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# The decline of the EU's 'magnetic attraction'?

## The European Union in the eyes of neighbouring Arab countries and Russia

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The European Union (EU) has hitherto been quite comfortable in the belief that it looms large in relations to neighbouring countries because of its sheer economic and political weight. This assumption drew strength from the conviction that the very success of the Union's politico-economic model made it a pole of 'magnetic attraction' for non-member countries, as some scholars have put it (Rosecrance 1998; Grabbe, 2003; Dannreuther, 2006). Both the Velvet Revolutions of 1989-1991 and the Colour Revolutions in Eastern Europe over a decade later, seemed to corroborate the view that neighbouring countries are naturally drawn to the European Union (Rifkin, 2004; Leonard, 2005). The faith in the EU's appeal has even led some practitioners to equate such attractiveness with the idea that the Union is 'in demand' by third countries in terms of providing guidance or leadership (cf. Bildt, 2007; Miliband, 2007; Ashton, 2010).

However, there are some indications that it is high time to revise the assumptions of the EU's instant appeal and neighbouring countries' automatic willingness to follow its heed. A first signal is the inconclusive state of the reform processes themselves in many neighbouring countries. Indeed, Börzel (2010) in her comprehensive survey of the European Neighborhood Policy finds more evidence for a status quo ante than actual positive reform developments since the 2004 launch of the policy. What is more, if earlier democratic revolutions in the EU vicinity demanded the Union be the 'anchor' of their political transition processes, such calls are poignantly absent in the popular protests sweeping across several Mediterranean countries in early 2011, or in the reform processes beginning in Tunisia and Egypt.

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The social opposition forces in these countries have rather quite consistently avoided appealing for foreign support both during the uprisings and, in the case of Tunisia and Egypt afterwards.<sup>2</sup> The European Union therefore does not currently appear to be the positive and central referent for determined neighbouring countries as is habitually claimed in Brussels circles.

What explains the European Union's flagging appeal then? In part, the Union's failure to resonate more positively with neighbouring countries is a result of years of EU complacency. The conviction of the EU's attractiveness has caused the external environment to become bracketed out as a meaningful factor in the European Union's foreign policy equation. This in turn has fuelled a largely introspective EU foreign policy, where intra-EU bargaining and side-payments have often taken precedent over foreign policy appropriateness and a thorough understanding of the partner countries' needs and aspirations, as an ample set of literature points to (cf. Hill, 1993; Barbé, 1997; Smith, 2003, Bicchi, 2007). However, the answer also in part lies in the changing domestic contexts of neighbouring partner countries. For this reason the present working paper will trace the evolving perception of the European Union in Arab Mediterranean countries and another key EU neighbour, Russia, comparing today with the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> We will apply a cognitive approach and use 'attraction' as a shorthand parameter to gauge the receptiveness to the Union's foreign and security overtures in these countries. A close examination of the said countries reveals a series of subtle changes in their domestic political scene in recent years which have come to impinge on elite and popular perception of the Union and eroded the EU's ability to exert sway and achieve its foreign policy aims.

The remainder of the working paper will unfold in the following manner: the first section will provide a brief explanation of the relevance of the external environment ('structure') to foreign and security policy, as well as offer some conceptual parameters that will be employed to try to gauge attraction. The second section will discuss the Arab Mediterranean attraction or non-attraction to the European Union. The third section will examine Russia in the same light. A fourth section will try to draw together some analytical pointers and ponder whether, by a

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<sup>2</sup> Here we refer to more extensive help with political transition beyond the mere securing of uninterrupted flow of aid and the continuation of the existing trade regime.

<sup>3</sup> Arab Mediterranean countries here is a shorthand for Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia

concerted effort, the EU can begin to recover some of the terrain lost in these countries and restore its 'magnetic attraction' in the short to medium term.

### 'Structure,' 'attraction' and EU foreign policy

We start off from the idea that foreign and security policy is a strategy chosen by an international actor to "achieve its goals in its relations with external entities" (Hudson, 2008). To this end, as many authors have argued, the actor must have capabilities and the capacity to achieve such goals (Hill, 1993; Jupille and Caporaso, 1998; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006). However, foreign policy also depends on the overall context(s) – the structure(s) – in which the foreign policy actor operates. Structures can be defined as "the sets of factors which make up the multiple environments in which agents operate, and shape the nature of choices, by setting limits to the possible but also, more profoundly, by determining the nature of the problems which occur there, by shaping our very life-worlds" (Hill, 2003: 26). The structure can refer to anything from domestic bureaucracies, institutions or the state (Carlsnaes, 1992: 246) to the much more abstract entity known as the 'international system' (Hill, 2003). Structures can also be understood as indicating a (more or less) 'objective' reality (economic means, geographical constraints etc.), as well as perceptions which come to constitute a cognitive reality in the sociological sense (pre-conceived ideas, expectations, amity/enmity etc.) (Wendt, 1992; Herrberg, 1998; Kegley, 2006).

Here our take on structure refers to the latter sociological meaning. Concretely, we use structure in the present working paper to denote the psychological environment in partner countries (political elite and society) that acts to condition the EU's foreign policy influence on these countries. The emphasis is on exploring the cognitive milieu in which the agent's action unfolds, and on which it ultimately depends (Rosati, 1995), for that milieu's ability to affect the agent's policy entrepreneurship. Bicchi (2002: 5; cf. Bicchi, 2007) has argued that "[f]or policy entrepreneurship to be successful, [...], a certain set of 'situational factors' [...] must be in place." The situational factors may enable or constrain foreign policy action. When enabling, the situational factors lower the barriers of immaterial transactions between countries and over time give rise to stable social relationships based on

perceptions of affinity or mutual/unilateral forms of lure between international actors. Conversely, when constraining, such relations come under strain.

Here we equate affinity with ‘attraction,’ that is to say, when actor A resonates with actor B *more positively than negatively*.<sup>4</sup> To gauge if attraction is present or absent in a social relationship we need to pay attention to two particular parameters. First, one crucial factor of attraction is essentially dispositional. That is to say, whether actor A’s attributes, values and/or actions find sufficiently favourable resonance with actor B, either for being pre-existent in the target audience or for being attributes, values and/or outcomes of actions that are broadly desired or aspired to in the target country (Nye, 2004). The agent (actor A) must therefore have (or acquire) socially-constructed attributes, values and foreign policy action which find favourable acceptance in the target country.<sup>5</sup> It can be said that inter-country attraction is therefore greatest when there is a perception of real or aspirational congruence across a broad range of issues. An example of real inter-country congruence could perhaps be the longstanding UK-US or Nordic affinity. Aspirational congruence can be said to refer to determined developing countries’ wish to convert themselves into a stable, developed and prosperous country like, for example, Switzerland.

