A MINIMAL DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY THE EU'S ROLE AS DEMOCRACY PROMOTER IN THE ARAB WORLD

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DEMOCRATISATION—A POPULAR SUBJECT

Democracy and democratisation are nowadays popular subjects for politicians, journalists or scholars, but, in spite of the fascination the subject exerts in these various environments, there is no consensus on the most likely ways of explaining democratic expansion or resistance to democratisation. Sometimes, the specific terms at hand in different situations are the same, but they nonetheless refer to different things. Considering the frequency of confusion and the probability of the practical consequences of theoretic ambiguities becoming dramatic, democracy remains a theme of special interest for both decision-makers and researchers in the field of political science.

We start with the observation that the importance of internal governing options has obviously increased at supranational level, becoming one of the main characteristics of contemporary international relations. Although the enthusiasm following the process believed to be an inevitable expansion of democracy in the '90s seems to have diminished, this continues to be seen as the champion regime of the modern world. Considering the positive connotation of the word family, some states tend to proclaim their own institutional functioning and their own set of laws to be 'the most democratic', as opposed to those of their competitors or adversaries, who are accused of having an inferior type of democracy or another regime type (Schmitter, 1998). These, in turn, have different response strategies, from promoting the virtues of dialogue and a minimum set of democratic behaviours to violent rejection reactions. Accepting he idea that there is no ideal model for democracy, either in a universal or in a regional context could actually represent the key to peaceful relations between actors in the international arena.

How could we evaluate the ascending trend of democracy on the 'international ideas market'? How could we explain the opposition to democratic principles and

what are the arguments of democracy promoters? Who are the relevant actors in such an analysis and how could we understand their actions? At the confluence of comparative politics and international relations studies, at the intersection of intellectual trends and developments in global reality, democratisation remains a theme worthy of the attention of political science researchers.

THE THEORY

We start by observing that the multitude of existing academic definitions of democracy and democratisation has a considerable impact beyond the academic debate. According to the way in which democratisation is understood, the assessments on progress made towards democracy can be optimistic or pessimistic, inciting political actors to different forms of behaviour. We shall follow Rustow's (1970) assumption, which opened the conceptual space for separately considering democratic transitions and democracy: 'the factors that keep a democracy stable may not be the ones that brought it into existence; explanations of democracy must distinguish between function and genesis'.

We shall refer to democratisation as a dynamic process, initiated in national unity conditions, where identifiable political actors have an important role in institutional construction; the model deliberately leaves open the likelihood of democracy appearing even at low levels of economic development (Rustow, 1970). This is a movement from less responsible to more responsible government, from less competitive or inexistent elections to freer and fairer elections; from restricted civil and political rights to guaranteed ones; from week or absent civil society to autonomous and numerous associations (Potter, 1997). The democratisation process supposes (whatever the definition, whatever the political, economic, cultural or social context, without considering the assumed goals and the speed of the process), an adjustment of the relations between the governing and the governed, in the sense of a gradual approach, tending to coincidence.

The outcome is a regime known in theory as polyarchy, a wider concept, which could be approximated as a transposition into practice of the democratic ideal: a bi-dimensional regime, supposing, on the one hand, contestation (allowed opposition and public competition) and, on the other hand, participation (the right to participate in public contestation). Dahl (1970) suggests that a functioning democratic system is defined by the existence of eight institutional guarantees:

liberty of association and organisation, liberty of thinking and expression, right to vote, right of the political leaders to compete for the electoral support, alternative sources of information, possibility to be elected, free and fair elections, institutions that make the government policies depend on the vote. The rule of law must be added to all these instruments. It comprises not only respect for the existing laws, but also the realization of an efficient administration, the existence of an independent magistracy and working system to solve private and public conflicts, the absence of corruption and criminality, the presence of a pluralist system of information.

If we are to proceed to an empirical analysis of democratic transitions and instaurations, it is very important to give a minimum definition of democracy. In this perspective, we shall retain at least the idea that all political regimes with universal suffrage (both male and female), free, fair, competitive and periodic elections, more than one political party and different and alternative sources of information should be considered democratic.

IGNORED EXTERNAL (F)ACTORS

In the last decades, the study of democracy and democratisation has occupied a central place in comparative politics and international relations analysis. Between the late 50's and early 70's (a time when democratic governments were the exception and not the rule) new and exciting arguments appeared, to quote only Lipset (1959), Dahl (1971) or Rustow (1970). Empirical arguments were progressively added to the debate on democratisation, the study of concrete examples reflecting more or less the preceding theoretical thinking. After the mid-seventies, authoritarian regimes began to be replaced by democratic regimes, and by the 90's the waves of democratisation reached even the states without traditions, allowing the prediction of such developments. Research adapted itself to these developments, proposing new explaining frameworks for the phenomenon of 'democracy expansion'. The degree of diversity in these analyses is highly interesting, since they favour certain dimensions or specific factors (economic, political, cultural, security), while failing to synthesize them.

