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EU Democracy Assistance Discourse in Its New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood

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Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, this article compares the structure of key policy documents on European Union (EU) democracy promotion in the Southern Neighborhood before and after the “Arab Uprisings.” With reference to the key document presenting the EU’s revised conception of democracy and strategic vision in the Southern Neighborhood, this article argues that, despite assertions of a paradigmatic shift in the EU’s approach to democracy, the conceptual structure of these documents maintains unaltered the substantively liberal model for both development and democratization. This is likely to leave the EU’s pre-Uprisings reputational deficit concerning democracy promotion unaltered.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Critical Discourse Analysis, Democracy Assistance, Democratization, European Union

INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the European Union’s (EU) first revision of its Neighborhood Policy in response to the Arab Uprisings. After an initial response to events in the Southern Neighborhood contained in the March 8 Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PfDSP),1 the EU undertook an overall revision of its Neighborhood policies, including democracy assistance, producing a second joint communication by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs entitled A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood (NRCN)2 on May 25.

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As with PfDSP, there are several areas in which NRCN claims to present
an innovative approach in light of the Uprisings. Although NRCN does not
talk of a “step change” in EU Neighborhood Policy as PfDSP did, the claims
made for its innovative vision are clear: the document’s preamble does not shy
away from a mea culpa, admitting that “EU support to political reforms in
neighbouring countries has met with limited results”\textsuperscript{3} and that “there is room
for improvement.”\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, it speaks of a need to “look afresh”\textsuperscript{5} at its policy
choices and that a “new approach is needed”\textsuperscript{6} in order to “rise to the historical
challenges.”\textsuperscript{7} A second area of novelty NRCN identifies is the idea of “deep
democracy,”\textsuperscript{8} which is presented as the EU’s new target in democracy promo-
tion. Finally, NRCN also specifically claims that in designing this new strategic
framework, the EU has learned from past mistakes.

This article examines the claim that the EU’s response to the Uprisings
represents a substantive policy shift. To do this, building on an existing ana-
lytical framework,\textsuperscript{9} the article adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)
perspective to examine the discursive construction of what could be called
“Three Ds”—democracy, development, and delivery. An analysis of the language
of policy documents cannot replace a substantive analysis of actual practices.
However, while such substantive analyses abound,\textsuperscript{10} there is a notable paucity
of attention to the conceptual construction and framing of policy, particularly
from a linguistic standpoint. Thus, for example, even in areas such as the EU
democracy assistance’s (DA) supposed liberalism in which there is a broad con-
sensus across both “mainstream” and “critical” scholarship—Pace et al., for
example, state that “the EU has a very definitive image of what kind of outcome
it wishes to see in the MENA region as a result of domestic political change:
namely, European-style liberal democracy”—there are few detailed analyses
of foreign policy discourse to corroborate these substantive accounts.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed,
even when some recent contributions on EU DA refer to discourse analysis
as a foundation for their argument,\textsuperscript{13} this consensus seems to have emerged
with little sustained linguistic analysis of the actual discourse.\textsuperscript{14} By drawing on
CDA, the analysis presented here contributes to filling this gap.\textsuperscript{15} The specific
strategy adopted here has been to examine occurrences of the term “democ-
archy,” noting the definition texts provide of democracy \textit{per se}, the definitions
of political and socio-economic rights, and how these are placed in relation
to democracy (included/excluded, foregrounded/marginalized, etc.). In addi-
tion, given the importance these documents recognize for “sustainable and
inclusive economic growth,” the documents have been examined for the me-
chanisms through which such growth is to be achieved, as well as the issue of the
instruments for implementation these policies are provided with.

The methodological difficulties of such an undertaking should not be under-
estimated: beyond the “normal” complexities of any text, EU documentation
falls into a category of particularly complex documents, in which there are
multiple directly and indirectly contributing authors, multiple audiences, and a
vigorou... and different political priorities. In addition, the European External Action Service (EEAS) itself is a not-yet-settled merger of parts of the Commission and parts of the Council, each of which believes its role to have been diminished and subjugated by the other in the merger. Finally, these documents present an articulation of democracy, as well as development and delivery, which frames multiple programs (ENP, EIDHR, UfM, etc.) located in or across different institutional settings (e.g., EEAS, DGs Aid, Enlargement). All these multiple authors and audiences, beyond the already diverse group of stakeholder Neighborhood Countries the policy texts address, will engage in a contest over the interpretation and implementation of the priorities that documents such as NRCN set. And it is precisely in this sense that NRCN can be viewed as a singular arena for this competition, the structure and characteristics of which play an important part in setting the “rules of the game” for such interpretive competition between stakeholders.

