The European Union and Upheavals in its Neighbourhood: A Force for Stability

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1. Introduction

From the ‘Colour revolutions’ in Eastern Europe to the Arab uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, the European Union (EU) has witnessed a wave of mass protests in its neighbourhood since the early 2000s. In many cases the protests led to a revolution where the anti-regime forces were successful in overthrowing the incumbent regime (Tucker, 2007, p. 536), while in others the authorities cracked them down (Raik, 2012, p. 554). The protesters called for justice, freedom and democracy, the very same values that the EU claims to promote in its foreign policy and defines as a core part of its identity (Treaty on European Union, Art. 2 & 21(1)). Therefore there were justified expectations from the EU’s own domestic publics and the protesters that the EU would support these demands for change. However, several scholars have argued that the EU’s response was more dominated by strategic interests than its self-proclaimed value-based foreign policy agenda (Youngs, 2008; Peters, 2012; Raik, 2012; Isaac, 2012).

How the EU responds to such events is an important indicator of its foreign policy actorness and power. The uprisings presented the EU with both potential threats, such as increased instability and migration, threat of violence and even a civil war or state failure at the EU’s borders, and possible opportunities regarding enhanced cooperation with closely situated countries in transition towards democracy. Hence,
the EU arguably had a clear interest, in terms of enhancing both democracy and security, in seeking to influence the outcome of the protests to its advantage. Nevertheless, even if the EU had a general interest in doing so, it is not the same as being willing, being able or having the power to do so. The varied responses to the protests are evidence of the EU’s limited capability to deal with crises in its neighbourhood.

Thus, it is important to ask: What kind of an actor and, hence, power is the EU in revolutionary situations in its neighbourhood? In order to answer this question, this article will examine the EU’s action in the context of mass protests in the eastern and southern neighbourhood, focusing on two cases: Moldova in 2009 and Tunisia in late 2010 to 2011. It will analyse the goals, instruments and impact of the EU’s action in both case, looking in particular at how stability- and security-oriented dynamics and the stated normative goals co-exist and characterise the EU’s external action and influence. The timeframe analysed is focused on the period from the initiation of the protests until the holding of the first free elections and their immediate aftermath. In order to account for the EU’s action during that period, it will also be necessary to look briefly at its relations with the two countries before the upheavals.

Despite the fact that the two cases chosen come from very different regions, they have many features in common especially when it comes to their frontrunner position in terms of relationship with the EU. The two countries were among the first to conclude ENP Action Plans with the EU and have been eager to strengthen their relations with the EU ever since, although on different issues. Both countries are among the smallest in their respective regions, with less geopolitical importance than other countries in
the two neighbourhoods; both are economically dependent on the EU; and both are cases where EU influence is relatively strong in comparison to other international actors. Furthermore, both countries experienced mass protests that emerged from the desire of the citizens to challenge the authoritarian practices of the ruling class. As a result of change of power, both countries became ‘success stories’ of the ENP (Boonstra, 2011; Mneimneh, 2013; Ashton, 2014). Altogether, these are not typical cases among countries in the neighbourhood, but cases where the EU has played a relatively strong role and where one can expect it to be more successful than average in pursuing its goals and making an impact.

2. The EU as an actor and the issue of power

The EU’s role in the world is a relatively new, but active area of research characterised by conceptual struggles to offer the most suitable characterisation of the Union as an entity and actor in international affairs. A key distinction in the literature on the EU’s actorness is between the studies looking at the practices of governing in the EU’s external relations and the ones analysing the ontological nature of the EU as an international actor. By ‘exploring the nature of the beast’ (Risse-Kappen, 1996), many studies strive to understand the allegedly unique nature of the EU’s foreign policy. As Hülls (2011) has emphasised, ‘there is a mismatch between the diagnosed contradictions in the character of the European Union as an external actor and the continuous providing of new concepts with exclusive claim which only shed light on singular aspects’ (p. 16). Indeed, there has been a tendency to focus more on reaching an understanding of what the nature of the EU’s power is rather than analysing what it does when conducting foreign policy. Besides a ‘normative’ power (Manners, 2002),
the EU has been called a ‘soft’ power (Nye, 2002), an ‘ethical’ power (Aggestam, 2008), a ‘post-modern’ (Cooper, 2003), ‘transformative’ (Börzel & Risse, 2009), ‘small’ (Toje, 2008), ‘structural’ (Keukeleire & MacNaughtan, 2008) and more recently a ‘market’ power (Damro, 2012). All these designations refer back to Duchêne’s article from 1972 where he characterises the European Community as an emerging ‘civilian’, that is, non-military, power (Duchêne, 1973).

Among these concepts, Ian Manners’ notion of Normative Power Europe (NPE) has raised most interest and a substantial debate among scholars as well as policy-makers. According to Manners (2002), normative power should be understood as the ability to shape or change what passes for normal (p. 10). Manners (2002) argues that the founding values of the EU, such as strengthening peace and liberty, and the willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions, are the core of the Community’s commitments of placing universal norms and principles at the centre of its relations with its Member States and with external actors (2002, p. 241).

