

Policy Paper
Between Pragmatism and
Principles – EU and the
Consolidation of Authoritarianism
in its Southern Neighbourhood
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Abstract

The way the EU policy towards its southern neighbourhood was changing after the Arab spring emphasises efficiency of Arab leaders' consolidating authoritarian rule in the region. Although these autocrats are important EU partners in areas of security and migration, it is likely that their regional interventionism and increase in repressions will influence further destabilisation. To counter the challenges these autocrats' actions pose for the EU, it could develop a special kind of partnership for its reform-prone neighbours and acknowledge conflicting interests with some of Arab most powerful and authoritarian states.

Introduction

The debate over whether it is pragmatism or principles that EU prioritises in its policy towards its southern neighbours was propelled together with the outbreak of the Arab spring and even more with the growing awareness that the mass protests were not able to bring expected change in the Arab world. The autocrats' unwillingness to give up their power not only caused havoc in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but also exacerbated the EU internal challenges. It caused the Union to distance itself from “deep democracy” goalⁱ and focus on stabilisation. However, the dilemma of values vs. pragmatic interests seems to be far-fetched. A shift in the EU approach towards its neighbourhood was rather a reaction to changing conditions, and it is these conditions that should be studied as a main drive for ENP prioritiesⁱⁱ. Therefore, it is important to establish whether the EU reaction towards changing conditions in its neighbourhood is adequate and can further realisation of EU interests in the region, rather than define its motivation.

First, the wave of mass pro-democratic movements and perspective for the regional systematic shift it brought, and secondly, the destabilisation and consolidation of authoritarianism in Arab states that followed, forced the EU to review its policy towards Union's southern neighbourhood. This was evidenced especially in the documents on European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) published in 2011 – an enthusiastic reaction to the protests and initial regime changes – and 2015, when the EU had to adjust priorities of its politics towards the region as

a response to lack of expected outcomes of its previous approach. The goal of democratising and transforming, as well as strengthening civil society, pursued according to a 2011 communique, was not abandoned, but lost its priority status. What replaced it was stability and resilience and idea of flexible tools' set, which could be adjusted to the specific country and regime. In the same time though the doubts concerning how the new approach challenges the EU role as a normative power emerged. Consequently, the questions appeared whether by implementing it the EU would not contribute to consolidation of autocracy, which will further destabilise the region and hence, the Union's borders.

EU and its Southern Neighbourhood after the Arab Spring

In March 2011, Catherine Ashton, the High Representative and Vice President of the EU Commission, in her joint communication highlighted that the EU had to more fiercely support “demand for political participation, dignity, freedom” and that its foreign policy should be based on “the respect of universal values and shared interests”ⁱⁱⁱ. It was the foundation for setting a new approach towards its foreign partners with the strategy called “more for more”. Its aim was to offer closer and more beneficial relationship with these states, who will more effectively proceed with political and economic reforms, widening social freedoms and opening the markets. The EU created packages of grants for the MENA region, i.e. €350 million as 2011-2012 SPRING grant, around €30 for Erasmus

Mundus programme and up to €2.5 billion from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development^{iv}.

In the words of one of the EU Commission workers, in 2011 the EU narrative was also filled with it blaming itself for previous close relations with autocrats and not predicting the wave of protests born out of the societies' frustration^v. The EU policy towards mass demonstration in Arab world was indeed reactive. However, the possibility of such a sudden regime changes was not taken into consideration by any state leader and virtually no experts and so, not only the EU, but Western states in general came rather unprepared for the new challenges in the region.

However, with time the EU politics remained reactive. Despite visible inefficiency and plundering of power by Mursi in Egypt, and in its consequence growing social discontent expressed in another wave of mass protests, it was only after Mursi was arrested in 2013 that Catharine Ashton visited the country (since her last visit in 2011) in a bid to cool tensions. There was also lack of political will for involvement in Syria - which came about with weak US leadership^{vi} - where the EU failed to develop an approach to the conflict that would ensure Union's influence in the process of its resolving. At the same time, the Tunisian economy was gradually collapsing, which was evidenced in the popular discontent on the streets, which also remained unaddressed by the EU, despite perceiving Tunisia as the "bonne élève" since its democratic transition after the Arab spring^{vii}. Even in the face of the new

protests in the Arab world in 2019, the EU reacted mostly with no more than EU Parliament resolutions.

