

Why does the EU fear change in its neighbourhood?

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The agenda of the Foreign Affairs' Council of 31 January will be packed with decisions to be made. Over the past month, the EU has been dithering to respond to the events taking place in its neighbours to the south and the east, despite this being indicated in the Lisbon Treaty as its priority foreign policy area. The EU has prided itself as a power that seeks to promote long-term processes of transformation in the countries that surround it. Yet when forces of change emerge in countries like Belarus and Tunisia, it is lost. Immediate responses were little more than appeals to contain the violence of repression of protestors, and the EU was virtually silent until Ben Ali fled Tunis. Longer-term strategies and possible post-transition still need to materialise. And the EU's track record in supporting transitions to democracy is not outstanding.

Belarus and Tunisia are not the only countries whose authoritarian governments have been challenged by popular protests; the possible domino effect in the Arab world has been pointed out by many as the protests in Egypt and Yemen show. However different the situation in each of these countries, and Tunisia is unique in many respects, they have two things in common. The deficits in democracy and political rights need to be understood as amongst the systemic causes that in the end undermine the regimes, and the EU's inability to issue more than hollow statements and take the leadership in supporting democratic change.

What is lacking is the compass on the basis of which develop immediate responses and longer-term strategies. Despite the rhetoric hailing the 'transformative' role of the EU, in practice the Neighbourhood Policy has been devised to sustain the status quo in Eastern Europe and in the South Mediterranean, in the belief that status quo equals stability. Political dynamics in both regions have amply shown that this is not the case. Yet even in Eastern Europe, where the EU can exercise more influence and has been called upon for support by pro-democracy forces, the Union has faltered to find appropriate strategies to ensure that the change brought about by the 'coloured' revolutions could be translated into consolidated democracies.

Why has this been the case? There are many priorities that sit uncomfortably next to the democracy rhetoric. To the east, member state relations with Russia - based on historical relations, energy supplies, and the country's importance as a regional and global player - remain one of the most divisive issues that shadows any attempt to develop EU policies aimed at democratic stability in the region, at a time of rapprochement with Moscow. Coupled with the unwillingness to offer any prospect of EU accession, it has weakened the EU's attractiveness in Eastern Europe. To the south, the fear of Islamist oppositions reaching government through democratic elections, cooperation in migration control, the containment of the Middle East conflict, and relations with energy exporting countries have blocked pretty much in nuce any attempt to promote basic human rights and a degree of political pluralism. These interests are compounded by the fact that member states have very different views on each issue, making the policies a patchwork of interests and values, without any being effective.

Beyond these competing priorities, which are easy to criticise, there is a key political dilemma between transformation and stability that needs to be taken seriously. How to strike a balance between condemning and isolating authoritarian regimes, and engaging them under the justification that dialogue is more helpful to promote reform? Witness the Obama Presidency struggling to find a new narrative in relations with the Arab world after the disastrous consequences of his predecessor's 'regime change' rhetoric.

For the EU the Belarusian case is emblematic of these difficulties: after a decade of frozen relations and targeted sanctions on human rights grounds, Minsk's liberation of a few political

prisoners gave the EU the cue to start establishing limited dialogue with the regime through the Eastern Partnership. Neither approach seems to have made inroads with Lukashenka's regime. Beyond strategic and tactical issues, where the EU also needs to assess its interest in promoting transformation and its ability to do so, these dilemmas show that even in the realm of 'values' (enshrined in the Treaty) the member states have different views on the universality of human rights and the legitimacy of interference in the internal affairs of other states. Roughly speaking, the Northern member states are more inclined towards international norms, and the Mediterranean ones more sensitive to cooperating with 'partner' governments.

In recent years, fearful of missing out in global competition, in accessing resources, and in the chessboard of international politics, the EU has been clearly shifting towards engagement regardless of the political situation in neighbouring countries. This is reflected in the initiatives that frame policies towards the two regions. The Eastern Partnership seeks to engage countries that have been most impermeable to EU influence, such as Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan and shifts much of the 'democracy and good governance' theme to the less important regional table. The Union for the Mediterranean (which has delivered very little so far) essentially has undressed itself of all the human rights and civil society content that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had developed.

The EU has been working on agreements with countries whose human rights records are abysmal, such as Syria, Libya, and now Central Asian countries. Relations with Tunisia have been particularly shameful: not only has Ben Ali's regime of repression been one of the least criticised by the EU, even compared to North Africa and the Middle East, but its economic reform has been praised to the extent that the country was a candidate to gaining 'advanced status' in its relations with Brussels. Even Israel's progress on that front has been de facto frozen because of the settlement issue.

Brussels' assurances that problems regarding political freedoms are addressed behind closed doors are simply insufficient. There is much that can be done to improve the EU's support of democratic change in its neighbourhood. The new human rights units in the External Action Service and the strengthened EU delegations around the world could contribute greatly to ensuring that human rights and political principles are more strongly integrated into the analysis of the political situation in third countries and fed into possible 'transformation' policies. Aid projects could also be better tailored to address these issues. And the high politics, including the diplomacy of the member states, need to go hand in hand with the other aspects of EU external relations.

But the member states need to confront with each other more openly and the more general question of whether the EU is serious about transformation or not, and match the strategies accordingly. The potential rise of Islamist parties through elections, how to deal with citizens' challenges to authoritarian regimes, whether to support political opposition movements, how to engage with civil society, and the degree to which the EU believes it can and should promote what it calls its 'values' abroad are just some questions to which it has no answers. While it would be impossible to draw up a blueprint for action, ad hocery does not do the EU's image any good with its own citizens and with those who are fighting for their rights elsewhere. Nor does it pay off in the long-term: enough cases show that containment and status quo policies do not mean stability.

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