

# Obs

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### **EU's democracy promotion policy in the Mediterranean: Squaring the stability – democracy circle?**

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Why does the EU have an ambiguous and inconsistent democracy promotion (DP) policy towards the Mediterranean countries? This paper argues that the EU's DP is determined by a crucial conflict of interests conceptualised as a stability – democracy dilemma. The EU has been attempting to promote democracy, but without risking the current stability and in connivance with incumbent autocratic regimes. In view of this dilemma, the four main characteristics of the EU's DP promotion are explored, namely: gradualism, a strong notion of partnership-building, a narrow definition of civil society, and a strong belief in economic liberalisation. A fifth feature, relation of the EU with moderate Islamists, is analysed in the paper as it represents the most striking illustration of its contradictions. The paper concludes by arguing that the definition of a clear DP by the EU that considered engagement with moderate Islamists would represent a major step towards squaring its stability – democracy circle.

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## Introduction

On September 2007 Morocco held parliamentary elections, in the wake of previous unimportant elections, these were considered to be different. The party of Justice and Development (PJD), viewed as the only real opposition party taking part in the elections (DRI 2007), had the potential to win a majority of votes. A PJD victory could have signalled a significant step forward in the democratisation process of Morocco. The European Union, however, was uneasy with this possibility because the PJD, in spite of its moderate agenda and not putting into question the legitimacy of the King, is an Islamist party. The electoral result, however, saw the PJD come surprisingly only second to the governing Independence Party. The historically low turnout, 37%, highlighted people's apathy with an electoral contest perceived to be irrelevant, and reinforced the current status quo and political standstill in Morocco. Europe's reaction was one of relief (ViewsWire 2007).

This paper examines the reasons why the EU has an ambiguous and inconsistent democracy promotion (DP) policy towards the Mediterranean. It will be argued that the EU's ambiguous approach, defined as a 'doubtfulness or uncertainty of meaning or intention'<sup>[1]</sup>, is determined by a crucial stability – democracy dilemma. The pursuit of rather contradictory goals and the lack of a clear political direction are crucial factors which hinder the overall coherence and effectiveness of the EU's DP efforts. The EU has been attempting to promote transitions to democracy amongst its Mediterranean neighbours, but without jeopardising the current stability and in connivance with incumbent autocratic regimes. The hesitant attempts to engage with moderate Islamists represent the most striking exemplification of these contradictions. As they stand now, crucially affected by this stability – democracy dilemma, the EU's attempts to bring democracy to the region can be then considered a venture analogous to 'squaring a circle'.

With the purpose of exploring the ambiguous DP policy of the EU towards the Mediterranean the first difficulty encountered is how to reconcile the literature and ongoing theoretical debates on European Foreign Policy (EFP), the relationship between democracy and Islam, and democracy promotion theory. This paper will focus on the analysis of the European Union as an international actor and its DP policy. For the purposes of the paper theoretical debates on democracy promotion will only be drawn insofar as they are relevant to the analysis of the EU's particular DP strategy. Theoretical debates on Islam and its relationship with democracy are largely beyond the scope of this paper, other than these initial considerations. The understanding of Islam in this paper follows a current of scholars who argues against Islamic exceptionalism (Esposito and Voll 1996; Roy 2004; Halliday 2002). Islam is thus believed to have a 'full spectrum of potential symbols and concepts for support of absolutism and hierarchy, as well as foundations for liberty and equality' (Esposito 1996: 7). An Islamist will be broadly defined as anyone who believes that the Koran and Haidth contain important principles about Muslim governance, and who tries to implement these principles. Such a definition includes a broad spectrum of Islamist movements, from Al Qaeda to the ruling AKP in Turkey (Fuller 2005: 38); this paper focuses on moderate Islamism. In this paper are understood to be moderate Islamists, those Muslim movements that have recognised a basic respect for democratic principles and have explicitly rejected violence as a means of achieving political goals. In line with Cavatorta (2007) rather than recognising them a definitive democratic 'ethos', moderate Islamists are treated in this paper as rational actors affected by 'surrounding environment' whose behaviour can be understood to follow a cost and benefit analysis (Cavatorata 2007; Fuller 2004)

This paper is then organised as follows: The first section examines the key factors determining the EU's ambiguous approach to DP in the Mediterranean. The most relevant arguments addressing EU's limitations as an international actor are first scrutinised, in order to demonstrate that compared to other regions the EU's Mediterranean policy is not particularly affected by its limitations. After this, the key interests motivating the EU's policy towards the Mediterranean are analysed. It will be argued that contradictory security concerns, conceptualised as a stability - democracy dilemma, are the key factor explaining the EU's vacillating DP policy. The second section seeks to explore in view of the stability – democracy dilemma the main characteristics of the EU's DP policy, namely: its gradualism and limited use of conditionality; a top-down approach based on a notion of partnership-building; a significant bottom-up dimension focused on a narrowly defined civil society; and a strong belief in economic liberalisation as tool for political change. A fifth feature, the relation of the EU with moderate Islamist, has been included in the paper as it represents the most striking illustration of the contradictions and dilemmas of the EU's DP policy. The third section provides an analytical discussion of the findings of the previous section. It also explores in a more speculative manner the impact that the definition of a clear policy vis-à-vis moderate Islamists would have in its ambiguous DP policy. By contemplating engagement with moderate Islamists, it will be argued, the EU could make significant steps towards squaring its stability - democracy dilemma. Finally, conclusions are developed.

## **The EU's Mediterranean Policy**

This first chapter studies the reasons why the EU is unable to formulate a more coherent DP policy towards the Mediterranean. It will first explore the limits to the international role of the EU, studying some of the limits to the European Foreign Policy (EFP) discussed in the literature, to see that the Mediterranean policy, compared to other regions, is not particularly affected by the characteristics of the EU as a non-unitary actor. What the literature considers the main interests of the EU towards the region is assessed in a second step to conclude that a fundamental stability – democracy dilemma affects the design of the policy. The scrutiny of the EU intentions provides a conceptual framework through which the analysis of the same DP policy is structured.

### *The EU as an international actor*

The EU is not a common international actor and its particular characteristics clearly affect its foreign policy. Some academics question the very notion of the EU as an international actor at all (Hoffman 1966; Pijpers 1991). What is clear is that the EU is a less unitary actor than a state which presents some limitations to its foreign policy. Most scholars concur that in some parts of its foreign policy it exhibits some elements of 'actorness' (Sjøstedt 1977; Hill 1993). In relation to the promotion of democracy in the Mediterranean it is possible to claim that the EU has developed a notion of 'actorness' in Sjøstedt's sense: it has recognition (Mediterranean countries accept dealing with the EU in the EMP and ENP), it has authority (the EU signs bilateral trade agreements with its southern partners), autonomy (through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) the EU is entitled to provide aid without a previous agreement with the government of a third country) and cohesion (at least greater

cohesion than compared to other regions) (Gingesberg 2002, 431-433). The recognition of the 'actorness' of the EU in this particular case cannot imply denying the particularities and limits of the EU as an international actor. The following section analyses the different arguments found in the literature exploring the limits of EU's international role in specific relation to the Mediterranean countries. It will be shown that the EU's Mediterranean policy does not particularly suffer from its internal contradiction and it actually compares well with other foreign policy areas.