Until releasing the Reflection on ENP in 2015, the documents on ENP assumed that the EU can offer the most appealing socio-political and economic model to its neighbours, and, therefore, they were based on the patronising approach and assumption of asymmetry in relations. The policy was to offer some financial support which was supposed to assist ENP countries in their road towards falling under the umbrella of democratic "circle of friends" of the EU, with free-market economies and liberal rules of social conduct.

The document from 2015 – revision on the ENP - changed this approach by distancing the EU from its democratising plans. It acknowledged growing instability in the southern Mediterranean and its aftermath in the form of the increase of irregular migrants traveling to the EU^{viii}. Migration indeed became one of the central issues for the relations between the EU and its neighbours, as it was also a matter that created major internal problems for the EU.

In place of "deep democracy" the accent was rather put on stability and security and "differentiation" in the sense of adjusting policy measures to socio-political conditions in a given country. The new ENP was to be more adequate to the situation on the ground in the deeply destabilised MENA and its securitisation was able to bring just that. With it however, as well as with the differentiation policy, the EU also deconstructed its image as an actor able to transform the politics in its neighbourhood^{ix}. The idea of differentiating both – goals and tools in

relations with the neighbourhood –was without a doubt positively received by Arab dictators, who found it playing into their narrative that MENA does not need democracy to prosper^x.

But it was the most recent document referring to the EU's relation with its Southern neighbours – The New Agenda for the Mediterranean – that gathered the most positive reactions among regional leaders, despite that there was no consultation with them (contrary to the 2015 reflection) prior to its publication^{xi}. The New Agenda, published in the beginning of 2021, although still mentions human rights and the rule of law, prioritises “new economic and investment plan”^{xii}. It is indeed in the context of economy that solutions for other issues pertaining to the region are framed. Within the framework of the New Agenda, the EC plans to mobilise up to €7 billion under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and support up to €30 billion of investments. The document refers to the problems of youth, unemployment, unfriendly business environment (and with it – the lack of security for financial interests of the European entrepreneurs), and – what seems to be another priority for the new partnership – green transformation. The 2011 “more for more” assumption was replaced by “incentive mechanism” as a part of NDICI, which excludes conditionality from the instruments adopted under the New Partnership for the Mediterranean.

In the same time the NDICI itself prioritises stability over democracy and human rights. In the same time, it defines cooperation on migration and economic reforms among the indicators, on which the incentive

mechanism is based, which is another factor deciding on decreasing significance of political reforms as EU goal in its neighbourhood^{xiii}. Moreover, emphasis on migration in the security context became a leverage in the hands of Arab leaders to gain financial support from the EU^{xiv}.

The New Arab Authoritarianism

Although the Arab states of the EU southern neighbourhood consist of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia, for analysing how the situation in the region was evolving, it is crucial to consider also regional politics of rich Gulf States. Rich Arab monarchies located in the Gulf managed to take over the role of dominant actors in relation between Western countries and Arab world with the destabilisation of, sequentially, Iraq, Syria, and for a short period of time – Egypt^{xv}. Throughout the last decade it is their interests that are able to decide how the relations between regional states evolve. With that, these interests are increasingly important in the context of the EU politics and goals in its southern neighbourhood.

The changes in the EU policy towards its Southern neighbours are, among other things, an expression of successive adjustment of Arab authoritarian leaders to regional and international reality, contrary to the decline of European influence^{xvi}. The Arab Spring democratic movements emerged with the growing popularity of Islamist parties. The most important of them were those linked to the Muslim

Brotherhood (MB), which posed a threat to dictators in Egypt and countries of the Persian Gulf and had the greatest chance of seizing power. When this threat became realistic after the MB overtook power in Egypt and Tunisia, the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, decided to increase their involvement in regional affairs. After the society's disappointment led in 2012 to another wave of protests against the new Egyptian president – related to the MB Muhammad Mursi - UAE and Saudi Arabia offered their support for the military, when it regained control over the state from Islamists.

