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# Spatial imaginaries and selective in/visibility: Mediterranean neighbourhood and the European Union's engagement with civil society after the 'Arab Spring'

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## Abstract

As part of a repertoire of the European Union's (EU's) geopolitical practices, the imaginary of Mediterranean Neighbourhood is a means with which to manage dissonance between the EU's self-image as a normative power, changing political situations in the region and the Realpolitik of security. We argue that this also involved a 'politics of in/visibility' that promotes democratization and social modernization through structured cooperation while engaging selectively with local stakeholders. In directing attention to EU readings of and responses to the 'Arab Spring', we indicate how both a simplification of the issues at stake and highly selective political framings of local civil societies have operated in tandem. Drawing on a review of recent literature on civil society activism in the southern Mediterranean, we specifically deal with Eurocentric appropriations of civil society as a force for change and as a central element in the construction of the Mediterranean Neighbourhood. EU support for South Mediterranean civil society appears to be targeted at specific actors with whom the EU deems it can work: apart from national elites these include well-established, professionalized non-governmental organizations, and westernized elements of national civil societies. As a result, recognition of the heterogeneous and multilocal nature of the uprisings, as well as their causes, has only marginally translated into serious European Neighbourhood Policy reform. We suggest that an inclusive focus on civil society would reveal Neighbourhood as a contact zone and dialogic space, rather than a project upon which the EU is (rather unsuccessfully) attempting to superimpose a unifying narrative of EU-led modernization.

## Keywords

Arab Spring, civil society, Eurocentrism, European Neighbourhood Policy, Mediterranean, spatial imaginaries

## Introduction

Social and spatial imaginaries of what might be called a European Union (EU)–Mediterranean cooperation space have been central but inherently problematic

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elements of the EU's attempts to structure interstate relationships with its near abroad. Imaginaries of 'Mediterranean Neighbourhood' are significant not only because of the ways they frame geopolitical contexts in political and socio-cultural terms, but also because of their role in stabilizing the EU's political identity as an international actor (Scott et al., 2017). The geopolitical narrative of EU-led stabilization and the regional narrative of Mediterranean transformation are interlinked and have supported the Eurocentric image of the South Mediterranean as a development space and an area of European concern (Cebeci and Schumacher, 2016; Jones, 2006). According to the EU's External Action website, the geopolitical imaginary of Neighbourhood (e.g. of common regional spaces) involves a situation in which:

> the EU works with its southern and eastern neighbours to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration. This goal builds on common interests and on values — democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion.[1]

These ambitious goals notwithstanding, EU–Mediterranean dialogue also exposes the gaps between the EU's ambitious cooperation goals and its capacity and/or willingness to follow through with their fulfilment. One explanation for this state of affairs is that the interaction of geostrategic interests with the EU's self-understanding as an international actor (i.e. as a force for good in the world) has led to incoherent and inconsistent initiatives (Bicchi, 2014; Börzel et al., 2014; Noutcheva, 2015). As a result, security concerns have generally overshadowed EU–Mediterranean dialogue in political, social and economic areas. Equally as important, however, are Eurocentrism and consistent patterns of paternalism toward the 'South' that have conditioned regional cooperation since its very beginnings (Joffé, 1997).

Following these observations, we argue that sustained critical assessment of the political as well as social and cultural character of EU–Mediterranean relations is a necessary step in potentially developing more progressive forms of regional cooperation. Indeed, Bialasiewicz and collaborators (2013) have drawn attention to different geographical imaginations underlying the EU's visions and agendas of regional cooperation, arguing that the normative project of a common Mediterranean space in fact obscures more control-oriented geopolitical agendas. In this sense, imaginaries of EU–Mediterranean cooperation have been less about the EU's southern neighbours and more about the EU's own need for reassuring mappings of its external relations and coherent narratives of regional cooperation (Jones, 2011). This is also related to the EU's attempt to craft a (geo)political identity; as Michelle Pace (2004: 294) has observed:

> foreign policy acts as a process whereby Europe is created as a democratic, progressive, advanced, Christian and civilized community in comparison to the Mediterranean as underdeveloped, lacking democracy (in parts), Muslim, etc. Thus, security discourses separate the alleged (presumed/constructed) victim of insecurity and the cause of insecurity that is Europe and the Mediterranean respectively. Insecurity in the Mediterranean is constructed as a ground for collective EU action.