Second, the agent’s ability to resonate more positively than negatively with actor B – here taken as the abstract sum of a social collective – is also a factor of whether the said attributes/values/actions finds anchoring in a broad majority and/or in politically dominant groups in the target country (Fan, 2008). This is of key importance if actor A pretends to shift from merely conjuring up a vague, inconsequential feeling of good will from actor B to having some form of influence over the direction of policy in that country. Research related to the democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe has revealed the important role played by key political actors in channelling the aspirations of a generally pro-EU public into a concrete reform process underpinned by European Union standards and norms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). What is more, if the agent only appeals to a

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<sup>4</sup> To our mind most situations exhibit a degree of appeal and extreme situations, where either an actor is judged wholly positive or negative, are rare.

<sup>5</sup> According to Nye (2004), attraction (‘soft power’) stems primarily from three sources: (1) an actor’s culture (in places where it is attractive to others), (2) its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and (3) its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.) Nye hence argues that “[i]nstead of a reliance on carrots and sticks to exercise influence, a nation’s capacity to win hearts and minds [of foreign audiences] is of crucial importance.”

smaller or less influential group of the target society, it might not be sufficient to impede the prevalence of a dominant political group or a majority from persisting in their negative evaluations of the agent. In such socially-divided contexts, there is even a distinct possibility that actor A becomes the political victim of social contestation and/or internal power struggles – often causing inaccurate/distorted pictures of the agent – making actor B, as a social collective, even further immune to actor A’s appeal. Attraction is thus, in short, more often than not greatest in situations where actor B’s politically dominant groups endorse actor A’s appeal and work to lobby for it among the wider population in that country.

We will now look for a perception of real or aspirational congruence and endorsement of the Union and/or its values from politically dominant groups in the European Union’s relations with Arab Mediterranean countries and Russia. It is our argument that, compared to a decade ago, the EU’s attraction is currently in stagnation or decline among the chosen neighbouring countries under survey. The way the EU socially constructs its values, norms and attributes no longer finds a strong resonance in these countries as a consequence of a shifting political scene, as well as of a subtle political game unleashed by several of the Union’s neighbouring partner governments.

### On EU attraction and non-attraction in Arab Mediterranean countries

The EU has a longstanding relationship with its Mediterranean Arab neighbours stemming from the early days of the European Economic Community. In the 1990s relations were upgraded, most notably by the Barcelona Process of 1995 and relations were upgraded again during the 2000s by way of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean. The Union’s overtures in the 1990s met with a rather favourable reception (Selim, 1995). The effects of the late 1980s ‘debt crisis’ in the Arab Mediterranean countries and the global redistribution of aid that happened as a consequence of the end of the Cold War had left many of these countries in poor economic conditions and their authoritarian regimes in a weakened position. The prospects of the Union’s financial assistance and, however modest, contribution to political stability in the region were in this context broadly welcomed by these

regimes (Marks, 1996).<sup>6</sup> The 1992 Madrid Peace Conference also paved the way for warmer relations between many Mediterranean countries and the EU for the latter's perceived support of the Palestinian cause. Finally, the fall of the Berlin Wall and events in Central and Eastern Europe would also raise hope among secular and liberal sectors in Arab Mediterranean countries. The EU's strong discourse on political conditionality and democracy promotion created expectations among a then fairly broad liberal majority in Arab Mediterranean countries who aspired for change in their country by adopting the values listed in the 1995 Barcelona Declaration (e.g. democracy, human rights and rule of law) (Joffé, 1997). Hence, even though the decade saw some highs and lows in terms of their respective populations' opinions of the EU and the West (e.g. the public outcry in many southern Mediterranean countries against EU member states' involvement in the 1991 Gulf War), overall, the Union held determined appeal to politically dominant sectors of these societies.

The late 1980s and early 1990s would, however, also see a rise of Islamism in these countries, first as mostly social movements although of these many eventually also transmuted into groupings with a distinct political agenda or even political parties. While the different Islamic activists' agendas are as diverse as there are groups and differences can be noticeable both inter-country as well as intra-country, one unifying factor is their message that the "solution to the persistent crises of contemporary Arab societies—a return to the fundamentals, or true spirit, of Islam" (Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, 2006). Their simple message of promoting Islam, as opposed to other formulas as a cure to many of their respective societies' ills has found inspirational appeal for an increasingly large audience in Arab Mediterranean countries both among poorer social classes and the well-educated middle class.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one could argue, as Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway (2006: 5) do, that "[i]n today's Arab world, Islamists have assumed the role once played by national liberation movements and leftist parties. They are the mass movements of the twenty-first century." The rise of political Islam in Arab Mediterranean countries has meant

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<sup>6</sup> The Arab Mediterranean governments valued EU assistance in a positive light for the link they made between such aid and regime stability. In the words of then Tunisia's international investment, cooperation and foreign investment minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi: "[w]e [Tunisia] have to concentrate on economic growth to improve our social status and to avoid the sentiment of exclusion which can create ruptures in society and allow certain political movements to develop which flourish in poverty.[...].The only way to do this is by linking into Europe" (as cited by Marks, 1996: 14).

<sup>7</sup> Cavatorta and Elananza (2008: 576) find, for example, that in Algeria and Jordan "the Islamist groups are very popular among the poorer classes despite also having strong middle-class membership and constitute the majority stakeholder in civil society."

that values and issues related to religion progressively play a larger role in social and political life – whether as a natural outcome of changing circumstances, or of years of Wahhabi proselytism. The popularity of the social and political Islamic discourse has created pressure on secular regimes and civil society, forcing them to increasingly address Islamic concerns. Such a change in the sociopolitical scene in the Arab Mediterranean countries has also had consequences for the perceptions of the EU (and the West) in said countries. This can be explained by two factors.