Many have criticised the notion of normative power, emphasising that other international actors may also be considered normative powers (Diez, 2005, p. 7; Sjursen, 2006, p.171; Zielonka, 2011, pp. 281-282). Others have pointed out that the EU’s efforts at norm promotion are unreflexive attempts to promote its own institutional model, since ‘institutions tend to export institutional isomorphism as a default option’ (Bicchi, 2006, p. 287). Lisbeth Aggestam (2009) sustains that it is not enough to claim the universal legitimacy of the EU values, as ‘their specific meaning in practice may be more contested’ (p. 30). Last but not least, a neo-realist critique of NPE argues that the EU is used by its largest members as an instrument for shaping
their external environments in order to promote stability and ensure their security (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 227).

At the risk of over-simplifying, one could identify a ‘realist’ view of Normative Power Europe, on the one side, and a ‘constructivist’, idealist view, on the other (Harpaz & Shamis, 2010, p. 583). The constructivist view has focused on the value-based nature of NPE, that is, the EU’s attempt to project its values and to advance its own legitimacy beyond its borders (Diez, 1999; Nicolaïdis & Howse, 2002; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007). The realist view has looked at the NPE as a strategy to meet the EU’s hard-power deficit and as a means to promote Europe’s material interests (Kagan, 2002; Hyde-Price, 2006; Aoun, 2003). However, reducing the EU’s external policy to strategic versus normative motivations is, as argued by Rosamond and others, a false dichotomy (Rosamond, 2014; Youngs, 2004). ‘Normative Power Europe’ can be seen as a discursive construction, its power residing in the identity it provides for the EU and the changes it imposes on others (Diez, 2005). Thus, looking at our empirical cases, through its responses to the protests the EU constructs its foreign policy identity and gives substance to, or undermines, the declared value-based agenda. It is in the EU’s practices of handling power that the character of European power emerges (Whitman, 2006, p. 15). As Forsberg (2011) puts it, ‘we need to focus on the mechanisms and concrete episodes of power in order to know whether a ‘normative power’ explanation holds’ (p. 21).

For the purpose of empirical analysis, our point of departure is Tocci’s (2008) operationalisation of a normative power by looking at the dimensions of goals, means and impact. Manners (2009) makes a similar distinction between principles, actions
and impact as elements of a three-part understanding of normative power. However, the purpose is not to find out whether the EU is a normative power or not but rather to see how the intertwining of the normative and security agendas of the EU is reflected in the choice of instruments at hand and how we can judge the EU’s actions on the basis of their impact or the ability to reach the desired goals.

As seen from above we argue for a theoretical framework that encompasses both rationalist/strategic and constructivist/normative explanations and questions the dichotomy between the two. The question is not whether actors follow a ‘logic of consequences’ or a ‘logic of appropriateness’, but under what conditions and with which consequences certain values and/or security interests would be preferred over others.

In the following we will describe the dimensions of goals, means and impact and the dilemmas that the EU faces when it needs to choose among the different strategic interests and competing norms that characterise its foreign policy. The key questions to be addressed in the empirical analysis are formulated under each subtitle.

2.1. Goals and principles

What were the goals and principles that the EU pursued in the two cases? Did it promote European values such as democracy, rule of law, human rights? Did it promote the norms of dialogue and reconciliation? How did security-oriented goals shape EU action? How did different goals relate to each other; were there contradictions between ‘normative’ and ‘strategic’ goals (for instance, between
Democratisation and stability), or between different normative principles (for example, between rule of law and reconciliation)?

A first step in determining how the EU has been guided by its values and interests is to identify its general objectives towards the neighbours and the specific goals pursued by the EU in the context of the protests. As mentioned above, the distinction between norms versus interests is contingent and open to interpretation. From a rationalist perspective, material and other interests are the primary drivers of external action. Nevertheless, those interests do not stand alone but ‘need to take place in the context of a set of wider duties within the international society’ (Brown, 2005, p. 26). From a rationalist perspective, the promotion of certain values can be defined as a strategic interest. On the other hand, most constructivists, subscribing to a post-positivist methodology, see foreign policy interests as shaped by the norms and values that constitute the actors’ identity (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein et al, 1998).

The goals of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) merge security and values (Kratochvil & Tulmets, 2010, p. 166-173; Noutcheva, Pomorska & Bosse, 2013, p. 1). The promotion of democracy and human rights is defined as a means to have a stable neighbourhood (Youngs, 2004; Laïdi, 2008). One can thus argue that promoting stability is not necessarily non-normative. However, the different stability- and security-oriented and normative goals can in practice be competing and not always compatible. In other words, the EU’s norm of promoting democracy and human rights can clash with its goal of preserving stability in the neighbourhood. In the cases of both Moldova and Tunisia, the EU was torn between sympathy towards the protesters and a preference for keeping the regimes of Voronin (2001-2009) and Ben Ali (1987-
2011) in power as they were Western-oriented and created stability in the region. In addition, in the southern neighbourhood, the EU faced a conflict between the norm of promoting democracy and the fear that a democratic process would bring to power Islamist-oriented parties, which are seen as non-democratic and not strategically convenient partners. Furthermore, we need to address the question of whether the norms promoted by the EU are mutually compatible in practice. In the context of revolutions, compromises between different normative goals such as democracy and the rule of law, or justice and reconciliation, can be unavoidable. It can also be difficult to advance the goal of democracy and at the same time stick to normative instruments such as persuasion and inclusion, which brings us to foreign policy instruments.