#### **a) Logic of diversity**

Hoffman's (1966: 881) 'logic of diversity' can partly explain the EU's ambiguous and ineffective DP policy in the Mediterranean. According to this explanation, foreign policy is amongst the most crucial elements of state sovereignty, with Member States (MS) reluctant to give away their national independence, which makes a common European position very difficult. Regarding the DP policy towards the Mediterranean, the existence of a north-south split has been well documented (Youngs 2002: 44). By considering the EU less of a unitary actor and more of a 'clearing house of national interests', the EU's hesitant Mediterranean policy can be explained by the problems of coordination between the different EU member states and EU institutions (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002:197; Behr 2008: 83).

Despite undeniable differences at national level, Member States with strong national interests in the region have systematically tried to pursue their agendas and interests through the EU rather than against it. Countries like France, with the Global Mediterranean Partnership and the recent Union for the Mediterranean, or Spain, with the Barcelona Process, have tried to upload their agendas to a European level in order to pursue their national interests. In addition to this, a process of convergence of interests and views has been taking place which has tightened the North – South split. Comparing Germany and France, Behr (2008) also identifies a gradual rapprochement of views since the end of the Cold War and especially after 9/11. Emerson et al. (2005: 201) concur to this view and maintain that 'some genuine convergence has taken place'.

The differences between EU states on DP regarding the Mediterranean look today less overwhelming than they were when the EMP was first started. The engagement of northern EU states in North Africa has clearly intensified since 1995, in the same way as the southern MS today are less reluctant towards democracy and human rights promotion strategies. The same deepening of European integration has contributed to these convergences, by Europeanising some of the southern MS' concerns. Following the Schengen Agreement and the commitment to move towards a common immigration policy, Northern countries such as Germany have increasingly seen Mediterranean immigration as an issue of internal concern (Behr 2008: 90); the German interest for the region was well exemplified by Merkel's readiness to jump on board of Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean project to prevent it to be an exclusively Mediterranean endeavour. Similarly, as a consequence of a new post 9/11 consensus linking terrorism and political repression, the EU established in 2003 new guidelines designed to improve the promotion of democracy and human rights in the Mediterranean. Authors concur that an agreement on such a reinforced commitment would have hardly been possible some years earlier (Emerson et al. 2005: 200-202; Youngs 2005a: 234-235).

Although some significant differences persist, a more coherent European approach towards the Mediterranean seems today more likely after a certain process of Europeanisation and

convergence of MS' foreign policy towards the Mediterranean (Behr 2008: 87). The logic of diversity can therefore not be claimed to be the major factor explaining the EU's vacillations when dealing with its southern neighbours.

#### **b) Inadequate institutions and decision making rules**

Another factor that could explain the EU's ambiguous DP policy is the apparent institutional complexity and inchoate decision-making procedures of the EFP. Rather than a cautiously reasoned and unfolding conceptual approach, the EU's DP strategies have in practice often emerged from noticeably unclear decision-making processes where 'arbitrary accidentalism abounds' (Youngs 2005: 246). Within the multilayered transnational EFP machinery, the diverse national, sub-national and supranational institutions are frequently unable to coordinate their work which inevitably hinders the final design of policy (Volpi 2004: 159-160). Germany, with dozen highly dispersed agencies involved in DP, best illustrates this problem (Youngs 2005: 246).

Although a greater degree of coordination between institutions and less inchoate decision-making procedures are necessary to give greater coherence to the EU's DP policy (Youngs 2005: 246), the short-comings identified in the DP policy are not exclusive to it, but can be seen in other areas of EFP. Moreover, a convergence of views between different European institutions on Mediterranean affairs is also noticeable, at least to a greater extent than regarding other regions (Emerson et al 2005: 200-202). An identifiable community of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) experts has been developed from the very 'thickness' of the institutionalised EU cooperation with North Africa. According to Emerson these transnational networks of experts can ease the problem of poor linkage between different elements of the EFP machinery under the EMP. Although still being a significant problem, inadequate institutional coordination and complex rules cannot be considered to be the main explanatory factor of the EU's ambiguities.

#### **c) Inadequate foreign policy instruments at a European level**

A clear limit of the Foreign Policy of the EU is the instruments and capabilities at its disposal. Lacking significant hard power, the EU has to rely on softer forms of power, such as economic or political tools, trade or aid. However, leaving aside the military dimension, which would be necessary to force regime change and impose democracy, the EU has a broad range of tools to promote democracy (Balfour 2007: 12). Moreover, the EU does not consider regime change as an option, and prefers 'a gradual, step-by-step political reform' (Youngs 2005: 237). Most experts concur that a successful DP policy needs to be mainly based on the ability to influence third states through diplomatic, economic and legal means (Ginsberg 1999: 445); and it is in this civilian dimension where the EU's strength lies. As such, the inadequate instruments argument can hardly be put forward to account for an ambiguous and ineffective Mediterranean policy.

#### **d) European Foreign Policy**

There is a considerable theoretical debate as to what should be considered the precise nature of EFP, a concept plagued with ambiguity (Edwards and Nuttall 1994: 84). Some scholars focus their studies exclusively on the second pillar of the EU, and thus equate EFP with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Holland 1997, 2004; M. Smith 2004). Such a restrictive

understanding of EFP allows a clear conceptualisation and facilitates its analysis, but it leaves too much unnoticed, such as the EU trade and aid policies. As such its usefulness to analyse the DP policy of the EU is questionable. A more popular definition of EFP includes all the instruments available at a European level. It covers CFSP, as well as the first and third pillars (Gingsberg 1999; K. Smith 2004). This definition presents the problem of coherence. This paper uses the third possible understanding of EFP: a two level system including the sum of what the EU and its Member States do in the international stage (Hill 1993, 1998). According to this definition coherence is not assumed, but it is understood that all actors involved in EFP, including the MS, are committed to avoid excessive inconsistency (Hill 2004). For the particular case of DP in the Mediterranean this definition is considered to be the most adequate in this paper. As it has been seen above, there has been a gradual process of convergence, and MS have encouraged the Commission to exert a leading role on DP towards the Mediterranean, to a greater degree than in other areas of EFP (Echagüe 2008: 7; Emerson et al 2005: 201).

As discussed above, the EU's limitations as an international actor cannot satisfactorily account for its ambiguous Mediterranean policy. This paper will consider the EU as a rather unitary and rational actor and will analyse in the next section the set of interests motivating its Mediterranean policy.

