The role of democracy assistance in future EU external relations

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- Democracy promotion is a prominent and important EU foreign policy objective, and the EU wields numerous policy instruments to try to encourage democracy in third countries.
- However, other interests – commercial, security – tend to 'trump' democracy promotion in practice.
- The inconsistent way in which the EU promotes democracy could reduce its effectiveness in convincing third countries to launch and proceed with democratic reforms.
- Although the EU uses language about values to justify the promotion of democracy, its policies to do so are not just about promulgating values: they are seen as a fundamental part of a long-term strategy to promote peace. In the short run, however, other aims are often seen as more pressing.
- The development of a European identity does not need a value-based foreign policy, but the inconsistent and incoherent pursuit of aims such as democracy promotion does not contribute positively to the EU's identity, either internally or internationally.
- EU democracy assistance does add value to overall democracy promotion efforts, but there is considerable potential to add even more, if member states would agree to coordinate their political aid programmes with each other and with the European Commission.

1.3 The role of democracy assistance in future EU external relations

1.3.1 Where is democracy promotion really placed in the hierarchy of European interests?

It must first be noted that it is difficult to specify a 'hierarchy' of European interests. The EU has tended not to set priorities among its various interests and policy objectives (most notoriously in the CFSP Common Strategies, as Javier Solana noted back in January 2001): only in 2001 did the EU begin to discuss priorities for external action. The European Security Strategy of December 2003 set out three strategic objectives: tackling key security threats, building security in the EU's neighbourhood, and promoting an international order based on effective multilateralism.[1] But it is still not clear which of these objectives comes first, either generally or in specific cases, nor what the hierarchy is among the various 'sub-objectives' listed, such as resolving the Arab/Israeli conflict or expanding the membership of bodies such as the World Trade Organisation.

Nonetheless, democracy promotion certainly seems to be an important EU policy objective. Since the Maastricht Treaty, the development and consolidation of democracy has been 'legalised' as an objective of both the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Community's development policy. In December 1998, the EU further declared:

The universality and indivisibility of human rights and the responsibility for their protection and promotion, together with the promotion of pluralistic democracy and effective guarantees for the rule of law, constitute essential objectives for the European Union as a union of shared values and serve as a fundamental basis for action.[2]

In June 2001, the Council reaffirmed 'its determination to promote stable, democratic environments, founded on the full enjoyment of human rights'[3], while the 2003 Security Strategy declared that the EU favours the spread of well-governed democratic states.[4]

The importance of democracy is not just limited to declarations: the EU wields several policy instruments to try to promote democracy, including positive and negative conditionality,[5] democracy aid, political dialogue and election observation. Democracy has been a condition for membership since 1978, when the European Council declared that 'respect for and maintenance of representative democracy and human rights in each Member State are essential elements of membership in the European Communities.'[6] The 1993 Copenhagen conditions for EU membership – now the benchmark for determining membership eligibility – state that applicants must have achieved 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities'.[7] Third countries beyond Europe are also subject to conditionality. The 'human rights clause' defines respect for human rights and democratic principles as an essential provision in the EU's cooperation and

[1] European Council, Brussels, 12 December 2003, 'A Secure Europe in a Secure World: European Security Strategy'.
[2] European Union statement on human rights, *EU Bulletin*, no. 12, 1998, p. 111.
[3] Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the European Union's role in promoting human rights and democratisation in third countries', Luxembourg, 25 June 2001.
[4] European Council, 'A Secure Europe in a Secure World', p. 10.
[5] Positive conditionality entails promising and delivering benefits (such as aid) if a third party meets certain conditions; negative conditionality entails withdrawing those benefits (or the promise of them).
[6] European Council, Copenhagen, 7-8 April 1978, 'Declaration on Democracy', *EC Bulletin*, no. 3, 1978, p. 6.
[7] Conclusions of the Presidency, European Council, Copenhagen, 21-22 June 1993, SN 180/93, p. 13.

association agreements with all third countries.[8] And new democracies – such as South Africa in 1994 – have been promised aid and agreements so as to encourage and consolidate democratic reforms.

