The Arab Revolts: an Impetus towards Reassessment of the European Union's foreign policy?

Michael Brtnický

Abstract: *The wave of political transformations in the Mediterranean Arab countries has created new obstacles and opportunities for the EU's Mediterranean policies. The southern and Eastern Mediterranean is an absolutely crucial field for the EU's foreign policy due to the geographical proximity and economic, social and security importance of this area. Over the past 15 years the EU has developed coherent, well defined and complex foreign policy towards the Mediterranean. However none of the EU foreign policy initiatives was successful and this fact has reason in many contradictions and deficiencies inherent in the EU's employment of this foreign policy. The connection made by the EU between the Mediterranean policies and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict; marginalization of the political forces which mobilize on the basis of Islamic rhetoric and symbols; lack of conditionality — especially negative one; cooperation and dependency on the Arab authoritarian regimes; and discrepancy between declared goals and praxis: these were the main reasons for the failure of the EU's foreign policy in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. But the EU still has a time to adjust its foreign policy to the new political reality in this part of the world and reclaim legitimacy for its foreign policy in the Arab countries.*

Keywords: *European Union, foreign policy, structural foreign policy, Arab countries, Mediterranean*

"Arab awakening" and the European Union

We can say, with a considerable degree of safety, that the current and still ongoing events in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean have completely changed the political situation in this part of the world. This turmoil has meant the biggest political change there since the end of World War II for the Arab countries of Northern Africa and West Asia.[1] Up to the date of writing the text three authoritarian rulers which decided fates of their countries for decades were toppled in Tunisia, Egypt and — after the brutal fight and the NATO's intervention — in Libya. The discontent and intense political mobilization of educated young people especially have shaken authoritarian governments in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. This evolution of events was a complete surprise for all powers in international relations and also for the pundits worldwide. Arab authoritarian regimes which successfully resisted calls for democratization for last twenty years were considered as stable and well entrenched against most of the challenges to their existence (see Carothers and Ottaway 2005; Perthes 2004). Moreover they skillfully exploited the existing international system for their own gains regardless of their alliances and the reductionist labels of "moderate" or "radical" Arab regimes put on them by some politicians and academics (see Valbjom and Bank 2007; Seale 2009). Nowadays they are all challenged because of their repression, unresponsiveness to the demands of people and impotence to offer promising perspective to their young and educated populations.

The current development in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean has utmost importance for the European Union. The EU through its official declarations, documents and officials regularly reiterated that the Mediterranean area has vital strategic importance for the integrated Europe. This importance has many reasons but we can pick three the most prominent ones: migration, security and energy. Arab states due to their geographical proximity and young unemployed populations are one of the main sources of the legal and illegal migration to the EU member countries. At present there are around five million Arabs in the EU, especially from the Maghreb (International Organization for Migration Cairo 2010). The migration is an increasingly sensitive issue in political debates inside the member countries and between them. The recent flush of Tunisian migrants to the Italian island of Lampedusa provoked ill-tempered debates between the Italian and French authorities and considerations to revise the Schengen system (Lambert 2011). The migration from the Arab states of the Mediterranean into the EU has also become a security issue due to the economic crisis, unemployment, rise of populist parties in some EU countries and spread of the radical political Islam[2] inside European Muslim communities, however it is a marginal phenomenon. Security deliberations of the EU have to take into account the existence of unending conflicts in Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Western Sahara,

not to mention recent conflicts and violence in Libya and Syria. Some Arab countries possess fossil fuels reserves which are crucial for Europe's energy security. And we cannot leave out of consideration numerous economic, social, cultural and other relations between people on many levels which connect both shores of the Mediterranean.

It is important to note here that the area of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean is an extremely diverse territory regarding social, cultural, economic and political conditions and it does not constitute one region, the area is rather fragmented into several regions (like the Maghreb or Mashreq). There are also other cleavages — historical, ethno-linguistic etc. — defining identity of people there. If we look at these divisions from the perspective of the EU's foreign policy we have to distinguish Turkey as a potential member state and candidate country from other states which are not considered as appropriate to join the EU because of their geographical position outside Europe. It is obvious that the area of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean represents a huge foreign policy challenge for the EU. The EU acknowledged this by developing one of its most extensive and sophisticated foreign policies inferior only to its foreign policies implemented towards the Central and Eastern European states which have become the EU member states in 2004 and the countries of the Western Balkan.