Mindful of these methodological caveats, the article first provides a context for the analysis of post-Uprising EU DA policy documents. This corpus was selected on the basis of the “internal genealogy” indicated by EU policy documentation itself, but also in such a way as to reflect diachronic characteristics. It includes COM(2001)252, the first substantive review of EIDHR; COM(2003)104, setting out “A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours” written in light of the coming “Eastern Accession”; COM(2004)373, a Strategy Paper setting out the EU’s post-Enlargement Neighborhood Policy; COM(2006)726, a Communication “On Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy” reviewing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); and COM(2009)188/3, on the implementation of the ENP in 2008. It then proceeds to analyze the discursive structure of NRCN. The results of the analysis of NRCN suggest the degree of innovation is considerably less than appears from the framing of this policy review. The risk this conceptual continuity highlights is that programs framed in broadly similar terms to the EU’s pre-2011 DA will also end up reproducing their widely recognized limitations.

**EU DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE POLICY BEFORE 2011**

While democracy promotion has long been argued to have been central to EU external relations, particularly after the Lisbon Treaty, all post-Uprisings key statements of EU policy toward the Southern Neighborhood emphasize the innovative nature of the organization’s stance, specifically with respect to democracy assistance. As will be shown in the following section, the innovation is presented along three major axes: a new conception of democracy that is not limited to elections, a new approach to development that recognizes
the negative implications of past approaches and emphasizes inclusiveness of growth strategies, and a new posture in the delivery of these goals. The analysis of pre-Uprisings policy, however, does not support the EU’s claims to innovation. Rather, it shows that several of these elements—albeit couched in slightly different language—were already present in previous policy reviews and strategy documents.

Democracy

It has been shown in greater detail elsewhere that while the preamble of COM(2001)252 presents a progressive and holistic approach to democracy and its promotion, the body of the document displays a gradual but definite shift away from these holistic conceptions and toward conventional, narrow, and procedural conceptions of both democracy and development. Thus, in claiming that the EU “seeks to uphold the universality and indivisibility of human rights—civil, political, economic, social, and cultural,” the introductory sections of the text propose a shift away from the conventional emphasis on civil and political rights in particular and procedural definitions of democracy in general—i.e., those based on “thin,” or procedural notions of democracy strictly as an electoral decision-making mechanism—and toward a recognition that social and economic conditions are not only crucial to the practical exercise of democracy, but that they ought to be considered as the realm of rights just as much as civil and political components of democracy. However, despite sporadic statements such as “economic and social rights as well as civil and political rights [have a] direct impact on the political process and on the potential for conflicts and instability,” as the document progresses, it is possible to detect a marked shift away from such holistic principles through a series of distinct moves. For a start, social and economic issues are given considerably less space than procedural aspects of democracy, and they are never central to the conception of democracy and its promotion (in the passage above, for example, they are linked to conflict and (in)stability, not democracy).

In the section translating EIDHR’s commitments into thematic priorities, social and economic rights not only do not deserve a separate entry, but they do not appear at all. The document’s authors notably provide special justification for this move, at pains to emphasize that, contrary to appearances, this exclusion of socio-economic rights must not be understood as questioning “the indivisibility and interdependence of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, or to accord political and civil rights a higher priority. Rather, the document suggests, this move reflects the fact that significant material support for the promotion of social, economic, and cultural rights should generally be pursued through the Community’s main development assistance programmes.” But this move from democracy-promotion instruments to development, growth, and trade matters is not as innocuous as the document’s authors suggest, as it involves understanding socio-economic issues
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away from being matters of rights and toward being (re)defined as questions of aid or trade. From the outset, COM(2003)104 presents a more problematic vision of democracy and of its place in EU Neighborhood relations. The document’s preamble omits democracy from its stated policy objectives, emphasizing instead “security, stability, and sustainable development.” Instead, democracy is mentioned in a footnote merely as one of the “shared values” which neighborly relations are encouraged to be grounded in. Democracy is mentioned only four times in the 26-page document, and only one other time in any substantive way. That statement presents a significant—if vague—commitment: “Democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law and core labour standards are all essential prerequisites for political stability, as well as for peaceful and sustained social and economic development.” While this conceptual framework suggests democracy, development, and security are inextricably linked and to be achieved simultaneously, it contrasts markedly with the priorities assigned in the document overall to stability/security and the economy, in which democracy hardly features.

