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The importance of democracy in contemporary discourse

Western thinkers have long held a conviction that democracy is essential for building stable and peaceful societies holding it to be the most equitable and efficient political model to allocate material wealth and ensure popular representation. This belief drove the reconstruction of western Europe after the Second World War and grew stronger during the 1990s when the countries in central and eastern European freed themselves from Communist regimes, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the Cold War came to an end. In this period, democracy and the liberal market economy travelled triumphantly through the world as populations in some newly independent states stridently defended these principles as the surest means to achieve a higher standard of living and freedom to shape their own lives. In Eastern Europe, the USA served as a model of socio-economic and political renewal alongside western European countries which also acted as points of attraction and promoters of democracy.

The end of the Cold War changed the ballgame of international relations as no longer one single over-arching strategic concern dominated global politics. This new situation coincided with a spectacular intensification of global economic and social interactions and communication and opened up the prospect of a renewed engagement where countries throughout the world became involved in the twin processes of democratization and economic modernization. At the end of the 20th century, democracy seemed to make great strides in most parts in the world as democratic government, the rule of law and good governance went hand in hand with economic and social transformation.

Then, during the first decade of the new millennium, the place of democracy promotion in the western world's foreign policy tool box changed as it became associated with measures to deal with failed states and the threat of terrorism. This change in character may have been the strongest on the politico-strategic level as NGOs and the development community at large continued working according to well-known principles linking freedom and democracy to improvements in populations' well-being. However, democracy promotion as a guiding principle, particularly in the USA's relations with third countries, was increasingly viewed with suspicion chiefly because the aims were no longer seen as driven by universal values and a benign trade-off between interests, but rather by more narrow security, energy or economic interests. In separate but concurrent events the backlash against democracy was further prompted by authoritarian regimes' reaction to the 'colour revolutions' in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Today, at a time when democracy appears to be backsliding and authoritarian regimes in countries such as China constitute a real alternative to developing countries in their quest for economic growth and development without having to engage in risky democratic and social reforms, the EU and the USA have a shared interest in redeeming the status of democracy promotion. Democracy is part of American and European fundamental values and is a basic premise of their societies. It is also a fundamental principle in their foreign policies and an essential aspect of their relations with third countries. Both the EU and the USA stand to gain if democracy was reinstated as a concrete expression of fundamental universal values and as a requirement for a multilateral system of governance on the global level.

The moment for intensified transatlantic cooperation seems propitious with the election of Barak Obama as president of the USA. The expectation in Europe on Obama, and his Foreign Secretary-elect Hilary Clinton, are huge as both appear more open to multilateral cooperation and dialogue. There is clearly a window of opportunity for both Americans and Europeans to advance shared principles and values on the international scene, as well as agreeing on a way forward on a host of difficult foreign policy challenges.

The USA as a promoter of democracy

Democracy is a fundamental dimension of the American self-image touching as it does on the very essence of American nationhood. Democracy promotion therefore becomes a natural ingredient in its relations to the outside world and given the country's size and resources the USA has been a key player in several successful instances of democratization, for instance Japan and West Germany after the second world war and the low-key support to human rights activists and dissidents of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe countries during the Cold War. However, there are other examples, for instance Latin America during the 70s and 80s, where American involvement acting within the Cold War imperative belied its attachment to democratic principles and attracted strong criticism from the international community. However, one should not forget that, particularly after the end of the Cold War, the US redeemed itself by turning against the likes of Pinochet, Marcos, and Suharto and in sponsoring democratic transitions in Central America.

An account of the American approach to democracy promotion cannot avoid focusing on the experience of the war in Iraq and the ensuing war on terror which has had such a fundamental impact on American foreign policy and its standing abroad. It has been argued that 'the Bush administration's identification of democracy building with the war in Iraq has discredited the concept both at home and abroad' and that a 'generation of work to

build consensus at home and legitimacy abroad for US democracy promotion is in disarray'.¹ Others, however, argue that there is still a robust US consensus, at least among the political elites in both parties, on the principles and instruments of democratization as debates have primarily concerned policies and priorities.

The war on terrorism, chiefly played out in Iraq and Afghanistan, epitomizes some of the greatest weaknesses and strengths of the American approach to democracy promotion:

The great appeal and force of attraction: The Bush administration made democracy a rallying cry for the war on terror and the redemption of failed states which harbour terrorists or tolerate them on their territory. At the start of American action in Afghanistan, the spread of democracy attracted a great deal of support both inside and outside the USA, whereas in the case of Iraq, democratisation was at first primarily articulated as a motive by a small number of neo-conservatives and although large sections of American society supported the invasion in Iraq in its initial stages, it soon became clear that popular support for this war petered out.