As Giaccaria and Minca (2011) imply, the EU's attempt to create a Mediterranean 'regional subject' has been premised on ideas of engagement with a 'not-yet modern' and crisis-ridden socio-political and cultural space. In similar terms, Cebeci (2017) has characterized the EU's spatializing politics in terms of major narratives that support the EU's construction of a positive EU–Mediterranean identity and thus a capacity to affect change in South Mediterranean societies. Cebeci argues that this narrative provides an ideational template that legitimizes the pursuit of a Mediterranean Neighbourhood based on the EU's terms and interests. Moreover, imaginaries of Neighbourhood are continuously (re) employed as means of managing dissonance between the EU's self-image as a normative power, the Realpolitik of security and complex political and social contexts that defy convenient interpretation (see Casas-Cortes et al., 2013).

Since 2011/2012 and the uprisings in South Mediterranean states, the cooperation context has indeed become more complex. In terms of its geopolitical identity, the EU had, and continues to have, great difficulty in reconciling the complex nature of socio-political struggle in the South Mediterranean with its own understanding of democratization and the

role of civil society in particular. While the EU had previously acknowledged civil initiative as an important element of the implementation of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and in the creation of a EU-friendly Mediterranean Neighbourhood, this new salience of civil society in political discourse nevertheless seems to have come as a surprise. As Cavatorta and Durac (2011) forcefully argued, this surprise stems in large part from a fundamental misreading of civil society and its socio-political role in Arab societies and, as a result, a search for Eurocentric coherence, conformity and recognizability in dealing with local civil society groups.

Framings of state–society relations are central to spatializations of political relationships within the context the EU now refers to as its 'southern Neighbourhood'.[2] What is equally salient is the fact that, by their very nature, such imaginaries produce partial images and stories of social reality (see Huber and Kamel, 2015). In this essay we mobilize the concept of visibility in terms of Eurocentric framings of EU–Mediterranean cooperation and, more specifically, the EU's engagement with and inclusion of civil society actors. 'In/visibility' contributes to the construction of social imaginaries through the simplification, even obfuscation, of wider social, economic and political dynamics that characterize South Mediterranean neighbours, such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. At the same time, to recognize issues and/or actors within policy discourses and provide them access to policy instruments is to 'make them visible' within a specific policy process. Invisibility implies the opposite. Such framings give evidence of a will on the part of the EU to align with forces for political change while maintaining the stability of formal relations with South Mediterranean states. Within this context, Eurocentric templates have served to interpret civil society, social change and the significance of civil unrest, indicating that democratization has been mainly imagined in 'western' terms. Consequently, civil activism has been ascribed a decisive role in the process of establishing democratic and humanitarian standards within authoritarian environments prevailing in these countries. What has been largely hidden from the narrative of wider cooperation and democratic change in the southern Neighbourhood is the more general significance of civil society as an agent of social development and as an important cultural resource.

The analysis is based on a mix of sources that include recent EU documents that define the process of re-evaluating and reconceptualizing engagement in the South Mediterranean and a review of literature dealing with ENP, civil society and CSO (civil society organization) activism in the Southern Mediterranean. In addition, interviews with CSO representatives working in the area of youth exchange provided important critical insights. The perspective elaborated in this essay addresses a need to understand the situated political and social concerns of local societies in the Mediterranean region as an integral element in the construction of regional cooperation. Here, we take inspiration from scholars of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy (Borren, 2008; Brambilla, 2015) who suggest that participation and hence visibility in political life is the necessary yardstick by which democratic endeavour can be measured. We specifically deal with EU's often problematic (Eurocentric) appropriations of civil society, including the role of Islamist civil society, as a force for change and as a central element in the construction of what we term 'Mediterranean Neighbourhood'.[3]

