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**The impact of EU democracy promotion:
The view from Brussels**

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**Abstract**

*This paper offers findings from new original primary interview data gathered from EU actors in Brussels regarding their perceptions of the impact of EU democracy promotion, and how they seek to measure its impact in practice. The European Union (EU) seeks to promote democracy in its neighbourhood through a wide variety of different instruments and mechanisms including conditionality over accession, small scale funding for civil society groups, sanctions, rule of law missions, dialogue and delegations. After the successful transition in Central and Eastern Europe from Communism to democracy, in which the EU arguably had a significant role, the EU is now faced with both a more challenging global environment for democracy promotion and with more challenging country cases. To meet these challenges, the EU can now utilise its long awaited European External Action Service (EEAS) which is intended to play a key role in a more co-ordinated EU approach to democracy promotion. The EU is also reviewing its Neighbourhood Policy and continuing to develop the Eastern Partnership. A number of questions will be posed in this paper. What are the perceptions of the impact of EU democracy promotion among EU actors themselves? What do they think works in having the greatest impact? How do they seek to measure the impact of EU democracy promotion? What lessons have they learned?*

**Introduction**

This paper explores the perceptions of EU actors regarding EU democracy promotion[[1]](#footnote-1). This will include the development of EU democracy promotion during the period 1990-2010 in terms of what instruments are available, how they are being applied and how their effectiveness is evaluated. What has worked and what has not worked in the view of EU actors will also be explored, as well as the changing context in which EU democracy promotion takes place. Particular reference will be made to three primary case study countries – Poland, Croatia and Ukraine.

The very term ‘democracy promotion’ now raises eyebrows in EU circles for reasons that become clear when you consider the recent history of the use of the term. The US-led action in Iraq in 2003 and the surrounding rhetoric about bringing democracy to the country has to a significant degree given the notion of promoting democracy a bad name (Whitehead, 2009). Upon adopting an EU ‘Agenda for Action on Democracy Support in EU External Relations’, the Council stated that: ‘The Council recognises that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside’ (Council of the European Union, 2009). It also however stated that the EU’s extensive array of instruments should be applied more consistently and effectively, and the hope among many commentators was that this new approach would end the ‘scattered and un-coordinated’ approach that had traditionally marked this area of policy (Bogdanova et al, 2010). So it seems that there is a desire to do this activity in a more effective way, whilst at the same time an admission that whatever the EU does will not be sufficient on its own.

The paper will proceed in four sections. Firstly, it will examine how we should conceptualise EU democracy promotion. Secondly, it will look at the various instruments of EU democracy promotion that are currently employed. Thirdly, it will examine the perceptions of EU actors about the effectiveness of these instruments. Fourthly, the external context in which the EU operates and the challenges it faces will be explored, with particular reference to the primary case study countries. Some conclusions will then be offered.

**Conceptualising European Union democracy promotion**

What is this thing called ‘EU democracy promotion’? Before we can start to examine it, it is important to be clear about what activities are actually involved. The EU can clearly not be regarded as a single actor, being as it is made up of a number of different institutions, including the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, the European External Action Service, the European Court of Justice, and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. Through these different institutions, the EU has developed a wide range of policy instruments designed to promote democracy, and so they are fragmented across its institutions and across policy areas. Many different EU actors therefore have a role in democracy promotion – European Commissioners, Members of the European Parliament, heads of state of EU members, EU diplomats and members of delegations etc.

So how then should we conceptualise the EU’s role? There is an argument that is made that the EU is unique and that it ‘does not need and has not needed to acquire state-like qualities to exert an important influence on the world’ (Hill, 1993: 316). For example, for Ginsberg: ‘No other regional body in the world plays the same international role as the EU... the EU’s place in international politics is *sui generis...’* (Ginsberg, 2001: 12). In terms of efforts to promote democracy by international organisations, the EU is not alone in its efforts. But, the nature of the EU clearly does make a difference to the way in which it is able to operate. As has been said, the EU cannot be regarded as a single actor. The way in which we should conceptualise the role of the EU in international affairs has been developed in the International Relations literature over the last three decades, with several key concepts have arisen, namely ‘actorness’ and ‘presence’, with a consensus that the EU has an international ‘presence’ and that it exhibits some elements of ‘actorness’ (Ginsberg, 1999: 432).

In terms of ‘presence’, Allen & Smith defined this as ‘a combination of factors: credentials and legitimacy, the capacity to act and mobilize resources, the place it occupies in the perceptions and expectations of policy makers.’ Presence will vary along two dimensions, the tangible / intangible dimension and the positive / negative dimension, from which four broad forms of presence can be derived, namely ‘initiator’, ‘shaper’, ‘barrier’ and ‘filter’. Whilst Western Europe has the most tangible presence in the economic sphere, in the political sphere it has acted as a ‘shaper’ or ‘filter’, moulding the perceptions of policy makers and others, shaping collective action and filtering out certain options (Allen & Smith, 1990).

The concept of ‘actorness’ was introduced by Sjostedt as ‘the capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system’ (Sjostedt, 1977: 16). This concept of ‘actorness’ was further developed by Caporaso & Jupille who proposed four criteria for evaluating actor capacity – recognition, authority, autonomy and cohesion (Caporaso & Jupille, 1998: 214). In a further developed model, Bretherton & Vogler’s approach to the ‘actorness’ of the EU has three elements: the ‘opportunity’ provided by the external context in which the EU operates; the ‘presence’, defined as the ability of the EU to exert influence beyond its borders; and the ‘capability’, defined as the ability to exploit opportunity and capitalise on presence. They also concluded that the EU should be treated as *sui generis* due to its degree of integration and the range of instruments it possesses. They also outlined four basic requirements for ‘actorness’ (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006: 24-30):

1) Shared commitment to a set of overarching values

2) Domestic legitimation of decision processes and priorities relating to external policy

3) The ability to identify priorities and formulate policies – captured by the concepts of consistency and coherence, where:

- consistency indicates the degree of congruence between the external policies of the Member States of the EU;

- coherence refers to the level of internal coordination of EU policies.

4) The availability of, and capacity to utilize, policy instruments – diplomacy / negotiation, economic tools and military means.