From 1986 the Community began to give small amounts of aid to some third countries specifically to foster democratic reforms. In 1994, the various funds were consolidated under one budget heading, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), whose budget has increased from ECU 59.1 million in 1994 to €410 million for 1999-2004. All of the EU's political dialogues with third countries and regional groupings are supposed to cover issues relating to human rights and democratisation. Finally, since the early 1990s, the EU has launched numerous missions to observe elections in third countries to help ensure that they are conducted freely and fairly.

But there are reasons to doubt the extent to which democracy promotion really matters for the EU, because other interests and objectives tend to trump democracy promotion in practice. The use of both positive and negative conditionality, particularly beyond the relatively small group of EU applicant states, is – to put it mildly – uneven. Aid has not been systematically redirected to democratising countries, and some democratising countries (South Africa, South Korea) have soon found themselves engaged in commercial disputes with the EU. Not every *coup d'etat* or blatant violation of democratic principles (including fraudulent elections) is punished with sanctions or even verbal condemnation. The commercial or strategic interests (including the desire for stability) of one or more member states can prevent agreement to impose negative measures. For example, from late 2001, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Iran have even been *rewarded* by the EU for their help in ousting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, even though none can be said to be squarely on the path towards democratisation. In the case of Pakistan, while in the wake of the *coup* that brought General Musharraf to power in 1999, the EU did impose some diplomatic sanctions and suspend negotiations on a cooperation agreement, the member states could not agree to cut off aid to the country – particularly since Musharraf was promising to improve relations with India.[9] These mild sanctions were completely reversed after the terrorist attacks on the US. The EU has also been slow to react to situations in which a country slides into authoritarianism, such as in Zimbabwe, and, as seen in that case, the member states can find it difficult to stick with any measures that have been agreed.

The EIDHR is a substantial programme – and EU political aid generally compares well with the amounts of aid provided by other donors (see Table 1), but it is still a very small percentage of the EU's external action budget, which is itself a small percentage of the EU's overall budget. EIDHR funds have not been used extensively in regions of the world that are more sensitive to outside 'interference' on issues of domestic jurisdiction (including Asia and the Mediterranean[10]). Most of the EU's external aid still goes to traditional development activities and reconstruction, and the mainstreaming of democracy concerns within those programmes is patchy at best. There is still a strong tendency to assume that political change will follow naturally from economic reform.[11] The EU's political dialogues with third countries are short meetings with

[8] Therefore either party to the agreement could terminate the agreement or suspend its operation if an essential provision is violated.

[9] Gareth Harding, 'Union softens its stance on Pakistan coup', *European Voice*, 10-17 November 1999; Council of the European Union, 'Annual Report CFSP 1999', document 5990/00, 10 April 2000, section II.12.m.

[10] The title of a recent Commission communication is revealing: 'Reinvigorating EU actions on human rights and democratisation with Mediterranean partners: strategic guidelines', COM (2003) 294 final, 21 May 2003.

[11] On this, see Richard Youngs, *The European Union and the Promotion of Democracy: Europe's Mediterranean and Asian* Policies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 194.

long agendas that include numerous topics in addition to human rights and democracy concerns, such as the fight against terrorism, organised crime and illegal immigration, which particularly since 11 September 2001 have topped the policy agenda. While there are dialogues specifically devoted to human rights with particular third countries (such as China), there are no dialogues on democracy alone.

These inconsistencies do not fit very well with the EU's declared foreign policy ambitions. It links democracy, human rights, development, and good governance in a virtuous package that will eradicate the root causes of conflicts, failed states, illegal immigration, and terrorism.[12] Thus promoting democracy will help promote human rights, development and good governance, prevent conflicts, and combat illegal immigration and terrorism. The problem is that in given situations the parts of the package may not fit together so easily, and hard choices have to be made about priorities, especially in the short term. Thus, while democracy promotion is clearly an important foreign policy aim for the EU, and resources (money, diplomatic time, and so on) are devoted to it, it does not by any means come top of the EU's hierarchy of interests. Other interests – such as combating terrorism or protecting the EU's agricultural market or fisheries resources – often prevail over democracy promotion, and may even harm the pursuit of that objective. It will be difficult for outsiders to take the EU seriously when it pushes democracy if it does so inconsistently – and this reduces the EU's potential effectiveness in fostering democratic reforms.