The nature of the EU's foreign policy

Before we shift our attention to the particular foreign policy initiative of the EU in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, it is useful to clarify the nature of the EU's foreign policy in general. The nature of the EU's foreign policy still poses analytical challenges due to the fact that the EU is not a fully-fledged state but also not a mere international organization (Hill, Smith 2005: 4). As a foreign policy we understand a policy which is focused on external environments with the intention of influencing the environment. This fact differentiates foreign policy from external relations which consists only in maintaining relations with the external environment (Keukeleire 2008: 19). There are dimensions which are traditionally considered as dominant in foreign policy. These are the states and relevant elites from the actor's perspective; personal, material and short-term goals and interests; a military aspect of the security is considered as the most important, military means as the most suitable to achieve the foreign policy goals; and the attention is devoted mostly to current issues, conflicts and crises. However during our times, formed by globalization and instability of the transitional period of the international relations after the end of the Cold War — all that intensified by the recent economic crisis so it is absolutely crucial to reflect also other dimensions of the foreign policy in order to make this policy effective and a long-term success (Keukeleire 2008: 20).

The identification of dominant and other dimensions of the foreign policy enables us to perceive this policy as continuum of the conventional and structural foreign policy which allows us to capture sometimes the concealed aspect of policies. The conventional foreign policy is concentrated on the states and relations between them; on solving the crises and conflicts; and the military power is its indispensable part. The main attribute of the conventional power is the relational power which we define as "the power of A to get B to do something they would not otherwise do" (Keukeleire 2002: 12). By this definition the relational power tallies with the traditional definition of power in most of the works about international relations and world politics (see Shimko 2008: 79; Goldstein and Pevehouse 2006: 57–61; Mingst 1999: 115–120).

The attribute of the structural foreign policy is the structural power which is defined as "the ability to influence in an enduring and sustainable way the relatively permanent frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises or other actors, through the influence of the choice of the game as well as the rules of the game" (Keukeleire 2002: 14). The structural foreign policy is a long-term policy which is trying to import and create the relatively permanent political, legal, social, economic, security, mental etc. frameworks — the structures — into a targeted external environment. These structures could be for example democracy, the rule of law, the liberalized market economy, gender equality, and civilian control over armed forces and so on. They are imported and created on various levels: individual, societal, state, regional and global to address the whole complex of individual to the society, the society to the state and the state to the state relations (Keukeleire 2008: 25–28).

The conventional and structural foreign policies are not in contradiction, rightly the opposite. They can complement each other and they can be dependent on each other. Generally we can say that right balance of the conventional and structural foreign policies is necessary for the successful foreign policy. The most illustrative example of the successful combination of the conventional and structural foreign policy is the consecutive American administrations towards Western Europe after the end of World War II and their lasting support to the European integration. The other good example is the EC/EU foreign policy towards the former communist countries of the Central and Eastern Europe which joined the EU in May 2004. There are still questions about the EU foreign policy in countries of the former Yugoslavia. On the other hand this EU foreign policy engagement in the evident confirmation of the complementarity between the conventional and structural foreign policy dimensions — the employment of the EU's structural foreign policy was possible only after the conventional response of the NATO, more precisely the United States (Keukeleire 2008: 26).

The conventional foreign policy cannot be the Union's foreign policy strength. This fact results from the lack of military capabilities and specific and complicated decision-making process. The EU clearly poses the extensive structural power especially in the immediate neighborhood of the Union but not only — in the economy and trade its scope is truly global. The EU structural foreign policy effectiveness in its neighborhood is connected with the set of tools which are available for using and also the level of conditionality which is credible. Its structural power is variously intensive in the relations with Croatia — probably the next member state — and other candidate countries from the Western Balkans; with Turkey; and with Azerbaijan, Belorussia or Egypt. Here is the crucial point of the possibility of enlargement. The import and creation of structures are the most likely when the targeted state or the group of states are perceived and promised as the potential member states. Logically, the potential member state is more willing to adopt its structures than the state where the membership is in the area of theoretical considerations or excluded straightforwardly. The European Commission itself stated that "enlargement has unarguably been the Union's most successful foreign policy instrument" (Commission of the European Communities 2003).

The 1995–2011 period

The beginnings of the intense EU's foreign policy in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean is connected with the end of the Cold War and the new geopolitical situation when the EU has begun to share responsibility for the stability in the area. A significant impact was also due to the Union's south-east division over the foreign policy priorities when France, Spain and Italy wanted to balance the intensive foreign policy engagement in Central and Eastern Europe over which they did not have as much interest as Germany (Hill, Smith 2005: 45). We mentioned that there are no candidate countries and potential members in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean except for Turkey. Thus, Turkey only marginally participated in the beginnings of the EU's Mediterranean policies and since then has interacted with the Union on a different level.