Favouring a social constructivist approach, Bretherton & Vogler consider the EU as a ‘multiperspectival polity’ which is under construction, and this approach allows for its evolution over time (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006: 36). Other approaches have echoed this view. For Ginsberg it is ‘a partially constructed international political actor [which] does not act consistently and uniformly... at times it does not act, and other times it acts too slowly or timidly’ (Ginsberg, 2001: 9). Allen & Smith defined Western Europe as ‘a variable and multi-dimensional presence, which plays an active role in some areas of international interaction and a less active one in others’ (Allen & Smith, 1990: 20). For Hill, it is ‘not an effective international actor, in terms both of its capacity to produce collective decisions and its impact on events’ (Hill, 1993: 306).

There may however be a disconnect between ‘actorness’ and effectiveness, and although ‘actorness’ may well be necessary if the EU wants to have influence in international affairs, it is not sufficient, at least in certain cases (Thomas, 2010: 26). As far back as the early 1990s, a gap between the capability of the EU and the expectations placed upon it has been identified, such that ‘The Community does not have the resources or the political structure to be able to respond to the demands... the consequential gap which has opened up between capabilities and expectations is dangerous’ (Hill, 1993: 315). Since then, both the external expectations *and* the self-proclaimed ambitions have created enormous pressure in the EU to perform credibly and effectively in international affairs (Gebhard, 2007: 13).

Having looked at the ‘presence’ and ‘actorness’ of the EU, I would wish to define a **‘**democracy promotion community’ which has both a tangible ‘presence’ and which manifests most of the requirements for ‘actorness’, and which finds expression through the various institutions of the EU. This community is made up of some parts of the European Commission’s bureaucracy (for example in DG Enlargement), groups of MEPs, some of the leaders of the EU member states at certain points in time, some members of the ECJ, as well as a wide range of interest and lobby groups. This community could be considered as an ‘advocacy coalition’ whose members share the perception that EU democracy promotion is (a) worth doing, and (b) effective. In trying to convince others of these two things, the democracy promotion community inevitably encounters some push-back from both inside and outside the EU.

Why does the EU seek to promote democracy at all? The reason depends on both your point of view and the period of time in question. One reason is that democracy promotion is a worthwhile activity in its own right which is driven by fundamental European values that have been constructed into a framework of democratic norms and values. A more hard-headed or ‘realist’ reason is that promoting democracy should be done in the EU’s own interests of peace, security and economic prosperity. A pragmatic reason is that the EU simply has had to respond to the changes in its neighbourhood, most notably post-1989 and the collapse of Communism, something that both Member States and the EU were unprepared for and had no strategy as to how to deal with, as EU foreign policy had at that time no forward contingency planning (Mayhew, 1998: 11). This touches on the question of where the EU seeks to promote democracy. The geographical focus of this activity has changed over the decades. The focus in the 1980s was on Greece, Spain and Portugal as they transitioned from authoritarian regimes, and this shifted from 1989 to around 2004 to Central and Eastern Europe’s post-Communist transitions. It could be argued that in the period from 2005 to 2011 there was something of a lack of focus as the EU concentrating on its own institutional issues, as well as the economic and Eurozone crisis in the latter part of that period (Popescu & Wilson, 2011: 5). Overall, it is undeniable that support for democracy has moved up the order of foreign policy concerns (Pridham, 2005: 25).

As to how the EU tries to promote democracy and the various instruments that it seeks to use, that is the subject of the next section, but at this point we can say that the EU has had to develop different instruments for use at different times and in different cases. There are now many decades of experience on which to draw as to what works most effectively, so we might reasonably expect that the EU’s democracy promotion activities to be more effective now than they were in the past. However, if the cases now in question are in some ways more different than in the past, then this may not be the case. It could be argued that the EU has more often than not had to play catch-up to events, rather than to be pro-actively shaping them.

**The instruments of European Union democracy promotion**

One other major thing that the EU does to promote democracy is simply to exist. This concept of ‘passive’ leverage that the EU can exercise (Vachudova, 2005) through the attraction of the prospect of membership of the EU is similar to the oft-cited notion of ‘soft’ power (Nye, 2004) or ‘normative’ power (Manners, 2002). As a grouping of nation states brought together in a single market, operating within a framework of respect for the rule of law and democracy, in which people can live and work in any one of its member states, the EU is an attractive club to join. Political leaders in non-member states who hope for economic development, political stability and international respectability for their nation look to the EU as a foreign policy goal and also as a source of mechanisms by which they can affect often difficult domestic political reform. This has been the case for many decades now and there remain many states in the EU’s neighbourhood which can plausibly hope to follow this path.

Beyond the passive attraction of the EU as a membership organisation, there are of course active instruments that the EU uses to promote democracy when its leaders look beyond EU borders and see both risks of many kinds (economic, social and security) and/or opportunities for spreading democracy and human rights values. These instruments include both those that seek to work with political elites, ranging from dialogues to full on accession negotiations, and those that seek to work with civil society actors such as NGOs. They include measures designed to have short-term impacts (such as sanctions) and very long-term impacts (such as offering potential membership). They also include measures that cost virtually nothing (such as dialogues), to those that cost many millions of Euros (such as rule of law missions). There is therefore a huge variety of what we can call ‘EU democracy promotion instruments’.

So, how can we seek to classify these instruments? Broadly speaking, the EU’s democracy promotion involves both ‘top-down’ approaches seeking to engage with political elites, and ‘bottom up’ approaches focused on civil society actors such as NGOs. I identify four areas in which the EU seeks to promote democracy; through the promotion of human rights, through its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), through the EU’s use of conditionality, and through the activities to safeguard democracy in existing EU member states. In these various different ways, the EU aims is to improve rule of law, human rights and democracy in non-member states.

The **enlargement** **policy** of the EU to include new member states, and the use of political conditionality, may well not be synonymous with democracy promotion, but as the EU will never admit a state that is not deemed to be a democracy in that it fulfils the Copenhagen Criteria, the very process of negotiating accession to the EU clearly is part of the EU’s activities by which is seeks to promote democracy. However, as the DG for Enlargement says:

“The term ‘democracy promotion’ has connotations and has slightly got itself a bad name. If you read back through all the official documents relating to enlargement you won’t really find that term used much at all.” (Leigh, 2011).