2.2. Means

What foreign policy instruments did the EU activate in response to the protests? How did it use the diplomatic and economic instruments available in the EU external relations toolbox?

Foreign policy means have been classified into soft/persuasive methods based on joint ownership, engagement, dialogue and cooperation, and more coercive methods such as conditionality, sanctions and military actions. Another categorisation, applied to EU foreign policy by Michael E. Smith (2011), is between diplomatic, economic, and military/policing instruments (p. 179). While diplomatic means tend to be persuasive and military force is by definition coercive, economic instruments fall between the categories of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power and can be applied in either coercive or persuasive manner.
In the context of the mass protests analysed in this article, the EU applied diplomatic and economic instruments, whereas military action was not appropriate. We can draw parallels here to conflict management literature: diplomatic instruments are most relevant in the conflict management phase, in our case during the protests, while economic ones tend to take the centre stage in the post-conflict/reconstruction phase (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005, p. 10). However, a promise of economic aid or (a threat of) withdrawal of aid can also be used in a conflict situation as a way to put pressure on the sides to move towards the desired outcome.

Among the diplomatic instruments, the EU generally makes frequent use of statements and demarches, which are usually displayed in the initial phases of conflicts. Although having a low degree of impact, they are important in order to determine whether the EU tries to live up to its declared foreign policy goals and to give an indication to the conflicting parties on the EU’s position (M.E. Smith, 2011, pp. 179-180). Other diplomatic instruments include high-level visits, common positions (usually indicating the EU’s objectives and a commonly agreed diplomatic approach) and joint actions (for instance to launch a civilian or military operation or appoint an EU Special Representative). Election observers and civilian experts to facilitate the transition phase are also an important part of EU foreign policy instruments.

In the context of external conflicts, the EU has in several occasions applied diplomatic instruments such as mediation or facilitation in the process of peace-making or conflict-settlement (K. Smith, 2008, p. 66). This can trigger a situation where the
EU’s roles as a neutral facilitator and a normative power are in contradiction. Forsberg and Seppo (2011) have argued that it is very hard for the EU to simultaneously pursue normative objectives and maintain impartiality with regard to conflicting parties (pp. 10-11). On the other hand, normative power identity can be an advantage, giving the EU a better position to fulfill a neutral mediator role (Raik, 2012, p. 565).

Economic instruments are often regarded as the most powerful tools that the EU has at its disposal. Association agreements, which cover the development of political, trade, social, cultural and security links, combine diplomatic and economic tools and are supported by different financial instruments. These were important instruments in the post-crisis situations examined below.

Manners (2006) has argued that soft methods are more normative than coercive ones because they are ‘other empowering’ rather than ‘self-empowering’. Conditionality is often categorised as a coercive instrument. Conditionality influences the cost-benefit calculation of the partner country by either increasing the benefit associated with compliance (positive conditionality) or by withholding of a reward in case of non-adoption (negative conditionality) (Wichmann, 2010, pp. 33-34; Smith 1998, p. 256). But as Tocci (2008) has emphasised, it is more relevant how rather than which policy instruments that are used (pp. 10-11). Thus, positive conditionality is not necessarily at odds with a normative agenda. If the EU is effective in bringing change in a more democratic direction in the target country through positive conditionality, which is normally based on non-coercive methods, then it should be counted as a normative
mean. Furthermore, it is very rarely that the EU uses incentives without trying to achieve normative convergence (McDonagh, 2009, p. 145).

2.3. Impact

*Did developments on the ground correspond to the EU’s declared goals? Did the EU’s action (or non-action) make a difference; did it have an impact on the process and/or outcome of the protests?*

Many scholars have called for judging EU’s behaviour by its outputs (Tocci, 2008; Aggestam, 2008; Rosamond, 2014). However, whether the EU’s actions have consequences for the development of revolutionary crisis situations in the neighbourhood is an important question that has only been touched upon by a few scholars (Raik, 2012; Stewart, 2009). Whether the EU has had an impact or not, and how large it has been, is not easy to assess as it is seldom that a particular change within a third country is the result of only one influence (Tocci, 2008, p. 12). As argued by Tocci (2008), assessing the impact will need ‘a detailed analysis of the interaction between policy on the one hand and the political opportunity structure underpinning the situation within the receiving party on the other’ (p. 12). The below analysis of the two cases makes an effort to trace whether the EU’s positions and actions made a difference to the calculations and choices of local actors on the ground. We seek to assess whether the EU made the local actors do something that they would not have done otherwise (such as engaging in a dialogue), or made them refrain from doing something (for instance using violence against protesters). We analyse the interaction between external and internal dynamics, and (to a lesser
extent) between the EU and other external actors, in order to try to single out the EU factor.