Literature proposes various explanations for the start of the process but the areas of theoretical convergence remain limited and generalizations are geographically and temporally limited. Firstly, democratisation studies consider the significant impact of economic development on the existence of democracy, as well as on its

survival. Secondly, there is a general agreement on the central role played by the elites in the democratisation process. Thirdly, regarding the effects of institutional options on political dynamics, the studies refer to the superiority of parliamentary systems over presidential systems in the consolidation and survival of democratic governing systems.

As to the role of external factors, we should emphasise that this issue occupies only a peripheral place in the studies on the democratisation processes, while interest remains focused on the analysis of internal reform dynamics and state-society relations affecting these dynamics. The global context in which the democratisation process unfolds is ignored in most cases mainly because of the difficulty to quantify the impact of external actors' actions on the consolidation of democracy (for instance, in the case of democracy assistance programs), a complex process which progresses in a irregular manner and unfolds over long periods of time.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that the globalization process, the actions of international organisations, especially the financial ones, or the increasing role of non-governmental organisations have diminished the capacity of individual states to act on their own, isolated from the international system. Given the fact that historical evidence suggests a strong impact of external economic, diplomatic or military influences, we believe that in order to construct a comprehensive approach to the topic, we should identify, analyse and explain the role of external factors (at regional or international level) in shaping the actual and potential democratisation processes.

Starting with Dahl's approach (1971), we shall refer to the likelihood of external domination (the only considered form) influencing the chances of polyarchy, through actions affecting the beliefs of the political elites, even reducing the regimes' options, or through direct domination. This perspective can be broadened by considering the relations between equal states with open options on internal politics, who nonetheless shape these options in accordance with the international context. On the other hand, without considering pro-democratisation external pressures as a hegemonic instrument, we shall admit the obvious connection between political principles supported by democratic states and their long and medium term economic and security interests.

Literature developing analytical typologies of external influences on regime change focuses mainly on two central issues: the 'identity' of actors sustaining democratisation and the mechanisms favouring democracy. Instead we shall begin

with a different type of question: what is the motivation of states and organizations for promoting democracy? We believe there are three types of objectives: the satisfaction of normative concerns, the need to improve the security situation and the promotion of economic interests. In order to reach these goals, different actors produce different strategies, using a wide range of instruments. We shall try to evaluate the practical application and the efficiency of these strategies.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE ARAB WORLD—A MULTIFACETED RELATION

If our objective is to understand the phenomenon of democratisation, an attempt to explain the way in which regions with significantly different traditions and approaches to the topic interact can prove to be more than interesting. We shall examine the relations between the European Union and the Arab world for several reasons: firstly, we are dealing with two neighbouring areas, which can be defined as opposed entities as well as interdependent entities; secondly, even though they show block characteristics, each block remains a conglomerate of distinct states with divergent interests, where the common voice in external relations represents more an exception than a rule.

We shall take into account the way in which the two perspectives of democracy are articulated, and look into the recent relations between Arab and European states, trying to find out whether the position of the EU concerning the Arab world corresponds to a real commitment to democracy or is instead a mere reflection of economic and security interests. The role of external impulses in initiating the democratisation process shall not be neglected either, since the democratisation of third regimes seems to have recently become a priority for West-European actors. In our case, the analysis shall focus on the way in which the states pursue their objectives and individual interests in the framework of multilateral formats; we refer to inter-regional institutionalized co-operation, manifest in different areas: politics, economy, culture and security. The relations between the European Union and the Arab world shall not be considered as a classic interventionism/imperial politics scheme; we believe that the proper perspective is to look at these relations as connections between states seeking to attain their own goals and some common objectives, while betting on the co-operation card and hoping that all the players face a win-win situation.

Before the end of the Cold War, the efforts aimed at stabilising allied regimes were mainly focused on the security dimension, and additionally, on the economic dimension; the instruments used were mainly military assistance and some development assistance, initially in the form of US support to the states in the frontline of anti-communist fight (in Western Europe and South-East Asia). In recent years a shift can be observed in the understanding of the political dimension and the (bilateral or multilateral) 'partnerships' of democracies with actors from outside the 'democratic area' seems to be essential.