There were three major foreign policy initiatives of the EU in the period of 1995–2011. The conference of 15 foreign ministers from the EU's countries and 14 ministers from the Mediterranean countries was held in Barcelona in November 1995 and started what begun to be known as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Part of the EMP was the multilateral Barcelona Process (BP). The cooperation between the EU and Arab states of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean plus Israel was based on a financial assistance — both bilateral and multilateral, a bilateral association and multilateral dialogue (BP). The whole EMP was clearly

inspired by the EU foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe and there was also an explicit connection to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflict, so called Peace Process (Hill, Smith 2005: 45).

The Partnership was divided in three thematic baskets. The first was dedicated to political and security issues, the second to the economics and finance and the third to the social, cultural and human issues. The goals were very ambitious. The cooperation in the political and security basket should head towards "creating of a common area of peace and stability underpinned by sustainable development, rule of law, democracy and human rights" (European Union External Action 2011d). The goals of an economic and financial area were "the gradual establishment of a free-trade area aimed at promoting shared economic opportunity through sustainable and balanced socio-economic development" (European Union External Action 2011b). The social, cultural and human basket was aimed at "promoting understanding and intercultural dialogue between cultures, regions and people, and facilitating exchanges between civil society and ordinary citizens, particularly women and young people" (European Union External Action 2011c). The purpose of this text is not to elaborate in greater detail on various aspects of the EMP functioning. Here, it is satisfactory to say, that relatively soon after its start it was widely perceived as partially or wholly dysfunctional. The EU has reacted in 2004 with its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) which has become an umbrella for the bilateral association and financial assistance for the countries participating in the EMP (Commission of the European Communities 2011b). From then the content of the EMP was only the moribund multilateral Barcelona Process which has become the first victim of the EMP dysfunction only a few months after the Barcelona Conference.

The ENP has improved some aspects of the bilateral association and financial assistance but overall the state of the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean relations still remained unsatisfactory (Bretherton and Vogler 2006: 158). This fact lied behind French President Nicolas Sarkozy initiative of the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM), which after an initial disapproval of some member states (particularly Germany), started in November 2008 in Marseille. The UFM should signify the separation from the previous EU's foreign policy initiatives by its concentration on the less ambitious and more tangible goals. These were largely the technical issues as clean-up of the Mediterranean Sea, civil protection from natural and man-made disasters or alternative sources of power (Aliboni and Ammor 2009: 6–8). From the retrospective of just three years we can say that the UFM was the last project of the largely unsuccessful and increasingly regressive foreign policies of the EU in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean during the now terminated 1995–2011 period.

The Union, by the foreign policy initiatives of the EMP and the ENP, strived to develop a coherent structural foreign policy where it tried to emulate its successful

policies in Central and Eastern Europe. The conventional foreign policy component was weak during the whole period due to the lack of the EU's conventional capabilities. Despite of the priority given to the region, the well expressed and relevant goals, substantial funding and the corresponding technical expertise — the results of these policies were for the most part disappointing. The main structures which the EU pushed to import and create on the political and societal level were largely or completely unsuccessful: as free and fair elections, pluralism, democracy, respect for the human rights or tolerance to religious, ethnic and other minorities (Freedom House 2011). On the economic level, with structures as the market economy and free trade, there were mixed results — many countries of the region had macro-economic success and high economic growth but poverty of the vast stratum of society has become widespread as never before (Khader in Maresceau and Lannon 2001: 269).

Contradictions and deficiencies of the EU's Mediterranean foreign policy

The Union's foreign policy initiatives in the Mediterranean and their pursuit had weaknesses and flaws from the beginning and the EU's decision-makers were not able to eliminate them during the whole period of 1995–2011. The main and foremost weakness was the non-availability of the potential membership. This was a clearly serious blow from the start for the foreign policy designed after the EU's policies in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans with such ambitious goals. The impossibility of enlargement is explicit from 1987 when Morocco applied for the membership and was rejected on the basis that it is not a European country. Countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean have been motivated to co-operate by financial incentives and by higher levels of association with the Union but naturally it does not substitute for full membership. The EU's structural foreign policy has lost its most successful instruments by the disposal of membership from the negotiation table.

Unfortunately for the EMP and disastrous especially for the multilateral dialogue in the framework of the Barcelona Process was the association of the EU's foreign policies in the Mediterranean with the so called Peace Process between Israel and Palestinians (Council of the European Union 2003). Initial euphoria from the Oslo Accords disappeared very quickly and the steady degeneration of the Peace Process and the renewed outbreak of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories caused the paralysis of all bodies for dialogue between Israel, Palestinians and the Arab states. The EU has put great political capital and substantial amounts of a financial support into the Peace Process, but the results have been deplorable. We can even say that the Union was not able to liberate its foreign policy in Northern Africa and Western

Asia from the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts which affected relations not only with rejectionist Syria but also with Maghreb countries which do not have interests and stakes in these conflicts.