3. Case studies

3.1. Moldova

The parliamentary elections held in Moldova on 5 April 2009 gave rise to mass demonstrations in major cities of the country. What sparked the protests was an election victory announced by the Communist Party, led by then president Vladimir Voronin, which had been in power for eight years. The opposition declared the elections fraud and called for repeat elections. Similarly to the ‘colour revolutions’ and protests that had taken place in the region before, the crowds demanded democracy and ‘Europe’. The demonstrations were smashed by the police with heavy hand and hundreds were detained (Council of Europe, 2009), which further fuelled the claims of protesters. The demonstrations, which took place during one week, did not directly lead to change of power, but were nevertheless an incentive for new political dynamics which eventually provoked new elections. Due to strong polarization and mistrust between the Communist party and the opposition, the parliament was unable to elect a new president, which according to the constitution led to the dissolution of parliament and early elections held on 29 July. Thus, although there were many common elements with the colour revolutions that had taken place earlier in the region in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006), the differences were the lack of a unified opposition and the fact that the OSCE-led electoral mission had declared the elections free and fair (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009, p. 140). In the early elections, the opposition reached a slim majority in the new parliament.
and established a four-party ‘Alliance for European Integration’ that formed a new government.

As in other similar cases, the events took the EU by surprise. The EU’s relations with Moldova had deepened after the 2004 and especially 2007 enlargements. The ‘Communist’ leadership had made some efforts to develop a reform agenda in the framework of the ENP and received considerable assistance from the EU. At the same time, the country was constantly criticised by the EU for shortcomings in the areas of democracy, rule of law and human rights (Commission, 2008; Phinnemore, 2006, p. 18). The regime was semi-authoritarian, but keen to develop closer ties to the EU and was seen as receptive to EU influence. The Communist party was the largest party in Moldova¹, enjoying solid support – which used to be propped up by control over public media and harassment of the opposition.

The EU reacted to the protests immediately and was active throughout the crisis, trying to calm the situation and work towards a solution. Although the EU’s sympathies went towards the opposition, the EU ‘tried’ to be objective and facilitate a solution, respecting the results of the elections.² Its key goal was to ensure stability and avoid violent conflict and chaos in its immediate neighbourhood. There was also a geopolitical aspect at play, as the EU feared that Moldova would have fallen in Russia’s arms if Voronin had decided to rely on support from the Kremlin. There were rumours that Russia had a say in the provocation of the violent turn of riots after the elections. Furthermore, there was a strong probability that Voronin would have

¹ Institutul de Opinii Publice, Barometer of Public Opinion, November 2009.
² Interviews, Brussels, June 2013; Skype, November 2013.
stayed in power and, thus, the EU would have had to continue cooperating with him\textsuperscript{3}. As put by one interlocutor, it was important to pursue ‘a realistic policy’ rather than supporting ‘our favourites or somebody else’s personal favourites… We want a democratic Moldova’.\textsuperscript{4}

In its first statements, the EU called on all sides – the government, the opposition and the people – to ‘refrain from violence and provocation’ (Council of the European Union, 2009). The EU had no normative ground to support the protesters’ demand for repeat elections, since the OSCE-led International Election Observation Mission had recognised the April elections as generally free and fair, although it pointed to problems such as ‘undue administrative interference’ and ‘lack of public confidence’ (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009). Thus, the EU was ‘trapped’ and could not voice a strong critique as it would have put in danger the ‘legitimacy and credibility’ of the OSCE as an international monitoring institution.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, an early election was not seen as a likely way out of the political stalemate, as the Communists were expected to remain the largest party, and the opposition was fragmented and lacked a uniting leader.\textsuperscript{6}

In addition to its emphasis on stability, the EU’s action was motivated by a more normative concern about human rights. It condemned the violent crackdown of protests and worked closely together with the Council of Europe with the goal to ensure the release of the detained protesters and investigation of human rights violations. The EU was not able to prevent mistreatment of protesters, but Europe’s

\textsuperscript{3} Interviews, Brussels, June 2013; Chisinau, October 2012.
\textsuperscript{4} Interview, Brussels, June 2013
\textsuperscript{5} Interview, Brussels, June 2013
\textsuperscript{6} Interviews, Brussels, June 2013.
pressure and involvement was essential for the release of protesters and launch of investigation (Shapovalova & Boonstra, 2012, p. 62).