Domestically, popular support for forceful regime change in the name of freedom was an expression of a deep-seated tenet in American society in support of the principle of democracy and a belief in the USA as a global promoter of democracy justified by the size and resources of the country. Abroad, its status as the world's uncontested superpower gave rise to expectations of the USA promoting American values on the world stage and taking action in order to enforce those values. However, the swiftness and effectiveness with which the USA can act may also turn against it when the action taken lacks legitimacy or contradicts stated values and principles. This is what the Bush administration has experienced as its actions in Iraq and in the war on terror which appeared to breach American claims of righteousness and vitiated morally justified policies. It has also driven home the message that forceful regime change cannot go hand in hand with the promotion of democratic principles and human rights. The challenge for the USA is to redress its message of democracy and human rights as a universal value for all people. At home, the next administration must fight against domestic forces that advocate isolationism and abroad it must re-legitimize its democracy promotion policies by doing away with the most criticized human rights violations (Guantanamo Bay, extra-territorial rendition, torture of prisoners of war and illegal tapping of its own citizens).

¹ Thomas Carothers, *Repairing Democracy Promotion*, washingtonpost.com's Think Tank Town, September 14, 2007. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications>

The dichotomy between a realist and normative foreign policy: The Bush administration's stated interest in promoting democracy in the Middle East and beyond is to improve stability and governability of these countries in order to prevent 'failed states' becoming a breeding ground for terrorism. Interests always play a role in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives. However, in the area of democracy promotion, ambiguity as to the true nature of the intervening state's interests is problematic. If the real reasons behind the strategy of regime change turn out to be contrary to the elevated and altruistic intentions stated publicly, or if there is even just a suspicion thereof, the positive effects of action abroad may at best be cancelled and at worst discredit both the author of the policy and the policy itself. Between these two poles lie many possible positions, but as the wars in Iraq and on terrorism illustrate, it is counterproductive for well-intentioned democracy promotion programmes if the international community believe the American administration's real interests in Iraq and the surrounding region are other than those stated publicly. Democracy promotion relies as a policy on the sincerity of the promoter as to the intentions and interests behind the policy. The challenge for the USA is to change the perceived association between American military intervention and regime change with democracy promotion policies.

Political and financial resourcefulness and ability to take action: The USA is the world's most resourceful foreign policy actor owing to its political and military strength, its budgetary resources and its cohesiveness as an actor including the powers vested in the office of the president. In 2006, US total overseas development aid amounted to 23.5 billion US\$; an amount that corresponds to roughly 0.16 per cent of GNI whereas the corresponding figure for 2007 is slightly higher at 0.18 per cent.² Beyond financial resources, the USA acts as a powerful player in multilateral organizations, both through financial instruments and political initiatives, and is an influential, if not the most influential, player in global politics. On another level, the USA is the host to some of the most influential NGOs in the area of democracy promotion which act on the ground to administer concrete projects and report on the state of democracy around the world as well as participants in the debate about the aims and objectives of democracy promotion.

In order to harness the resources and influence of the USA and direct them more explicitly towards national security, the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, coined in 2006 the term *Transformational Diplomacy*. Under the auspices of a newly created post of director

² OECD, *Aid at a Glance 2005-2006* and *OECD Factbook 2008: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics*, published on www.oecd.org.

of foreign assistance, the efforts and financial resources of the State Department and USAID have been pooled together in order to improve performance and effectiveness within seven strategic goals all geared towards enhancing democracy and development worldwide. In the area of democracy promotion the USAID and the State Department combined spent US\$ 2.65 billion in 2007 on the strategic goal *Governing Justly and Democratically* and an increase of 27 per cent was requested for the 2008 operations³ although much of this spending can only very loosely be considered democracy promotion funding. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this reform although concerns have been raised that the reform aims at gearing development assistance more directly towards foreign policy objectives.

With this kind of resourcefulness comes responsibility to adopt policies that are true to their stated aim and in keeping with the principles of democracy. Responsibility weighs heavier on the shoulder of the resourceful than on those lacking in resources but gives leverage and ability to take action. The challenge for the USA is to engage in a sincere manner with third countries, one that does not refrain from criticizing those that resort to doubtful democratic practices and human rights abuses even if they are considered strategic partners in the war on terror or control assets that are of strategic interest to the USA. It should also put more emphasis on multilateral fora where a positive engagement on behalf of the USA is of key importance to build an international consensus in favour of democracy.