It is important to note that socio-economic factors are central to the document’s diagnosis of the sources of threat to stability and prosperity. COM(2003)104 presents three thematic priorities for EU Neighborhood policy, the “Three Ps”: Proximity, Prosperity, and Poverty. However, echoing COM(2001)252 economic issues in particular are never framed in terms of rights, except indirectly through references to human rights, which are elsewhere recognized as indivisible. Social issues are explicitly referred to as rights in a single instance, namely the claim that “the EU believes respect for social rights and labour standards [not ‘labour/economic rights’] leads to durable and equitable social and economic development.” This instance also displays a characteristic slippage in which economic rights are replaced by references to labor standards. Indeed, even the specific mention of social rights when inclusive of economic and labor rights appears increasingly replaced by more allusive references to human rights in general: the term social rights all but disappears from later strategy documents, especially in comparison to the earlier documents in which social rights are presented as equally important as political rights. In the EIDHR strategy paper (2007–2010), for example, “human rights” rarely stands on its own and is most often grouped with justice, the rule of law, and the promotion of democracy. Elsewhere, discussion of social and economic issues is equally ambiguous: “The EU will encourage partner governments’ efforts aiming at reducing poverty, creating employment, promoting core labour standards and social dialogue, reducing regional disparities and improving welfare systems; “The ENP will encourage reforms that will bring benefits in terms of economic and social development.” Crucially, documents fail to specify what constitutes civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, how the EU seeks to uphold these, or with what priorities. This omission frees the EU of any obligation to address these rights in reality: the vagueness
is important precisely because it fails to mention either socio-economic issues as rights, or agents like independent trade unions.

Documents since roughly the EU’s focus on the Eastern Enlargement seem to pay decreasing attention to democracy in any explicit terms. First, COM(2004)373 defines the framework for and methodology of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). As in COM(2003)104, democracy is not specifically mentioned in the document’s introduction, save at best indirectly through references to human rights and good governance. The document restates the EU’s commitment to “human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights” and the “Union’s aim [. . .] to promote peace,” and “[i]n its relations with the wider world, [to] upholding and promoting these values.” However, these commitments notably come halfway through the document and are not foregrounded as part of the programmatic aspects of the Strategy Paper.

Second, COM(2006)726, a paper setting out a range of measures to strengthen the ENP, does not even use the word democracy, referring only to “political cooperation” or “reforms,” and nearly exclusively in reference to security or economic matters at that.

Finally, like COM(2004)373, COM(2009)188/3 barely mentions democracy at all, and of the four times it is mentioned, none are in contexts reflecting on the ENP’s overall strategic focus, which remains the promotion of “mutual prosperity, stability, and security.” References to “political reform” appear only sporadically to be linked to concepts of either liberalization or democratization.

Development

Analysis of pre-Uprisings policy documents confirms the EU’s commitment to economic liberalization. The linkage between (this approach to) development and political transitions toward democracy (or at least stability)—which could otherwise be argued to be problematic—is reconciled through a narrative strongly reminiscent of the so-called Washington Consensus, namely the claim that market deregulation brings about increased competition, and thus greater and more equitable economic growth but also—via a demand for the rule of law said to be necessary to market economies—greater demands for political liberalisation, and thus in the long run also democratization. This causal linkage between economic liberalization and democratization is a Leitmotiv running throughout EU DA policy documents. Even when more balanced conceptions of development—e.g., mindful of social inclusion—are presented, the substantive sections of these documents, which frame the implementation of these principles, display a discursive structure focused on economic liberalization, free trade, economic growth, foreign investment, and small and medium enterprise (SMEs), while issues such as social inclusion and employment receive scant attention, mostly ignored, save as implications of liberalizing economic reform.
COM(1994)427’s acknowledgment that “a major effort will be necessary to support the sustainable socio-economic development of these countries, aid their structural adjustment and encourage regional cooperation” could be construed as an indirect recognition of the socio-economic dislocation caused by liberalizing/privatizing reforms. Nonetheless, the paper presents the promotion of “economic reform” understood as liberalization and privatization—e.g., “streamlin[ing] their regulatory and economic policy framework; rais[ing] their long-term competitiveness; attract[ing] substantially more private direct investment, especially from Europe”—as the engine of “sustained growth and improved living standards,” and these, in turn, are presented as crucial to the “diminution of violence and an easing of migratory pressures.” For COM(1994)427, increased growth and poverty reduction steady domestic conditions, thereby facilitating political reforms and eventually democratic transition.