Between April and early June, the EU made active efforts to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation between the main political forces. The diplomatic work was mainly carried out on the ground by the EUSR for Moldova, Kalman Mizsei. Prime minister of the Czech Republic (Topolanek), which held the rotating presidency, and HR Solana both visited the country in April to underline the EU’s messages. An immediate goal of the EU was to enable the election of a new president in the parliament, which required a qualified majority and thus votes from both the Communists and the opposition. However, the political atmosphere was too tense and mistrust between the two main political camps too high for a constructive dialogue. Had the EU succeeded to persuade the parties to agree on electing a new president, there would have been no early elections and no change of power. Among the opposition and civil society, which were strongly EU-oriented, there was a sense of frustration and disappointment over not getting a clear support from the EU (Ghinea & Panainte, 2009, p. 126).7

In this situation the self-representation of the EU as a normative power had a restricting effect on its engagement with the conflict parties and left the EU in a dilemma. On the one side, the EU could not go against its own principles of respecting the legitimacy of the international monitoring system and its own principle of being neutral, not intervening in a sovereign country. At the same time, being a normative power is about ‘the ability to shape the concept of “normal” in international

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7 Interviews, Chisinau, April 2009 & October 2012
relations’ (Manners, 2002, p. 239) and ‘being a force for good’ and hence, promoting the principle of democracy. In this case the EU prioritized the use of normative instruments with a short-term security goal in mind.

Beneath and beside the official EU policy, there were different views inside the Union. Several MEPs and especially the neighbouring Romania were more clearly on the side of the protesters and the opposition and condemned more strongly the crackdown of protests by the Communist leadership. Romania thus took a more normative stance, but its normative positions were interwoven with a geopolitical agenda and ethnicity-based claims about Moldovans being Romanians, which were politically controversial inside Moldova. President of Romania, Traian Basescu, made repeated public statements about Moldova being ‘part of Romania’ and about the goal to re-unify the two countries, which were never actively supported in Moldova and was also in contradiction with the official EU position. At the same time Romania was a vocal supporter of Moldova’s European perspective.

When the Moldovan parliament was dissolved and early elections were announced in June, the EU re-focused its activity on supporting the organization of the elections. Although the EU had not promoted a change of power, once a strongly pro-European government came to power in September 2009, the EU embraced the change. It quickly mobilised additional assistance and launched negotiations on an association agreement and visa liberalisation. The EU’s offer was by and large copied from its

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8 Interviews Brussels, June 2013; Copenhagen, February 2014
9 ‘Interview transcript: Traian Basescu, president of Romania’, Financial Times, 13 December 2010. Available at http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2f1b77e8-06e0-11e0-8c29-00144feabdc0.html#axzz33e7xt9mK
10 Annual bilateral assistance almost doubled from 40 Million EUR in 2007 to 79 Million in 2011 (information provided by the EU delegation to Moldova, September 2011).
policy for Ukraine after the Orange revolution, but the process was much faster: association agreement talks started with Ukraine in March 2007, more than two years after the Orange Revolution, and with Moldova in January 2010, four months after the change of leadership. The assistance was also relatively larger considering the small size of Moldova. The EU’s leverage was increased by it being the largest trade partner of Moldova, with a share of 54 % of total imports and 49 % of total exports in 2010 (Commission, 2011a).

The new government declared an ambitious reform agenda and commitment to take the EU’s conditions seriously. Although it did not push for an immediate membership perspective, it made clear that it was motivated by the hope of one day joining the EU. The EU on the other hand applied increasingly enlargement-like conditionality towards Moldova (Raik, 2011). At the same time the change generated a lot of goodwill on the EU’s side, expressed by frequent high-level visits and meetings and an abundance of positive statements in addition to the increase of assistance. Moldova became the brightest spot of the ENP (not least because of the lack of positive developments elsewhere in the neighbourhood).

Political instability continued after the new government took office. As during the crisis, the EU diplomacy continued to play a role in managing domestic political conflicts and facilitating relations between the government and opposition and, even more importantly, inside the coalition, pushing the parties to stick together in spite of fierce rivalries and disagreements.11

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11 Interviews, Brussels, June 2013; Chisinau, September 2011 & October 2012.
To sum up, during the political crisis between April and July, the EU’s guiding principles were dialogue and reconciliation, rule of law, respect for human rights – and, above all, stability. Although the eventual change of power was motivated by Europe’s power of attraction, it happened in spite of EU policy, not because of it. It was the internal political dynamics that drove the course of events, while the EU’s impact was limited to preventing further destabilization. The EU and other European organisations played a role in channeling the political process in a non-violent way and in accordance with the Moldovan constitution and law, e.g. by assisting the organisation of new elections in July. Once the change had happened, the EU did re-adjust its policy by increasing support to the reform-oriented new leadership.

3.2. Tunisia

The mass protests in Tunisia began on 17 December 2010 after Mohammed Buazizi, a fruit and vegetable seller, had set himself on fire after his cart was confiscated by police. In the following weeks demonstrations led to a number of clashes with police forces, especially on 24-27 December 2010. The crisis further escalated on 8-12 January 2011 with another series of violent encounters between the police forces and the demonstrators, which was followed on 14 January 2011 by the escape of president Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia. An interim government was set up and in October 2011 the first free elections for the National Constituent Assembly were held.