First, the political Islamist groups have been notoriously ambiguous in their approach to the EU. On the one hand, in most Arab Mediterranean countries the Islamists have embraced a strongly nationalistic, one might even say conveniently populist, discourse, whereby most things foreign are viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and some of these groups have even made themselves into the guardian of the anti-colonial flame in relation to former imperial powers and members of the European Union (Pintak, 2009: 202). Many of these groupings have therefore unleashed criticism, ranging from the outright candid to differentiated degrees of convoluted, of the colonial legacy in the form of Western-style governance and institutions which characterises current Arab Mediterranean states. Their argument is that these remnants of former colonial powers are alien forms of state organisation to the country and to the Arab culture. Once a marginal message, the message of political Islam on this matter has in the 2000s gained greater adherence among a broader population. A public opinion survey in 2001 stated that 76 percent of Moroccans and 74 percent of Jordanians perceive the impact of Western value system as ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ negative on local value systems (Gallup, 2002).<sup>8</sup> A later poll from 2007 reveals that an approximate 80 percent of Egyptians ‘strongly’ want ‘to keep Western values out of Islamic countries (cited in Pollack, 2007). The Islamic nationalists can therefore be said to have met with considerable success in shaping public opinion into conceiving Western values and formulas of development as in opposition, or an ‘Other,’ to indigenous formulas based on Islam and the Arab ‘Self’.

On the other hand, most of the political Islamist groups have over time come to pragmatically accept and even embrace some ‘Western values’ as a part of their manifesto, such as democracy, human rights, separation of religion and state, as well

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<sup>8</sup> From Syria there are reports of a slight variation of the negative connotations made with Western values in that “[t]he public perceives that Europe’s main aim is to force the regimes to become more politically and economically dependent on the West. This fear strips references to European democracy of all popularity, and leads to rejection” (Kawakibi, 2007: 106).

as the principle of rule of law. However, their conception of these values is usually at variance with the meaning habitually attributed to these by the EU and its member states. If mainstream Islamist organizations have taken onboard the rhetoric of democracy and human rights it can be argued that this fact is as much a consequence of strategic convenience as well as a genuine belief that an ‘Islamic democracy’ is possible (Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, 2006). In part Islamists use democracy and human rights as strategic and legitimate instruments to put pressure on their governments to allow Islamist political groupings to have a greater role in the country’s political life and demand that their militants be freed from state repression.<sup>9</sup> However, there seem also to be a widespread belief among many Islamist political organisations that democracy, human rights and the rule of law could and should adhere to an Islamic reading, even within the larger framework of an otherwise secular state.<sup>10</sup> Political parties with Islamic roots in Morocco are, for example, reported to assert that the “Moroccan society itself possesses the cultural resources necessary to become a democratic society and that these are to be drawn from Islamic sources” (Amghar, 2007: 7). Hence, as one scholar reports from Algeria “the majority of Islamist players declared that they did not reject the possibility of becoming more democratic ‘thanks to Europe’ and its [financial] support, but not ‘like Europe’” (Boubekeur, 2007: 8). There is evidence that the Islamist discourse alleging the existence of different types of democracies (i.e. ‘Western democracy’ vs. some or other kinds) is also shaping non-Islamic public opinion. The Tunisian journalist and writer Sihem Bensedrine in the aftermath of the fall of Ben Ali in 2011 noted, for example, that “[w]e only ask that they [referring to external actors] let us labour in peace, and that they do not try to impose a model upon us, since the Tunisian democracy will be created by the Tunisians” (as cited in *El País*, 2011, *author’s translation*).

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<sup>9</sup> The release of political prisoners, among them Islamist activists, has indeed also been one of the more tangible outcomes for Islamist political groups of the political overhaul in Egypt. In Tunisia individuals pertaining to the long-exiled Islamist groups have been allowed to return.

<sup>10</sup> Today there are not many Islamic political groups that would seriously argue in favour of repeating the experience in post-1979 Iran or post-1989 Taliban Afghanistan of conflating religion and state into a totalitarian-style governance trying to control both the public and private life of the citizens. Therefore, the separation of state and religion is the favoured approach by most, if not all. The widespread Salafi Islamists, however, “consider democracy a form of infidelity and polytheism, as they believe it replaces the command of God with the command of the people and the nation” (Eddine Jorshi, 2007: 49).

Second, the direct effect of the growing role of Islamic groups on national political scenes is that the liberal and traditionally pro-Western political forces have been increasingly marginalised. This has meant that today “liberal Arab opinion has become even more irrelevant and its voice and ideas even less audible to the public” (Jamai, 2010) compared to earlier decades. In part this is a consequence of the fact that the secular liberal groups increasingly constitute “a minority within civil society and, by their own admission, have a very difficult time in publicizing their message and their activities” for lack of financial means and for essentially representing a diminishing part of the middle-class while having scarce appeal for the much larger working classes (Cavatorta and Elanza, 2008: 576).<sup>11</sup> Some groups have resolved this by adopting forms of the dominant Islamic narrative as their own in order to survive. However, in some countries the liberals have suffered irreparable damage to their image for their inflexible stance toward politically active Islamic groups. The fear of the example set by the Algerian civil war in the 1990s has meant that in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, the traditionally pro-Western “liberal, even leftist, political constituencies in the Arab world [...] have preferred to abort the whole [Western-inspired] liberalisation process if the alternative was to see religious conservatives take control” (Jamai, 2010; cf. Cavatorta and Elanza, 2008).<sup>12</sup> Their defensive reaction has therefore made them align publically with authoritarian governments, a gesture which, in turn, has made them even less popular with the general public.

With Islamic political actors on the up and liberal sectors pushed into the defensive, the share of the public opinion in several Arab Mediterranean countries perceiving real or substantial aspirational value congruence with the European Union appears to be diminishing. In a December 2010 poll majorities in Muslim Mediterranean countries claim to be unhappy with their respective current regimes and 56 percent of Egyptians, 81 percent of Muslim Lebanese and 69 percent of Jordanians stated that they prefer democracy to any other form of government (Pew Global Attitude Project, 2010; cf. Braizat, 2010). However, the same survey also

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<sup>11</sup> Cavatorta and Elanza (2008: 576) note that the lack of financial means is in part due to their reluctance to accept funds from Western governments or organisations given that this would leave them “vulnerable to the accusation of conspiring with the West at a time when European and US policies in the region are not particularly popular.”