Although the EU enlarged in the 1970s and 1980s, it was only really in its dealings with the post-Communist states of Central and Eastern European in the 1990s that the EU started to have a direct role in their democratization (Baracani, 2008: 54). Many different metaphors have been employed to describe how the EU works in this way, such as being an ‘anchor’ or a ‘guard rail’, but however it is described, there is consensus that the EU can play a powerful role through its enlargement policy and the use of political conditionality. Studies have shown a strongly positive correlation between democratization and EU political accession conditionality in the EU’s neighbourhood (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008: 207). EU actors certainly perceive enlargement as a powerful instrument:

‘’Enlargement reinforces peace and stability in Europe. It is in the EU’s strategic interest to take the enlargement process forward...’ – Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council.

A renewed consensus on enlargement was agreed by the European Council in December 2006, and a tougher process for accession negotiations was introduced following the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007.

“Croatia is the first case that follows the rules of the renewed consensus on enlargement of 2006. The rules were toughened up considerably. The existence of Chapter 23, much closer political monitoring, the introduction of opening benchmarks, a more direct link between political dialogue and the pace of the negotiations, which had been said before but there were no mechanisms for it. So Croatia has had more hoops to jump through in this area of democracy, rule of law and human rights than did the countries in the 5th enlargement. I think they have delivered pretty well on the whole. The determination not to see the same mistakes as were made with Bulgaria and Romania has gone quite far and has been fairly successful, on the whole.” (Leigh, 2011).

This new, tougher approach had a two-fold logic. Firstly, tougher conditionality was important in order to get the country in question to deliver, and secondly it was important to allay the fears of member states that new members would be allowed to join who were not quite ready. The successful accession of Croatia would be an enormous boost to the credibility of the EU’s enlargement policy and, it is hoped, help to rejuvenate reform in the Western Balkans. For this reason, it is very important that the EU gets this right, and is seen to have done so.

“Enlargement policy has slowed down so we are rather keen on successes to give credibility to the policy as a whole. So there may be some excessive inclination to get good news, despite all the checking and monitoring.” (Leigh, 2011).

There are of course many states that the EU wishes to positively influence but which are not candidates for membership. The **European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)** was launched in 2004 as a response to the fact that once the EU had enlarged to include the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe, its immediate neighbours would now include such ‘problematic’ states such as Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. The worry was that these countries, and Ukraine in particular, would feel ignored by the EU and that cross border trade would diminish with ‘fortress Europe’.

“ENP then got generalised to other countries. Then later, the idea of a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA) to go beyond even the Europe Agreements, was devised as the tool. In a way, it’s not a bad approach in a way. It gives Ukraine a framework and an agenda for several years. If Ukraine can deliver, it will start to build up its credibility. Given that there is no stomach whatsoever for giving a membership perspective to Ukraine, this is perhaps the next best thing. Now, do they have the capacity to conclude the negotiations? Yes. To implement it? Is this holding operation enough and providing enough incentive to strengthen democracy, to strengthen those that would like to keep a Western orientation for Ukraine, to boost domestic reform? I don’t know.” (Leigh, 2011).

However, there is a strong view among the Ukrainian political elite that they do not seen themselves as the EU’s ‘neighbours’ but rather at the heart of Europe, and so should not be subject to the ENP (Stegniy, 2011 54). Whereas the EU’s view is that the ENP holds the promise of real benefits:

‘The European Neighbourhood Policy is a win-win game: the higher our partners’ reform ambitions, the stronger our response’ – Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, 12 May 2010

The ENP involves the use of Action Plans which are agreed documents that are negotiated with the countries concerned. They include fairly extensive commitments in three areas:

1) Democracy (constitutional framework, electoral law, threshold for entering Parliament, access to media during campaigns, presence of international observers).

2) Rule of Law – judicial independence, fighting corruption, depoliticised civil service.

3) Respect for human rights – UN conventions, and Council of Europe conventions (for European countries who are members, except Belarus).

The head of section for ENP co-ordination in the EEAS, explains how this has developed:

“This is something which has developed much more intensively in the last 5 to 7 years. There was a need to fall back on something which is solid legislation, as the EU as such has adopted very little in the way of legislation in these spheres. And it’s convenient in the dialogue with Eastern partners as they themselves are members [of the Council of Europe] so it’s not us preaching to them, it’s mutual accountability.” (O’Rourke, 2011).

The major criticism of ENP has been that it is not effective because there is no offer of membership, and it has therefore been dubbed ‘enlargement-lite’ (Popescu & Wilson, 2009). But some are sceptical about this argument:

“It’s often brought up as a criticism of ENP that it is not as effective in promoting democracy because there isn’t the leverage of potential accession. But in Poland for example, the commitment to democracy was not contingent on an EU membership perspective. If a country is telling you that their commitment to democracy is going to be contingent on an EU membership perspective then there is something seriously wrong already.” (O’Rourke, 2011).

The term ‘enlargement-lite’ clearly carries a pejorative connotation, but this alternative approach to the use of political accession conditionality still has the capacity to promote democracy ‘through the back door’ via joint problem solving – known as the ‘governance’ model (Freyburg et al, 2009). ‘The ENP Action Plans remain objectives rather than precise timetables, and that’s one of the areas that may evolve towards greater precision,’ (O’Rourke, 2011).

The ENP also includes financial aid to support democracy in the form of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) which has a budget of 11.5 billion Euro for the period 2007-13. This has funded civil society projects in Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Russia, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine. A review of ENP was initiated in the summer of 2010, and the results of this review were presented in May 2011 (COM(2011) 303). As well as calling for 1.2 billion Euro of additional funding for the period until 2013, one of the headline proposals was the establishment of a European Endowment for Democracy, echoing the well-established National Endowment for Democracy in the US. This is an idea that has been in circulation for some years as a solution to the ‘slow decision talking, excessive bureaucracy and inflexibilty’ of the European Commission (Barysch et al, 2006: 6).

Two region specific initiatives should be mentioned at this point. One is the ***Eastern Partnership*** (EaP) between the EU and seven of its Eastern neighbours which was launched in 2009. This policy does not hold the promise of EU membership but rather ‘issue-specific rewards’ such as visa-free travel for progress in key areas including human trafficking and illegal immigration. In practice, the EaP is the same as ENP in all but name. ‘The Eastern Partnership is just the Eastern expression of the ENP. It’s essentially doing the same things but with more ambition,’ (O’Rourke, 2011). The EaP has been criticised for having an ill defined notion of partnership at its heart, and for its low visibility and public appreciation (Korosteleva, 2011a; 2011b).