### *Mediterranean policy motivations*

The EU is keen to declare that the promotion of democracy and human rights is one of its foreign policy priorities. The relevance of DP is corroborated by the wide Euro-Mediterranean institutional framework, which was created including democracy promotion as one of its key goals. But following the same rationale used by Olsen to analyse the EU's policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa (Olsen 2002, 324), it can be argued that if the Mediterranean has become 'high politics' for the EU, it is because the region has importance in the broader EFP, and not because of altruism and moral reasons to support the cause of DP in the region. DP is then understood as a means to achieve a higher goal. This section analyses the main priorities of the EU in the region to assess whether conflict between them and the DP agenda can account for the EU's ambiguous approach.

#### **a) Economic interest**

The EU's commitment to democracy could be seen as little more than a means to further European economic interests. Being the EU primarily a commercial entity, opening new markets could be the key driver of EU's Mediterranean policy. In fact, out of the three areas of activity set up in the Barcelona declaration, political, economic/financial and cultural/social, the second basket has been clearly the most developed. Over 200 times more money has been allocated for assisting processes of economic reform than for DP projects (Youngs 2002: 55). Hence, Schlumberger, amongst other authors critical with the Western DP efforts in the region, claims that good governance has less prominence for the EU than opening or maintaining export markets (Schlumberger 2005). Similarly, Dillman perceives that the rule of law and human rights promotion have been secondary to the economic development agenda and European economic interests (Dillman 2002, 68).

It can be argued, however, that the EU's Mediterranean policy has notably been driven more strongly by strategic than by commercial considerations (Youngs 2002: 44). The importance given to economic reform, rather than pursuing European interests, could be understood as part of the overall DP policy. As it will be discussed below, one of the crucial elements of the EU's strategy is a strong belief in the correlation between economic and political liberalisation. Despite important energy interest of some individual MS in North Africa, from a purely economic stand, the EU could afford to upset Mediterranean autocrats, as the financial and commercial presence of the EU in the region is rather modest in relative terms (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002, 196-197). The DP agenda can thus hardly be considered to be subordinated to economic interests, and can thus not account for the EU's ambiguous Mediterranean policy.

### **b) Geo-strategic rivalry**

Rivalry with the US and other geopolitical considerations certainly affect the EU's Mediterranean policy (Dillman 2002: 68). From a geo-strategic standpoint the Mediterranean is perceived as the EU's backyard, especially by its southern Member States. DP efforts could then be understood as 'a subtle rephrasing of realpolitik' in a geo-strategic contest to exert influence over the region (Volpi 2004, 160). With the end of the Cold War, a series of new security and socio-economic challenges emerged from the region which required initiative from the EU. Parallel to this European increased interest for the region, the strategic importance of the Mediterranean also grew for the US (Volpi 2004: 151). Following Volpi's logic, the Mediterranean was opened to a new geopolitical competition between the US and the EU since the early 1990s. The Barcelona Process could be seen as a European attempt to respond to the US hegemony in the Middle East (Dillman 200: 67). In an effort to resist America's unilateralism in the region, non-'atlantist' MS, such as France, up-loaded their agendas to the EU and attempted to recuperate regional influence by developing the Euro-Mediterranean institutional framework (Petras and Morley 2000). Similarly, a more assertive US policy towards the MENA region after the 9/11 forced the EU to react. Although European Neighbourhood Policy is commonly understood to be a response to aspirations of membership of Eastern European Neighbours after the EU enlargement to Central and Eastern European Countries, it can be argued that Southern Mediterranean countries were finally also included as a response to the US-led Broader and Middle East and North Africa Initiative.

Geopolitical considerations and rivalry with the US have certainly had an influence in the design of Europe's policy towards the Mediterranean, and DP efforts have been in part increased to counterbalance the US widening influence in North Africa after the 9/11 (Youngs 2006, 102-103). However, such a crude interpretation of Europe's DP as merely another tool in a geo-strategic power struggle with the US can hardly be helpful to explain Europe's ambiguous approach to DP. Therefore, geo-strategic rivalries cannot be taken as a crucial factor explaining Europe's uncertain DP policy.

### **c) Security concerns: the stability – democracy dilemma**

It is generally agreed that security concerns are the most significant factor explaining the EU's inconsistent and cautious approach to DP in the Mediterranean. According to the mainstream view, The EU's Mediterranean policy is based on the democratic peace theory (Menendez Gonzalez 2005: 16). Following this hypothesis, democracy is believed to work as a moderating influence. Democratic states are less inclined to go to war, and are better equipped to manage

domestic unrest and internal ethno-religious struggles. Thus, by promoting democracy in the Mediterranean, the EU is able to address the root causes of the “soft” security threats emanating from the region, and thereby enhance EU’s own security in the long run (Malmvig 2004: 15-16; Menendez Gonzalez 2005). Democracy promotion is therefore not seen as a goal in itself, but rather serves the strategic self-interest of the EU, in being a means to promote security for itself. At the same time, however, this policy is also taken to be an ethically sound one, as it seeks to benefit and improve the livelihoods of peoples in the region (Gillespie and Youngs 2002: 8). In light of this, security interests can be understood to be the main motivation of the EU explaining its attempts to promote democracy in the Mediterranean, rather than specific normative or ethical concerns. Hence, it follows that where democracy and security appear as conflicting interests, security will take precedence. (Youngs 2002: 41-46).

Despite the fact that democracy is expected to lead to an increase in Europe’s security in the long run, problems of instability and internal conflicts associated with democratic transition are seen to be crucially challenging in the short run by the EU (Menendez Gonzalez 2005: 16-17). Firstly, democratic transitions from authoritarian regimes can be extremely destabilising period. Steps towards democratisation can result in ethnic or sectarian conflict, violent social upheavals, and even civil war. This seems a valid concern regarding the Middle East and North Africa region, where societies are deeply divided, with multiple ethnic and sectarian cleavages, and debatably cultural obstacles to democracy (Lewis 2002). Secondly, a full political liberalisation without a prior modernisation of their societies would lead in most MENA countries to an empowerment of Islamists parties. Islamists are perceived as movements hostile towards Israel and the West, and alleged of bringing about a hidden anti-democratic and repressive agenda (Balfour and Missiroli 2007, 11-12; Cook 2006). Fear of a ‘One man, one vote, one time’ scenario (Sadowski 2006: 229), with an Islamists party establishing an Iranian-like Islamic dictatorship after gaining power through democratic elections, explains reluctance amongst many Western governments towards these movements. Moreover, and especially after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, many existing regimes have been regarded as necessary allies to ensure counterterrorism cooperation (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196–98). This conflict between the promotion of democracy and short-term stability is the mainstream explanation amongst scholars of the EU’s incoherent Mediterranean policy. The literature, however, offers several interpretations on how democracy promotion and preservation of stability interact.