Another weakness of the structural foreign policy was a grudging employment of conditionality, especially negative one. The absence of the membership possibility excluded the biggest reward for the fulfillment of the countries obligations but the EU was also very cautious in the application of any penalties in the case of not honoring the concluded commitments. The result was often repeated delays and failure to fulfill obligations which were simply looked over. The lack of conditionality was accompanied with the increasing cooperation and dependence on authoritarian regimes (Kausch and Youngs 2009). These regimes were perceived as guarantors of stability with no desirable alternative. The EU accepted the political status quo in the Arab countries and rulers like Egyptian Hosni Mubarak, Tunisian Zen Din Ben Ali or even Libyan Muammar Qaddafi were perceived as important partners. Naturally the main victim was a democratization component of the structural foreign policy.

We remarked a gradual securitization of relations instead of the attempted democratization. The EU has seen the whole Arabic area of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean as security problem instead of seeing it as an opportunity to exert its influence. Islamism, terrorism and migration were the most often spelled out issues of the political, security and societal levels of the foreign policy. Especially the issue of political Islam was dealt with an irrational resentment which precluded any constructive approach to even the most inoffensive representatives of political forces who used Islamic symbols for political mobilization. The EU was not able to establish any working relations with an Islamist party or group — contrary to the US foreign policy initiatives which do not have difficulties to work with the Islamist party in Morocco or discreetly engage the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The exclusion of Islamism was closely connected to the myth of so called "third power" and also to the failure of the Union to communicate with the civil society in the Mediterranean Arab countries (Burgat 2009).

The so called "third power" has served as an excuse for the EU's unwillingness to engage with Islamists. The notion was that there is the third power beside authoritarian regimes and opposition forces which mobilize their constituencies on the basis of Islamic symbolism — for example against despotism, injustice and humiliation by interpreting relevant Islamic models and rules accordingly. The EU involved into its civil society and democratization programmes only that kind of persons and political forces who spoke a language that the Union wanted to hear. The result was that the EU sponsored programmes were full of marginal or pliant representatives of marginal or pliant political forces — be they liberals, socialists, communists etc. The real opposition was excluded, partly because of its employment of Islamic language and also because of the EU's worries about authoritarian regimes sensitivities. In some

cases the Union even trained and sponsored the persons who were dispatched and controlled by intelligence services of the regimes. The same symptoms were demonstrated in a dialogue with the civil society when the EU ignored the Islamic civil society organized around mosques, Islamic societies and charities and Islamist parties. Consequently the Union's foreign policy was isolated from the vast sector of political and civil society forces (Burgat 2009).

All these weaknesses and flaws were partly caused by the imbalance in the internal setup of the Union in the formulation and execution of the EU's foreign policy in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. A disproportionate influence was exerted by the southern member states and especially France. The problem was that France's elites perceived the EU's foreign policy as their own and as a continuation of decades-long colonial and neocolonial policies. This has become clear after fall of Tunisian and Egyptian dictators which led to the series of French domestic political scandals, including the demise of foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie (Pape 2011). The member states policies were sometimes clearly in conflict with the EU's declared goals but due to the intergovernmental setup of the Union's foreign policy the Commission was not able to counterbalance it. To sum up, all deficiencies of the structural foreign policy have one crucial and for the foreign policy efficiency deadly impact — they discredited the structures which the EU wanted to import and create. Democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, tolerance and other structures on political and societal levels were victims of the cooperation with and dependence on the authoritarian regimes, securitization, attempted isolation of Islamists, favoring of so called "third power" and bitter reverberations of the colonialist policies (Youngs in Carothers and Ottaway 2005: 230–231). With all these elements of its foreign policy — increasing with years — the EU has become part of the problem, not a solution.

A new beginning?