The EaP does include a Civil Society Forum which provides a more structured approach to engagement with a wide variety of civil society organisations than was previously used. It also includes Euronest, a parliamentary assembly bringing together MEPs with delegates from ENP countries, which finally got up and running in May 2011 after divisions over whether or not to include Belarus. One of the four ‘thematic platforms’ of the EaP is entitled ‘democracy, good governance and stability’, and it focuses on improving the functioning of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, public administration reform, and the management of borders (Implementation of the ENP in 2010). The other region specific initiative is the **Union for the Mediterranean,** a French-led innovation created in July 2008 which had as a co-Chair Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. Its opening declaration stated ‘An ambition to build a common future based on the full respect of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms’ but it has been heavily criticised for being too much about high level summits rather than grass-roots engagement, unlike the EaP (Grant, 2011: 9). For the purposes of this paper, these two initiatives require mention only to make the point that clearly individual EU member states continue to take steps themselves to pursue particular issues in their own neighbourhoods, and that these will sometimes overlap, but sometimes potentially clash, with EU policies.

With the eventual ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU finally got its act together in terms of having the institutional framework necessary to operate its own ***Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)***. The key development was the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which began operation in 2010/11. Getting the EEAS up and running however proved to be difficult, with tensions emerging almost immediately between the EEAS and member states own diplomatic efforts, and much criticism of the first High Representative, Cathy Ashton (Raines, 2011). The ability of the EU to act as a ‘normative power’ is not powerful, especially when military action is required (Kubicek & Parke, 2011: 68). One of the most visible activities that the EU undertakes under the CFSP umbrella are the **rule of law missions**. A good example of these missions is the one in Kosovo. Here, the EU’s rule of law mission, known as EULEX and created in December 2008, involves over 3,000 police and civilian personnel, making it the largest civilian mission ever launched. Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008. UN General Assembly resolved to ask the International Court of Justice to rule on whether the declaration was legal in international law. In July 2010, the ICJ ruled that it was not in violation of international law. The EU still officially refers to Kosovo with the addition of the words ‘under UN Security Council Resolution 1244’, which when adopted in June 1999 authorised the presence of a civilian and military mission in Kosovo and established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The international presence in Kosovo has been subject to a significant amount of both criticism and public protest. EULEX describes its central aim as being ‘to assist and support the Kosovo authorities in the rule of law area, specifically in the police, judiciary and customs areas. The mission is not in Kosovo to govern or rule. It is a technical mission which will monitor, mentor and advise whilst retaining a number of limited executive powers.’ (EULEX website). The EU also supports NGOs operating in Kosovo through both the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and IPA (Instrument of Pre-Accession) aid, in a way in which the Commission aims to spread its aid by supporting small NGOs (Fagan, 2011: 709).

There has developed a rather pessimistic consensus that the EU has lost its influence on developing states in terms of promoting human rights as countries which emphasize sovereignty above human rights, such as China and Russia, have become increasingly economically successful (Dennison & Dworkin, 2010). However, the EU does undertake a significant amount of activity aimed at promoting human rights around the world. The **European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights** (EIDHR) was created in 1994 and has become one of them most visible instruments that the EU in this area (Youngs, 2005: 5). The main strength of the EIDHR is that it does not require the consent of the government of the target country in order for it to operate, as it works directly with civil society organisations and can therefore focus on politically sensitive issues (Herrero, 2009). The EU also undertakes what it calls ‘dialogues’ on human rights issues with more than 30 non-EU countries, including China, Russia, and Belarus. These dialogues amount to meetings between officials once or twice per year, with civil society seminars on the fringes of these meetings.

The EU tends to favour positive instruments that reward reform efforts rather than negative ones, but it does use **sanctions** in some casesagainst states that are found to have violated certain norms. One of the stated objectives of the EU’s use of sanctions is “to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” EU sanctions can include measures such as diplomatic sanctions (expulsion of diplomats, severing of diplomatic ties, suspension of official visits), suspension of cooperation with a third country, boycotts of sport or cultural events, trade sanctions (general or specific trade sanctions, arms embargoes), financial sanctions (freezing of funds or economic resources, prohibition on financial transactions, restrictions on export credits or investment), flight bans, and restrictions on admission (source: EEAS website).

“Now with regard to whether or not sanctions are effective, I would like to remind you that one of the very first motions tabled in this new National Assembly was a motion asking for the removal of sanctions... Now if sanctions are not effective, why are they so keen on having them removed?” Aung San Suu Kyi, 2011

There was a substantial increase in the use of sanctions by the EU in the 1990s. For example, the imposition of an arms embargo on Croatia from July 1991 to November 2000, part of the EU arms embargo across the states of the former Yugoslavia, which were kept in place even after the Dayton Agreement, unlike the UN’s sanctions (Kreutz, 2005). Another example is Belarus, which has been the subject of EU sanctions that were first imposed as a response to the treatment of EU diplomats and the OSCE mission (Portela, 2005), and these were tightened several times between October 2010 and June 2011. The EU strengthened its sanctions against Belarus as a response to the sentencing of opposition leaders to lengthy prison terms for their roles in protests after the December 2010 Presidential election, which the OSCE heavily criticised for the way it was run (OSCE, 2011). In June 2011, sanctions were placed on three companies with close ties to the Lukashenko regime (Taylor, 2011).

The EU has very limited instruments to **safeguard democracy in its own member states**. It is something of a paradox that candidate countries for EU membership go through a tremendously intense period of coaching which, when they join, suddenly stops.

“The EU in reality loses leverage the moment the accession treaty is signed. Once a member, the ability to monitor or to take action on all the areas where we worked so intensively before membership is really not there. They go through this incredible hothouse coaching, with a sort of quasi-Imperial right of intervention, and then it suddenly stops. The idea that the momentum carries forward is not borne out by experience.” (Leigh, 2011).

This leads to both the risk, and the reality, of backsliding (Rupnik, 2007). There is an increasing number of examples of existing EU Member States facing the threat of legal action either from the Commission or from other Member States, from Austria in 2000 to France in 2010, and individuals and pressure groups have used victories in the European Court of Justice to force governments to alter domestic policy.