Economic growth and development constitute a key area of concern for COM(2001)252, and are presented as inextricable from democratization. The document claims, for example, that the EU’s “new development policy is firmly grounded on the principle of sustainable, equitable and participatory human and social development,” of which the “promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance are an integral part,” not least because “[p]overty reduction [. . .] will only be sustainably achieved where there are functioning participatory democracies and accountable governments” and because “respect for social rights and labour standards leads to durable and equitable social and economic development.” However, in parallel, in the context of the Barcelona Process, EU discourse framed economic liberalization—in practice often at odds with the protection of socio-economic rights and labour standards—as a precursor to economic development, suggesting open markets would lead to increased trade and foreign investment, and thus both higher growth rates, democratic consolidation, and regional stability. For COM(2003)104, for example, liberalization is the key to guaranteeing socio-economic rights and balanced growth: “the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade should bring about efficiency gains and improve welfare through increased market integration.”

Like COM(1994)427, COM(2003)104 also recognizes the negative impact of liberalization/privatization alone—sometimes implicitly (“Spreading the benefits of increased economic growth to all sectors of society requires positive action to promote social inclusion via mutually reinforcing economic, employment and social policies”) and other times explicitly “Increased economic integration with the EU [. . .] may increase macroeconomic and financial volatility in specific contexts.” However, later, the recognition such potentially negative linkage gradually disappears, and discourse comes to focus almost exclusively on trade, decreasing the frequency and depth of references to socio-economic issues. Unlike COM(1994)427, for COM(2003)104,
development policy is reduced to focusing on “political and economic” aspects, while omitting mention of socio-economic dislocation produced by such reforms. COM(2003)104 focuses on increasing economic growth (GDP) and the creation of a “zone of prosperity or ring of friends” within which, in return for “political, economic, and institutional reforms,” partner states are offered a stake in the EU’s internal market. Resultantly, capacity-building initiatives are focused on reforms which enhance “free trade” and “economic liberalisation” such as the creation of “free trade zones/agreement/areas”; and “harmonisation/standardisation of internal markets and legal structures with the EU.”

Also typically of such policy documents, the language used to outline policy guidelines for liberalizing economic reform is notably more specific than that describing measures aimed at socio-economic support. Thus, for example, in COM(2004)373, while the ENP pursues the “reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade [which] should bring about efficiency gains and improve welfare through increased market integration [and] By bringing neighbouring countries closer to the EU economic model, also through the adoption of international best practices [. . .] will improve the investment climate in partner countries,” with respect to the “social dimension,” the same document “encourage[s] partner governments’ efforts aiming at reducing poverty, creating employment, promoting core labour standards and social dialogue . . . enhancing the effectiveness of social assistance and reforming national welfare systems. The idea is to engage in dialogue on employment and social policy with a view to develop an analysis and assessment of the system.” Not only is the language of economic reform more specific, but it is also more active: in social development, the EU restricts itself to monitoring, analyzing, and assessing. Unlike issues of either democracy or socio-economic rights, substantive treatment of the acceleration and deepening of free trade and other liberalization measures—and often the articulation of a linkage between such reforms and positive outcomes in terms of security, stability, and democratic transitions—is contained in every document under consideration. COM(2006)726, for example, argues that “in order to reap additional economic and political benefits for all, it is important to offer all ENP partners . . . a clear perspective of deep trade and economic integration with the EU and to include within our liberalisation offers improved access in all areas of economic potential and interests for our partners.” Even the 2008 global financial crisis, triggered not least by deregulation in loans and derivatives markets, is met with claims that in order to avoid the “spill-over” of negative effects (stagnant economic growth; public spending cutbacks; and high unemployment, especially youth) from Europe, the liberalizing “trade and trade-related priorities from ENP Action Plans are more important than ever.” This despite recognizing that the “low integration of the financial sector and prudent lending policies, combined with the relatively low reliance on external financial flows” have sheltered the Middle
East from much of negative domestic social and economic impact being felt in Europe and the West more generally.