A first group of scholars focus on region-building to argue that despite its instrumentalist origin, EU’s Mediterranean policy can still lay the foundations for a far-reaching transformation of the Mediterranean region (Adler and Crawford 2002). Following a social constructivist approach, they claim that by ‘agreeing on practising the same practices’ the EU helps creating the foundations for conflicting actors to develop peaceful positions (Adler and Crawford 2006: 16-17). Region building is dependant on the social construction of new identities and is thus a very long-term process, which can certainly take more time than DP and ‘might not even happen in our lifetimes’ (ibid: 19). With this in mind, and being the focus of this paper democracy promotion and not region building, this literature is only further explored insofar as the same rationale partially underpins the EU’s DP strategy.

A second group of scholars suggest that in practice strategic self-interest and democracy promotion are incompatible goals. They argue that the EU has no real intention of fostering democracy in the Mediterranean and is only interested in stability (Feliu 2001; Spencer 2001; Stavridis and Hutchence 2003). According to this ‘conspiratorial understanding’ (Malmvig, 2006:

348), the DP agenda is simply a cover for domestic consumption and intended to enhance the normative dimension of the EU internationally. Narrow security interests drive its Mediterranean policy with the EU having no real intention of exporting democracy to the region. As put by Stavridis and Hutchence, 'the EU has no clearly defined objectives, nor the intention to consistently and coherently project them to the Mediterranean beyond mere rhetoric about the benefits of democracy, peace and human rights' (2003: 73, quoted in Malmvig, 2006: 348). Spencer criticises the EU's *modus operandi* which ignores the demands of the peoples of the region and focuses on strengthening the current regimes to control their citizens and become guardians of the current stability (Spencer 2001: 141-142). According to this view, the main priority of the EU is to strengthen the status quo, as authoritarian political orders are understood to represent the best option to ensure stability in a period of global socio-economic transformation. Autocrats are perceived as a less evil option, than risking the region to fall into anarchy (Volpi 2004, 160). Judging its efforts against this view, the EU's apparently failing DP approach, would be actually performing its function of enhancing or maintaining the EU's normative power, without jeopardising the status quo and regional stability. Although partially correct, such a conspiratorial reading of the DP does not help to explain the EU's ambiguity and it is far too simplistic. Understanding the EU's DP policies as merely a rhetorical instrument consciously manipulated by the EU to ensure its futility is extremely cynical and cannot account for its persistent attempts to improve the effectiveness of its democracy and human rights promotion policies.

A third group of scholars also understands stability and democracy as incompatible goals (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196–98; Haddadi 2004; Jünemann 2003: 7; Youngs 2005: 237), although in a less conspiratorial fashion. According to these authors a stability – democratisation dilemma is the main reason explaining the EU's ambivalent Mediterranean policy: based on the democratic peace theory, the EU regards the promotion of democracy amongst its Southern neighbours as the best means of ensuring its own security. However, for the reasons listed above, a rapid transition to democracy in the MENA region is not desired. DP is understood as a strategic goal for the EU, but only secondary to its immediate security interests as it is perceived that a rapid transition to democracy would most likely be damaging to European security interests (Behr 2008: 82), leading either to instability or the establishment of anti-western Islamist governments (Jünemann 2002). Faced with this dilemma, the EU has chosen a gradual approach to democratisation. Political reform is being pushed with the proviso that this policy does not clash with the higher goal of immediate security (Youngs 2002: 43). In this sense, through notions of partnership and cooperation the EU has sought to accommodate, rather than undermine the Mediterranean autocratic regimes (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 198). Security cooperation with North African regimes on issues such as migration or terrorism has been prioritised, if necessary, at the expense of idealistic goals of democracy or human rights promotion. In the nexus between security and democratisation, the EU has thus favoured the later goal of security (Junemann 2004: 7). The attempt to reconcile two practically incompatible goals has implied an incoherent Mediterranean policy, condemning its democracy promotion policy to ineffectiveness due to the superiority of short-term security concerns (Balfour and Missiroli 2007, 11-12).

A fourth and final group of scholars has attempted to challenge the 'stability – democratisation dilemma' explanation using a discourse analysis approach (Malmvig 2004, 2006; Behr 2008; Bicchi and Martín 2006). According to this view, the EU's Mediterranean policy has not so much been based on a prioritization of security concerns over idealism, but has been hampered by

the presence of two conflicting security discourses (Malmvig 2004). They concur with the previous group of scholars that EU's Mediterranean policy has been marked by contradictions and inconsistencies. They argue, however, that these vacillations cannot be explained by the democratisation – stability dilemma, as constructed above with security always prevailing over democratisation. The EU's ambiguity would rather be the result of a Mediterranean policy 'based on two different and conflicting discourses on which type of threats the Union face, how security is to be achieved, and what the Mediterranean is' (Malmvig 2004: 6). Thus, the EU has been following 'two contradictory and incompatible security strategies with regard to the Mediterranean states' (Malmvig 2004: 18), which have clearly affected its effectiveness. Behr accepts the existence of the democracy – stability dilemma, but he disputes the argument that EU Mediterranean policies are informed by a static rivalry between realist security interests and idealist concerns for democracy, but are in fact different visions of identity, interests and threats, that are open to evolution (Behr 2008: 82). Behr argues that the dilemma will hold only as long as Islamist parties are perceived as a threat and sceptical views about the short-term consequences of security in the MENA region continue. As pointed out by Jeandesboz, however, discourse is an integral and integrated part of the social universe in which it is to be deployed, and therefore it 'should not be divorced from a broader analysis of the particular realm of practices' (Jeandesboz 2007: 390). It can be argued that Malmvig's studies (2004, 2006) have favoured an in-depth analysis of discourse, while narrowing down the practical aspects of the phenomena dealt with. Malmvig's reading of the EU's Mediterranean approach reflects this problem. The European Union might be 'caught in a continuous and paradoxical practice of reproducing two simultaneous and conflicting versions of security' and neither of the two versions of security might not have gained an hegemonic position, as argued by Malmvig (Malmvig 2004; 2006: 343). But as indicated by advocates of the democracy – stability dilemma, the EU has systematically prioritised pro-stability policies over pro-democracy ones when they have come into conflict. It can be, hence, hardly denied that the status quo security narrative has clear prevalence over the democratisation one when it comes to policy implementation. The discursive analysis studies, however, can still contribute with some interesting remarks to qualify the stability – democratisation dilemma explanation.

The stability – democratisation dilemma approach is then used in this paper as the best suited analytical tool to study the EU's DP policy. Scholars advocating for this approach, however, seem to implicitly conceptualise this dilemma as a static conflict between realist notions of security cooperation and idealistic democratisation goals; implying this understanding a split between security and democracy (Malmvig 2006: 348). In this paper the EU's dilemma is understood to be between two conflicting notions of security. The European Mediterranean policy is understood to be a balancing act between two conflicting security logics, with a simultaneous presence and intermingling of the two logics at a discursive level (Malmvig 2004: 3), but with a clear prioritisation at a policy level.