**Table 1: Summary of types of EU democracy promotion instruments**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Policy area** | **Instrument** | **Mechanism** |
| EU Enlargement | passive leverage | the attraction of EU membership |
| active leverage | conditionality |
| European Neighbourhood Policy | ENPI | financial aid to civil society organisations |
| EIDHR | financial aid |
| Common Foreign and Security Policy | sanctions | economic or diplomatic |
| rule of law missions | civilian and military presence |
| human rights dialogues |  |
| Eastern Partnership | linkages between political elites | e.g. EP delegations, Euronest |
| civil society exchanges | e.g. Civil Society Forum |
| N / A | rhetorical actions against existing member states | naming and shamingthreat of legal action |
| bilateral actions between Member States | sanctions |

In terms of human rights within the EU, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), which was established in 2007 having previously been known as the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), provides ‘assistance and expertise’. It can also conduct investigations on specific issues, for example when the European Parliament requested a comparative legal analysis on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The FRA has a daunting task of protecting fundamental rights within the EU, as in 2010 the European Court of Human Rights made 636 judgements against EU member states in which at least one fundamental right had been violated. Every member state except Denmark had at least one judgement against it, with the worst offenders being Romania (135), Poland (87), Bulgaria (69), Italy (61), Greece (53), and Slovakia (40) (FRA, 2011).

Both the European Parliament and the European Commission have become much more active in challenging member states over violations of fundamental rights, a major example being the furore over the treatment of Roma immigrants in France in the summer of 2010. When the EU engages in human rights dialogues with, for example, China, it risks diminishing what little effect these dialogues may have by placing itself wide open to the charge of hypocrisy. So the EU needs to develop mechanisms to safeguard against democratic failings in its own member states, whether new or old (Emerson, 2009: 29). We can see that EU democracy promotion cuts across a number of different policy areas and relies on a number of different instruments and mechanisms, as summarised in Table 1 above.

**Perceptions of European Union actors about the effectiveness of the EU’s democracy promotion instruments**

In this section, we can begin to explore the perceptions of EU actors, with particular reference to the cases of Poland, Croatia and Ukraine. Having examined what EU democracy promotion entails, and the instruments used, we can now look at how effective EU actors perceive them to be. EU enlargement has been an obvious focus of the study of democratization in Europe in the period in question, 1990-2010. It is the fifth enlargement of the EU which took place in 2004 which is the ‘successful’ case from which the notion that enlargement is the EU’s most successful foreign policy mainly derives. EU foreign policy in the 1990s towards Central and Eastern Europe is widely claimed to be one of the most influential examples of democracy promotion (Youngs, 2010a).

“These countries were on a path away from authoritarianism towards something else. They chose this path for themselves in overthrowing Communism. So probably the credit goes to far sighted political leaders in those countries themselves. The EU element reinforced, made more precise, provided something of a blueprint for the way institutions can function, a legal framework, incentives – all of which reinforced the process. It would be over-claiming to say that the accessions process was the main element that led to the establishment of more or less viable democracies in these countries. It was a very strong reinforcement, and perhaps decisive in some cases, to a process that was already underway.” (Leigh, 2011).

We can see this in the case of Poland where EU membership perspective acted as a guarantor of democracy in checking the tendency for the public administration to become politicised. But right from the very first report on Poland, the EU considered it to be a functioning democracy. The EU umbrella helped, but it was never the decisive factor – Poland chose its path to democracy itself. One person who was a member of Poland’s EU accession negotiation team between March 1998 and January 2001, says:

“Deviation from basic democratic standards would have been penalised by the EU in the accession process, for example the treatment of Slovakia in 1997 in being held back.” (Truszczynski, 2011).

and he gives an example of an area in which EU pressure had an effect:

“It was partly under EU pressure that, gradually and slowly, the Polish judiciary began to adapt, in minor ways, like training of future judges, dealing with backlogs.” (Truszczynski, 2011).

How is the effectiveness of the different instruments of democracy promotion evaluated? This question is clearly vital, but it is surprisingly under-researched, despite the fact that EU actors recognise that rhetoric must be matched by effective policy:

‘Democracy support can only make a difference on the ground if we manage to translate our ideas into concrete and effective instruments and procedures.’ Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament, 19 May 2011.

One of the main monitoring tools in terms of enlargement policy is the use of regular reports which Commission officials in DG Enlargement prepare on the progress of the candidate countries based on three main sources – the candidate countries themselves, the Commission’s delegations to those countries, and the Commission in Brussels. Other inputs include reports from NGOs and other international organisations. Indicators of democracy, such as those produced by Freedom House, are used informally as a useful way of comparing countries both with each other and with themselves over time. They are not however used in formal reports to avoid them being challenged.

“NGO influence fed in as one of many sources, but NGOs alone don’t have any exceptional weight. That is their job, and they have their own agendas. It is not the primary factor but it is taken into account. A serious effort has been made to get the state of the art in monitoring of all these issues, which means Council of Europe, OSCE, all other available reports from member states and our delegations etc.” (Leigh, 2011).

The perception in DG Enlargement is that their reports are robust and that criticism of the report findings from the candidate states is rare, as a Head of Section in DG Enlargement explains:

“We do our own analysis which comes from three main sources – the candidate countries, the delegations, and the Commission – which come into one, with inputs from many NGO and international organisations. They are quite robust. I’ve never heard criticism saying ‘this is completely unfair’. They see it as an agenda.” (Cas Granje, 2011).

***The European Union’s use of Regular Reports***

The Regular Reports are a major tool and so merit a detailed examination of their production and use. The Regular Reports themselves vary from around 50 to 150 pages each and follow a standard format. In the section on political criteria the areas covered are:

- Democracy and the Rule of Law

- Parliament

- The Executive

- The judicial system

- Anti-Corruption measures

- Human Rights and the Protection of Minorities

- Civil and Political Rights

- Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

- Minority Rights and the Protection of Minorities

Croatia also has an additional criterion, that of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). In 2004, the EU found that this had ‘improved significantly’ and by 2010 was ‘continuing to cooperate with the ICTY, although problems with access to important documents remain.’ In the case of Ukraine, the fact that it is not a formal candidate for EU membership means that the EU’s documented ‘opinions’ on its level of democratic development are scattered across several different but related areas of EU activity, e.g. the Partnership And Cooperation Agreement, the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan and the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

Sometimes the comments are extremely broad brush (e.g. “Croatia is a functioning democracy”) and sometimes they are extremely specific in referring to just one event or development such as a high profile legal case or act of violence. As has been said earlier, it is not clear how much weight is given to the very different inputs. In some cases the assessments are equivocal. In the areas of human rights and the protection of minorities, there is hardly ever a completely ringing endorsement, but then it is hard to think of any country in the world in which there would be. As the reports do sometimes use one off cases as ‘evidence’, they must sometimes be felt as unfair by the countries concerned. If, for example, the UK had been subject to the same process in the 70s and 80s, social unrest and labour disputes could easily have been presented as evidence of deficiencies in democracy.