Delivery

Finally, the review also identifies a series of technical problems in the delivery of EU DA policy principles that are familiar themes in both policy and academic analyses. These issues are serious enough that “[p]rioritisation, focus, delivery, and impact are the main threads running throughout the document.”\(^{52}\) COM(2001)252 acknowledges a series of well-known issues, including coherence and consistency in EU policy design and implementation especially across thematic and geographical Instruments and between institutions;\(^{53}\) more efficient resource targeting; setting priorities thematically and not just geographically;\(^{54}\) the obstacles of government-to-government bilateralism; and the lack of flexibility and speed in EU responses.\(^{55}\) But most importantly for present purposes, COM(2001)252 emphasizes positive conditionality, arguing that “[t]he most effective way of achieving change is therefore a positive and constructive partnership with governments, based on dialogue, support and encouragement” rather than conventional negative conditionali-
ties, “a positive approach by promoting social development through incentives and capacity-building measures, rather than sanctions.”\(^{56}\) Negative conditionality does not disappear, however: if this positive approach fails, “negative measures may therefore be more appropriate,”\(^{57}\) including sanctions.\(^{58}\)

The presence of “positive rather negative or punitive [reinforcement] measures” in relation to the “ratification and implementation of [inter alia] human rights instruments”\(^{59}\) is not unusual. Aside from COM(2001)252, positive conditionality is referred to explicitly or implicitly in several other documents. COM(2003)104, outlines a system of benchmarks and incentives to be used to encourage and reward reform, setting out “clear and public objectives and benchmarks spelling out the actions the EU expects of its partners.”\(^{60}\) The function of these benchmarks is precisely to provide a framework within which positive rewards—and by extension withholding or possibly withdrawing those rewards—can take place (“[t]he extension of the benefits [. . .] should be conducted so as to encourage and reward reform”).\(^{61}\) The emphasis here appears to be on rewarding progress rather than punishing its absence in key areas—from rights to governance, liberalization to trade—by offering the positive reward for “all the neighbouring countries [of] a stake in the EU’s internal market.”\(^{62}\) In this context, new benefits should be offered only to partner states to reflect progress and, in the absence of such progress, no opportunities will be offered.\(^{63}\) For its part, COM(2004)373 also implies a kind of positive conditionality, stating that “the conditionality element should draw on the economic priorities and measures of the Action Plans, ensuring that this type of assistance is an additional incentive to pursue political
and economic reform.” In turn, in COM(2006)726, progress is rewarded with “improved trade and investment prospects [...] opening more possibilities to mobilise funding,” the Communication refers explicitly to “positive returns” promised to partner states in return for progress on various goals, and designates the function of the Neighborhood Investment and Governance Facilities specifically as “to reward progress in implementing reforms and to leverage financial assistance available for investment from IFIs and other donors.” Finally, the ENP review provided in COM(2009)188 speaks explicitly of “positive incentives provided by a performance-based, differentiated policy.”

THE EU’S NEW RESPONSE TO A CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOOD: OLD WINE IN OLD BOTTLES?

After its initial response to the Arab Spring in the form of PfDSP, the EU published a longer, more elaborate document entitled *A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood.* Several elements in this document are striking both in themselves and in terms of the difference they present compared to PfDSP. For a start, the preamble sounds more “defensive” than PfDSP; it spends considerably more time in its preamble emphasizing the positive dimensions of previous EU policy, the way in which the EU’s strategic objectives were correct in spirit if not in practice. In addition, NRCN conveys less of a sense of urgency than PfDSP, and much more a sense of attempting to build a narrative about the EU’s past actions. It also appears to focus nearly exclusively on ENP reform while disregarding EIDHR. But its key concept is what has become perhaps the best-known rubric for the EU’s new approach: “deep democracy.” Aside from a commitment to vaguely defined principles such as “mutual accountability” and a “shared commitment to the universal values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law,” the core of NRCN’s proposal will be again examined in relation to the “Three Ds”: democracy, development, and delivery.

Deep Democracy

Typically for EU DA policy documents, NRCN emphasizes the EU’s acceptance that neither democracy nor the path toward it can be captured by a single model or a single experience. Indeed, NRCN is characteristically at pains to stress that while the values that underpin democracy are universal, the EU “does not seek to impose a model or a ready-made recipe for political reform.” Indeed, it emphasizes that it will pursue “a much higher level of differentiation allowing each partner country to develop its links with the EU” ranging across different areas “closer economic integration and stronger political cooperation on governance reforms, security, conflict-resolution matters, including joint initiatives in international for on issues of common interest.”
In this context, the NRCN describes deep democracy as “the kind [of democracy] that lasts because the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service—and other civil and human rights that many Europeans take for granted, such as the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” A more formal definition is also provided, which in addition defines the criteria for benchmarking the “more for more” approach:

1. strong and lasting commitment on the part of governments [to] free and fair elections;
2. freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media;
3. the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial;
4. fighting against corruption;
5. security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces.