The dilemma is conceptualised to be between, on the one hand, stability, a security notion focused on short-term concerns, and, on the other, democracy, a construction of security as long-term project. Stability is to be maintained as the best means to achieve short-term security. Security cooperation with current regimes, for example, in immigration and counterterrorism issues is hence necessary. From this point of view Islamism is defined almost as an homogenous reality and is framed as a threat to security, as the uneasiness of the EU with a potential good result of the PJD in Morocco's 2007 elections or its reaction to the Hamas victory in 2006 unveil. Democracy should bring Europe security in the long-term. 'Structural stability' is

promoted by the EU amongst its Southern neighbours seeking 'sustainable economic development, democracy and respect for human rights, viable political structures and (...) with the capacity to manage change without to resort to conflict' (European Commission 2001: 10). From the democracy stand, Islamists are starting to be recognised as important forces for change, but the EU still lacks clear guidelines on how to treat them (Hamzawy 2005:11). These two notions of security are competing and highly incompatible. The kernel of the matter is the EU's incapacity to leap from short to long-term security. The EU's ultimate goal – gradually evolve from current autocratic status quo to a 'structural stability' with democratic Mediterranean partners, without jeopardising current stability– appears a venture as herculean as attempting to square a circle.

## **The EU's Democracy Promotion strategy**

The design of its democracy promotion strategy has been clearly affected by the EU's attempt to reconcile two largely contradictory goals, conceptualised as the stability – democracy dilemma. The EU has chosen a very gradual approach to DP in the Mediterranean. One based on a step-by-step political reform rationale, which aims to walk a 'third way' between stark regime change and undimmed support for autocrats (Youngs 2005: 237). This chapter analyses the main characteristics of the EU's DP policy to illustrate how it has been affected by the stability – democracy dilemma.

### **a) Limited conditionality**

A soft approach to DP and the limited use of conditionality is the first defining characteristic of the EU's DP. With direct military intervention out of question, the EU has largely disregarded strong diplomatic pressure or the use of negative conditionality to promote democracy, and has only introduced notions of positive conditionality with the Neighbourhood Policy. The EU has been pursuing a strategy in which 'strong' top-down instruments to exert pressure have been avoided. The use of indirect instruments, such as positive engagement based on notions of partnership building, as it will be seen below, has been largely preferred. This approach is, in principle, theoretically sound. The EU's approach follows the policy recommendations made by most academics who argue that coercive instruments to promote democracy, such as the suspension of agreements, should be exceptional (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 197), as coercion might even have a counterproductive effect – a study by Dalacoura of Western DP policies towards Egypt, Iran and Turkey showed how the use of coercive instruments, once relations were already tense, had yielded negative results, whereas through cooperative engagement the US and the EU had been able to exert a greater deal of influence (Dalacoura 2003). In the same line, Levitsky and Way's argue that the West will hardly be able to impose democracy through leverage, and advocate therefore for the promotion of the notion of 'linkage', as a more effective means of exerting influence (Levitsky and Way 2005).

The problem with the EU's strategy is not its preference for positive instruments, but the fact that when exceptional situations have arisen, the EU has not resorted to the stronger instruments at its disposal. Confronted with instances of severe political repression and gross violation of human rights, such as massacres of civilians in Algeria during the 1990s and the notorious Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim case in Egypt (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005: 22), or significant reversals in processes of political reform, such as Arafat's last years of rule of the

Palestinian National Authority (Malmvig 2006: 346), the EU has turned a blind eye (Balfour and Missiroli 2007: 12). The fact is that on no occasion has the EU used the human rights clause to suspend development aid or trade concessions (Behr 2008: 81). Certainly this is partly a result of the complex internal decision-making process required to activate the human rights clause, but it is mainly due to the prioritisation of other interests (Balfour and Missiroli 2007: 14), such as stability concerns or the desire not to disrupt a process of partnership building.

Similarly, the potential effect of positive conditionality has also been undermined by the prioritisation of stability concerns over DP. The EU has been providing substantial financial support to Mediterranean states without in practice conditioning this aid on progress in political reform processes (Malmvig 2006: 346; Youngs 2002: 48). Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, two of the largest recipients of Mediterranean Development Assistance funds, receive a constant flow of financial assistance, despite slow progress and even setbacks in their democratisation processes (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005). This situation led Richard Youngs to suggest that the European Mediterranean Partnership was 'the most significant deviance from rewards-based conditionality' (Youngs 2001: 81).

The EU has recognised its failure to apply rewards-based conditionality in the Barcelona process and has attempted to redress the imbalance (Balfour and Missiroli 2007: 13). The launch of the ENP, based on the enlargement experience (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005) showed the EU's willingness to place a stronger emphasis on positive conditionality: by drafting bilateral Action Plans and building on a 'regatta approach', the EU has tried to apply the same enlargement rationale to foster political and economic reform amongst its neighbours. Many scholars, however, have argued that this new emphasis on positive conditionality will do little to foster political reform. Firstly, the EU is not providing enough rewards to encourage North African elites to push for further political liberalisation (Behr 2008: 81). The ENP follows the same enlargement logic, but without offering membership. The cost-benefit ratio is thus clearly not the same as for prospective EU members (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005: 37). Moreover, as it will be seen below, this rationale seems to overlook the fact that ruling elites in North African countries are not democratic. In short, the EU is asking Mediterranean autocrats to push forward far reaching political and economic reform, thus undermining their power monopoly, in exchange for 'a stake' in the EU's internal market (Schlumberger 2006). Secondly, the power of attraction of these already weak incentives is further decreased by the lack of clarity of the Action Plans, which present unclear criteria for the evaluation of achievements, and have been defined as chaotic 'shopping lists' for reform (Barbé and Johansson 2008: 92; K. Smith 2005: 765). Thirdly, the inclusion of other political objectives in the Action Plans, such as migration control, counterterrorism cooperation and non-proliferation of WMD, have further reduced the effect of positive conditionality. Through his agreement to cease WMD programmes in 2003, for example, Qaddafi has gained Europe's silence on human rights and political reform issues in Libya. Short-term security concerns have thus permitted Libya to swiftly incorporate the Barcelona process structures, regardless of its neglectful political liberalisation process (Youngs 2005b: 9).