The sudden events in Tunisia and the pace at which they developed took by surprise most EU member states and EU officials. Especially EU member states with close ties to the region such as France, Italy and Spain were reluctant to support the protesters in
the beginning, not believing in the possibility of the fall of the Ben Ali’s regime.\textsuperscript{12} This was also evidenced in the behaviour of the French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie who offered help to Ben Ali to crush the uprising.\textsuperscript{13}

Although the wave of protests erupted in mid-December 2010, the first official reaction from the EU’s High Representative, Catherine Ashton, and Commissioner Stefan Füle, came on 10 January, after a week of bloody protests (Popescu & Wilson, 2011). The declaration stated, ‘we are concerned about the events that have been taking place in Tunisia (…). In particular, we deplore the violence and the death of civilians.’ At the same time it was made clear that the negotiations for an ‘advanced status’\textsuperscript{14} would continue, though, involving ‘increased commitment from both partners on all issues, in particular in the areas of human rights and fundamental freedoms’ (European Commission, 2011b).

The very cautious response was a clear indication of the EU’s goal of promoting stability in Tunisia, suggesting that the EU wanted to make sure that if the regime did not fall, the relationship could be continued as usual and not be frozen as had happened earlier.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, one reason for the cautious response to the uprising in Tunisia was the very tense and patchy political dialogue that the EU had experienced with the Ben Ali regime with the consequence that the dialogue on human rights and democracy had

\textsuperscript{12} Interviews, Tunis, November 2012; Brussels, June 2013; Copenhagen, June 2013.
\textsuperscript{13} EU Observer, 14 January 2011.
\textsuperscript{14} The advanced status or Privileged Partnership (PP) is a new enhanced agreement between the EU and Tunisia. The agreement focuses on a range of areas that will support Tunisia’s economic and democratic development such as gradual integration into the European internal market, negotiations on liberalising trade in agriculture, conclusion of a mobility partnership (EU Council 19 November 2012).
\textsuperscript{15} Interview, Brussels, June 2013.
been frozen between 2005 and 2007 (del Sarto & Schumacher, 2011, p. 942). EU officials interviewed emphasised the tension between, on the one side, the official cooperation of the EU member states with the regime, because Tunisia was seen as a ‘buffer zone for migration and the raise of terrorism, to maintain an equilibrium between countries like Libya and Algeria’, while at the same time, the efforts of the EU officials criticising the regime and trying ‘to do something for the human rights situation’ behind the doors.16

While the dialogue on domestic political and human rights conditions was very slim, Tunisia under Ben Ali was very successful in cooperating with the EU in the areas that it found in its advantage such as economic liberalisation, more specifically macroeconomic issues and governance support, the private sector and social issues such as education, health and employment (Commission, 2008). Thus, although the EU was expected to have some leverage on Tunisia because of the high Tunisian exports to the EU and EU assistance to Tunisia, the EU did not push for the political change in view of the difficulties it had encountered (Powel, 2009, p. 65; van Hüllen, 2010, p. 252).

Hence, the policy conducted by the EU in Tunisia, as well as in the rest of the Mediterranean region, was an evidence of the incompatibility between the normative goal of promoting a democratic Tunisia, as emphasised in documents and declarations, and the security-oriented interest in the maintenance of a stable and effective government as a guarantee for preventing terrorism, illegal immigration and militant Islamism (Holm, 2004; 2010; Malmvig, 2007; Bilgin, 2009).

16 Interviews, Tunis, November 2012; Brussels, June 2013
The EU’s position shifted to a more clear declaration of support to the protesters only after Ben Ali had fled the country on January 17: ‘We will stand side by side with Tunisians as they pursue their peaceful and democratic aspirations’ (European Commission, 2011c). The same message of solidarity was conveyed by the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs at a Council meeting a week later (Council of the European Union, 2011). Also, on February 4 the EU froze the assets of Ben Ali, his closest family and collaborators (Official Journal of the European Union, 2011). At the same time, the EU underlined bottom-up dynamics, as explained in an address by Ashton at a meeting with EU senior officials: ‘… we should offer help but not dictate outcomes or impose solutions. (…) we will accompany the transformation if our help is welcome. But the future lies firmly in the hands of the Tunisian and Egyptian people. They own their revolution and rightly so’ (European Union, 2011).

Consequently, the EU did not rush to impose any form of democratic conditionality but was rather responding to the events on the ground in a wait-and-see position (Pinfari, 2012, p. 38). Such emphasis is explained by several factors. First of all, right after the revolution the EU did not have a positive image among the Tunisians who were fairly bitter concerning the EU’s rather unconditional support for Ben Ali. In the eyes of Tunisians, the EU was often associated with France and Italy, which were the most visible and present member states cooperating very closely with Ben Ali (Dennison et al., 2011, p. 2). Moreover, there was an attitude among the Tunisians

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17 Interviews, Brussels and Copenhagen, June 2013.
After this initial hesitation, the Commission and the EEAS presented on 8 March 2011 a joint communication proposing a ‘A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean’, thus, a more general reaction to the turmoil in the region. The normative tone is very much present with an emphasis on the principle of joint partnership and differentiation. The communication emphasised ‘the joint commitment to common values. (...) The commitment to democracy, human rights, social justice, good governance and the rule of law must be shared. The partnership must be based on concrete progress in these areas. It must be a differentiated approach’ (European Commission & High Representative, 2011a).