The EU as a promoter of democracy

The EU is a very different political actor from the USA. It has evolved from cooperation among six countries in western Europe centred around trade and agriculture to become a highly institutionalized political body encompassing almost the whole of Europe. The importance of the EU in terms of geographical stretch and size of its economy warrants a place on the scene of global politics. Although, the EU's international ambitions have grown considerably in recent years, now ranging from development to security, it is still considered an atypical foreign policy actor, principally because of its institutional and political structure built on consensus-building and collective government among the 27 member states. The EU is in the midst of a difficult constitutional reform with the Lisbon Treaty which if ratified despite the Irish 'no' in a referendum in June 2008 would enable the EU to adopt a more coherent and effective foreign policy. Whether the EU is in the end endowed with more potent treaty-based competence in the area of foreign policy or not, it is no longer shy about

³ Information obtained on www.usaid.gov.

projecting itself as a global player. The perception of the EU as a global actor has the support of European elite circles but it has still to prove its credentials both to European and foreign publics. An account of the EU's efforts to promote democracy sheds light on its strengths and weaknesses as well as the challenges ahead.

A normative foreign policy: The EU has often been referred to as a normative foreign policy actor. This is a reflection of its *raison d'être* as well as its policies. The EU was set up in the aftermath of the 2nd World War to create a union among previously warring states to support their economic and social modernization and consolidate the still fragile state of democracy in West European states in the shadow of the Cold War. The EU was conceived as a process with some clearly defined objectives whereas its end-goal was deliberately ambiguous in order to let political integration among the member states evolve gradually. As a consequence, the EU has since its inception professed a number of values and principles that guide both the conditions of integration among member states as well as the aims of common policies. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are founding principles of European integration and lie at the heart of the EU's normative foreign policy. As a result of continuous constitutional reform and enlargement, these principles have been further elaborated. The Lisbon Treaty building on the treaties currently in force states unequivocally that the EU must build relations with third countries on the basis of its own values and founding principles, namely 'democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human right and fundamental freedoms and respect for human dignity....' and affirms that the Union's external relations objectives should 'consolidate and support democracy, rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law'.⁴

With these kinds of declarations of intent the EU has attracted criticism of enouncing lofty goals and principles but falling short of delivering effective policies to enforce those principles, let alone take decisive action when these values and principles are violated. The EU has also been accused of inconsistency in its over-all policy direction pursuing policies with contradictory outcomes in recipient countries. The reasons for inconsistency are most often due to disagreement among member states and their attempts to protect domestic interests to the detriment of declared foreign policy aims. The challenge for the EU is on the one hand to build relations with third countries that are true to its own values and principles and consistently promote these abroad, and on the other, to conceive coherent

⁴ Treaty on European Union (as amended by the Lisbon Treaty), art.21.

foreign policies that are not thrown off course because of domestic opposition or sectoral interests.

From stand-in policies to democracy promotion in its own right: Despite lacking a foreign policy commensurate with its economic weight, the EU has pursued a number of policies through which it has been able to spread democracy quite successfully. The EU insists since 1995 on the inclusion of a human rights clause in all bilateral association agreements it concludes with third countries and democracy and human rights are mainstreamed into all EU external policies and strategic documents. The EU is also an active player in multilateral organizations, particularly the UN where it supports actively the UN Human Rights Council, although the efficiency of this forum and the EU's leverage within it has been questioned due to the dominance by authoritarian regimes. The EU has also given its support to specific projects such as the International Criminal Court, electoral monitoring and so on. Democracy, good governance and human rights are increasingly being emphasized within EU and its member states' development policies and certain countries, such as Sweden, have made democracy an overriding principle of its development policy.

Since 1994, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) is, despite some criticism regarding its efficiency, the EU's flagship programme on democracy promotion and human rights supporting the activities of civil society working for human rights and democracy in third countries as well as regional and international organizations. The budgetary resources of this project were €140 million in 2007.⁵ Looking at over-all spending on development aid, the EU and its member states constitute the world's largest donor as their combined budgets for development in 2006 made up 56 per cent of the development aid delivered by major industrial countries. In 2007, the EU15 spent roughly 0.45 per cent of their GNI on overseas development aid.⁶