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, this is also a fear expressed by some of the Islamic groupings themselves. In the words of the Jordanian Islamist Ishaq Farhan: “[o]ur phobia is Algeria” (as cited in Hamid, 2011: 74).

reveals that most of those polled would like to see a democracy in which Islamic political forces take on a more prominent role, presumably to allow religious precepts become more prominent in social and political life.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is very likely that such opinions are testimony to the general public's lack of confidence in the purely secular liberal groups' ability to deliver governance substantially different from some of the current authoritarian regimes.<sup>14</sup> Most Arab Mediterranean societies would also support more rule of law in their countries. However, the above mentioned public opinion surveys also reveal that solid majorities of Muslims in Egypt and Jordan favour some form of application of Shari'ah law, more than those who would continue to adhere to the Western-based legal traditions which are now applied in their country (Pew Global Attitude Poll, 2010).<sup>15</sup> Finally, while Arab Mediterranean public opinion seems to want economic development and European level of welfare, the European Union's developmental formula appears to touch a raw nerve among increasingly prickly nationalist Arab Mediterranean countries. Emad Gad (as cited in Bayoumi, 2007) reports that "[t]he EU is seen to be presenting to the Arab world, in general, a 'readymade model' for economic and political development to be taken or left altogether. Thus, the cooperation formula is considered to be twisted into 'preaching' and the 'partnership and dialogue one' are seen as 'patronizing'." As intra-Arab trade (with Gulf countries) has increased (Schumacher, 2010) and new economic actors, such as China, has come onto the scene, the patience for such 'preaching' appears to have been even further reduced.

Another factor explaining the stagnation or decline of EU's attraction in Arab Mediterranean countries is that the above noted ambivalence toward the Union is also stoked by individual governments in the region. In the shifting political landscape of the 2000s and growing social discontent, some governments have found a harsh discourse against 'foreign intrusion' in the region convenient to deflect criticism against their own governments and their governance. This is fairly clear in terms of how certain Arab regimes have skilfully exploited Arab public resentment over how Western powers are handling the Middle East since the beginning of the Second

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<sup>13</sup> 85 percent of polled Egyptians, 76 percent of polled Jordanians and 58 percent of polled Lebanese indicate that they see Islam's role in politics as positive (Pew Global Attitude Project, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> The exception here seems to be the Egyptian tolerance, for the time being, of the transition government composed of the secular (albeit not decisively liberal) Armed Forces.

<sup>15</sup> This can also be interpreted as an expression of strong popular frustration with the imperfect manner in which the current rule of law has been implemented until now, as much as a genuine desire for a greater application of Shari'ah.

Intifada (2000) as a glue to try to hold together the country and propagate their stay in power (Ebeid, 2004). Jaidi (2010; *author's translation*) notes “the deterioration of the Palestinian-Israeli situation continues to be an important factor made use of by those Arab governments who seek to expose the ‘European contradictions’ without questioning their [Arab] own divisions.” The EU’s shortcomings in this area have, according to the same author, meant that the European Union has become “discredited” among the general public (*ibid.*). This strategy of making the Union a lightning rod for social discontent is also expedient for preventing ‘foreign influence’ such as EU-financed civil society actors or Western ideas from having too much local impact (Joffé, 1997). On a different and final point, Arab Mediterranean governments have not done much to inform their citizens of the essence of EU policies (e.g. European Neighbourhood Policy and/or Union for the Mediterranean) or EU engagement with their country. The true nature of relations with the EU and the state in question is therefore rarely known to the Arab Mediterranean countries’ publics at large. In reference to Egypt, one author finds, “levels of public awareness [of the EU policies] are moderate and largely confined to officials, the media, research centers, universities, political elite, and the business class. Regular and comprehensive opinion polls are very rare and fail to provide adequate benchmarks to analyze the Egyptian view of the [Euro-Mediterranean] partnership and its evolution” (Ebeid, 2004). The wider Egyptian populace, similar to most citizens in other Arab Mediterranean countries, is therefore not really aware of the extent and/or effects –whether positive or negative – of European trade and assistance. Such lack of knowledge has indeed created obstacles for the population in order to make their own informed opinion of the European Union.

In sum, the shifting political scene in Arab Mediterranean countries, whereby the Islamic discourse have become more prominent and successful in ‘Othering’ European values and practices, means that currently there is little evidence for a real or aspirational congruence between the EU and Mediterranean Arab societies. On the contrary, in recent years there seems to be a trend indicating that real and aspirational values are increasingly diverging between the EU and some of its Arab Mediterranean neighbours. Moreover, our findings also indicate that the support in target societies which the EU enjoyed from broad majorities or political dominant groups in the 1990s is increasingly failing. Liberal, pro-Western sectors are no longer prominent actors of their respective societies and this has meant that the EU’s values no longer

find such ample anchoring in Arab Mediterranean countries. Finally, the Arab leaders are increasingly engaged in elaborate cat and mouse games with the EU, accepting aid and trade while at the same time fanning (or failing to counteract) domestic fears about the detrimental effects of foreign influence, such as the European Union, on local traditions and culture.

### On EU attraction and non-attraction in Russia

The EU's relations with the Russian Federation began to take shape in the early 1990s. The birth of the Federation in 1991 would usher in EU aid and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in 1994. Such relations were intended to be strengthened with the Four Common Spaces initiative initialled in 2004. In the early years of the nascent Russian Federation, EU-Russia relations experienced a considerable amount of good will. Western technical and financial assistance was warmly welcomed as Russia found itself in deep economic straits after the dissolution of the USSR. The new regime desperately needed supporters to anchor the new state and gratefully accepted the sympathetic discourse emanating from European Union and several of its member states (Adomeit, 1995). Russian liberal sectors, encouraged by the Union's overtures to help countries in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, rode high on expectations that similar approaches to foster change in Russia would bolster the transition process. Pro-Western liberal attitudes had a wide public following in these years. Shevtsova (2010: 155) reports that at its peak in autumn 1991, approximately 70 percent of Russians supported liberal democracy and market economy. This percentage would steadily erode during the remainder of the decade, as a consequence of a series of highs and lows (e.g. 1993 shelling of the Russian Duma, Chechnya and Kosovo). However, the Russian liberal discourse and the favourable view of the EU continued to dominate the Russian political scene until well into the 2000s.

The early 2000s would, however, usher onto centre stage a different set of heterogeneous Russian social and political actors. The Russian trauma experienced over the Western disregard for its preferences over Kosovo in 1999 became an inflection point in EU-Russian relations and meant that a heady nationalistic discourse would find fertile ground in the Russian public's mindset. The nationalist groupings'

agendas are on many points quite disparate (ranging from former Communists to social conservatism and even outright fascism), however, a unifying element appears to be a ‘Russia first’ mentality, whereby it is conceived that the solution to the Russian Federation’s many problems lies in the resurrection of the country’s historical great power status (Shevtsova, 2010). Russian greatness and unencumbered sovereignty (free from external dependence and/or interference) have thus become the glue for uniting such disparate groups and cornered the market of patriotic discourse. Over the years this narrative has met with an increasingly favourable reception among the broader Russian public opinion yearning for national recovery and pride. This patriotic narrative, which has its roots in a more than century-long intellectual tradition within Russia, has become the centrepiece of much of Russian social and political life today.<sup>16</sup> This sociopolitical trend has been so broadly accepted by the public as it has been made a staple of the political programmes of the three most voted political parties in Russia, and this shift in thinking has had an impact on EU-Russian relations.<sup>17</sup> This can be explained by two factors.