Furthermore, in another communication presented on 25 May 2011, the Commission and the EEAS launched a ‘new response to a changing neighbourhood’ focusing on supporting ‘deep democracy’ and ‘sustainable economic growth’ in the partner countries with once again a strong emphasis on the partners’ commitment to a differentiated approach and with a significant stress on both positive and negative conditionality (European Commission & High Representative, 2011b).

Overall in the two documents, the EU seems to redefine or rather to reinforce the existing polices with a more explicit emphasis on conditionality, political and security co-operation and, last but not least, the differentiated approach (Tömmel, 2013; Whitman & Juncos, 2012; Balfour, 2012, Dennison, 2013). The reinforced ENP is not

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18 Interview, Tunis, November 2012.
necessarily more normative than the previous policy but it seeks to take a more assertive position regarding the Mediterranean region, as a response to the Arab Spring (Tömmel, 2013, p. 35).¹⁹

As to the instruments used, after the early passiveness, the response from the EU intensified after Ben Ali’s fall, first of all, with a series of high-level visits from EU officials in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, such as HR Ashton, Commission President Barroso, Commissioners Füle, Malmström, Georgieva, Barnier, De Gucht, as well as the President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, all emphasising EU support for the democratisation of Tunisia.

A wide range of EU financial instruments were mobilised to support the challenges of the transition process and humanitarian support was made available, in particular to help Tunisia cope with the influx of refugees fleeing the war in neighbouring Libya.²⁰

In addition, an EU-Tunisia task force, the first one in the region, was set up with the aim of coordinating more efficiently European and international support for Tunisia’s political and economic transition (European Commission, 2011d). The deliverables of its first meeting, held in September 2011, included the decision to begin formal negotiations between Tunisia and the EU to establish a ‘Privileged Partnership’, the establishment of an asset recovery support team and an agreement on a number of

¹⁹ Interviews, Brussels, June 2013.
²⁰ One month after the revolution, the EU allocated €17 million to cover the most urgent needs. In addition, through the Instrument for Stability, the EU allocated at the same time €2 million to help prepare the elections for a Constituent Assembly and to strengthen the capacity of civil society (European Commission 8 March 2011). It also increased the funds available for the bilateral cooperation with Tunisia: the allocation for 2011 was doubled and for the period of 2011-2013 the budget was increased from €240 million to €400 million. These funds were targeted in particular to economic recovery and strengthening of civil society organisations (European Commission, 2011f).
financing programmes. Furthermore, the launch of negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Tunisia and on Mobility Partnership were decided (European Commission, 2011d). Last but not least, an EU Electoral Observation Mission was present in Tunisia on 23 October 2011 at the country’s first free elections.

While these steps expressed a change of attitude from the EU’s side with a stronger emphasis on democracy and human rights, the immediate security interests of the member states continued to be very much present as well. For example, in connection with the extra money allocated for the 2011-2013 period, the EU made it conditional that the Tunisian government took ‘strong and clear action’ to prevent its citizens from leaving for Europe and take back the thousands that had already made it to Italy (Barroso, 2011).

This was due to the migration situation that the protests in Tunisia and later in Libya had created. Between 15 and 30 January 2011, 6000 Tunisian immigrants arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa. The situation got worse and in less than three months, from January to March 2011, approximately 20.000 Tunisians arrived in Lampedusa (Frontex, 2011). This created a diplomatic crisis between Italy and Tunisia and later with France as well, as most Tunisians headed towards France, which is the European country with the largest Tunisian diaspora (Boubakri, 2013, pp. 8-9).

Turning to the impact of the EU’s actions on the uprising, there is little if any evidence that the EU with its belated declarations influenced in any way the course of
the events in Tunisia between December 2010 and January 2011. The rapidity of the protests and the pace at which they developed took the European leaders by surprise and created a kind of paralysis, which only changed after Ben Ali had fled the country (Pinfari, 2012, p. 36).

As mentioned before, during Ben Ali’s regime the EU did not manage to improve the state of human rights and democracy in Tunisia. The EU’s demands were not taken into consideration by the regime because Ben Ali believed repercussions to be unlikely. Nevertheless, interviewed EU officials emphasised that behind closed doors, they were able to prevent the worse human rights abuses. The situation changed after the revolution when Tunisia needed great funds to compensate its financial losses due to the global economic crisis and the mismanagement of the economy by the Ben Ali’s regime. At the same time, since the EU needed to underline its ability to obtain positive achievements in return for its funds and investments, Tunisia became an opportunity for conditionality to prevail. Thus, after the revolution, the EU played an important role in channelling the political process by first of all assisting the organisation of new elections in October 2011 as well as making sure that the new constitution does not include discriminatory elements concerning the rights of women and the place of other religions than Islam.