The lean use of conditionality, its contradictory goals and inconsistency have clearly had a negative effect on its partners' willingness to comply with human rights standards and implement reforms. This has clearly undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the EU as a promoter of human rights and democracy (Balfour and Missiroli 2007: 12-14)

## **b) Partnership building**

The EU's limited use of conditionality can to a large extent be explained because of the soft top-down approach to DP chosen. As a result of its own post-war reconciliation experience, the EU's strategy has been strongly influenced by a notion of 'partnership-building' (Youngs 2005a: 238). Based on social constructivist theories and following the same rationale as scholars studying region-building (Volpi 2004: 153-155), the EU has been seeking to engage with its Southern neighbours and ensure regular political dialogue by gradually institutionalising their relation (Balfour 2007: 12). By practicing the same practices and through a process of positive socialisation, the EU has attempted to create a Mediterranean narrative, which should lead to regional political change (Adler and Crawford 2002; 2006). With some authors arguing that some benefits of the positive socialisation effects of the Barcelona Process can already be noticed, for example, contributing to the development of a certain Euro-Mediterranean identity (Fernandez and Youngs 2005: 106), the process until significant political changes are finally fostered through partnership-building is certainly still a long one (Volpi 2004: 154).

Moreover, as mentioned above, a focus on elite persuasion and a fear of damaging the partnership building efforts have largely inhibited the EU from using diplomatic pressure and strong conditionality (Gillespie 2006: 89). The sparse dividends in terms of human rights and democracy achieved so far (Balfour 2007: 12-13) by this soft top-down approach has gained the EU criticism as being too regime friendly, with EU's Mediterranean policy leading to the accommodation of authoritarian regimes instead of fostering political reform (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196). Arguably this engagement with the EU has also become a new source of legitimacy for some authoritarian regimes.

Some scholars have suggested that persistence and consistency, rather than intensity of pressure could be the key to a greater success (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196). The EU should, thus, show more insistence at governmental level to prevent, for instance, North-African regimes from blocking bottom-up democracy promotion activities. In an effort to work towards this direction Europe offers, through the ENP, the establishment of political dialogue and a sub-committee on democracy and human rights in exchange for closer cooperation and additional financial support, which, for example, has been signed by Morocco (Balfour 2007: 15). The EU's strategy, however, seems to overlook the crucial factor that a democratic transition from an authoritarian regime must imply a break from the previous status quo. The priority given to stability and notions of partnership leads the EU to choose a gradual DP strategy in connivance with incumbent regimes. But as Schlumberger argues, this approach is doomed to fail, as current regimes are not only the most powerful players in the process, but also crucial veto players (Schlumberger 2006, 46-47). Autocrats will always welcome a process of partnership building, as long as they are in power. The EU, however, will hardly be able to induce them to cede real power only through a process of socialisation.

## **c) Narrow 'civil society'**

The EU's DP strategy is also characterised by its strong bottom-up component. The EU has attempted to empower civil society as a crucial agent in democratisation processes. The EU's rationale is to build strong civil societies in North Africa as democratic counterweights to both autocrats, and Islamists. In order to maintain stability, this needs to be a long-term process which will gradually lead authoritarian regimes to be 'encircled' by civil society. Arrived at this

point, autocrats will have to accede to reform or collapse (Roy 2005: 1005). The rationale of the strategy follows a fundamental recommendation of democracy promotion theory, being this that democratic transitions must mainly be an endogenous process (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 198).

The EU's approach, however, presents a number of crucial problems. The first is the weakness of civil society organisations in Mediterranean countries, or at least those organisations that the EU is willing to consider (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 198). The EU has been working with a very limited notion of civil society, which has effectively been restricted to secular and liberal groups, being faith-based ones systematically excluded (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002, 198). As Hamzawy points out, the EU has good reasons for focusing on Arab liberals as strategic partners—they share the same goals and speak the same values-language—the problem is that they are incapable of mobilising considerable constituencies (Hamzawy 2005: 4). The EU's approach has been based on the 'myth' that civil society consists of latent democratic forces, which are simply awaiting activation by Western countries to pop up. By considering all organisations in Muslim countries outside this narrow definition of society for being not 'civil' enough, the EU has been systematically denying the reality on the ground. By not providing support for civil society projects involving Islamists organisations, the EU has been instead perpetuating a narrow focus on the 'usual suspects' (Hawthorne 2005: 104; Roy 2005: 1003).

The second flaw is that the EU gives *de facto* veto power to Mediterranean regimes. The EU's work has been largely restricted to those associations, which have been granted legal status by the regimes. Any organisation representing a potential source of opposition, which includes most of Islamists, is thus automatically disregarded (Gillespie 2006, 89). Even with EIDHR funds—which allow the EU to fund civil society actors without a previous agreement of Mediterranean governments—the EU has been highly accommodating with host governments (Barbé and Johanssen 2008: 92). Therefore, the groups that are ultimately favoured are often elitist associations close to the government or organisations affiliated with transnational NGOs. Not only Islamists, but also overt pro-democracy associations tend not to be included in the EU's DP projects (Gillespie 2006: 89).

The third problem is that the EU overemphasises the potential role that this narrowly defined civil society can play in democratic transitions. Many scholars point out that democratic transition can hardly be non-conflictual processes (Ottaway 2005: 169). Hawthorne calls it a 'second myth' that democratisation in authoritarian countries can occur without real politics and without conflict (Hawthorne 2005: 105). Democracy minded intellectuals operating in small NGOs are unlikely to bring about change unless they succeed in building larger constituencies. The EU's excessively timid and long-range approach is aimed at democratisation without conflict, trying forever to minimise any source of political risk (Gillespie and Whitehead 2002: 196–98).

The EU, however, seems to have acknowledged the problem and is trying to move beyond the 'usual suspects' (Youngs 2005a). There is a growing consensus that the EU must recognise the reality on the ground and broaden the scope of EU-funded projects to engage with the real political actors, namely Islamist organisations. But as it will be seen below, the EU is far from thriving in this respect. Hence, pro-democracy forces in Southern countries still consider the EU's approach to be too cautious, and biased towards ensuring stability, to the detriment of encouraging change (Barbé and Johanssen 2008: 92). The EU's narrow focus on a Western

style civil society has been critically understood by some scholars as a mere excuse to buy time and ignore the real demands of North African societies (Roy 2005: 1012).

#### **d) Economic liberalisation = political liberalisation?**

Under the framework of the Barcelona process, the EU is promoting economic reform in the region as the means for tackling the root causes of the soft security threat emanating from the region. With the economic development this liberalisation agenda is expected to generate, people from the region should have fewer incentives to migrate or to become radicalised and embrace Islamic fundamentalism. Economic reform, moreover, is also advanced by the EU as a DP tool in its own right.

As the rentier-state literature has most satisfactorily explained (Beblawi 1990; Dillman 2002: 64; Karl 1997) the resistance of Middle Eastern regimes to democratic change can to a great extent be explained by their economic structure. With large revenues from natural resources as their main source of income, these regimes do not need to rely on taxation to finance themselves and therefore remain economically largely independent from their citizens. This leaves citizens in a very weak position to exert pressure and to keep their governments accountable, making the emergence of democracy all the most difficult (Kaldor et al 2007: 22-24). Economic reform is thus imperative, if political reform is to be promoted. The economic structure needs to be changed in order to diversify the source of income of the state with the ultimate goal of eventually reaching a stage where a social contract between the state and its citizens is achieved by which citizens agree their economic activity to be taxed by the state in exchange of some common services provided by the state; thus giving citizens an incentive to keep their government accountable and a very powerful tool to do it. The EU's strategy is then based on this rationale and the hope that economic liberalisation will in a slow, but inexorable way, reduce government's power, by expanding the influence of the private sector, which eventually will lead to a process of democratisation (Dillman 2002: 66).