Dandashly (2018) and Kourtelis (2018), among many others, have directly criticized the EU's selective engagement with South Mediterranean countries, which marginalizes local needs and privileges security issues; by the same token, they have also recognized the capacity of the EU to adapt its external actions to changing conditions and in response to demands levelled at the EU. Moreover, in directing attention to EU readings and responses since the 2010/2011 Arab uprisings, we indicate how EU imaginaries of EU–Mediterranean cooperation are subject to frame adjustment and can imply an opening up of discursive and policy spaces but, in order to stabilize the EU's self-understanding, maintains a biased reduction of complexity through selective political framings of local civil societies.[4]

## In/visibility and socio-spatial imaginaries of neighbourhood

According to Jessop (2012: 74)

an imaginary is a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world. There are many such imaginaries and they are involved in complex and tangled relations at different sites and scales of action.

Following the logic that geographical imaginations matter (see Gregory, 1994; Howie and Lewis, 2014), recent studies of geopolitics, borders and bordering have appropriated the heuristic of imaginaries as a means of approaching complex socio-spatial processes (Brambilla, 2014, 2015; Bürkner, 2017). In order to be meaningful, ambitious political agendas of regional cooperation, such as the EU's promotion of Neighbourhood, must build on imaginaries that orient action, reduce complexity and allow actors to 'focus selectively on some aspects of the world as the basis for becoming active participants therein and/or for describing and interpreting it as disinterested observers' (Jessop, 2012: 72). Similarly, imaginaries provide practical clues to the everyday and its social interpretation; they tell us, for example, what would be appropriate solutions to a new set of problems – according to a guiding principle or rationales that are immediately intelligible or acceptable. As Clark and Jones (2011: 291–292) argue:

> Elite spatialising political practice (…) comprises actors' use of spatial concepts in familiar settings and their adaptation to new socio-political contexts. These new contexts provide prompts and cues to elite actors to develop new spatialising political practices, derived from reappraising their existing practices and the spatial concepts upon which they are predicated.

Spatial imaginaries of Neighbourhood perform basic border-making functions: they separate what belongs 'in' from that which is to remain outside a specific territory, region, social milieu or specific political context (see Cebeci, 2017). According to Wodak (2007), furthermore, historical, geographical and religious dimensions condition inclusionary as well as exclusionary discursive practices of EU political elites. As a prominent example of spatializing politics, Mediterranean Neighbourhood suggests a natural, if rather unilateral, belonging of surrounding regions to the EU. It also renders natural the EU's mission of modernization based on 'European values' (Cebeci and Schumacher, 2016; Jones, 2011). Consequently, Mediterranean Neighbourhood promotes asymmetric power relations, beckoning neighbouring countries to seek orientation through regional cooperation partnerships (see Averre, 2009; Bialasiewicz, 2012; Börzel et al., 2014).

Much criticism of ENP has focused on its *Eurocentric* nature (Lehne, 2014; Smith, 2005), involving the confirmation of the Mediterranean as an *economic, political and social development space* that requires EU action and the construction of a liberal mode of democratization and economic development (Dandashly, 2018; Teti, 2012). However, it is not simply plain Eurocentrism (in the sense of claims for hegemony) that is at stake but also the consolidation of a sense of EU geopolitical identity (Ifversen and Kølvraa, 2007). ENP stabilizes this identity by providing an ideational framework that enables the EU to reduce the complexity of its external relations and provide a vision, if a highly selective one, for action. This implies a dynamics of selectively highlighting actors, institutions and agency in order to manage tensions between geopolitical realities and the EU's desire for a more predictable and stable geopolitical environment – at least it promises a degree of stabilizing coherence in the face of changing conditions (Chernobrov, 2016; Natorski, 2016). One major drawback of such strategies is a lack of connection between the EU's conceptualizations of a southern Neighbourhood and socio-political realities of EU–Mediterranean interaction. To paraphrase Bialasiewicz et al. (2013), this feeds into a 'macroregional fantasy' of EU geopolitical influence.