In their specific relation to democracy, consolidated democracies have a major interest in stabilising the periphery, while the neighbouring states are interested in getting closer to credible partners, in order to enhance their reputation and to identify new ways of ensuring the predictability of internal developments. Although at first glance these positions seem irreconcilable, the existence of convergent interests gradually leads to language alteration and adaptation of action strategies.

On one hand, supporters of democracy tie the development of economic relations to the maintenance of a political dialogue, but sometimes tend to reduce the dialogue on democratisation to a minimum set of elements, thus introducing double standards in critical assessment, applied according to their specific momentary interests. On the other hand, non-democratic states, motivated by the need for legitimacy or the desire to strengthen their position as constant economic partners, can make concessions at the discursive level or turn to adjustments of the internal institutional framework, so that it can be described as democratic. In this way specific institutional dialogue frameworks are constructed, with a view of pursuing jointly assumed objectives, and the dialogue areas are usually extended in a progressive manner (from economic to political an even security dialogue).

In the European case, the development assistance offered to the states of the Arab world set out as a continuation of politics from the colonial age (preferential trade agreements, public investment, and fixed export prices). The promotion of democracy was used more as a pretext for undermining communist dictatorships than as action following the logic of some universally valid rule. After the collapse of communism, the policies of western states changed simultaneously with the start of ambitious reforms in the neighbouring states. The end of the Cold War cut off international support for many of the authoritarian regimes in the developing states, thus offering new opportunities for democratisation. Democracy and market

economy/capitalism began to be presented as a universally applicable solution. Given the interdependence between democracy and prosperity, the transformation of neighbouring regimes into democratic market economies seemed to be the best way of ensuring stability. The post-communist transition countries formed the avantgarde of what was supposed to be a global democratisation process.

What has happened so far? The current state of the European Union's neighbourhood is far from being a perfect testimony of the Union's major success in stability export. None of the instruments used, including trade liberalization, foreign direct investments, financial assistance and political dialogue, has proved to be 100% efficient. Economic incentives seem to work only if the states are already well governed, therefore donors tried to induce reforms recommending to aid recipients the adoption of democratic policies permitting good economic relations, and also appealed to a variety of labels: conditionality, political dialogue and democracy promotion. However, political dialogue has never been a purely technocratic exercise: the choice among the different reform strategies, reflecting different values and interests, affecting the income-wealth distribution, has always been a political problem which can determine the survival of governments and social peace in partner countries. The actions suggested by the donors involve the risk of unpredicted and unintended consequences.

EUROPEAN DEFINITION(S) OF DEMOCRACY

From a juridical outlook, the European Union recognizes the principle of democracy as a fundamental principle for the Union and as a common principle for the Member States (a recent acknowledgement from 1999, when the Amsterdam Treaty came into force). A similar reference can also be found in the Charter of the fundamental rights of the European Union, proclaimed in 2002 in Nice, which reiterates that the Union is based, among others, on the principle of democracy.

As to the external action sphere, the Treaty on the European Union, signed in Maastricht in 1992, included two references to democracy, which have not been amended by the later Treaties. The first is found in the framework of the provisions on a common foreign and security policy: article 11 *(1)* stipulates that the development and consolidation of democracy is among the objectives of the Union's common foreign and security policy. The second is in the framework of the provisions on the development of co-operation: article 177 *(2)* of the Treaty

Establishing a European Community (TEC) stipulates that Community policy in the sphere of the development of co-operation should contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy. The Treaty of Nice contains a new reference to democracy, in the framework of provisions on economic, financial and technical co-operation with third countries. 'Community policy in this area [economic, financial and technical co-operation with third countries] shall contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to the objective of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms' (Article 181a(1) TEC).

At a first glimpse, we could conclude that the principle of democracy, as a common value of the Union, should be respected not only within its borders, but also in the Union's external relations, particularly in the common foreign and security policy, in the development and co-operation policy and in the economic, financial and technical co-operation with third countries. The EU's democracy promotion activity seems to have a strong juridical basis. The problems arise only when it comes to identifying the precise meaning of 'democracy' and 'democratic' actions, since these meanings differ as interlocutors differ.

In the case of candidate countries, the 'democratisation through enlargement' strategy proved to be a remarkable success: political conditionality (the Copenhagen criteria) was the major instrument of the EU, progress toward membership being measured in terms of compliance. States in Central and Eastern Europe had to ensure the 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities', by implementing the following main political priorities: reform of the judiciary (in particular independence of the judiciary), fight against corruption, reform of the administration and decentralization, real guarantees of political, civil, economic and social rights and the protection of minorities.