This strategy is coherent with the stability – democracy dilemma, as it helps to ensure short-term stability, but sows the seeds for future democratisation. The approach, however, has not been working as expected, and it has so far failed mainly because it was based on two flawed assumptions. The first assumption of the strategy was that economic reforms, and opening Mediterranean economies, would lead to an increase of direct foreign investment that would bring economic growth and help to create new jobs. This has not been the case, as some studies show how much of the potential domestic investment has fled the region towards more profitable markets (Joffé 2005 in Fernandez and Youngs 2005: 161). Economic liberalisation has not brought the expected boost to economic development (Behr 2008: 81; Dillman 2002). Secondly, the assumption that there is a causal link between economic liberalisation and political liberalisation has been proven wrong (Dillman 2002; Kienle 2005). Several studies have shown that even the contrary might be possible, with some countries in which economic liberalisation coincided with political 'deliberalisation'. Tunisia is the best example of this possibility, as it is largely regarded as a success story in economic terms, but has been increasingly repressive in terms of political participation (Kienle 2005: 28-29).

The EU's economic assumptions have not functioned mainly because authoritarian regimes act as rational actors. Despite rhetoric asserting that economic change would lead to political reform, the EU has not explicitly tied economic liberalisation to democracy promotion and has

conversely showed a 'crossing-fingers' attitude, hoping that economic and political liberalisation would eventually lock together (Youngs 2006: 110). The EU's vacillations have allowed incumbent regimes to manipulate economic reform to their own benefit. Their ability to control large distributional coalitions and patronage networks during economic reforms, have reinforced their positions and to a certain extent relieved pressures for political liberalisation from key domestic constituencies (Dillman 2002: 66). Privatisation of state monopolies aptly demonstrates the incongruence of the European approach. The EU has been fostering these processes as means of creating a new independent business class, but privatisation has been noticeable because of its lack of transparency. As Kienle argues it is reasonable to expect that regimes which are not accountable to anyone will favour their own patronage networks during transitions to a more liberalised economy (Kienle 2005: 31-34). Therefore, it seems futile to expect large-scale business to become agents of change for political liberalisation, as their privileged position is highly dependent on the authoritarian status quo to continue (Schlumberger 2006: 56). Moreover, in some countries like Egypt economic liberalisation has deepened societal differentiation (Kienle 2005: 29). While the benefits of economic reform usually accrue to a minority, the costs, at least in the short-term, are borne by all, thus affecting disadvantaged groups disproportionately (Echagüe 2008, 11). In these cases, the explicit linking of economic reform and DP not only reinforces the position of autocrats, but alienates potential supporters of political pluralism amongst the most disadvantaged, eventually enhancing anti-liberal and extremist forces (Fernandez and Youngs 2005: 164).

#### **e) The EU and moderate Islamists**

The relation of the EU with moderate Islamism represents the most striking example of its contradictions and dilemmas. Islamist movements are mainly regarded as a security concern from the prism of short-term stability. The EU considers these movements to have equivocal relations with terrorism and democratic values, and to pose a threat to current stability (Emerson and Youngs 2007). At the same time, there is a growing consensus that Islamists are necessary if real democratic transitions are to happen in the region (Youngs 2005a: 244-245). Thus a progressive securitisation of political Islam as part of the EU's counter-terrorism strategies has coincided with the EU's first attempts to reach out to moderate Islamists (Bicchi and Marti 2006). Moderate Islamism is thus caught in the middle of the two extremes of the EU's stability – democracy dilemma.

In its democracy promotion dimension the EU has shown its commitment to start a positive engagement with moderate Islamists in countless ministerial statements and policy documents. In April 2005, for example, EU foreign ministries called for engagement with faith-based groups in the southern Mediterranean (Youngs 2006: 102). In front of its failing DP strategy, there is a growing consensus that the EU must move beyond the 'usual suspects' to reach out to the real political forces on the ground (Fernandez and Youngs 2005: 163; Noor and Zoller 2007). The ENP shows already this change of perception and it has abandoned the fundamental premise that secular forces in the region are natural allies against Islamists (Brusse & Schoonenboom 2006, 8-9). A plethora of initiatives aimed at cultural understanding between the West and Islam has also been set up, with the Anna Lindh Foundation as its flagship. At a national level, Germany is taking the lead in trying to identify "moderate" Islamists and has made dialogue with the Islamic world a Federal Foreign Office priority after 9/11 (Mulack 2005). These new efforts, however, have fallen short to solving the problem. New initiatives aimed at intercultural dialogue, such as those promoted by the Anna Lindh Foundation, have shown the same

problems as previous projects, with an extreme politicisation of culture, a tight governmental control and incumbent regimes acting as veto players (Malmvig 2005). Moreover, a concrete support for Islamists in order to widen political participation in their home societies is still lacking. At the end of the day, Islamists continue to be the untouchables of the democracy assistance world (Youngs 2005a: 244).

The EU still perceives Islamists with suspicion. The prevalence of the Algerian trauma and fears of “one man, one vote, one time” scenarios make the EU doubtful about their degree of commitment to democratic reform and their real intentions behind pragmatism (Hamzawy 2005: 11). However, further to the political controversy and prevalence of prejudices, the main reason hindering the EU’s engagement with moderate Islamists might well be their potential as reform forces. Moderate Islamists represent the most serious political challenge to incumbent regimes (Albercht and Wegner 2006; Ottaway 2005). Choosing engagement with moderate Islamists could imply a major step towards democratisation and a new balance in the stability – democracy dilemma. But in front of this political challenge, the EU is lacking the political direction to decide how to address moderate Islamists (Hamzawy 2005:11; Youngs 2006: 108). The problem is that the EU ‘is trying to avoid the issue for as long as possible’ (Barbé and Johanssen 2008: 91).

### **Squaring the stability – democracy circle?**

This chapter discusses why is worth trying to engage with moderate Islamists. By analysing the findings of the previous chapter, it explores in a more tentative manner how the EU could give more coherence to its DP policy through this engagement.

