'' (European Commission, 2011h). Ashton called to mind Europe's often difficult and dumpy road to democracy, and stated that ''some humility is in order'' (European Commission, 2011h). Here also, for the first time, the need to translate rhetoric into practice was stressed: ''I can make hundreds of statements – and I do. I deplore, condemn, urge, demand – but we also need to act'' (European Commission, 2011h).

At this point, the wave of protests had spread even further: Syria and Yemen were also in uproar. In this case, too, the rhetorical positioning was strong and unequivocal: ''Let's be blunt and clear, as I was with the Foreign Minister of Syria yesterday: what is happening in Syria is a popular aspiration for democracy and the rule of law (…) I told him [Yemeni president Saleh] he knew what he had to do – in the interests of his country – and that he should do it'' (European Commission, 2011h). These were two statements directly in line with what had been declared earlier about Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Gadhafi: the regimes in Syria and Yemen had lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the EU and should work to facilitate a transition away from themselves.

Bahrain, however, was addressed in a completely different tone: ''In my meetings in the Gulf, I met with the King of Bahrain: we discussed the initiative for dialogue without preconditions that the Crown Prince had put forward, and I urged him to pursue the dialogue'' (European Commission, 2011h). This is striking, because by all accounts the uprisings in Bahrain were just as popularly driven and just as fiercely repressed as in earlier cases, where it *did* elicit condemnation or even early calls for regime change (Greffrath and Duvenhage, 2014, p. 40; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012, p. 136).

The same observation has been made about the reaction of the United States administration. It has been argued that it encouraged reform rather than revolution in the Bahraini case because of a clear strategic calculus: hosting the headquarters of its Fifth Fleet and being an important

centre of stability in the Middle-East, the Obama administration apparently felt more for helping the regime survive in a constructive manner than encouraging a revolt (Pinho Fereira Pinto, 2012, p. 109; pp. 117-118). Consequently, the President's tone in public statements was milder: ''If America is to be credible, we must acknowledge that at times our friends in the region have not all reacted… with change that's consistent with the principles that I've outlined today'' (Atlas, 2012, p.362).

The question then becomes why the European Union felt compelled to follow a similar approach to the case of Bahrain – not hosting any fleets there itself. Particularly since it has not shunned to be quick in calling for regime change, while the United States administration acted ''ambivalent and hesitant'' in most cases (Pinho Ferreira Pinto, 2012, p. 109), it remains puzzling why such a normative force as the EU would not map its own course in human rights issues. One possible explanation could be that it was following U.S. leadership as far as the Gulf Region was concerned. If that was indeed the case, then it would be a clear instance of an interest-driven concern, because the EU would be placing the strength of its own alliances above a value-driven concern with the well-being of the Bahraini people.

Ashton herself commented on the situation in monarchies more broadly on the 6th of July – again, addressing the European Parliament – when she addressed situation in Morocco and Jordan. Both of these monarchies, she stated, had outlined ''ambitious reform proposals concerning political parties and the electoral process'' (European Commission, 2011i). Apparently, this was satisfactory to earn the support of the EU. Bahrain, however, was singled out as a bad example: ''In Bahrain, I have continued to express my concern at the persistence of human rights violations, from trials lacking in due process, to the handing down of death sentences, and the disgraceful treatment of doctors who tried to help those in need'' (European Commission, 2011i). Despite these condemnations, further steps remained to be desired.

On the 12th of July, Ashton spoke at the Brookings Institute in Washington, specifically addressing ''The EU Response to the Arab Spring''. There were a lot of familiar themes from earlier statements: the 3 M's, local ownership of the revolutions, the need for 'deep democracy', and the role of the EU as ''guardian of that process on behalf of the people''. What is remarkable, however, is that at this stage she appeared to have made three categories of outcomes in the Arab Spring phenomenon: there were countries where the transition had succeeded and which now had interim governments; there were countries in turmoil and anarchy, about which no reliable predictions could be made; and there were countries which

were ‘’trying to make the changes without chaos and reform now’’ (European Commission, 2011j). Examples of the first kind are Tunisia and Egypt, to the second kind belong Syria and Libya, and the third kind counts (among others) Morocco and Jordan.

Such a subdivision marked a new degree of realism compared to the initial stages of the revolts. In contrast to earlier hopes about ‘winds of change’ and democratization engulfing the region, there was now large uncertainty concerning certain countries – for which reason she pledged to ‘’stand with the United States’’ on, for example, Libya – and acceptance of modest and gradual reform in others.