In the case of neighbouring states, the Union declared its intention to promote democratic reforms in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Eastern Europe, the Southern Mediterranean and Southern Caucasus, aiming to create a 'ring of friends'—i.e. states that do not have the perspective of EU membership, but can anyway enjoy privileged political, economic and cultural relations with the Union (data from www.europa.eu.int). The ENP was developed in the context of the EU's 2004 enlargement, with the objective of avoiding the

emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and strengthening stability, security and well-being for all concerned. It was first outlined in a Commission Communication in March 2003, followed by a more developed Strategy Paper in May 2004, outlining in specific terms how the EU proposed to work more closely with these countries. The key elements of the European Neighbourhood Policy are the bilateral ENP Action Plans mutually agreed between the EU and each partner country, which set out an agenda of political and economic reforms with short and medium-term priorities. Originally, the ENP was intended to apply to the immediate neighbours—Algeria, Belarus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and the Ukraine; in 2004, it was extended to also include the countries of the Southern Caucasus with whom the candidate countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey shared either a maritime or land border.

The EU offered its neighbours a privileged relationship, building upon a mutual commitment to common values (democracy and human rights, rule of law, good governance, market economy principles and sustainable development), and going beyond the existing relationships to offer a deeper political relationship and economic integration. The level of the relationship was supposed to depend on the extent to which these values were effectively shared. According to the European Commission, in return for concrete progress demonstrating shared values and effective implementation of political, economic and institutional reforms, including aligning legislation with the acquis, the EU's neighbourhood should benefit from the prospect of closer economic integration with the EU … the prospect of a stake in the EU's Internal Market and further integration and liberalisation to promote the free movement of—persons, goods, services and capital. (COM(2003) 104 final, 11.03.2003, p. 4)

The Commission made clear some essential prerequisites for political stability: democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law and core labour standards, and described the political situation in the two regions of neighbourhood policy as follows: 'nearly all countries of the Mediterranean, the WNIS and Russia have a history of autocratic and non-democratic governance and poor records of protecting human rights and freedom of the individual. Generally, the countries of the WNIS and Russia have taken steps towards establishing democracy and market institutions over the past 12 years. Yet political reform in

the majority of the countries of the Mediterranean has not progressed as quickly as desired'. (COM(2003) 104 final, 11.03.2003, p. 7)

In the southern Mediterranean, the ENP brought added value to the provisions of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Barcelona Process started in 1995 (data from www.europa.eu.int). It is considered 'a unique and ambitious initiative', and its goals are, according to the Barcelona Declaration, *(1)* the definition of a common area of peace and stability through the reinforcement of political and security dialogue (Political and Security Chapter), *(2)* the construction of a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free-trade area (Economic and Financial Chapter), and *(3)* a rapprochement between peoples through a social, cultural and human partnership aimed at encouraging understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies (Social, Cultural and Human Chapter). The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership comprises two complementary dimensions: a bilateral one (through the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements that the Union negotiates with the Mediterranean Partners individually and which reflect the general principles governing the new Euro-Mediterranean relationship, although they each contain characteristics specific to the relations between the EU and each Mediterranean Partner), and a regional (regional dialogue representing one of the most innovative aspects of the Partnership, since it covers at the same time the political, economic and cultural fields).

In the case of the EU's relations with other countries in the Arab world, references to democracy are less markedly present although respect for human rights remains a precondition for commercial agreements; Article 177 of the TEC, which refers to the development of co-operation, lays down the objectives of development of co-operation with reference to human rights, particularly by opening the door to 'human rights' clauses: 'Community policy in this area shall contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms'. Gradually, the clauses containing provisions related to violation of human rights have been incorporated in all bilateral trade and co-operation agreements. Article 177 also states that 'The Community and the Member States shall comply with the commitments and take account of the objectives they have approved in the context of the United Nations and other competent international organisations'. There is, however, no specific requirement related to democracy in its political dimension.

EU's relations with the countries of the Co-operation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (a regional organisation created in May 1981 by Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) are channelled through a Co-operation Agreement signed in 1989 between the European Community and the GCC (data from www.europa.eu.int). The objective of this Agreement is to contribute to the strengthening of stability in a region of strategic importance and to facilitate political and economic relations, but even though officials stressed their political will to further relations and co-operation in all areas besides trade and economic issues, little if no progress followed. There were positive signs on specific security areas such as counter-terrorism or non-proliferation; however, even the negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (initiated in 1990, soon blocked and resumed in 2002) are facing difficulties and the partners have not yet reached consensus.