This regional interventionism is one of the pillars of the Arab authoritarianism after the Arab spring. The authoritarian leaders, in the face of the lack of other forms confirming social legitimacy for their power, seek both – threats and ways for their power to survive – in the foreign politics. Together with Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia became involved in Libya, supporting General Khalifa Haftar, who fought against the forces of the internationally recognised government of Fayez Sarraj – also associated with the MB. Their involvement in Libya was contradicting the EU's interests and exposed it to major obstacles for successful realisation of its project IRINI. IRINI, with the annual cost around €10 billion, was established to support the implementation of the UN embargo on arms supplies to Libya. However, from April 2019 to June 2020, about 6,200 tonnes of weapons and ammunition were imported into Libya from Emirates bases, and by April 2020, the UAE carried out more than 850 attacks in Libya using

drones and aviation. The destabilisation of Libya led to smuggling networks development in the country. This in turn contributed to the record number of irregular immigrants (more than 181,000 people) arriving in Italy in 2016 through the so-called Central-Mediterranean route, which exposed the EU to further costs related to preventing irregular migration^{xvii}.

Moreover, after the democratic transformation in Tunisia, the authorities of the UAE and Saudi Arabia hindered entering that state's territory for their citizens. The political elite of the UAE maintained close relations with the Tunisian Free Destourian Party, whose members collaborated with the former regime and criticised Tunisian democratisation, blaming the moderate Islamist party al-Nahda for the country's economic problems. Arab autocrats equate fighting Islamist groups with countering terrorism and preventing further regional destabilisation, justifying their repression of MB supporters. Thus, the EU focus on security in its southern neighbourhood plays into the autocrats' narrative, as it helps legitimise their interventions, framed as actions taken against those who threaten the stability of the EU borders.

Another pillar of Arab autocrats' narrative is the rhetoric that prosperity and economic development do not require democratisation. It is to be supported by innovative "mega-investments" ("New Cairo", "NEOM" in Saudi Arabia, or "Masdar City" in the UAE). The aim of these projects is to prove that the shortened decision-making process in authoritarian

systems allows for quicker and more effective reaction to economic and social challenges than in the democracies. Simultaneously, these investments are advertised as innovative, low-carbon intensive, supporting countries' transformation towards more green economy. The development strategies (like Egypt Vision 2030) are connected to realisation of sustainable development goals, creating more business-friendly and innovative environment and green transitions. These strategies aim at proving that the climate change and SDGs are one of the priorities in autocrats' agenda and attract external resources for lucrative, development projects, which in authoritarian states are often conducted by companies or organisations close to the regimes (i.e. in Egypt the military controls and owns much of the country's economy^{xviii}). The effectiveness of this approach is envisioned not only in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean economic priorities, but also in the EU member states cooperation with southern neighbourhood countries. I.e. in June 2020 France's Minister of Finance Bruno La Maire signed agreements on aid and investments in Egypt worth €3.8 billion as part of strengthening of economic cooperation between the two countries.

Autocrats also use the argument of economic development and investment opportunities against the EU interests and its position as a normative power. Since 2018, Arab autocrats (with an exception of Qatar) aim at normalising relations with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. They criticise western powers for maintaining the sanctions against the

regime. They blame the sanctions for preventing their potential investments, which would, as they claim, improve Syrians' life conditions. The EU cannot accept the authority of Syrian president and his elites who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity and stay unpunished. However, with the Arab autocrats' narrative that their investments could help in facilitating Syrian refugees' returns, it is likely that some of the member states, like Greece, will normalise their relations with Assad.

Lastly, Arab dictators are diversifying their foreign relations to prevent the EU from conditioning its financial support on democratic reforms, thus decreasing the asymmetry in relations. They tighten economic cooperation with China, and security cooperation with Russia. The former provides the Arab leaders with an attractive development model, which does not include increasing the levels of freedom for their citizens and yet represents successful economic advancement. Contrary to the EU, China is not interested in changing the relations between state and society of its partners, whereas it assumes that strong authoritarian leaders are the most capable of maintaining stability and prosperity in the region, which is in accordance of Arab leaders' narrative^{xix}.