First, the Russia-first/sovereignists appear perhaps even more ambivalent about the European Union than the Arab Mediterranean Islamist groups, if possible.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, these groups claim Russia as part of Europe, as well as different from it – some of them would even argue Russia as superior to the Western Europeans.<sup>19</sup> The Russia-first/sovereignists are, nevertheless, keen to reinterpret the West and the European legacy to Russian history and to highlight the self-sufficiency and uniqueness of Russian culture (Beichelt, 2009). Such collectives would argue that the European influence has made Russia weak in the past and the only way of regaining Russian greatness is to keep the West and the EU at a prudent distance. What is more, the European Union, they would assert, needs to be actively checked as it engages in unfriendly actions designed against Russia out of its alleged fear of the rise of a strong Russia today. For example, as one author reports, these collectives would argue that “[u]nder the guise of European values, the EU pursues a peculiar

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<sup>16</sup> This discourse has much in common with the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘Euroasianism’ or ‘Slavophilism’.

<sup>17</sup> We refer here to the following political parties: United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

<sup>18</sup> The Russia-first/sovereignists ambivalence take the expression of appearing to oscillate between benignly ignoring the EU as an international actor altogether or deliberately favoring undermining the Union by playing individual member states off each other.

<sup>19</sup> These groups, for example, draw strength from Samuel Huntington’s arguments that Western Europe/the EU and Russia are separate self-contained civilisations.

kind of bureaucratic imperialism that seeks to modify and partially control EU's neighbourhood [including Russia] through various instruments like the ENP, the Common Spaces, the Energy Charter, etc." (Medvedev, 2007: 13). Such acts, this school of thought holds, are meant to undermine Russia to keep it subjugated and divided, as well as directed to circumscribe Russia's influence in the 'near abroad' (Trenin, 2004: 12). There is ample evidence that this Russia-first/sovereignist narrative of Russia as a "country under siege" (Shevtsova, 2009) from the EU has come to carry considerable currency with Russian public opinion in the past decade. In a 2000 public opinion poll 35 percent of Russians surveyed maintained that Western values and culture as promoted by the EU were destructive for their country, a view which had increased to 42 percent at the end of 2006 (EU-Russia Centre/Levada, 2007).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in a 2010 survey 57 percent of polled Russians think that the West/EU seeks to undermine it and that West/EU criticism of Russia is 'hostile' (CSPP/Levada, 2010). The Russia-first/sovereignist viewpoint can therefore be said to have succeeded in positioning itself as the dominant voice shaping a negative public perception toward an EU 'Other' to Russia.

On the other hand, the Russia-first/sovereignists do not reject values frequently associated with the West (democracy, human rights and free market), even if these have not played prominent roles in Russian history or in moments that are considered the country's maximum splendour. However, the Russia-first/sovereignists apply a quite different reading to these values compared to the EU and this fact has put the former's discourse at variance with the latter. According to their logic Russia must develop its own state model. Such rhetoric is, in part, a patriotic cloak that puts pressure on potential rivalling schools of thought with different political projects, or dissuades these from entering the political space. However, there is no denying that there is also a widespread belief that a different model is needed and justified in the Russian context given its special history. The cornerstone of such a Russian model according to these collectives should be state sovereignty, i.e. greater autonomy from foreign influence. State sovereignty, to Russia-first/sovereignists, entails a conception of democracy, which while retaining basic features of Western-style democracy

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<sup>20</sup> Moreover, most Russians (71 percent) do not regard themselves as 'Europeans' in the sense that they do not feel they share the liberal values believed to be the hallmarks of integrated Europe (EU-Russia Centre-Levada, 2007). This number is up from 48 percent of polled Russians 'never' or 'rarely' 'feeling European' in 2000. Source: New Russia Barometer VIII, X, XI, XIII (as cited in CSPP/Levada undated)

(elections, multi-party, social and economic liberties etc.) should preferably have a strong centralised authority that ‘manages’ political life (Silitski, 2009: 42-3).<sup>21</sup> Their narrative here links up with a widespread belief in Russia that equates decentralised political power with threat of secession and fragmentation of the Russian territory. A different key feature of state sovereignty is, as Krastev (2006) notes, that such sovereignty is interpreted as a capacity for relying on economic independence (as opposed to interdependence). The Russia-first/sovereignists tend to view economic interdependence as a covert form of the West’s exploitation of lesser developed countries. This is a perception that has been perhaps most forcefully expressed by the Communist party of the Russian Federation, in arguing that the EU in its trade arrangements treats Russia as a colonial dependency from which merely to extract natural resources and markets to sell goods (Moshes, 2009). Overall, thus, the Russia-first/sovereignists tend to view Western values as both central and alien to the Russian state conception. The persuasiveness of the Russia first/sovereignist message has prompted three-quarters of the country’s polled population to hold that Russia is ‘special’, “neither European nor Eurasian,” and that it should follow “its own path of development” (EU-Russia Centre/Levada, 2007).<sup>22</sup>

Second, liberals in Russia have been on the retreat since the 1990s. The liberal sectors of Russia – some having sided with Yeltsin – are still today largely discredited on the Russian political scene. There has not been any concerted attempt to rescue the liberal discourse in Russia, in part for fear of the consequences of challenging the current regime which sometimes have entailed repression, harassment and/or incarceration. However, the lack of viable liberal voices in Russia today is also a consequence of the tendency of too many Russians to make a negative connection between liberal formulas and a less than happy period of the young Federation’s history. A considerable amount of Russians still associate liberal policies with the economic shocks and blatant corruption of the Yeltsin years, as well as the risk of further Russian disintegration (Light, 2008) and the loss of the country’s great power

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<sup>21</sup> The strong centralised authority is intimately linked to Russian history – and therefore seems as endogenous to Russia by these groups – even if the forms of such authority have varied, e.g. Czarist absolutism/parliamentarism or Communist one-party system.