The enhancement of co-operation in political, economic and social fields remains a desideratum, reaffirmed, in the aftermath of the Iraq war, by the establishment of an EU Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which provoked a renewed interest in EU-GCC relations. The EU believes that such enhanced co-operation will also open up possibilities for the European Commission to support the region's domestic reform efforts, including areas such as education or human rights.

Once more, there is no specific reference to democracy in its concrete political dimensions. Could it be because Europeans carefully respect the sovereign right of third states to decide on internal affairs (and human rights represent the only area where the large freedom of action traditionally belonging to States has been restricted in many respects by international law)? This could be an explanation. But it could be argued against very easily after one closer look at some statements made by EU officials, who, at a discursive level, continue to critically address internal developments in third states, where elements characterizing democratic regimes (free elections, freedom of speech or of association) are absent.

It is noticeable that the declarations often differ in intensity, and one possible reason is the difficulty of EU member states to reach a compromise on the meaning and consequences of their assessments (regardless of whether they are Conclusions of the Council or statements by the EU Representatives); the EU's external relations remain, for the most part, an area where the level of decision is not communitarian, but inter-governmental, where decisions are taken not by majority, but by consensus.

And consensus is difficult to reach when 25 (or soon 27) actors with often divergent individual interests have to negotiate priorities and budgets. Consequently, EU's critics seem to be right in stating that the EU is applying double standards and avoids any actions that involve the risk of irritating some of its potential 'strategic' partners, in terms of geopolitics/security/trade.

They could also be right in criticising the inefficiency of the Union's actions as democracy promoters. For the moment, there is no democratisation in the Arab world: even though the need for reforms is no longer a taboo theme, and steps have been taken toward liberalization, the reform discourses of administrations in the Arab World are far more generous than their actual actions of reform implementation. More than that, it will come as no surprise that short-term plans to export stability rarely fit cultural, political and social realities on the ground; although no one can deny the local elites' desire to question the existing regimes and to build alternatives for the future, there are no widespread popular movements favoring change and it is difficult to predict the moment when the debate on democratisation will spread over to politics, encompassing large-scale norms and values. There is still potential for conflict between liberal values and democracy as reflection of the majority will (hence the risk of oppression), and there is still a gap between the need for economic liberalization and the subsequent budget cuts (hence the risk of paralysis of state institutions). Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that elites will easily support reform processes comprising measures which could put drastic limits to their wealth and power resources. But abandoning the mission is not an option for democracy promoters.

POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

The promotion of democracy remains a favoured objective of the European Union in its relation to other parts of the world. Even if democracy's supremacy in not universally endorsed, even if the 'end of history' seems to have been postponed, the factors blocking democratisation are regarded more as accidents and less as permanent roadblocks to the triumphal procession of democracy. The lack of open political systems, the temptation of authoritarianism and the violent conflicts between governments and opposition movements are seen as key-factors limiting the potential for economic, social and human development of societies in some parts of the world.

Although the difficulties of transition from autocratic to democratic systems can be anticipated in the case of the Middle East or Northern Africa, there is still support, amongst European officials, to the idea that only authentic democratisation can lead to peace, justice and prosperity. Avoiding a normative approach (as long as democracy promotion is looked upon as an instrument for stability and predictability of regimes in the Arab world, rather than as a *per se* objective), the majority of decision makers proclaim the long term advantages of liberal democracy for the region. The only 'compromise' in the 'recipe' is the acceptance of the fact that immediate assertion of 'western—type' democracy is not a must, and that a gradual process, conducive to increasing participation of people in the economic, social and political life, in harmony with the specific religious norms, is preferable for the states in this area. Even if the 'clash' between western and Arab political and spiritual values is sometimes brought up as an obstacle to stability, Europeans believe that, without constant pressure and pro-liberalisation arguments from external factors, without exposure to the political 'model' in place in the European states or in the US, the kickoff of the 'democratisation race' in the Arab world seems impossible.

What would be the proper course of action for the EU in this complex context? One solution could most likely derive from the understanding of democratisation as a long term objective, or, in other terms, from the construction of 'consumer targeted marketing strategies' in the process of 'democracy export'. Another answer should probably relate to the 'product' itself. This well-known 'soft-power' could probably become a more successful actor on the international stage if it were to resolutely (not audaciously) resort to the same arguments that served the European construction. A good example of efficient institutional power-sharing; an illustration of economic performance derived from political will; on the whole, a successful model of co-operation based on shared values: this is what the EU stands for.

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