The EU’s DP strategy has been critically hindered by the stability – democracy dilemma. Democracy is understood as the best way of ensuring regional stability, and thus Europe’s own security. This, however, has been framed as a long-term project to avoid the perceived risks of a rapid transition to democracy –namely regional destabilisation or the emergence of hostile regimes. The EU’s strategy has succeeded in ensuring the status quo, regional destabilisation in North Africa seems today less likely than when the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was launched. It has failed, however, to set the path to the transition from current stability to a ‘structural stability’ (European Commission 2001: 10). The EU’s ill-defined DP policy has promoted partial liberalisation, but has been unable to foster real political reform (Brumberg 2005; Haddadi 2004: 11-12), thus perpetuating the status quo and leading most Mediterranean countries to different forms of liberalised autocracy. Moderate Islamism presents the EU with an opportunity to break the present political standstill. Engagement with Islamist movements could, to a certain extent, solve the EU’s stability – democracy dilemma, providing more coherence to the overall strategy. This would surely not be an easy venture, but the EU could apply trust building rationale to non-violent Islamists, and through a process of positive engagement gradually increase mutual understanding.

As the Moroccan 2007 elections or the Hamas victory of 2006 suggest, and with the only exception of Turkey, the EU still perceives the possibility of Islamist governments with anxiety and as a threat to current stability. With an increased mutual trust, however, it is not unreasonable to believe that the EU’s reticence of the formation of an Islamist government in a Mediterranean country could decrease. Arguably a transition to democracy would then be

perceived by the EU as a less threatening possibility, as their most probable outcome were free elections to take place –a good electoral result for the faith-based parties and the possibility of Islamists to reach power– would no longer be seen as a fundamental security threat to Europe’s security. This would partially solve the stability – democracy dilemma. By defining a policy towards moderate Islamists and by considering them as potential partners for political reform, rather than marginalising them, the EU would increase the coherence of its DP strategy and solve some of the problems seen above of its 5 main characteristics.

- Firstly, the EU could increase its credibility as a democracy promoter. The lack of success in the EU gradual and regime friendly strategy has resulted in accusations of hypocrisy and connivance with autocrats. By ignoring the main opposition forces on the ground and not accepting electoral results which have given these forces power, the EU has largely lost its credibility as a promoter of democracy. By engaging with moderate Islamists or at least recognising them as potential legitimate partners, the EU could recuperate much of this lost legitimacy.
- Secondly, the EU could implement a more effective top-down approach to democracy promotion. Although the EU would most likely encounter strong opposition from incumbent regimes, if it was to succeed in engaging with Islamists, the EU would witness a major increase of its leverage over autocrats. MENA regimes would not so easily use the ‘Islamist threat’ and the spectre of ‘One man, one vote, one time’ scenarios to excuse the lack of democratic reform. Moreover, if the EU was not to fear the probable outcomes of democratic elections throughout its Mediterranean neighbours, it would have real potential to increase its assertiveness.
- Thirdly, by collaborating with moderate Islamists the EU could increase the effectiveness of its bottom-up approach. The EU’s attempt to empower a Western style civil society as a counterweight to both autocrats and Islamists has failed. By broadening its DP programmes to reach out to Islamists, the EU could attempt to foster a coalition between some secular and Islamist opposition forces in order to build a sufficiently strong constituency for democratic reform. Civil society could thus play its envisaged role, and put real pressure on autocratic elites –forcing them to cede power as the only means of partly maintaining its privileged position.
- Finally, engagement with Islamists could help solve some of the flaws of the EU’s economic liberalisation rationale. In collaboration with Islamists the EU could monitor the processes of economic liberalisation. This would not guarantee a direct link between economic and political liberalisation, but could prevent the most striking cases of corruption. Moreover, bringing Islamists on board would increase the legitimacy of economic liberalisation. The Islamists could be used to explain the necessity of these reforms, thus reducing the risk of reforms being manipulated by radical and extremist forces, which would delegitimise the entire political liberalisation process.

By engaging with moderate Islamists the EU could develop a more coherent DP policy and make steps towards redressing the theoretical flaws of its strategy. It could also provide a practical way forward from the current political standstill and partially solving Europe’s dilemma. In line with Behr’s argument (Behr 2008), the stability – democracy dilemma will hold only as long as Islamist parties are perceived as a threat and short term security is the ultimate goal of

the EU Mediterranean strategy. If the engagement with moderate Islamists was to be considered, the EU's analysis of the Mediterranean reality would change substantially. Authoritarian regimes might still be perceived as acceptable partners for the short-term, but unacceptable in the long-term. However, by increasing mutual understanding, the challenge posed by Islamists to the current autocratic status quo would probably be perceived as less threatening. By engaging with moderate Islamists, the EU could not only address some of the problems of its current strategy, but could also perceive the transitions to democracy amongst its Mediterranean neighbours not only a remote possibility, but a project feasible in the medium-term, thus partially starting to square the stability – democracy dilemma.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the question of why democracy promotion policy of the EU towards the Mediterranean has been characterised by ambiguity and ineffectiveness. The First Section has sought a theoretical answer to this question exploring different relevant debates in the literature. First, the limitations of the EU as an international actor were analysed in order to assess the extent to which the particularities of the EU can account for its ambiguous Mediterranean policy. This showed that in comparison with other regions, the EU behaves as a rather unitary actor towards the Mediterranean region. The key motivations of the EU's DP were scrutinised next. This analysis demonstrated that the EU's Mediterranean policy has been significantly impacted by its pursuit of two contradictory security goals. Short-term stability and long-term democracy have been sought simultaneously, which has affected the overall coherence of its DP policy towards the Mediterranean. This stability – democracy dilemma, qualified with findings from discursive analysis studies, was identified as the main factor explaining the EU's ambiguous DP policy in the Mediterranean.

The Second Section analysed in view of the stability – democracy dilemma the main characteristics of the EU's DP policy towards the Mediterranean, namely: first, gradualism and limited use of conditionality; second, a regime friendly top-down approach aimed at partnership building; third, a bottom-up approach focused on empowering a narrowly defined civil society as key actor in democratic transitions; and finally a strong belief in economic liberalisation as a motor for political reform. The relation between the EU and moderate Islamism was studied as the most striking example of the EU's stability – democracy dilemma. This analysis illustrated that the design of the EU's DP policy is based upon several flawed assumptions. The effectiveness of this policy has been further limited by the stability – democracy dilemma, with the EU systematically favouring short-term security concerns over the long-term project of democracy

The Third Section discussed the findings of the previous two sections and in a more exploratory manner, suggesting that by engaging with moderate Islamists the EU could make steps towards solving its stability – democracy dilemma. Considering moderate Islamists as potential partners, the EU could improve the effectiveness of its DP policy, reducing its incoherence and ambiguity.

This paper leads to the conclusion that the main reason explaining the ambiguous and ineffective democracy promotion policy of the EU towards the Mediterranean is a crucial conflict of interests. The stability – democracy dilemma has affected the overall design of its policy and can also help to explain its anxious relation with moderate Islamism. An act of political boldness

and the definition by the EU of a clear DP policy that considered engagement with moderate Islamist would surely represent a major step towards squaring its stability – democracy circle.

## Notes

[1] Ambiguity. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ambiguity> (accessed: August 27, 2008)

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