The Regular Reports have been criticised for being ‘ad hoc and inconsistent’ and for being used ‘less to promote EU norms and evaluate their implementation, but rather [as] more of a process-oriented process, that emphasized ‘progress’ at all costs.’ (Hughes & Sasse, 2003). In some areas, the Regular Reports use a lot of proxy measures, and they have many different inputs with no transparency over the relative weight given to these inputs. In other areas, the reports are highly descriptive with no real methodology apparent. The Regular Reports also have an implied dynamic of plotting the progress towards an end point at which the country concerned is ready for accession to the EU, and their very regularity is a useful way of keeping pressure on the accession countries. They do however sometimes contradict each other. For example in 2007, the report on Croatia states “This section examines the progress made by Croatia towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria”, but the report of 2004 had stated three years earlier that “the Commission confirms that Croatia meets the political criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993.”

So if the Regular Reports are not in fact monitoring the progress made against those criteria, what exactly are the reports doing? Clearly they serve a function on both the EU side and the domestic side. On the EU side, the regular reports operate as a useful way of controlling the pace of negotiations towards accession; a brake or accelerator depending on what is required politically at any given time and in any given case. The implied dynamic of progress towards an end point at which the country is ready for accession to the EU does not even necessarily hold. For example, the 2006 report on Romania and Bulgaria states that “further progress is still necessary in the area of judicial reform and the fight against organised crime and corruption. The Commission will establish a mechanism to cooperate and verify progress in these areas *after accession*.” (my emphasis). On the domestic side, the regular reports also serve an important political function. Firstly, they are taken very seriously by political elites; secondly, the reports generate a lot of domestic media attention; and thirdly, they can be used as leverage by civil society actors to press their cases for domestic reform.

Despite this, there are significant issues with any attempts to measure the democratic development of states.

“There is a limit to how effective all of this can be, and always quite a gap between anecdotal evidence and even what monitoring teams can pick up. Elites in each of these countries are very attuned to the accession process and they adopt the terminology, and to a considerable extent they bounce back what they think we would like to hear. We also want to see our policies to succeed. So there is a certain tendency to wave the flag when we feel there is a successful case to prove that the whole thing is working.” (Leigh, 2011).

It is all very well to use progress reports in those cases where there is actually progress to report, but what about the more negative cases in which progress is slow and/or non-existent? We can compare the success of the fifth enlargement with the current ‘negative’ cases, such as Bosnia, which is practically a failed state. Here we can see that the type of leverage based on the promise of EU membership is very weak. This kind of leverage may therefore be necessary but not sufficient.

“EU’s power is still too limited to affect the democratic fundamentals. Either a society is ripe enough to do it on its own, or the main ingredients are not strong enough or downright missing, or it will take decades. No amount of pressure from the EU will fill the gap.” (Truszczynski, 2011).

There is however some success in the Balkans through the use of enlargement policy. If we look at the case of Croatia, this is the first case of a country coming out of a very recent post-conflict situation into the tougher EU accession process that was put into place after the renewed consensus on enlargement in 2006. Closer political monitoring, the introduction of country specific opening as well as closing benchmarks for the negotiating chapters, and a more direct link between political dialogue and the pace of the negotiations were all introduced, as well as the new Chapter 23 on the judiciary and fundamental rights.

“This whole aspect of democracy, human rights and rule of law has taken a greater role after the 2004 enlargement... So it’s been more structured both in the negotiations and in the assistance that accompanies it, because there have been more doubts about the democracy first of Romania and Bulgaria, and then also in the candidates like Turkey and the Western Balkans.” (O’Rourke, 2011).

One head of section in DG Enlargement expands on this:

“The lessons we learned were mainly from the 5th enlargement. The political criteria relative to what we did with the economic criteria were neglected. We focused very much on the transition to the market economy. So we needed a chapter looking at the political criteria. Now there are two chapters, 23 and 24, and the negotiations are much more intense. We changed also the methodology and introduced opening benchmarks, which are country specific, as well as closing benchmarks.” (Cas Granje, 2011).

What is perceived to have been effective is the way that the EU can provide a blueprint for reform:

“They don’t have to reinvent the wheel, they can take off the shelf a whole range of regulatory legislation which is needed both for modernisation and development in their countries, and for preparing for membership. That has worked. And also political stability and a framework for economic development. That has worked.” (Leigh, 2011).

and what is perceived to have not really worked:

“What has not really worked so well is the strengthening of civil society and the building up of the institutions and mentally of an effective civil society and liberal democracy. Also, the prevention of corruption, which is still extremely widespread and which creates a feeling of powerlessness and cynicism towards the political class. That is the work of a generation or more. The EU can create a favourable climate but not much more than that.” (Leigh, 2011).

This is clearly exemplified by the case of Ukraine, which has slid back into being a ‘partly free’ oligarchy, with worsening press freedom, intimidation of NGOs and rigged local elections (Puddington, 2011: 27). There is now a ‘worrying disconnect’ between the West and Kiev over definitions of democracy (Kuzio, 2011) and Ukraine remains ‘in the grey zone between modern democracy and post-totalitarian autocracy’ (Umland, 2011). As the EU negotiates the DCFTA with Ukraine, commentators have stressed:

“It is imperative to get Ukraine right before it joins the free-trade area – as seen in the bad example of Bulgaria and Romania and the good example of Croatia, where the EU learnt its lessons of stricter conditionality before a country is let in.” (Kuzio, Way & Kudelia, 2011).

According to the Deputy Director-General of DG Enlargement from January 2007 to June 2009:

“Grass roots support need to be given. When I was in DG enlargement, we conceived of the civil society facility that was set up. Okay, in practice it always falls short of what you would really like to see, both in terms of the efficiency of delivery on the EU side, and in terms of the take up and lasting effect on the beneficiary’s side. But it is better than doing nothing.” (Truszczynski, 2011).