<sup>22</sup> The percentages of polled Russians agreeing to these notions were 76 percent in 2003 and 75 percent in 2006. (EU-Russia Centre/Levada, 2007).

status.<sup>23</sup> This has led Trenin (2005: 4) to note that one of the main liberal shortcomings has been the failure to cater to the average Russian's yearning for Russian unity and historical greatness, thereby causing the notions of liberalism and patriotism to come "to be seen as mutually exclusive in contemporary Russia."<sup>24</sup> The negative view of liberals is, for example, evident from the fact that the two main liberal political parties Union of Right Forces and Yabloko both failed to attract sufficient votes to clear the minimum 7 percent threshold to enter the Duma in the 2007 elections, just as they failed to clear the then 5 percent barrier in 2003. Some liberal parties have therefore opted to form 'unholy' coalitions with entities that espouse the Russia-first/sovereignist logic in order to gain hearing from the larger Russian population such as, for example, the decision of (liberal) United Civil Front, headed by Garry Kasparov, to join forces with a set of right-wing patriotic activists to form the Other Russia coalition in 2006. Liberal leaders have also begun to incorporate elements of the Russia-first/sovereignist discourse into their own. For example, Vladimir Lukin, one of the leaders of the Yabloko Party, argued:

“[t]he 1990s have demonstrated, perhaps more clearly than the period of [Cold War] confrontation, that Russia and the West live in separate civilizational realms created, above all, by their different historical experiences. There are visible civilizational differences and ignoring them has never done Russia any good and will not do it any good in the future” (as cited in McDonald, 2009: 135).

With liberalism on retreat and Russia-first/sovereignists on the forefront, people tend to respond in a mixed fashion. When asked for their preference for Russian state governance the levels of satisfaction with the current regime is rather low (26 percent) (EU-Russia Centre/Levada, 2007). However, when asked for viable alternatives, the Russians spread out across a wide spectrum of opinions. According to

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<sup>23</sup> Corruption is widespread in today's Russia as well, but it is less overt and in overall the average person still perceives as being better off compared to a decade ago, hence, public attitudes toward corruption are currently more tolerant.

<sup>24</sup> Nodia (2009: 36) affirms “[f]or Russia, however, the 1990s were not merely a time when individuals lost their pensions; they were a time when the nation lost its superpower status. It lost standing, recognition, and respect in the world—or so Russians thought. Associated with this loss, moreover, was the rise of elites who seemed, so their critics said, excessively deferential toward the West and shamefully ready to denigrate their own country's past.”

one survey 40 percent say that Western democracy and culture ‘does not suit us’ or is ‘destructive’ to Russia, while 45 percent say ‘we can learn a lot of useful things from it’ (*ibid.*). Still the survey revealed that 65 percent of Russians polled in the same sample were quite unable to describe what liberal, Western-style democracy actually meant to them.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps there is no surprise then that the survey concludes that the “Russian understanding of democracy, liberalism, freedom and human rights is confused and often contradictory” (*ibid.*). In a different survey from 2009, 43 percent of polled Russians responded that their country needs its own unique democracy ‘following national traditions’ and 14 percent favoured a ‘democracy’ ‘like that of the USSR’ (CSPP/Levada, 2009). What is more, to the vast majority of Russians ‘order’ appears to have a much more important quality to it than Western-style ‘democracy.’ When surveyed, a full 72 percent of respondents preferred order to democracy (as cited in *Ria Novosti*, 2010). For 41 percent of Russians ‘order’ means “political and economic stability, social guarantees for poor (29 percent) and halting the fight between powers (27 percent), as well as the rule of law and the opportunity for everybody to exercise their rights” (*ibid.*). Similar concerns and confusions are expressed about the Western market system and in particular, about privatisation, which is closely associated with greed, corruption and dishonesty (Cameron, 2007).

Another factor which explains the stagnation or decline of EU attraction in Russia is that the above ambiguous perception of the Union held by the Russian public is further fuelled by the Russian political leadership. Most blatantly perhaps is the Russian government’s accusations that hands of Western intelligence forces were behind the Colour Revolutions in Ukraine and in Georgia (and attempts elsewhere), acts which are interpreted by the average Russian both as a stab against the Russian prerogatives in its near abroad as well as fuelling fears of foreign/Western circumscription of Russian sovereignty. Such fears notably boosted Putin and can be found as one of the principal explananda for his electoral victory in the 2004 presidential elections. The Colour Revolutions have also served Putin’s political purposes in terms of limiting foreign-funded civil society actors in Russia and even

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<sup>25</sup> Although when allowed to choose from a set of predetermined definitions, 54 percent of polled Russians either describe ‘liberal democracy’ as a “fair system of state governance based on the participation of all citizens on equal terms,” or a “series of guarantees to observe citizens’ rights and freedoms by the authorities/government.” Only 9 percent cite such fundamental democratic principles as the ‘free competition of political parties for voters’ and ‘separation of powers (the executive, judiciary and legislature) and accountability of the authorities to its citizens (EU-Russia Centre-Levada, 2007).

caused the expulsion of activists critical of Kremlin from Russia. Moreover, the Putin-Medvedev government, while not the intellectual origin of the Russia-first-sovereignist discourse, has essentially embraced parts of it as its own (Light, 2008).<sup>26</sup> The Russian government which sees an opportunity to consolidate power and draw strength from the Russia-first/sovereignist camp to impose a view of Russian greatness which in part comes about as a complex Othering of the European Union (and the West). Shevtsova (2009) notes that the Russian government seems to try to straddle the contradictory ambition of being “together with the West and opposed to it,” i.e. maintaining lines of communications open while limiting influence. In the words of Khachaturian (2009: 22) “[a]s Russia has become an increasingly important economic force, the Kremlin’s foreign policy has split into a pragmatic desire for Western integration [and lucrative contracts] and a rhetorical anti-Western nationalism.”<sup>27</sup> Some have argued that this means “Putinism is ideologically empty” (Khachaturian, 2009: 22.). However, the Russian government under the Putin-Medvedev tandem has become increasingly adept at using patriotism for their foreign policy objectives. The Kremlin is reportedly skillful at using public opinion polls for its own political ends (Petrov, 2005: 63; Cameron, 2007), so that it is contributing to the very psychological environment which is emitting its verdict on the European Union. There are therefore elements of similarity in Moscow’s handling of the EU with Arab leaders’, however, where the latter have mostly relied on lack of proper information about the European Union in their respective countries, the Russians are informed about the EU as an international actor, although in a way which suits the government’s aims.<sup>28</sup> The same cannot be said about the exact details of the Union’s engagement with Russia and different EU assistance and technical programmes about which the average Russian is not very well informed (Cameron, 2007).