In analysing the role of spatial imaginaries in orienting EU regional actorness, we consequently suggest that the concept of *visibility* (and thus *invisibility*) provides insights into how the EU stabilizes its role as promoter of regional cooperation. Visibility has, of course, been implicit in much critical discussion of ENP and the frequent evocation of 'border spectacles' and 'Mediterranean deaths' (e.g. by Cuttitta, 2014; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2014).

Nevertheless, the EU's politics of visibility has received comparatively little attention with regard to its spatializing practices. One possible reason for this is the ambiguous relationships between power and visibility; to be socially or politically in/visible is at once a question of recognition, of surveillance and control, but also of resistance (Brighenti, 2007). At the same time, and as indicated above, spatial imaginaries are also simplifications of political relationships that serve to create clarity of purpose within highly complex realities (Jessop, 2012). Recognizing this conceptual polyvalence, Casas-Cortes et al. (2015) identify *differential visibility* as a 'new keyword' that not only emphasizes the highly situational, subject-bound aspects of visibility but also opens space for a more objective understanding of visibility as a prerequisite for inclusive political deliberation.

Differential visibility also resonates with Arendt's (1968) notion of the politics of appearance or the making evident of positions, interests and actors that represent them. Borren (2008) has, in fact, suggested that Arendt's political philosophy can be adapted to criticize European 'politics of in/visibility' with regard to migrants, which disenfranchises them as non-citizens, exposes them (as threats) and/or obscures their claims, problems and motivations. Conversely, as positive agency, a politics of visibility could signify an expression of social acceptance and integration. Arendt's political ideas can be fruitfully mobilized by making use of Brighenti's (2007) position that the relation of social agents to political institutions and power is characterized by mutual attempts at making persons, ideas and objects selectively visible so as to achieve strategic or tactical objectives. This concept of visibility serves as a heuristic tool when exploring asymmetric relations and biased recognitions of 'others' in the Neighbourhood. Accordingly, we understand that the EU, while offering an inclusive discourse to the neighbours, by its particular attitude of defining the neighbourhood as a development space, inevitably obscures non-EU actorness and communicative competence. With this in mind, the general question of how the ENP is interpreted and appropriated by the 'non-EU' also needs to be addressed (Pace, 2014). Academic and policy debate have recently encouraged a greater focus on non-elite actors who represent wider sectors of the population and whose relation to the EU is often more complex than that of specific policy-makers (Härdig, 2015).

Building on this perspective, we will identify discursive and procedural mechanisms of creating and maintaining selectivity and, hence, in/visibility. EU support for Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region states appears to be targeted at specific actors with whom the EU deems it can work: apart from national elites these include well-established, professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[5] and westernized elements of national civil societies (Haddouk, 2016). It is self-evident that politics of in/visibility do little to recognize the Mediterranean's political, social, cultural and geographical complexity (Giaccaria and Minca, 2011). As Huber and Kamel (2015) demonstrate, the west's insistence on recognizable scenarios of social transformation has obscured the multilocal and multifaceted nature of social movements in the South Mediterranean. The so-called Arab Spring was in many ways more about the aspirations of marginalized places and people than outright regime change. The EU, however, has remained steadfast in its claims that MENA civil societies have been striving to achieve global standards of democracy and freedom (e.g. Freudenstein, 2011). As a result, recognition of the heterogeneous and multilocal nature of the uprisings, as well as their causes, has only slowly begun to translate into serious ENP reform (Balfour et al., 2016).

## Southern neighbourhood, the 'Arab Spring' and selective visibilities

The development of EU–Mediterranean regional cooperation dialogue has been punctuated by crisis since its inception in the late 1980s. Most recently, the implementation of Neighbourhood Policy in the South Mediterranean has coincided with a period of protracted financial and economic turmoil, rising north–south disparities, civil unrest and regional conflict. Much of the problem can be attributed to unsubstantiated European assumptions that economic reforms and growing interdependence support social

development and political modernization (Youngs, 2015). Indeed, even after the uprisings of 2010/2011, the European Commission (2013) confirmed that: 'EU support to stimulate sustainable economic growth is (…) crucial to the promotion of democratic institutions, provided that the countries of the region contribute to the promotion of a friendly environment for investment, jobs and growth'.