Although social and economic issues are not entirely absent from NRCN (cf. p. 2), they are never described as rights and are always noticeably distinct from any definitions of deep democracy, even in the minimalist and indirect fashion presented in COM(2001)252, where they are set aside under the rubric of coverage by other EU programs and institutions (e.g., DG Aid or DevCo). On the contrary, the only explicit association between democratization and socio-economic issues suggests the reverse causal mechanism: not greater socio-economic justice as an enabling factor in democratic transition, but democratization as a cause of economic growth, thus addressing socio-economic inclusion (“Reform based on these elements will not only strengthen democracy but help to create the conditions for sustainable and inclusive economic growth, stimulating trade and investment”).

One notable element in NRCN in relation to civil society funding is its adoption of one of EIDHR’s central rationales, namely its provision to “make EU support more accessible to civil society organisations through a dedicated Civil Society Facility support the establishment of a European Endowment for Democracy to help political parties, non-registered NGOs and trade unions and other social partners.” Such a commitment would be particularly significant if translated into action, given the importance of non-registered rights and advocacy groups in Egypt and Bahrain.

NRCN also commits the EU to promoting “media freedom by supporting civil society organisations’ (CSOs’) unhindered access to [ . . ] electronic communications technologies; [and] reinforce human rights dialogues.” This is also the only mention made of EIDHR, supposedly the EU’s flagship program coordinating and targeting DA, in either NRCN or PfDSP.
Most of this reflects a fairly straightforward liberal view of civil society: “citizens to express their concerns, contribute to policy-making and hold governments to account,” with the notable exception of the inclusion of non-registered CSOs and trade unions, which the document specifies is important because CSOs in general “also help ensure that economic growth becomes more inclusive” although it does not mention labour organisations in this respect. Elsewhere, NRCN specifies that “[c]ivil society plays a pivotal role in advancing women’s rights, greater social justice and respect for minorities as well as environmental protection and resource efficiency.” Moreover, the establishment of a European Endowment for Democracy in particular is aimed at “especially political parties and non-registered NGOs or trade unions and other social partners.” Less heartening is the methodological aim of this funding: “In-country EU Delegations will seek to bring partner countries’ governments and civil society together in a structured dialogue on key areas of our co-operation. EU funding for such actions could be delivered through the establishment of a dedicated Civil Society Facility for the neighbourhood.”

In sum, NRCN does seem to provide the space for a broader conception of civil society and, in these sections at least, a recognition of the importance of socio-economic issues (albeit not as rights) in the context of democratic transitions.

Development

NCRN begins to flesh out the idea of “sustainable and inclusive growth” first outlined in PfDSP. In its first treatment of the issue, it declares the EU’s intention to “support inclusive economic development [to] trade, invest and grow in a sustainable way, reducing social and regional inequalities, creating jobs for their workers and higher standards of living.” Here, development is qualified: inclusion and sustainability are specifically linked to the reduction of inequality. By contrast, PfDSP framed inequality as the natural consequence of growth. However, the mechanism through which to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth is left unspecific in the opening sections of the text, but as strategies for development are fleshed out, it becomes clear that achieving these objectives is left to precisely the same mechanisms of market liberalisation that were the hallmark of previous policy. Moreover, economic growth is framed separately from democracy; no link is established between the two, either causally or normatively.

In principle, the diagnosis of the problem and of the EU’s interest in it, while not particularly radical, would provide avenues to think more systematically about socio-economic rights in relation to democratisation and development. For example, NRCN acknowledges that

[economic and social challenges in our neighbourhood are immense. Poverty is rife, life expectancy is often low, youth unemployment is high and the participation of women in political and economic life is low in several countries
of the region. Tackling these challenges is crucial to ensure the sustainability of political reforms [while feeble growth, rising unemployment and an increased gap between rich and poor are likely to fuel instability].

and that

It is in the EU’s own interest to support these transformation processes, working together with our neighbours to anchor the essential values and principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, a market economy and inclusive, sustainable development in their political and economic fabric.

Just like PfDSP, NRCN links “economic and social challenges” to “instability,” rather than democracy. Passages such as these assert a recognition that a “new approach” is required, and that “sustainable economic development” is a crucial goal. However, while such statements appear to recognize the interconnectedness between economic growth, fairness, and political (in)stability, they contain no explicit linkage between (redressing) these economic imbalances and democracy.