Although the economic cooperation with China is growing, especially in the context of the Belt and Road initiative, the EU still has a significant leverage in trade with all of its southern neighbours^{xx}. Cooperation with the EU remains more important also in the context of innovations, knowledge

transfer and green transformation for Arab states. Nevertheless, this leverage is not communicated efficiently^{xxi}. In a 2017 survey, less than a third of respondents from 6 Arab states (five in the EU southern neighbourhood and Iraq) were aware of any EU development assistance to their country. In the same study, after being asked an open question with which country respondents would want their own country to have stronger relations, they named 58 states, and only 7% of respondents nominated an EU member state^{xxii}. At the same time, according to Arab Barometer study from 2021, among the respondents from Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt 70%, 63%, 49% and 30% respectively said they would prefer their country to have stronger economic relations with China^{xxiii}.

Between Pragmatism and Principles: Challenges for the EU

The way the EU framed its policy towards southern neighbours since the Arab spring intensified the debate whether its approach towards the Arab world is based on EU values or rather its interests. However, the changes in the ENP and approach towards the Arab neighbours since 2011 should rather be regarded in terms of defending EU's influence in the region by shifting from focus on end results to the socio-political processes on the ground. Nevertheless, in the words of one expert – the influence should be a mean leading to achieving the goal, not the goal itself^{xxiv}.

Achieving stability and prosperity in the region is and should be the final assumption of the EU policy towards southern neighbourhood. The way its approach is framed now is helping Arab autocrat legitimise their anti-democratic politics and regional involvement, and therefore – consolidation of authoritarianism in the Arab neighbourhood. This can increase stability in the region in the short term, but, as evidenced in the mass protests from 2019 and 2020, the Arab spring was a breakthrough in the way Arab societies express their discontent against dictators, and therefore, in the longer perspective consolidation of authoritarianism will lead to further destabilisation. Since Tunisian president Kais Saïd suspended parliament, dismissed the Prime Minister and closed some of the media stations in July 2021, Tunisians regularly organise mass protests against this backsliding into authoritarianism he initiated.

Additionally, so far Arab autocrats' regional interventionism rather influenced destabilising processes in the southern neighbourhood, like in the case of Libya, which threatened the safety of the EU borders and exacerbated the numbers of migrants trying to reach Europe. In view of major regional authoritarian actors like the UAE or Egypt support for Tunisian president actions, the EU should be carefully assessing their influence in this country. The ambition of fighting even the moderate Islamist groups in the Arab world leads to the radicalisation of some of the religious Arab communities, which unable to realise their political aspirations tend to join jihadi groups^{xxv}.

Decreasing support for political reforms in the Southern Neighbourhood threatens effectiveness of

the projects supported from the EU budget. In the EC document on Budget Support from 2020 - *Under the European neighbourhood policy, the EU works with its southern and eastern neighbours to foster stabilisation, security and prosperity*^{xxvi}. The document also highlights the growth of both – economic and political – risk factors for the realisation of projects conducted within the budget. In 2020, the risk level for southern neighbourhood was higher than the average level for all regions included. Although the document explains it with inclusion of new countries, some of which do not receive budget support (Lebanon, Algeria), it also stipulates that risk factors are connected to bigger challenges to human rights and democracy.

Providing bigger legitimacy for authoritarian leaders through the securitisation of ENP and prioritising investments and economic cooperation in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean contribute to undermining the normative power of the EU. Not only is this taking place through simply weakening the democratisation narrative, but through validating Arab leaders' claims that the EU is partially responsible for the struggling of inhabitants of Syria. Their rhetoric exposes the EU on critics, endanger its internal coherence and consistency with the US. Additionally, emphasising economic cooperation over political reforms proves dictators' narrative about the importance of their ability to adjust faster to changing financial conditions more valid.

Recommendations

Partnership in place of Incentives

The lack of proactive approach towards issues in its direct neighbourhood, created space for other countries stronger involvement in regional issues. Despite positive reception of Arab protests and supporting their outcome, the ENP from 2011 lacked a concrete form of partnership offered for those neighbourhood countries, which will be more prone to democratise^{xxvii}. Although the EU provided Tunisia with financial and political support, what was missing was an offer of something between the membership and simply an important neighbour^{xxviii}. Now there is no Arab state that would be close to Tunisian achievements and status from before July 2021, however creating a new form of relation for the most important and democratising neighbours could give the EU partners a perspective of partnership in place of protectionist treatment.