Given increasing pressure for a fundamental 'reset' of ENP, and EU–Mediterranean cooperation in particular, numerous observers have pointed to the EU's difficulties in affecting substantive improvements in its cooperation policies (Balfour et al., 2016; Bremberg, 2016; Lehne, 2014; Tömmel, 2013). This is, of course, partly due to considerable policy constraints and difficulties in achieving consensus between the European Commission, the European Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS). However, long-term legacies of problematic and misconceived cooperation philosophies continue to impact on the Neighbourhood: the dictates of market liberalization and regulatory convergence have not been met with a commensurate opening of Europe towards the south, nor has economic reform as demanded by the EU responded to pressing social needs in the region (see Achrainer, 2014). Maria Sorbello (2015) reminds us that ambitious ideas of development, economic cooperation and social dialogue have formed the basis of different conceptualizations of a common Mediterranean space since the early 1990s. However, since then an increasing sense of alienation between the EU and its southern neighbours seems to have resulted. Ironically, at the same time, increasing migration has emphasized the interdependent and interconnected nature of the Mediterranean as a region (see Jones, 2015). As Tuastad (2003) indicated, it bears mentioning that political activity in the MENA region has remained largely invisible for the west because of its incongruence with western stereotypes of Arab culture as violence-prone and backward. According to Tuastad (2003: 591) when interpreting MENA societies, the selective western gaze seeks 'explanations of political violence that omit political and economic interests and contexts when describing violence, and presents violence as a result of traits embedded in local cultures'.

## The 'Arab Spring' and beyond: Eurocentric interpretations of civil society

Well before the uprisings, the EU grasped that civil society would be a key agent in promoting its influence in the South Mediterranean began. It was the grassroots nature of the rebellions that inspired most political commentators inside the EU, as well as scholars working close to EU institutions, to give highly positive appraisals of the events. For example, as EU Commissioner for External Affairs, Catherine Ashton (2011) declared, 'deep democracy' in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia was a clear priority of EU policy. There was ample belief in the self-healing capacities of civil society, much of which allegedly had been inspired by the EU message of preserving human rights and establishing democracy (see e.g. Boose, 2012). The civil movements in these countries were considered to be an outcome of an emerging collective orientation towards universal values such as democracy, freedom, respect of human rights, the rule of law etc. – values that were claimed as specifically European and transatlantic. As one commentator operating close to the European Commission (Freudenstein, 2011: 70) put it: 'It is the triumph of these values in the Arab Spring that should give us confidence, next to the undeniable necessity to critically examine our past strategies'.

While signalling greater social engagement, the above confirms that the EU continues to seek out European-type CSOs as partners. Despite criticism of the inconsistent, bureaucratic and frequently random nature of EU support (Bicchi and Voltolini, 2013; Börzel et al., 2014), policy-oriented analyses of the role of grassroots CSOs and professionally organized NGOs in Arab Spring protests have been largely uncritical about possible incompatibilities between the EU's understanding of civil society and the ambitions developed by local civil agents (e.g. Dandashly, 2014; Echagüe et al., 2011; Van Hüllen, 2012). Common EU understandings are mostly geared towards the communitarian model of civil society, which reflects idealistic notions of grassroots autonomy, self-empowerment and claims for natural rights (e.g. Boose, 2012). While such elements of civil self-organization and self-help are

present in various local CSOs, these organizations often lack political recognition or respect in their own countries. Accordingly, there was a more general misrecognition of the role of civil society in the Arab uprisings, marginalizing the argument that the uprisings were popular reactions to mass impoverishment resulting from neoliberal reforms in MENA countries, rather than a struggle for more democracy (Bergh, 2012: 305; Dalmasso, 2014). In this regard, most observers have followed the political thinking formulated by the EU. In its institutionalized support of democracy, for example through the European Initiative Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the idealistic aim of supporting civil society and creating favourable conditions for the implementation of universal values and good governance was combined with a consistent geostrategic component (Tömmel, 2013). Intrinsically, every claim that was made for human rights and democracy conveyed the hidden agenda of binding civil agents and their countries closer to the EU. Despite the rather obvious nature of this in/visibility strategy and its practical outcomes, they have been addressed only by a small number of critical analyses (e.g. Dimitrovova, 2010; Wetzel and Orbie, 2012).