1.3.2 Democracy promotion and strategic foreign policy: does European identity need a value-based policy agenda?

EU democracy promotion is not just about promulgating values as part of an 'ethical' foreign policy, as is clear from the preceding paragraph. There is widespread acceptance in EU policy-making circles of the democratic peace proposition: democracies don't fight each other, therefore promoting democracy is a peace strategy (and clearly of primary importance). Democracy promotion is thus clearly a strategic interest for the EU.[13] The Union's efforts to prevent conflicts in *and* between third countries include the promotion of democracy – though it is acknowledged that the democratisation process itself may be destabilising, so that considerations of stability must also be balanced with those of democracy. This example shows how in practice – *pace* the realists – the difference between 'values' and 'interests' can be vague: isn't preventing instability in the EU's neighbourhood and beyond by a policy of democracy promotion in the EU's interests? The problem is, of course, that reconciling order and justice in international relations is not so easy: promoting democracy ('justice', most obviously, but also 'order' if we take the democratic peace proposition seriously) is a long-term policy; in the short-term, other issues of 'order' (including, somewhat paradoxically, security considerations) may be seen as more pressing.[14]

[12] See, for example, the presidency conclusions from the European Councils in Tampere, 15-16 October 1999, paragraph 11, and in Seville, 21-2 June 2002, annex V.

[13] Of course, the extreme version of this same doctrine is that of US neo-conservatives. Chris Patten warned against '"armed missionaries" – bringing democracy to Islamic countries on the tips of precision-guided missiles. If we in the West think that democracy as a political form holds global appeal, we should not force-feed it to subservient states as a Western geostrategic option.' Chris Patten, 'Democracy doesn't flow from the barrel of a gun', *International Herald Tribune*, 16 September 2003. But democracy promotion is still seen as security strategy in the EU too.

[14] On 'order vs. justice', see Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler, 'Blair's Britain: A Force for Good in the World?', in Karen E Smith and Margot Light, eds, *Ethics and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 169-71.

In the EU's foreign policy discourse, there is certainly rhetoric about democracy promotion reflecting its values and identity. For example, External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten has declared, 'it must be right for this European Union, increasingly and rightly seen as one of the bastions of democracy in the world, to devote a much greater effort to promoting free and fair elections beyond its borders, in countries where the rights which we are too often inclined to take for granted are still fragile or under threat.'[15] The EU has a moral duty – not just a strategic interest - to spread democracy because it itself is a club of democracies.

All foreign policies express the identity and values of the state (or entity, in the EU's case): policy-makers must choose particular courses of action (however constricted the choices might be) and even where we might say these have been designed solely to fulfil certain material interests, the conceptualisation of those interests – and the way they are to be pursued - reflects fundamental values. Additionally in the case of the EU, any collective foreign policy is the result of compromises among the member states – which include some states with quite explicit and strong 'ethical' orientations. Here it should be noted that the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe can be expected to back quite vigorously the EU's promotion of democracy and human rights – because of their historical experiences of authoritarianism.[16] So agreements reached at the EU level must perforce accommodate such values, at least to some degree. Thus a value-based policy (to the extent that we consider democracy promotion to be primarily about the promotion of values) must arise from the EU's identity, and more particularly that of its member states.

But that is a different matter to the question of whether the development of a European identity needs, or depends on, the pursuit of a value-based foreign policy – meaning that 'ethical considerations' such as democracy or human rights come before the pursuit of self-interested commercial or strategic considerations, except where vital national interests are at stake. If we are to argue that it is, then the road towards a common identity is going to be littered with deep potholes. For no international actor pursues completely consistently such a value-based foreign policy – though we could maintain that some do come close (such as the Scandinavian countries or Canada, but we can all think of examples where even these countries did not pursue an entirely 'ethical foreign policy'). Certainly the EU's inconsistent promotion of democracy proves how difficult it is to be a 'good international citizen'.[17] The implications of such inconsistency and double standards are presumably not positive for the development of a European identity if we hold that that identity needs a value-based foreign policy.