Barroso echoed this differentiation of hopes in a speech held at the Cairo Opera House on the 14th of July. Whereas he noted that on the one hand ‘’the steady progress of Tunisia and Egypt has not been mirrored in other countries in the region,’’ he nevertheless acknowledged ‘’the progress in reform that Morocco and Jordan are undertaking’’ (European Commission, 2011k). Algeria, Bahrain and Yemen were subsequently mentioned with differing degrees of determinacy: Algeria was called upon to implement pledged reforms, Bahrain to translate promises into reforms, and Yemen had to ensure that ‘’President Saleh begin the transfer of power now’’. Different countries could count on differing degrees of specificity.

On the 27th of September, Ashton remarked in a speech to the European Parliament: ‘’Six months on we still need to match words with delivery’’ (European Commission, 2011l). The immediacy of the revolutions had at this point ceased to be the real issue: some countries had transitioned, others were implementing reforms; some were in civil war, others had experienced a crack-down. The mood throughout the autumn of 2011 had changed from one of hopeful optimism to the perception of stalemate and sometimes outright disappointment, as when on the 12th of October Ashton was forced to say how ‘’we were all shocked and appalled by the violence against a peaceful demonstration by the Coptic Christian community’’ (European Commission, 2011l). With the coming of winter, the Arab Spring had ended and morphed into a new period of regional instability which was to occupy Europe for years to come.

Conclusion

What the chronological analysis above demonstrates is that, for all the high-mindedness with which the EU initially approached the Arab Spring revolts, it became increasingly pragmatic in its tone as time went on. Whereas in the beginning it was eager to call for regime change

quickly in the case of an uprising, the later stages of the response show that in some cases (Morocco, Jordan) reforms *within* the system were viewed as sufficiently satisfying, whereas the notable case of Bahrain was never followed up with explicit support for the opposition, but always remained a call for dialogue and reform. Furthermore, with regards to the financial aid programme, the discrepancy between pledged funds ('commitments') and money actually spent ('disimbursement'), although only known in hindsight, can nevertheless be seen as a manifestation of the gap between the rhetoric and realities of democracy promotion.

Returning to the research question – that is, to what extent the EU response was determined by value-driven or interest-driven concerns – it can be concluded from these observations that the European Union tried to act based on its values and initially did so with some success, but was nevertheless forced by political realities (and therewith interests) to eventually dampen its tone and accept modest reform over the negative consequences of outright revolution. Furthermore, the many references to 'shared prosperity', 'shared security', and 'peace and stability in the neighbourhood' indicate that an additional motive for initially supporting many of the transitions was economic self-interest derived from mutual gain. This could be seen as a form of *milieu shaping*, strengthening the case for a realist, interest-based explanation.

In addition, the tacit acceptance of different degrees of democratisation according to the feasibility of further progress indicates a more pragmatic approach to democracy promotion than merely spreading values. Rather, it seems that in some cases in the Gulf, idealistic conceptions of the end-state were subjected to either contentment with step-by-step reform or other possible geopolitical interests. This reveals that, at least to some extent, norm diffusion is a *secondary-order* pursuit for the EU.

However, the external validity of this research has to be nuanced for several reasons. Firstly, because it deals only with a single case (the Arab Spring), it is by no means already established that interests take precedent in all conflicting cases for the EU: further studies of likewise dilemmas and their outcomes would have to be made. Secondly, the outcome of a the content analysis is to some extent dependent on the actors and thereby documents selected. In this research, the European Commission was regarded – and even within the Commission, only the most relevant personalities were systematically examined for their speech. It is very conceivable that an analysis of, for instance, the European Council or national leaders could alter the picture. Data selection in a limited study is ultimately dependent on one's conception of what the EU fundamentally is, and that in itself is a loaded discussion. Finally,

Further research could fruitfully be conducted on the Bahraini case. As mentioned previously, it remains an enigma why the European Union did not more strongly condemn its repression, impose sanctions, or openly call for (a form of) regime change. Vague statements about 'the necessity of reform' were in the end the utmost exertion, whereas in other countries demands escalated further given an equal degree of protest and repression. An explanation of EU behaviour towards Gulf Monarchies more generally could perhaps help make progress in this line of inquiry.

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