In addition, many forms of civil activism during and after the Arab Spring have remained 'unnoticed' by the EU for their complexity, informality and – surprisingly – technological underpinnings. The Arab Spring was not a unitary process and, as Huber and Kamel (2015) argue, diverse forms of mobilization, from the peripheries, in particular, contributed to the movement and also contained potential for future change. Extensive social media activism in particular was largely underestimated regarding its originality and ownership (Elghamry, 2015). It was not a simple import of western technology and related types of action but rather an original, creative acquisition of various heterogeneous tools that contributed to civil activism (Comunello and Anzera, 2012). As Khalid (2015) argues, grassroots movements with traditionally low visibility and representation (for example, women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups) were able to make their presence known and emphasize the moral nature of political revolution. These aspects of the Arab Spring have been neglected in the EU's affirmation of support to civil society.[6]

Instead, in many cases the larger national organizations and international NGOs are (mis)taken for original representatives of grassroots movements and a 'vibrant civil society' (Jad, 2011: 90; see also Ennaji, 2011; Silva et al., 2013). Also urban civil society associations, many of them operated by local elites, are preferred over rural CSOs operating closer to the social basis. These asymmetries are fostered by the EU itself because it favours NGOs, which respond to the EU's need for stable relationships with the Neighbourhood, mainly on the basis of professionalized cooperation and formal organizations. The resulting networks, which have been named 'NGO-cracies' in other regional contexts (Lutsevych, 2014), are established by professional organizations that are mostly in close touch with national policy-making elites, rather than integrated into domestic social movements. In this way, EU support, especially EU funding, often channelled through government bodies, ends up in the promotion of pro-government elite circles of the civil society – which finally strengthens the state's 'strategies of control and containment of civil society discourses' (Dimitrovova, 2010: 529). It also produces NGO-favourable inclusion in international political debates while small local CSOs are largely shut out. Such patterns of building up the visibility of EU-compatible organizations have even more negative effects for local CSOs, beyond their increasing invisibility. Not only is their access to EU financial and moral support restricted but, ironically, their autonomy can also be jeopardized once they receive support. Financial support also requires accountability, which often means new pressure on CSOs to professionalize and bureaucratize (Daniele, 2014: 28).

One conspicuous issue is the lack of interaction between EU representatives and Islamist civil society actors. Cavatorta (2006) has indicated that EU hesitance to engage with Islamist organizations is grounded in the Eurocentric belief that these are inherently undemocratic and detrimental to political reform. Cavatorta argues that this selective view of the EU fails to acknowledge the important potential role of Islamist civil society, which is not only capable of political learning but which in its interaction with other sectors of civil society can create a greater critical mass of activist organizations and actors within the general context of authoritarian rule. As

Masbah (2015) warns, the marginalization of Islamist CSOs risks marginalizing the needs of the rural and the least prosperous groups of (Moroccan) society.

Paradoxically, European understandings of civil society partly help consolidate autocratic tendencies that continue to reject European values, while the very promoters of autonomy, political independence and self-empowerment are excluded. The rising influence of authoritarian and religious groups, plus a partial restoration of authoritarianism within insufficiently established democracies, has considerably limited opportunities for basic democratic change and civil participation. As these tendencies reaffirm themselves, there exists the danger that attention could drift even further away from grassroots civil society, thereby undermining the EU's goal of promoting new forms of regional cooperation. As Catalano and Graziano (2016) document, this is evidenced by the fact that ENP incentives have been used instrumentally in South Mediterranean states by government elites rather than having any autonomous supportive effect on democratization. Indeed, a number of scholars (for example, Noutcheva, 2015) have indicated that despite the events since 2010 little substantive change has taken place in the EU's Mediterranean Neighbourhood strategy. According to Balfour et al. (2016: 7), 'Most (aid) still goes to governments, mostly still oriented towards approximation processes, while much civil society funding is de facto used with governments' acquiescence'.