But there is a further complication in the case of the EU, because the EU itself cannot properly be conceived as a democracy, whether you believe the 'democratic deficit' is serious or not. Decisions are made by elites, and it is not possible for the public to throw out one set of EU-level decision-makers and replace them with another: MEPs contribute to decision-making, but only in part; and individual members of the Council of Ministers are members of governments but they are obviously elected on the basis of national elections. Christopher Lord, among others, argues that the main constraint on the democratisation of the EU is the lack of an EU-wide demos, based on a shared identity. This could be constructed around shared civic values (rather than ethnic identification) but 'the Union would not be able to make a common attachment to liberal-democratic

[15] Chris Patten, 'Speech to the European Parliament plenary on the Commission communication on EU election assistance and observation', Speech/01/125, 14 March 2001.
[16] See Jiri Sedivy, 'The Impact of the New (Post-Communist) EU Member States on the CFSP', *CFSP Forum*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2003 (www.fornet.info), p. 9.
[17] Dunne and Wheeler suggest that 'good international citizens' are those states that place concerns such as human rights (we would add democracy promotion here) before the pursuit of narrow commercial and political advantage. Dunne and Wheeler, 'Blair's Britain', p. 171.

values the basis of its association without embedding those same values in its own practices.'[18]

In this sense, if the EU's decision-making machinery in the area of foreign relations were made more democratic, then foreign policy could contribute to the development of a common identity. And perhaps a more democratic foreign policy machinery would result in a more consistent value-based foreign policy – though it also might not: public opinion polls show that European publics are particularly concerned about issues such as security, illegal immigration, and terrorism, concerns that would be reflected in democratic foreign policy-making, and as we have seen above, dealing with all of those issues can conflict with an 'ethical foreign policy'. Thus a European identity – just like a national identity - does not *need* a 'value-based' foreign policy.

We might argue that the pursuit of a values-based foreign policy is one way that the EU could distinguish itself from other international actors – particularly other large actors (notably the US), and thus the EU's international identity would depend on a value-based foreign policy. But as already stated above, all foreign policies express values: the US foreign policy discourse, for example, is imbued with value-laden language. The EU could cut out a distinct and distinctive role in international relations by the way in which it conducts foreign policy (including democracy promotion), but it would have to do this consistently and coherently, with the member states all singing from the same song sheet, if this is to strengthen its international identity.

1.3.3 What is the 'added value' of EU democracy assistance?

There is clearly some added value of EU democracy assistance, since the amount of EU aid does more than match that of the individual member states (see Table 1). And although as Thomas Carothers argues, there are more similarities than differences in donors' democracy assistance programmes,[19] the EU's programme does have unique elements. In particular, the extensive funding of NGOs – both directly, to boost the capacities of NGOs, and indirectly, by providing democracy assistance through NGOs, who implement projects – sets the EU apart from other donors.[20] The EU focuses on strengthening civil society, and unlike the US and until recently, paid little attention to political institutions.

The EU's civil society approach is considered a strength of the EU's programme by EU policy-makers, and several evaluations of EU democracy aid have noted the advantages of such an approach. But as the EU Court of Auditors has also noted, there are disadvantages: it is essentially reactive, dependent both on NGO responses to calls for tender and on the quality of the projects that they propose and then implement.[21] And more NGOs does not necessarily mean more democratic government. But certainly the EU's approach has merits – and contributes something distinctive to democracy aid more generally.

The EU could add considerably more value to *European* democracy assistance if member states would agree to coordinate their programmes (and with the Commission) within the EU framework: total EU political aid (the EC budget plus the member states) is quite high – more than that of the US – but this means little in practice because the Commission and the member states do

[18] Christopher Lord, *Democracy in the European Union* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 132.
[19] Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), p. 12.
[20] See Gordon Crawford, *Foreign Aid and Political Reform: A Comparative Analysis of Democracy Assistance and Political Conditionality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 129-30.
[21] Court of Auditors, 'Special report no. 12/2000 on the management by the Commission of European Union support for the development of human rights and democracy in third countries, together with the Commission's replies', in OJ C 230, 19 August 2000.

not coordinate their programmes. A more coordinated effort on the part of the EU and its member states would at the very least diminish duplication and allow serious funding of good projects.