The Arab revolts have caught the EU in complete surprise. This was underlined by fact that the first revolution which has served as an inspiration to all subsequent events has begun in Tunisia. The Tunisian regime of President Ben Ali enjoyed close and cordial relations with the EU and especially France. Tunisia was the first country of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in 1995 (European Union External Action 2011e) and the regime spoke about "strategic choice" in its relations to the Union. The EU's criticism of poor human rights record and oppressive policies of the harshly authoritarian regime was only restrained if any and it was not an obstacle in deep cooperation between the sides. There were negotiations about an advanced status of Tunisia's relations to

the EU in the last moths of the old regime's existence. Therefore it has immense symbolism that the revolts against authoritarianism, abuse of power, corruption, poverty and humiliation started in Ben Ali's Tunisia. However it is fair to say that not only the Union but also all other powers were taken by surprise and tried to cope with the speed of events. The revolts against authoritarian regimes were not inspired from abroad — they were about searching for Arab solutions and Arab power. Slogans of the revolutions were not directed against the international system and its actors: they have been addressing domestic problems (Tahrir Documents 2011).

The EU is now in the period of adjusting its foreign policy to the new reality of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. The area is completely politically different after many years of stagnation and apparent standstill. In Northern Africa, there are nowadays three states which are going through profound political change. In Morocco the king promised the transition to the constitutional monarchy. Only Algeria is resisting calls for change. In West Asia, Syrian, Jordanian, Israeli, Bahraini and Yemeni demonstrators are calling for revolutions or at least significant reforms. The old EU's ways of executing its foreign policy in this area would ensure the path to insignificance. Up to this moment the Union has reacted with two documents. The first one from the beginning of March is called "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" which is the immediate reaction to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt before military action in Libya (Commission of the European Communities 2011a). The second is "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood" from 25 May 2011, which has the ambition to adopt the ENP to the new realities of the EU's neighborhood (Commission of the European Communities 2011a).

It is not our ambition here to analyze these two documents. Anyway, we have to wait some time to assess the changes of the Union's foreign policy incorporated into the proposals. It is important to stress — and both documents are alluding to this fact — that the developed and coherent structural foreign policy already exists. The problem was with its execution and anachronistic habits of some member states. But there are reasons for the cautious optimism. The EU proved in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans that it is a well suited, experienced and capable actor in the field of assistance to the countries which are enduring the transition from non-democratic political systems. Many EU representatives have realized the vital importance of the Mediterranean region and international publicity given to events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria etc. has underlined this trend. The Union has not lost all credibility in the field of democracy promotion and still poses a soft power vis-à-vis Arab states of the Mediterranean.

It is important not to repeat some blatant mistakes of the 1995–2011 period. The EU should concentrate on three important aspects within the framework of its existing foreign policy in the Mediterranean. All of them are addressed in A Partner-

ship for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean and A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood with different emphasis. The first one is inclusiveness. It is not possible to seriously advance with the democratization agenda or civil society programmes when the most important section of political and societal forces are ignored and ostracized. The EU's foreign policy should free itself from its Islamism phobia. Albeit some pundits speak about the end of Islamism or post-Islamist era and definitely especially radical al-Qaeda inspired Islamists formations got a serious blow by the People's Revolutions, it is highly probably that Islamists will continue to constitute a noticeable part of Arab political and social fabric. Any structural foreign policy is doomed to be less effective without addressing Islamist formations and civil society.

The second important aspect of the EU's foreign policy which was underestimated and ignored is conditionality. The Union should employ more conditionality particularly the negative one. It is very important to use the conditionality in relations with new authorities in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, or Rabat to avoid an authoritarian backlash in these countries. The path to pluralism and democracy is far from guaranteed. If democratization, human rights and other aspects of the EU's structural foreign policy are going to be effective the Union would have to use the negative conditionality and sanction abuses of the power by new authorities. The third aspect is the necessity of an individual approach to each country. This aspect was addressed by the creation of the ENP, but there is still the need to stress the importance of it. Like we mentioned in the first part of this text — the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean does not constitute one region and the political and socioeconomic conditions of countries are extremely diverse. Likewise the foreign policy should reflect these individual conditions and address specific needs of each country.

However the most arguable aspect of the 1995–2011 period to avoid is a discrepancy between a declared foreign policy goals and the actual foreign policy practice. This discrepancy which was perceived by the people in the Arab states in the Mediterranean as hypocrisy was the most damaging for the EU's legitimacy and has the potential to completely destroy it if the discrepancy is going to continue after the wave of Arab revolts. And the structural foreign policy cannot be successful without legitimacy. The EU has so far heavily disappointed the Arabs of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. The Arab revolts have given it excellent opportunity for the reflection and reassessment of its foreign policy priorities. But there is not much time left for hovering and the EU has to make a clear choice if it is supporting transitions and aspirations of the people or if it is going to continue with the policies which embarrassed her so badly.

Notes

1   Or at least since the consolidation of the authoritarian regimes in the 1960's and 1970's.
2   In this article political Islam off-shoots and their particular formations are labeled as "radical" when they do not renounce violence as a means of their political action.

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