## Frame adjustment and politics of selective visibility

The revolutionary movements of 2010/2011 have been generally portrayed in the West European media as a failed project of democratization (Abusharif, 2014). Huber and Kamel (2015) consider, on the contrary, that the so-called Arab Spring was an epochal turn with regard to the expression of a political right to protest and in complicating the construction of EU–Mediterranean spaces of partnership. In any case, the Arab uprisings made an important difference in terms of a frame adjustment in the elaboration of EU–Mediterranean cooperation

agendas. The 2010/2011 outbreak of civil resistance and calls for political change exacerbated the gulf between the EU's competing logics of democratization, stability and security. As a result, the EU appears to have begun moving towards a pragmatic yet more flexible and reactive role in the South Mediterranean (Dandashly, 2018). EU democracy support has thus moved towards 'a diversity-accommodating and complexity-appreciating democracy support language' (Kurki, 2012: 3). This includes 'contingencist' interpretations of political Islam that could provide an opportunity for greater engagement and cooperation instead of containment (Behr, 2013). The attempt at renewal of ENP and EU–Mediterranean dialogue also involves a much greater focus on social and sustainable development and thus on local needs (European Commission, 2017). Evidence for these changes are provided by road maps for civil society engagement as well as more recent iterations of EU–Mediterranean cooperation agendas (European Commission, 2017) that indicate a widening of perspective and the promise of a more inclusive approach (Concord, 2015; European Commission, 2012, 2017; European External Action Service, 2014a, 2014b).

The frame adjustment that is underway could promise a more reflective and responsive EU approach. However, practices of engagement in South Mediterranean states indicate that selectivity continues to apply. Practices of in/visibility manifest their persistence in the selective nature of working with the EU and its instruments, as the number and kinds of organizations that can be involved are inherently limited. The rules and partly standardized project-related routines that are needed to interact with the EU (e.g. application processes, adherence to normative programming objectives, funding modalities, reporting requirements, French or English language competence) serve, at the same time, to reinforce the EU's administrative and operational coherence. Unfortunately, these rules and routines exclude many potential partners and hence much local knowledge and expertise. Almost by default then, CSOs and NGOs that are experienced in working with the EU enjoy privileged access and visibility. As one Cairo-based CSO representative indicated:

the EU seeks civil society actors that speak its language and share its agendas […] other groups, more grassroots level organizations remain largely at the margins because of a lack of access and because they do not fit in to the EU's frames of civil society engagement.

With regard to EU rules, one of the interviewees stated:

> it is very cumbersome and onerous to work with EU programmes and financing instruments. It often feels like an exercise in disciplining. Other organizations don't have this problem. The Anna Lindh Foundation, the Swedish Diakonia or German foundations are much more accessible.[7]

This direct (and indirect) selectivity is substantiated in the case of Morocco, where Dimitrovova (2010: 524) described the nature of civil society as contradictory and changing, '(…) at times supportive of, at other times hostile or indifferent, to the EU's democratic and often neo-liberal inspired agenda'. There is a deep divide between urban CSOs operating close to the government or influential political parties, and CSOs that have spontaneously emerged in rural areas. Urban CSOs that the EU has tended to work with were established by a French-speaking, middle class intellectual elite that are relatively close to political power (Silva et al., 2013). In contrast, rural CSOs, and also many neighbourhood-based urban CSOs, followed more communitarian approaches, establishing grassroots networks to meet the challenge of poverty and service provision as felt by local communities (Härdig, 2015). A similar role has been taken by local women's organizations operating against poverty, hunger or social insecurity in various contexts and serving as important endogenous drivers of social change in North Africa (Ennaji, 2011; Salhi, 2011).

