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Conflicting objectives, neglected relationships, and authoritarian backlash: the crisis of EU democracy promotion

Democracy promotion is an integral component of EU foreign policy, however the EU has not always been successful in its efforts to foster democracy in external countries. **Sonja Grimm** *offers several explanations for these failures, including the absence of a consensus among democracy promoters about policy objectives, and the interference of hidden agendas.*

Democracy promotion was and still is an integral component of the foreign policy of both Europe's established democracies and the European Union itself. Among other foreign policy issues, promoting democracy forms part of development cooperation, liberal peace and state-building, and regional integration. However, the failed US regime-change driven invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the bumpy integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union and the sobering reality of the survival of authoritarianism in the majority of the Arab spring countries has played a part in sweeping away bold hopes of further quick and easy democratic transitions from authoritarian rule. With a focus on European activities, I suggest four explanations for the observed lack of effectiveness of current democracy promotion efforts.

First, international democracy promotion seeks to foster democratic institution-building and the empowerment of democratic political actors, as well as to contribute to the creation of favourable conditions for democratisation. However, European democracy promoters such as the European Commission, the governments of EU member countries, their respective development agencies, other regional organisations such as the European Council and the Organization for Security and Economic Co-operation in Europe and numerous other European based non-governmental organisations working in the field of democracy promotion do not agree on what to achieve and how to achieve it.

In practice, these democracy promoters do not base their work on clear-cut definitions of policy goals, concepts, and instruments. Some practitioners avoid the term 'democracy promotion' and prefer to speak about 'good governance formation', while others have a wider agenda in mind and subsume under 'democracy promotion' also socio-economic development and post-conflict state-building. Consequently, different actors seek to achieve different policy objectives that do not necessarily coincide, while hidden policy agendas driven by higher ranked issues of security or economy compromise democracy promotion.

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Second, these European democracy promoters neglect the rational interests of domestic actors who seek to modify, adapt, change or even reject external reform demands due to diverging preferences or domestic constraints. The attitude of domestic actors toward external demands for democratic reforms can range from very supportive to critical. But even when they are critical, the governments and state officials of democratising countries do not necessarily oppose the fundamental ideas that

lie behind an external reform initiative – such as improving transparency, accountability, or service-orientation to citizens – but they might substantially disagree with the scope and scale of desired reforms, with the necessary degree of local third-party participation in policy-making, or with the procedure for implementing a costly reform.

Furthermore, not only external actors but also their domestic counterparts employ a wide range of instruments (such as persuasion, modification, adaptation, slow-down, or emancipation) with which they can alter preferences of external actors and through which they can succeed in convincing external actors to accept modifications of drafted laws and to change reform objectives. External actors might even be obliged to drop certain aspects of desired reforms. Democracy promoters tend to misperceive such processes as the outcome of "local resistance" against external demands.

However, I suggest reframing domestic behaviour as rational in the face of domestic constraints, and democracy promotion in such a context as a dynamic process of constant interaction that necessarily leads to the change of original reform proposals. Democracy promotion might appear on a first sight less effective because the originally planned outcomes of reform were not realised and can therefore not be measured. But evaluators might oversee the adaptions, modifications and learning processes that took place on the domestic side while negotiating the democratic reform.

Third, authoritarian incumbents have started to 'push back' liberalisation efforts and to crackdown on domestic oppositional non-governmental organisation and popular uprisings, as well as international democracy promotion. In doing so, they spoil European democracy promotion efforts. Autocrats have learned techniques either to challenge the opposition and to undermine their legitimacy or to co-opt (and thereby muzzle) oppositional forces. Strategies of repression have successfully ridden out popular uprisings in a majority of countries affected by the Arab spring and the colour revolutions.

Autocrats have started to include domestic elections in their policy mix. Although it seems to be a risky strategy that could potentially throw them out of office, many have succeeded in creating stability and even legitimacy for their authoritarian rule. Autocrats have even gone as far as to include counter-monitoring of elections in their toolbox to offset Western claims of fraud. Besides election management, autocrats have developed domestic response strategies such as public spending to international sanctions in case of electoral fraud and other human rights violations. European democracy promotion has not yet found adequate answers to deal with such (regained) authoritarian self-esteem and the autocrat's capacity to survive in office while adapting successfully to domestic and external democratisation threats.

Fourth, 'negative external actors' undermine European democracy promotion by promoting autocracy, or by making more attractive aid offers without democratisation pressure. Authoritarian powers such as China in Asia, Russia in the former Soviet space and Saudi Arabia (or China as a non-regional power) in Africa at times offer critical financial, military, or diplomatic support to neighbouring autocracies and trade partners thereby mitigating the impact of Western influence. Russia for example seeks to secure the access to and the supply of energy and natural resources and to decide territorial and border issues for its benefit, under the guise of protecting Russian diaspora in the Baltics, Ukraine, Moldova, the Southern Caucasus, and in Tajikistan, and guarantees support for and by allies like Belarus, Armenia, and the Central Asian republics in fighting against 'terrorism'.

China's tremendous need for resources makes it interfere especially in Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, while China, like Russia, is engaged in diplomatic initiatives and regional organisations, it prioritises non-dominant economic cooperation. China's support of infrastructure projects, foreign direct investment, and deployment of a Chinese work force to recipient countries is not attached to any political conditionality. The regime solely expects in return access to natural resources or diplomatic support. This makes China's offers attractive to authoritarian incumbents and reduces European democracy promotion leverage, whose aid is normally connected to the political conditions such as to progress democratisation and to improve human rights protection.

Scholars of democracy promotion mostly agree that supporting democratisation requires the donors to take a context-

sensitive approach. This old scholarly claim is still not taken seriously in the practice of European democracy promotion and adequate answers to the identified challenges still need to be found. It seems hard to defend the democracy promotion agenda in times of severe financial, political, and military crises, and to unite European democracy promoters around an efficient democratisation policy. Nevertheless, the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights for the sake of the people that do not live in the EU's safe haven are worth fighting for.

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Note: This article summarises the author's recent paper in Global Policy and was originally published at our sister site, Democratic Audit. The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Sonja Grimm – *University of Konstanz*

Dr Sonja Grimm is a Senior Lecturer in International Comparative Politics at the University of Konstanz, Germany, who specialises in democratisation studies, the study of state-building and transition to democracy in post-conflict societies, international democracy promotion, development cooperation and EU integration. More about her can be found here. She is a member of the research network "External Democracy Promotion".

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