There is a common understanding among the Tunisians that the EU is a strong economic power, from which Tunisians can learn a lot and which can give them support for their transition (Dennison et. al., 2011). Tunisia is more or less dependent on the EU economically and this can be an important factor in the EU’s likelihood to

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21 Interviews, Tunis, November 2012.
22 Interview, Brussels, June 2013.
have an impact on the transition process. Tunisia’s exports to the EU in 2010 were 72.1 percent of the country’s total exports, while representing only 0.6 percent of the EU’s imports (Commission website). Tunisia is very much interested in the incentives offered by the EU, such as agricultural liberalisation, visa facilitation to increase mobility, and greater economic cooperation eventually leading to participation in the Single Market (Dandashly, 2014, p. 9). Moreover, the EU is the most trusted actor in Tunisia, and generally, in the region, and it gives the EU stronger influence (Dandashly, 2014, p. 25). Last but not least, the majority of the Tunisian population and especially its elites perceive that their values are very close to those held in the EU.

4. Conclusions

Moldova and Tunisia are both small neighbouring countries that are more receptive to the EU’s influence than most other countries in the neighbourhood. If anywhere (apart from candidate countries), it is in these two cases that the EU’s normative, value-oriented agenda has a fairly good potential to succeed. However, our analysis of the EU’s action in the context of the upheavals in Moldova in 2009 and Tunisia in 2010-11 points to a rather limited, contradictory and reactive role of the EU during major crises in the neighbourhood. In light of these cases, the EU appears as a more realist actor than is commonly assumed, due to its strong emphasis on stability and reluctance to support revolutionary pro-democratic change – hence, more aptly characterised as a ‘force for stability’ rather than a ‘force for good’. At the same time its action in the two cases suggests a lack of clear strategic goals, apart from the broad

23 Interviews Tunis, November 2012.
aim of the ENP to extend EU norms and values, and prioritisation of stability by default. Specific security considerations such as migration flows and fight against terrorism played a more important role in the case of Tunisia, whereas in the case of Moldova, the EU was concerned about stability in a more general sense, while change of power was not seen as a potential threat to the security interests of the EU or the member states.

Before the upheavals, the EU promoted a political reform agenda in the two countries with limited success. Yet the EU did not rush to support the goals of the mass protests, although these aimed at a more credible European-oriented reform process. In both cases, the EU did not expect the change to be possible, arguably with good reasons considering the political landscape of the two countries. It had established good relations with the incumbent regimes that were fairly pro-European although not taking the EU’s calls for political reforms seriously.

The EU’s support to stability as a key goal took somewhat different forms in the two cases. In the case of Tunisia, the EU was simply absent during the first crucial weeks of protests. Only once the fall of Ben Ali radically changed the situation on the ground did the EU come out with statements supporting the Tunisian people and the transformation that they were demanding. In the case of Moldova, the EU was more actively involved throughout the crisis, trying to calm down the situation and promote domestic dialogue. A normative agenda emerged during the crisis alongside the stabilisation efforts, as the EU together with other European organisations aimed to stop and prevent violence, address human rights violations and promote a constitutional way forward. However, in a difficult balancing act between justice and
reconciliation, and rule of law and democracy, the EU called for reconciliation and compromise with the regime that was responsible for the human rights violations.

In spite of its initial disbelief in the change of power, the EU did strongly embrace the new leadership that emerged in both countries as a result of the crisis. The goal of promoting democratic transformation became dominant in the EU’s efforts to assist the new governments. The strategic goal to ‘Europeanise’ the neighbourhood got a new lease of life, and Moldova and Tunisia became the two model countries of the ENP. While the EU had a limited impact on both countries during the crises, though more on Moldova than Tunisia, the crises in return had a rather strong impact on EU policy. The reactive behaviour of the EU did not, however, bring a fundamental policy change, but rather reinforced the original core ideas of the ENP and gave a new boost to actually implementing them. As the neighbours themselves turned to a more reform-oriented direction, it became easier for the EU to merge its (still ambiguous) strategic and normative goals instead of having to make compromises between stability and democratisation.

The instruments applied by the EU were mostly diplomatic (statements, visits, facilitation of dialogue, election support) during and immediately after the crises, and economic (new association agreements and DCFTAs for both, mobility partnership for Tunisia and visa liberalisation for Moldova) in the post-crisis period. Although conditionality became more important after the crises, generally the instruments used can be categorised as persuasive and normative, not coercive, with the exception of the use of sanctions in the case of Tunisia. The use of mediation in Moldova during the crisis is a clear example of the dilemma of simultaneously pursuing normative
objectives and being a neutral facilitator. In the post-crisis situations, the favourable domestic conditions enabled the EU to use positive conditionality in a way that is compatible with the concept of normative power in the sense that it does not impose the EU’s norms and values but supports bottom-up demands. Before, during and after the crises the EU was acting in line with an understanding of normative power as reflexive and not imposing one’s views on others. In practice this means taking a reactive role and having a limited impact.

The two cases analysed paint a picture of the EU as an actor with an often complex and unclear understanding of what its ‘normative’ role is in the policy towards the neighbours. It is difficult to pin down a well-defined strategy, which encompasses both security interests and normative considerations. Instead, we are confronted with an on-going tension, which is reflected in the internal debate inside the EU as well as the relationship between the EU and the partner countries.

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