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<sup>26</sup> For the growingly cosiness between members of the Putin entourage and the International Eurasian Movement, cf. Umland (2008). However, it is also worth noting that the government has in recent years acted to rein in, or outright persecute, groups pertaining to the Russia-first/sovereignist camp which have espoused a discourse too much at variance with the official one (Beichelt, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> As Khachaturian (2009: 22) further elaborates on: “[t]here is undoubtedly a ‘realist’ element in the Kremlin’s current policies that will displease the autarkic neo-Eurasianists. The prospects of Western capital, especially with Russian energy companies reaping massive profits from sales to Europe, are too enticing for the Kremlin elite. This means that Russia under Medvedev will continue to be a key player in the world economy, despite the anti-Western rhetoric of its government and the political tensions that result from it.”

<sup>28</sup> One of the features of managed democracy, according to Petrov (2005:63), is “state control over the media, which is used in order to mete out information in doses, and to shape and govern public opinion.”

In sum, in the shifting political setting in Russia in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the Russia-first/sovereignist rhetoric has become increasingly proficient at tapping into Russia patriotic sentiment, the EU has been assigned the role of the negative ‘Other’ against which the country must be contrasted. This situation has meant that the real or felt aspirational congruence between the broad Russian majority and the EU is currently in decline. On the contrary, the perceived differences between Russia and the EU might have grown since the early 1990s. Moreover, our survey above shows that the more positive view of the EU that found support and anchorage among Russian liberal groups has disintegrated at the same rate of that these same groups have disappeared as decisive and trusted voices in the Russian society. Finally, the Russian government has resorted to an ambivalent two-level game where formal appearances with European Union countries are maintained while Russian population’s suspicion of EU overtures is at times tacitly nurtured, at times implanted, by Kremlin.

### The decline of the EU’s ‘magnetic attraction’ – what next?

Our findings point to a complex picture. The empirical evidence reveals that in Arab Mediterranean countries as well as in Russia a perception of real or aspirational congruence with the EU is not currently at optimum levels (for the Union). The European Union has become, to greater or lesser extent, a scapegoat for local discontent or a battleaxe among different segments of the populations/political elite which have different ambitions for their countries’ futures. Modern Arab identity has been developed in a dialectical interaction with the European identity since the inception of Arab nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, this trend has perhaps become more accentuated in the last decade. Today Europe is used as an Other toward which the Mediterranean Arab Self is contrasted, especially as a consequence of a rise in political Islam and such groups’ necessity to stake out a political space for themselves. In Russia the search for a redefinition of the Russian identity, to escape the country’s communist past as well as the turbulence of the 1990s, has led the political dominant groups to construct a discourse which also places the EU in the role of a negative Other.

We have also tried to show that there is distinct erosion in the perception of shared interests and real or aspirational values with the European Union compared to the 1990s. Such decline does not necessarily translate into outright ill will towards the Union, but it is safe to say that overall broad majorities in these countries display a greater reservation against the EU and its foreign policy initiatives today compared a decade or more ago. It is worth noting that although the EU has come to constitute (one of the) Others in the Arab Mediterranean or Russian identity quests, the critique of the Union does not represent a desire for a radical break with Europe. In the mind of political Islamist groups (Amghar, 2007), as well as the politically dominant groups in Russia, collaborating with the EU is a political necessity. A wholesale rejection of the West, à la al Qaeda's discourse, has not proved popular among the broader Arab Mediterranean population and hence the Islamic movements in these countries need to find a difficult equilibrium between Self and Other (*ibid.*). They need to stake out a political space for themselves that combines pragmatic collaboration with the West, while not accepting all in toto. This balancing act can also be found in a large extent among the Russia-first/sovereignists and the broader Russian public opinion. Russians in general are equally eager to buy European luxury goods as to travel there for tourism, so while the narrative of economic independence may be in vogue, the actual consequences of cutting ties with the West/EU would not be welcome on the Russian street. The Russia-first/sovereignist cannot therefore burn all the bridges with the European Other.

The current state of affairs has not been helped by the less than straightforward role played by governments in many EU partner countries. The political elite – even though willing to accept financial support from the EU – they are not eager to allow the European Union to have a greater influence in their internal affairs. They largely conceive such influence to be a zero-sum game whereby points scored by the Union would entail an automatic loss for their regime. Their reluctance thus translates into an active or passive counteracting of EU attractiveness and/or potential influence over their citizens. In some countries the official media linked to the regime report EU news in a skewed manner; in other countries information about the European Union does not reach the wider public. Civil society is too closely controlled to be able to serve as an alternative channel of information. The political elite fear the repetition of the Velvet Revolution, the Colour Revolutions – and now the Flower (Jasmine and Lotus) Revolutions – in their countries and hence relations

with the EU have been distorted as a way for these regimes to hold onto power. The main difference between the Mediterranean and Russian experience here is that Arab authoritarian governments have tried to play the EU and Islamic groups off each other to safeguard political control, while the Kremlin has been quite unencumbered by such concerns.

It is worth noting that although the focus of the present working paper is on the external environment, this does not mean that the EU is wholly blameless for the changing perceptions in Arab Mediterranean countries and Russia and for its reduced support among certain dominant political sectors in these countries. The above discussion noted that the introspectiveness of EU policies has been one factor. We have also noted elsewhere the unhappy consequences of tilting the game board too much in favour of one's own interests in detriment to an outsider's preferences and aspirations (Barbé and Johansson-Nogués, 2008). Furthermore, the Union's inconsequential talk of values (democracy and human rights) has over time turned against it. In spite of proclaiming itself to be a defender of norms, the EU has in effect done little to foment them and rather ended up supporting repressive Arab regimes. According to observers this has been one of the major factors in undermining the European Union's moral authority and legitimacy in Arab Mediterranean countries, and reduced the Union's attractiveness in the eyes of the broad population (Kawakibi, 2007). The Union has belatedly partly recognised the short-sightedness of its policy, with EU Commissioner Stefan Füle offering *mea culpas* on this subject in light of the political change in certain Arab Mediterranean countries (*EUObserver*, 2011). The Russians have, on their hand, found the EU a divided and difficult partner to dialogue with, given the internal contradictions which afflict the Union every time Russia is on the agenda, leaving the European Union at times paralysed, but mostly the emitter of confused and contradictory messages in its neighbouring countries. Hence, the EU's potential 'attractiveness' has been effectively undermined. The Union no longer seems as a legitimate actor – whether economically or politically – to have substantial influence over the direction of affairs in partner countries. For the tension it evokes, the EU's ability to resonate with Mediterranean Arab and Russian elite and population diminishes. The lack of resonance in turn undermines, the Union's foreign and security policy objectives, as expressed by the Union's different multilateral framework programmes (Union for the Mediterranean) and sets of bilateral initiatives

(the European Neighbourhood Policy with southern Mediterranean countries; Four Common Spaces with Russia).