By comparison to the discussion of “liberal” growth mechanisms (outlined below), issues of social justice are confined to barely more than two goals. The rationale for the first—“strengthening and modernising social protection systems and advancing women’s rights”—is that this “will do much to support our shared objectives of inclusive growth and job creation.” The second, employment and social policies, merits a single line: reprising a characterization deployed in PfDSP on the issue of independent trade unions, NRCN states that “dialogue” on these policy areas will be considered for those partners which make sufficient progress on macro-economic growth and budgetary sustainability. In neither case are socio-economic issues described as involving rights, nor is there a linkage between these—in the form issues or rights—to democracy or transition toward it.

On the contrary, when NRCN discusses mechanisms for growth, it presents the same picture outlined in PfDSP and in pre-2011 policy. Its two main instruments in this sense are the Support Sustainable Economic and Social Development and the call for Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) announced in PfDSP. The first, for example, equates “encouraging partner countries’ adoption of policies conducive to stronger and more inclusive growth” with “support for efforts to improve the business environment […] which in turn stimulate[s] innovation and job creation.” DCFTAs, which are reserved more detailed and lengthier treatment than civil society support by far, discuss options for deeper economic integration. This discussion always takes fora granted reform to come under the rubric of free trade; it never considers alternatives and does not address the political implications of such reforms, save to acknowledge that “the reforms can be politically challenging.” The latter would indicate at least some awareness that growth through liberalization has not been—and presumably is not expected to
be—compatible with those fairer distributions of wealth that “sustainable” growth is supposed to achieve, and indeed that such reforms might actually increase social unrest.

The NRCN itself does not lay claims to any particular qualitative novelty in its economic recipes, stressing primarily the intensification of existing efforts (e.g., “increased funding for social and economic development, larger programmes for comprehensive institution-building [CIB], greater market access, increased EIB financing in support of investments; and greater facilitation of mobility”). In *Building the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean*, NRCN differentiates between short-term and long-term goals and methods. In the short term, the vision of democracy NRCN presents relies on a combination of a “supply side democratisation” emphasis on state-building (“customs, enforcement agencies, justice [. . .] “targeted in priority towards those institutions most needed to sustain democratisation”) and economic liberalization (agriculture-oriented enhancement of Association Agreements). These measures, which are intended “to accompany the structural adjustments linked to market opening and promote inclusive growth,” take for granted the mechanisms for macro-economic growth and economic justice, epitomizing the tensions in the EU’s articulation of policies with respect to the goal of achieving fairer wealth distributions. In the long term, the vehicle for EU support to democratic transitions is PfSPD membership, which is conditional on satisfying the definition of deep democracy, but the criteria for which, again, notably fail to include independent trade unions or socio-economic rights.

**Delivery**

The third and final axis of NRCN relates to delivery. Here, the shift to positive conditionality—the so-called more-for-more principle—is presented as a substantive policy innovation, while other measures under this rubric aim to address a range of issues that notoriously affect EU DA. Regarding the latter, NRCN addresses a range of known problems with EU DA policy, committing itself to improving consistency and coordination, focus and benchmarking, consistency, flexibility, and simplicity. However, although it is clearly central to the EU’s strategy and to its presentation, the more-for-more positive conditionality mechanism outlined in the PfDSP does not receive similar prominence in the NRCN. For example, according to NRCN, “increased EU support to its neighbours is conditional. It will depend on progress in building and consolidating democracy and respect for the rule of law. The faster a country progresses in its internal reforms, the more support it will get from the EU.” Moreover, this positive conditionality is presented as complementing rather than replacing negative conditionality; in providing increased funding, the EU will “take the reform track record of partners during the 2010–2012 period (based on the annual progress reports) into account.
when deciding on country financial allocations for 2014 and beyond. For countries where reform has not taken place, the EU will reconsider or even reduce funding.” Finally, the EU makes plain that it intends to “uphold its policy of curtailing relations with governments engaged in violations of human rights and democracy standards, including by making use of targeted sanctions and other policy measures” specifying that “[w]here it takes such measures, it will not only uphold but strengthen further its support to civil society.” Comparing this position with that of COM(2001)252, which presents a similar mix of negative and positive conditionality, it is difficult to conclude (e.g., pp. 8, 9) that the more-for-more principle appears more as a shift in emphasis rather than a substantive strategic change in policy instruments.

CONCLUSION
As with PfDSP before it, the analysis of NRCN, which is intended to frame the EU’s reaction to the so-called Arab Spring, suggests considerable skepticism regarding the claims to a qualitative break with earlier policy strategy. Rather, in relation to its three key themes of democracy, development, and delivery, the NRCN, like PfDSP, is best viewed as articulating rhetorical variations on themes already present in pre-2011 policy documents.