Critics point to the incoherence of EU policy and insufficient co-ordination of civil society assistance in explaining its lack of effectiveness (Kaca & Kazmierkiewicz, 2010: 4).

“It is either this way, or no way at all. Recent instances show that NGO action can result in an acceleration of change, provided society is conducive and the actions falls on fertile ground and there is a societal response. You cannot be a prophet in the dessert, you need followers. There have been NGOs like Otpor in Serbia and Pora in Ukraine and in Georgia – instances where considered action by NGOs can be more than incremental in larger change. But here again, it needs to have fertile soil otherwise it will be a flash on the screen and then go down again.” (Truszczynski, 2011).

How do EU actors view the prospects of the states in the Western Balkans? There is a hope that success in the Croatian and Serbian cases will help to rejuvenate EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia, and that citizens across the region will press their leaders to undertake the necessary domestic reforms. Despite the path towards EU membership being open to the states of the former Yugosphere, something has been missing in getting reform progressing.

“Now we are seeing the limits in the Balkans because there the problems are more intense. Minorities, borders, dysfunctionality. So far the leverage has not quite been enough. The number of problems speak for themselves. Bosnia is the biggest example, but not the only one. Macedonia with the name problem which we haven’t been able to resolve. But also the domestic reforms will slide as long as the accession process is slowed down. Serbia is potentially a positive case, and Montenegro as well. But in the Balkans we see the limits of the effectiveness of this tool when there are a whole raft of additional problems which need to be addressed.” (Leigh, 2011).

The state with the largest population and economy in the region is of course Turkey, which is seen by many in the Commission as a unique case. To say that progress in the case of Turkey has been slow would be a massive understatement, but for the Commission, it can continue to operate under the mandate they have from the Council, producing their annual Regular Reports for as many years as necessary.

“Turkey has changed a lot and we shouldn’t undermine that. Don’t know if we’ll ever get to the destination, but the journey has been very intense. Changes are taking place all the time, but there is so much still to do. This is the 12th year that we have been writing progress reports, and there is still so much work to do. EU negotiations have given them an instrument to change the country. They have been moving in a lot of areas. They are using the accession process for their domestic agenda... Turkey is a partially reformer, they move very slowly, and we are always reporting progress and lack of progress at the same time.” (Cas Granje, 2011).

**The changing context for European Union democracy promotion**

The external context in which the EU must operate provides the ‘opportunity’ (or lack thereof), one of the three elements in Bretherton & Vogler’s approach to ‘actorness’. It is important then to look at this context and how it may have changed over time. Then we can ask whether the EU has the ‘capability’, defined by Bretherton & Vogler as the ability to exploit ‘opportunity’ and capitalise on ‘presence’.

The post-1989 situation in Europe clearly provided such an opportunity for the EU to capitalise on its presence, and through the accession process culminating in the 2004 enlargement, the EU showed it had the capability to do this. Now however, EU democracy promotion faces a much more challenging environment than it did previously (Burnell & Youngs, 2010). The cases that are now candidates or potential candidates present much more complex problems than did the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in terms of their recent history of conflict and issues of minorities and weak statehood, and the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood face a far less favourable prospect for joining the EU than did the CEE 10 (Demeš, 2010: 11). Critics argue that the use by the EU of basically the same mechanisms that it used before ignores the fact that the conditions are different in the target countries in the Western Balkans, as are the conditions in the EU itself (Koinova, 2011: 827). There has also been a backlash from authoritarian regimes that have watched and learned from recent examples and have found new methods to restrict democratic freedoms, for example the freedom of use of the internet. In the face of this, the EU will need to adapt the approaches that have worked well in the past if it wants to be truly effective in the future. The review of ENP is one example of this adaptation, and the birth of the EEAS is another.

There has also been much discussion of so-called ‘enlargement fatigue’, a phrase which has been widely used but which it is important to get behind what it really means (Szolucha, 2010).

“We are adverse to ‘enlargement fatigue’ as a terminology. I think it’s very lazy thinking. It’s better to analyse what is involved. The logic has been that tougher conditionality is needed both to get the country to deliver, and also to reassure public opinion in the member states that no one is going to join who is not ready. Because there is a widespread view that Romania and Bulgaria were not ready.” (Leigh, 2011).

It is, perhaps, a manifestation of a reassertion of member states’ control over enlargement in what has been called a ‘creeping nationalisation’ of enlargement policy (Hillion, 2010). Fatigue does not of course mean stopping altogether. Officials in DG Enlargement concede the clearly evident observation that EU enlargement has slowed down, and they also say that in order to show that enlargement as a policy still has legitimacy, there may be a inclination to look for good news and to look for successes, and this is especially true in the Western Balkans where successes have been rare. The slowing down of enlargement has arguably been due to EU member states wishing to avoid the consequence both of rejecting countries outright, and the domestic costs of further enlargement (Youngs, 2010b: 136).

The logic behind the tougher conditionality that is now in force was always to both get the countries in question to deliver, but also to demonstrate that the same mistakes that were made with Romania and Bulgaria are not made again. Their accession in 2007 is widely accepted to have been rushed, so was there a desire to avoid any post-accession mechanisms such as the Co-operation and Verification Mechanism (CMV) used for Romania and Bulargia? ‘Absolutely. It’s very important to put the emphasis before [accession] because our leverage is greater before than after accession,’ (Cas Granje, 2011).

So is there a reluctance to offer an EU membership perspective to further countries? Clearly, the answer is yes. But, is this a (relatively) temporary state of affairs driven by the domestic politics of certain key EU member states, or is it a more serious and persistent phenomenon? That remains to be seen. If enlargement is not going to be the instrument by which the EU preserves and promotes peace and stability in the Western Balkans beyond the accession of Croatia, then what exactly is going to be the policy response when there seems to be no alternative to the accession process? One possibility is offering the reward of the ‘carrot’ in smaller parts awarded along the way rather than it being only in the form of EU membership at the end of a very long and hard road (Grabbe, 2010). The failure so far of the carrot of EU membership to leverage Bosnia into reforming itself into a fully functioning state is worrying, and there is a danger that Europe’s attention may shift away from the Western Balkans to areas in which conflict is spilling into violence on the EU’s southern borders.