The EU's efforts in promoting democracy is however the most effective in the context of accession of new member states. For European states aspiring to become members of the EU, democratic governance and institutions were previously a requirement taken for granted. In view of the newly democratized countries in Central and Eastern Europe's wish for membership in the early 90s, the EU toughened the conditions for opening accession negotiations by referring explicitly to the adherence to the values and principles of the EU treaties and by imposing specific criteria on the aspiring countries. In the area of democracy,

⁵ European Commission, *Furthering Democracy and Human Rights across the Globe*, OPEC, Luxemburg, 2007

⁶ *OECD Factbook 2008: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics*, published on www.oecd.org

the Copenhagen criteria specified that in order to be eligible for membership, a country must have achieved ‘stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities’.⁷ The criteria for democracy, along with requirements in other fields, became a yardstick for assessing candidate countries’ democratization process and helped to anchor these countries’ transformation process within a larger framework buttressed by sticks and carrots to keep candidates on the path of reform. The enlargement process provided a strong element of conditionality as the Central and Eastern European countries’ membership was conditional on the candidates’ fulfilment of the criteria. These criteria are now applied in the accession negotiations with Turkey and Croatia as well as in any other future enlargement negotiation.

The success of enlargement as an instrument of democratization was emulated in the policy towards the countries neighbouring the enlarged EU to the east and south. The neighbourhood policy is built on bilateral association agreements between the EU and neighbouring countries (15 countries plus the occupied Palestinian territory) that are tailor-made to correspond to individual countries’ interests and level of ambition in terms of integration with the EU. The agreements attempt to set up privileged partnerships building on a shared commitment to common values, including democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance. In the same vein, the EU is seeking bilateral association agreements, the so-called European Partnership Agreements, with 75 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, based on shared values and norms, including democracy, good governance, human rights as well as in other regional association agreements with third countries such as the Mercosur and the Andean Community.

However, in terms of conditionality the EU does not have the same leverage in the association agreements as in the enlargement process. It is unquestionably so that the motivation to conform to EU’s values and principles is less when membership is not at stake. It would be in the EU’s interest to capitalize on the leverage of conditionality in contractual contexts other than enlargement in order to persuade third countries to adopt democratic principles, human rights and good governance. At the same time, the EU cannot enlarge infinitely lest its attractiveness would be lost and therefore the EU as a foreign policy actor needs to refine conditionality as a foreign policy instrument, not as a condition for membership.

⁷ European Council, Conclusions, Copenhagen, June 1993

Coherence, cohesiveness and political leadership: The EU has been characterized as an economic giant but a political dwarf. It has been criticized for incoherence in its policy stances, over-compartmentalization of policies, indecisiveness in times of political crisis and for not speaking with one voice. Much of this criticism can be explained by the fact that the EU foreign and security policy has to be decided consensually among its 27 members and implemented through complex constructions involving EU institutions and national diplomatic services and security and military structures. In many instances, such as development policy, member states retain their national prerogatives as EU competence in this area is complementary to the national competence. The financing of EU external policy initiatives is also dependent on both the EU budget and national budgets again adding to the impression of fragmentation. This situation is detrimental for over-all coherence, particularly in the pursuit of value-based principles such as democracy which require perseverance and long-term commitment. Attempts have been made to anchor more firmly EU values such as democracy and human rights to specific policies and strategic policy documents. The Consensus on Development of 2005 emphasizes that ‘EU partnership and dialogue with third countries will promote common values of: respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, peace, democracy, good governance, gender equality, the rule of law, solidarity and justice’.⁸ The European Security Strategy of 2003 affirms that well-governed democratic states are ‘the best protection for our societies’ and the spread of ‘good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order’.⁹

The Lisbon Treaty makes a number of institutional changes which aim at improving the ability of the EU to act globally. The most significant are the creation of the office of High Representative (HR) for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European External Action Service providing the HR with autonomous resources in terms of expertise and personnel. This development has worried the European development community which sees it as a means of conceiving a more interest-driven foreign policy to the detriment of the value-based normative nature of EU external action. In its view, democracy promotion risks becoming just another tool of the traditional realist foreign policy, and the EU, and in extension those who implement its projects, would lose creditability in the process when seeking to promote universal values in the global arena. The challenge for the EU is to

⁸ Council of European Union, *The European Consensus*, Doc. No. 14820/05, Brussels, 22 November 2005.

⁹ Council of European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World*, European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

ensure that, if the Lisbon Treaty is ratified, an enhanced capacity to conceive coherent and effective external relations policies and pursue its interests globally do not imply that it does no longer seek to promote even-handedly its values and principles, particularly democracy and human rights.