Specifically, NRCN as much as PfDSP appears to settle on a consensus framework for the definition of democracy which is over-reliant on narrow, procedural criteria prioritizing elections and civil–political rights over and above social and economic rights. While it is beyond the scope of this article to question whether such a narrowing is analytically legitimate—mainstream democratization studies would certainly claim this, while Latin American and Middle East scholars would dispute these restrictions—it is important to emphasize the political implications of this analytical strategy. The restriction of the definition of democracy to minimalist criteria has implications for both the goal of activities that fall under the rubric of democracy promotion, and for the methods with which these goals can be legitimately pursued. The prioritization of minimalist goals marginalizes other possible configurations of democracy, in relation to both social and economic goals and actors, for example. Most importantly, it relegates the pursuit of these other features of democracy—economic rights, social justice, etc.—to the realms of aid or development, failing to recognize these as rights with political implications central to democracy and transitions toward it.

Documents such as NRCN and PfDSP do present margins for maneuver and may allow projects with more holistic conceptions of democracy to receive EU support. Although this requires a final judgment to be suspended until it is possible to see how EU DA changes in practice as a result of the 2011 policy re-evaluation, the strong elements of continuity in the EU’s strategic stance on DA do constitute a worrying precedent.
NOTES


3. NRCN, 1.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., “New approach” is mentioned twice on p. 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 2, 3.


17. The EU’s first response to the Arab Uprisings was contained in the March 8, 2011 *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity* (PfDSP), which addressed itself only to the Southern neighborhood. A more detailed analysis of PfDSP is contained in Teti, “The EU’s First Response,” 2012.


21. Ibid., 10.

22. Ibid., 18.

23. EIDHR does refer to “support for awareness raising and capacity building of groups who pursue a rights-based approach to basic human needs and access to resources [including] Social, economic and cultural rights as human rights objectives” (COM(2001)252: 18) but by differentiating between civil society and social partners, it appears to exclude trade unions. Nor, in practice, does much EIDHR funding appear to have reached organizations promoting such issues. For more detailed analysis, see Teti, “The EU’s First Response,” 2012.


25. Ibid., 3.

26. Ibid., 4.

27. Ibid., 7.


29. COM(2001)252 final: 8; see also 14.


34. Ibid., 12.


37. Ibid., 9.
38. Ibid., 5.
39. Ibid., 7 (III, 7).
41. COM(2001)252, 8. It also mentions, presumably as a suggested *modus operandi*, that the Commission “has its own instrument in the ‘social incentive clause’ in the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), which provides for additional preferences to be extended to countries honouring certain International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards” (COM(2001)252: 8).
44. Ibid., 8.
45. Ibid., 14.
46. Ibid., 4.
47. Ibid. 5–11.
49. COM(2006)726, 3; also p. 4.
50. COM(2009)188/3: 10. Also see the preamble to (COM (2006) 726: 2); “Most of our neighbours have made progress during the last years in economic and political reforms . . . Nevertheless, poverty and unemployment, mixed economic performance, corruption, and weak governance remain major challenges.”
51. Ibid., 9–10.
53. Ibid., 6–8.
54. Ibid., 16–18.
55. Ibid., 19.
56. Ibid., 8.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 9.
59. Ibid.
60. COM(2003)104, 16; emphasis added.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 10.
63. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 14.
68. COM(2009)188, 10.
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71. Ibid., 2.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 3. Also, see MEMO/11/918, in which deep democracy is defined as “not only writing democratic constitutions and conducting free and fair elections, but creating and sustaining an independent judiciary, a thriving free press, a dynamic civil society and all other characteristics of a mature functioning democracy” (1).
76. COM(2011) 303: 3.
77. Ibid., 4.
78. Ibid.; emphasis added.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.; emphasis added.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.; emphasis added.
83. Ibid., 2.
84. Ibid., 7.
85. Ibid., 20.
86. Ibid., 2.
87. Ibid., 7–8.
88. Ibid., 6–8.
89. Ibid., 8–9.
90. Ibid., 7.
91. Ibid., 8.
92. Ibid., 3.
93. Ibid., 15–17.
94. Ibid., 16.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid., 2, 19.
98. Ibid., 17; see also MEMO/11/918.
100. Ibid., 19.
101. Ibid., 3.
102. Ibid., 3.
103. Ibid., 3.