“With the Balkans – the EU commitment is high, but the process is so difficult. The initial conditions were so difficult. There are no strong states, they need to be created. There are strong minorities that have to live together after war. It will take some time. But I think everybody understands that this is an unfinished process in terms of EU enlargement in the Balkans.” (Cas Granje, 2011).

Whatever the eventual outcomes may turn out to be, events in North Africa and the Middle East in the early part of 2011 created the perception that the European neighbourhood had dramatically altered, and that the EU would have to respond. The review of ENP, that had already begun before the Arab Spring, took on rather more importance afterwards. These events were also a big test for the new EEAS, although the Libya case in particular demonstrated that it was NATO ‘hard’ power that became crucial, rather than the EU’s new diplomatic service.

“Events in North Africa have essentially vindicated something the Commission has been saying for quite some time, that we need to be more ambitious in engaging with our neighbours. It has also brought back some home truths that sometimes our member states tend to forget, particular with respect to the South, that we have tended to emphasise stability, framed in a negative way as the absence of upheavals. Democracy tends to be messy, and recent events show that if you don’t build stability on a democratic foundation then it is a time bomb which some day will blow up. So even if only in our own self interest, we would be doing well to encourage democratic processes.” (O’Rourke, 2011).

This view is supported by those who argue that the missed opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa to support democracy have led to tumultuous revolutions with uncertain outcomes, rather than orderly and negotiated reform processes (Walker, 2011: 36-37). There must also be a worry that attention will re-focus itself away from the EU’s Eastern neighbours and to the South, but perhaps this is not quite the case. Rather than one region taking a new priority over another, events clearly always have the capacity to put a region or one state at the top of the agenda, but does this necessarily mean that other regions will lose out?

“It’s not a competition between South and East. What will be fundamental in the East is whether our promotion of democracy in wholehearted... and whether we can we put forward a model of society to our Eastern neighbours that is attractive. I’m sure the model is attractive, but can we make it realisable and viable?” (O’Rourke, 2011).

The new ENP can continue to operate as a driver of reform throughout the EU’s neighbourhood, possibly through offering ‘multiple small carrots’ rather than the one big carrot of EU membership. The EU has built up its ‘capability’ to exploit ‘opportunity’ and capitalise on ‘presence’ through several decades of experience that it can now draw on. On the negative side, the policy-learning that has taken place has been ad hoc, leading to a situation in which there has not yet been a synthesis to create a systemic and effective approach (Youngs, 2011: 13). With the challenges for democracy promotion greater than ever, this is a pressing task.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored the various instruments that the EU has at its disposal for promoting democracy in its neighbourhood, and the perceptions on the EU side about their effectiveness. Firstly then, what instruments has the EU developed for promoting democracy? As we have seen, there is a wide range of instruments that have either been initiated or have significantly developed in their nature in the period in question, that is, from 1990 to 2010. Some developments have taken many years and involved the creation of entirely new institutions, such as the creation of the EEAS. Others have developed more gradually as discrete policy areas, such as European Neighbourhood Policy. Whilst enlargement of the EU to include new members was not new in this period, the major enlargement of 2004 was by far the most significant case of the EU’s ability to affect domestic reform in non-member states. As to how the various instruments of EU democracy promotion are being applied and evaluated, we have seen how the Regular Reports are used in the cases of accession negotiations.

Secondly, what are the perceptions in the ‘democracy promotion community’ about how effective EU democracy promotion is? There is actually a very open admission that the influence of the EU may be necessary but not sufficient, and that domestic factors remain the decisive ones in any state’s path to democracy. For example, Catherin Ashton has written that ‘Leadership – a vision of the future and a readiness to take risks for it – is the mystery ingredient that foreigners cannot supply’ (Ashton, 2011). Since the transformation of the European geopolitical landscape in 1989, the EU has certainly been a key player in promoting political stability and economic development, but it is less clear whether the EU can claim much credit for aiding the development of liberal democracy in Europe. For that, we must look to the domestic politics of individual countries, some of which now happen to be EU members, whilst others remain firmly on the outside. When the ‘soft’ power of the EU meets the hard realities of the persistent problems faced in the Balkans, the leverage that the EU has been able to exert in the past and in other cases is evidently lacking. Worse, there as yet does not seem to be a Plan B. To some, the example of Turkey offers a worrying precedent that the EU is resigned to allowing an EU candidate country to wait for many years and for its political development to progress fitfully at best and at worst to stall. For others, this is proof that the accession process is robust and credible and that the EU will not admit a country that is not ready.

What lessons have been learned in Brussels about EU democracy promotion? Even those who acknowledge that the EU’s efforts at promoting democracy are not really very effective in practice, and that domestic factors are far more important, do not necessarily think that the EU should not try to use the limited influence that it does have. Whether it undertakes these activities from an intention to reduce the threats in its neighbourhood, or because it is driven by deeply held values, or a mixture of both, the EU is perceived to have power which it can use to promote reform in other states. Does this activity however amount just to democracy *support* rather than actual democracy *promotion*? Especially in the most challenging of cases, is the best that the EU can hope to achieve to support civil society activity that was taking place anyway, and hope that it will eventually bring about a fully democratic politics? Perhaps there is an argument to be made that having more realistic ambitions would lead to the delivery of more realistic (and more effective) policies.

In talking about what the EU does to promote democracy, it is rather easy to become fixated on accession to the EU as the paramount instrument. Approaches from the EU that fall short of offering a membership perspective, such as the ENP, are seen as ‘enlargement-lite’. But in trying to discover what instruments of EU democracy promotion are perceived as most effective, this fixation on EU enlargement must be overcome. Firstly, because some states in the EU’s neighbourhood are at best many decades away from ever joining the EU, and secondly that some are never likely to do so. Without at least some level of consensus about what the end point of the EU’s foreign policy aspirations are, how can there possibly be the necessary agreement on the right approaches to take and instruments to use? Clearly you need different policy instruments for different times and places.

Wherever the EU’s borders lie at any given point in time, there will always be challenges in the neighbourhood, and so for that reason alone, EU democracy promotion has to be a constantly evolving policy area. As it evolves, so will the perceptions of political elites and civil society actors in the states that are the subject of the EU’s democracy promotion attempts. There must be a relationship between all these differing perceptions as the various actors seek to further their goals, and this presents an interesting area for future research.

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1. This paper draws on interviews with EU officials conducted by the author in May 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)