As the psychological environment has turned into the Union's contra, the domestic factors in these countries are changing the rules of the game for the EU. The European Union will now have to come to grips with a less open and less favourably disposed set of neighbouring countries. The post-Lisbon Treaty Union has to open its eyes to the fact that capabilities (policy strategy, instruments and money) are necessary but not sufficient in carrying out its foreign and security objectives in neighbouring partner countries. Moreover, the Union should also begin to take note of the 'post-EU normative' turn when dealing with its neighbouring partner countries, whereby European Union values can no longer be said to be the unquestioned 'gold standard' for such relations.<sup>29</sup> It must therefore rediscover the external environment as a relevant element of its foreign policy analysis and begin to consciously target the psychological milieu. We believe, in light of our survey above, that the EU could in particular find it useful to begin with targeting the information deficit/slant about the European Union, its values and its policies which exist in neighbouring countries.

One of the major challenges and opportunities laying ahead for the European Union is learning how to portray itself properly to foreign audiences. The EU is usually found as in deficit in terms of conveying information about itself to a larger global audience.<sup>30</sup> Non-EU media producers tend to note that the Union is often found to be a too complex animal to fit into that sound bite viewers/readers' need to understand.<sup>31</sup> The complexity of the Union's institutional set-up and policy making often warrants such long-winding explanations that media producers often desist in relaying to their audiences the actions of the EU. This in turn generates a fragmented information flow about what the European Union is and its objectives among third country spectators. Carta (2010: 214) has, perhaps as a consequence, found in her interviews with Brussels-based non-European diplomats a consistent call for the EU to strengthen "its capacity to communicate directly with the political elite and civil society in their countries." The diplomats in particular lament "the absence of an overall EU strategy to reach the common citizens and inform them about the EU's

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<sup>29</sup> For several interesting contributions on the 'post-normative' turn cf. the Special Issue of *European Foreign Affairs Review* 15, 5, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> And very often to its own citizens as well.

<sup>31</sup> For cutting down on EU-related information for being too complex see Donatella Della Ratta (2007) on Al Jazeera.

missions and activities in the world with a language that is accessible to everyone, within Europe and beyond its borders” (Carta, 2010: 214). Without such direct communication the Union becomes vulnerable to those foreign leaders which attempt to socially construct the EU for their own political purposes. Reaching out to foreign audiences could therefore be an important measure in order to boost its attraction once again.

Another challenge or opportunity ahead for the EU is to gather and process information stemming from neighbouring partner countries in order to be able to react adequately and timely to negative evolutions in the psychological environment. Such information should ideally be used to better adapt its foreign policies (e.g. European Neighbourhood Policy) to the different countries in which they are applied and allow them to evolve with changing local conditions. In order to achieve this the EU delegations in each neighbouring country must boost their ability to collect information and establish lasting working relations with all relevant political groups to be able to keep the finger on the pulse on evolving political contexts. This information must also find its way back to Brussels and begin to play a larger part in decision-making circles for strategic planning and implementation of the Union’s neighbourhood policies. This could help the European Union regain some ground lost in terms of its positive image and attractiveness among neighbouring countries. Otherwise continuation of the EU’s current muddled approach and introspective thinking will most certainly relegate the Union to an even more marginal place in its neighbouring countries’ domestic and foreign policy calculations.

## Conclusion

The EU has long been lulled in its belief that it exerts a natural attraction on neighbouring countries. This conviction caused it to bracket out the external environment in its foreign policy calculations. However, as this working paper has tried to show, perhaps it is high time for the EU to open its eyes to the social and political changes in neighbouring countries and to how these affect relations. The decline or stagnation in aspirational convergence between the EU and most of the countries under survey here has impaired the Union’s ability to achieve its foreign and security policy objectives. The Union’s flagging attractiveness has also made it into

the easy and convenient political straw man for neighbouring countries' governments to deflect critique from their own governance. Their use of the EU as the lightning rod for social tensions has in many ways further distorted relations.

The European Union now needs to come to grips with the fact that it can no longer demand deference and alignment by the sole virtue of its alleged 'power of attraction'. In a less EU-friendly world, the Union has to find ways of better understanding and addressing the forces which underpins such negative attitudes. The post-Lisbon Treaty European Union needs to break out of its shell of introspectiveness and become more finely tuned to events going on in its neighbouring partner countries. A first step on the way would be to engage in stronger and straightforward communication with the audiences in neighbouring partner countries ranging from traditional media, to informal communication networks, civil society actors and boosting exchange and cooperation programmes on all levels. The strengthened role of the EU delegations in third countries and a professionalisation of staff as envisioned by the Treaty is a first positive sign. This could allow delegations to keep Brussels better informed of the evolving cognitive milieu of the different countries in which they are located. However, such valuable information can only truly improve the EU's standing in the perception of elite and public in neighbouring countries if properly fed into the Brussels-machinery with a view to seeking a better 'goodness of fit' of the Union's policies with local conditions and concerns.

The way towards good working relations with its many different neighbouring partner countries must also pass through a stage of critical self-reflection on the part of the European Union and its member states. First, with conditionality and the 'EU norms as the gold-standard' attitude now in disrepute, the Union must labour to reinterpret (socially re-construct) its values in a way which may find more favourable resonance with neighbouring audiences. Such reinterpretation does not mean abandoning cherished EU values as much as publicly recognising the limits of imposing rigid interpretations of such norms. Finding the middle-ground in terms of the meaning given to basic social norms and standards, and perhaps working out joint road maps for their realisation, could potentially prove more productive than a ritualistic use of EU-established conditionality. Second, the European Union must abandon its reticence against talking with groups that are not overtly EU-enthusiastic. It should open up to new dialogue partners whether Islamic groups in the Mediterranean area or sovereignist proponents in Russia. The major everyday role

here could be played by a strengthened EU delegation in terms of outreach to local actors across the political spectrum, as pointed out above. However, already established channels of communication at different levels in the framework of bilateral or regional cooperation could also be opened up to a broader range of dialogue partners. The exchange of ideas may in the medium term help find common interests which may serve to reconnect the EU with politically dominant groups in neighbouring countries. In sum, a more even-handed approach in bringing a wider range of actors to the table in discussing the essence of basic social norms, as well as avoiding the use of paternalism and of preconceived formulas, could begin once more to foster a more positive view of the European Union in neighbouring countries.

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