Acknowledging Conflict of Interests

The securitisation of the ENP and emphasis on economy alleviated the meaning of the partnership between the Union and those Arab states who more fiercely involved in regional conflicts. Not only does it not bring more stabilisation to the region, but also provides legitimacy for their narrative, defying the EU normative power. So far, the EU is perceiving those states – the UAE and Saudi Arabia – as the most important partners when it comes to security^{xxix}, which overshadows their role as the EU competitors in its southern neighbourhood. Isolating leaders of these countries would not be in the EU interest, but

it should consider addressing the threats deriving from their interventionist policy towards the Union's southern neighbours. One way EU could do that is through developing a strategy and appointing special representative for the Persian Gulf^{xxx}.

Better communication

The EU could also invest more in communicating its role in development aid and sharing know-how with civil society organisations. As shown in the research citizens of Arab states do not recognise the scope of EU's financial and socio-political support. Therefore, the EU could increase requirements on organisations implementing projects it supports regarding information about the funding sources. As most of the EU projects is located in the capital cities, it should also consider involving more in the rural areas of the southern neighbourhood countries.

Managed migration

Focusing on preventing the migration from the southern neighbourhood to the EU is another argument with which autocrats' argument in favour of their role in protecting the EU against the consequences of instability in the region. They use migration to get both – financial and political support from the EU. To hamper using this narrative and in the same time limit the activity of smugglers, Member States should better facilitate legal migration for Arab populations^{xxxi}. Considering the widening demographic gaps and demand on European markets for workers, EU states could increase the number of temporary working visas issued to the citizens of Arab states or try to encourage those with higher education to apply for

the so-called Blue Card - a visa system for qualified people.

Transatlantic approach

Taking into account the strategy of Arab autocrats, European leaders, even applying a more restrictive approach to the incentive-based mechanism in terms of democratisation, are not in a position to effectively exert pressure on them. However, in the view of growing Chinese and Russian influence in the region and considering the US critical approach to those two countries, the EU could initiate the transatlantic approach towards the consolidation of authoritarianism in the region.

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ⁱ European Commission, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Agnieszka Cianciara, *The Politics of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, (New York, Routledge, 2020), 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ EU Commission, 2011.

^{iv} Ibidem.

^v Interview with an employee of the European Commission.

^{vi} Interview with an employee of the European Commission.

^{vii} Interview with an employee of the European Commission.

^{viii} European Commission, 2015.

^{ix} Cianciara, *The Politics...*, 57-62.

^x Ulrich Speck, “EU Faces Tough Choices in the Neighbourhood”, EU Observer, 18.05.2015, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/128728>

^{xi} Interview with an employee of European Commission.



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- ^{xii} European Commission, A new Agenda for the Mediterranean, 9.02.2021.
- ^{xiii} Elżbieta Kaca, Jakub Benedyczak, Lidia Gibadło et.al., Raport PISM: Wizja rozwoju Partnerstwa Wschodniego po 2020 roku, Polish Institute of International Affairs, 03.2019, 35.
- ^{xiv} Interview with an employee of the European Commission.
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- ^{xx} Interview with Brussels based expert; European Commission Directorate General for Trade.
- ^{xxi} Interview with Brussels based expert.
- ^{xxii} Andrea Teti, Pamela Abbott, *Perceptions of the EU in MENA Public Opinion. Arab Transformations Policy Brief* 2, (University of Aberdeen, 2017), 3-4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315836881_Perceptions_of_the_EU_in_MENA_Public_Opinion_Arab_Transformations_Policy_Brief_2
- ^{xxiii} Arab Barometer Wave VI, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/covid-19-survey/>



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^{xxiv} Interview with Brussels based expert.

^{xxv} Sara Nowacka, “New Arab Authoritarianism as a Challenge for the EU”, Polish Institute of International Affairs, 26.07.2021, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/new-arab-authoritarianism-as-a-challenge-for-the-eu>

^{xxvi} European Commission, Budget Support Trends and Results, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/budget-support-trends-and-results_en.pdf

^{xxvii} Interview with Brussels based expert.

^{xxviii} *Ibidem*.

^{xxix} Interview with an employee of the European Commission.

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