In addition to the evolution in institutional reform of the formal EU foreign policy instruments, new European initiatives have been taken through the foundation of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) to enhance the role of European NGOs in providing democracy assistance in partnering with their American NGO counterparts.

Transatlantic co-operation in democracy promotion: current state of affairs

Despite sharing similar value-based foundations and normative principles, cooperation between the EU and the USA in the area of democracy has in recent times been neither systematic nor recurrent. This state of affairs can be explained by a number of factors, such as the understanding of democracy promotion in a policy context; the approach to receiving countries; and the methods used and the articulation of democracy promotion vis-à-vis other policy objectives.

The USA has in the past been criticized for being a too self-conscious democracy promoter, adopting a rhetorically charged democracy strategy that often emphasizes confrontational stances, centres directly on foreign rulers or specific causes and highlights visible manifestations or symbols of democracy, such as elections. However looking beyond the conspicuous cases of Iraq and Afghanistan the difference between US and EU approaches to DP should not be overstated, for instance both MEPI and the Barcelona Process stress non-confrontational partnership-based approaches with Arab regimes, disproportionately favour economic assistance over aid to civil society.

The most visible American democracy promotion measures are connected to high-level presidential initiatives that often take place outside the existing channels and structures of US democracy assistance and multilateral organizations. Receiving countries have sometimes experienced US democracy promotion as too intrusive to the detriment of constructive dialogue and long-standing involvement although it should not be forgotten the difficulty in finding the appropriate balance between maintaining good intergovernmental relations while assisting indigenous liberal/democratic forces. The US is on the other hand a more decisive actor when it comes to applying coercive instruments, for instance sanctions but also military, and therefore wields the power of persuasion with much more credibility,

both positive and punitive, than the EU. In addition, its clear-cut rhetoric and distinct recipient makes it more effective in terms of the communicative impact.

The EU on the other hand has prioritized low-key, long-term dialogue and most of the time of a less aggressive character than the American. The EU has often refrained from the American rhetoric regarding it as counterproductive and although both recognize the link between peace and democracy the EU has linked democracy also to socio-economic development, the rule of law, good governance in a more systematic fashion. In addition, in view of the EU being an institutional actor itself, it places a much greater emphasis on building structures and processes with the aim of achieving a densely-knitted web of cooperation in the medium-to-long term. The EU engagement with the African Union is one example of this. The EU has also been ready to promote and interact in multilateral fora and with international organizations, such as the UN, the World Bank and the OSCE.

On the political level both parties emphasize the benefits of stepping up cooperation and EU-US summit declarations have recurrently stated their shared commitment to promotion of peace human rights and democracy. Indeed the EU and US have been successful in promoting a number of projects within the UN, for instance the revamped Human Rights Council. In the context of the multipolar world that has emerged in recent years in which democracy seems to be experiencing a backlash, there seems to be an obvious interest for the EU and the USA to increase their cooperation in multilateral fora.

Recommendations

The US-EU summit in Washington in the spring 2009 comes at an interesting point in time as a new president of the USA will have been instated and the EU is to have a new European Parliament and European Commission by the autumn 2009. New administrations in the US and the EU open up for an opportunity to address common issues and re-launch fruitful transatlantic cooperation. In the area of democracy promotion, the working group would like to suggest the following recommendations

To the USA

- Redeem the legitimacy of US democracy promotion policies and dissociate them from the policies of ‘failed states’ and forceful regime change;
- Dissociate democracy promotion policies from national interests if the latter are contrary to democratic values and principles and recognize that democracy promotion cannot be the instrument of foreign policy in a traditional sense.

- Engage in a sincere, open and transparent manner in multilateral organizations and with third countries.

To the EU

- Build on the positive experience of enlargement of the EU to promote democracy, human rights and good governance to the countries neighbouring on the EU;
- Give democracy promotion a more pronounced place in the EU external relations by strengthening democracy policy instruments and resources, including the instruments offered by the EU NGO democracy support agencies. Work on shaping democracy conditionality into a proper instrument that works beyond enlargement;
- Prioritize among normative principles and values, such as democracy and human rights, and EU external interests in a transparent and just fashion.

To the USA and the EU

- Recognize the interest of cooperation in the area of democracy promotion and the value of a coherent message on behalf of the USA and the EU on the global level;
- Adopt a coherent policy of democracy promotion towards undemocratic states, refrain from competition on strategic resources or interests which will undo democracy promotion policies;
- Recognizing the urgent need of third countries for economic and social development which constitutes an essential factor in the democratization process.