The Tunisian case, perhaps the most positive example of civil society mobilization, provides ample evidence of selective engagement. For example, EU support for independent civil society movements is accompanied there by paternalism and a sense of a EU attempt to impose cultural hegemony, reflected in a reluctance to use Arabic instead of English or French (Haddouk, 2016). Furthermore, Haddouk (2016: 2) writes that

more broadly, EU programmes in Tunisia are perceived as privileges granted to those who advocate a certain vision that is not necessarily inclusive—or, to be more precise, that should be subjected to an open, intrasocietal debate. This debate may also address religion, domestic politics, and other particularly sensitive social issues.

In its Tunisia Country Report, the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development, or Concord (2017: 5), has pointed out that 'CSOs seem not to be consulted on the formulation and priorities of the EU Delegation calls, although they generally find this support as relevant in the current national context'. The Concord Report (2017: 5) also draws attention to the long-standing issue of the EU's administrative practices, which are inherently selective and serve to reduce the participation and hence visibility of grassroots CSOs.

> Access to funds is complicated and restricted, both by the limited capacities of CSOs (technical, institutional, financial) and by the burdensome procedures and complex requirements. Very few CSOs have the capacity to apply for the calls and to understand and speak the 'EU language'.

The Concord group suggest that the European Union Directorate (EUD) in Tunisia develops more systematic approaches to capacity-building that are based on a reflection of past experience and are implemented through programmes with greater local specificity. In doing this, the EUD would signal sustained commitment to Tunisia CSOs and in doing so improve local perceptions of the EU's role.

It bears mentioning that despite a strengthened engagement with civil society, mention of Islamist organizations is largely avoided. The EU's 2011 outline of a 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity' makes no mention of Islamist organizations despite its clear commitment to support CSO capacity-building. Similarly, one of the EU's first post-Arab Spring communiqués 'supporting closer cooperation and regional integration in the Maghreb' (2012) only mentions Islam in connection with terrorism. Following Behr (2013), the rise of political Islam in the EU's southern neighbourhood has challenged the imaginary of EU-led modernization and exacerbated the quandary of balancing regional stability,

security and democratization. Behr (2013) also indicates that while the political movements in the MENA region have elicited a shift in EU strategy from containment to an engagement with political Islam, this engagement takes place on conditions dictated by the EU and, thus, according to essentialist assumptions of political Islam's incompatibility with modern democracy. It is remarkable, furthermore, that in the recent road maps and policy reviews, the role of Islamist grassroots organizations is not directly mentioned. Instead, this is indirectly suggested through an emphasis on a greater need to understand and address social and cultural issues. At the same time, the 2017 ENP Implementation Review makes brief mention of EU intentions to work closer with large regional and international Islamic organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in areas of wider economic and social significance (European Commission, 2017).

In the case of Tunisia, Morocco and other south Mediterranean countries, hesitant EU engagement with Islamist CSOs is also attributable to a fear of political consequences. As one Cairo-based CSO representative remarked: '(…) the EU is afraid of them, that they could politicize relationships and create conflicting agendas. The EU has a self-image to protect, und to countless political interests of individual member states and is that makes it tricky'.[7] According to Concord (2017: 2):

> Besides lack of funds and capacities, the politicization of civil society is a concern. There is still also a reciprocal lack of trust between CSOs and public authorities, which raises questions not only for the dialogue at central level, but also in the process of decentralization and in participative democracy at the local level (…).

The EU is thus wary of the often tense relationship between Islamist movements and national governments. Moreover, maintaining good relations with partner states complicates the inclusion of Islamist CSOs, as in the case of Morocco where the continuous marginalization of Islamist organizations, such as the Jamiat al-Adl wal-Ihsan organization (AWI), has been supported by the government (Masbah, 2015). In summary, we can argue that this lack of engagement with an exceptional cultural other is not

only a matter of the EU's avoidance of confusing political struggles, but it also reflects the spatial politics of implicitly marginalizing 'unwieldy' partners who do not reflect the EU's values or harmonize with its projects of democratization.

## Conclusions and consequences: Revising neighbourhood as a concept

Imaginaries shift with time, maintaining the basic premises that give them a sense of purpose and legitimacy, and also incorporating new information and experiences that allow for their sustainability. This is reflected in developments within the ENP framing process and the modification of the conceptual and ideational framework of ENP while maintaining the exceptionalist EU narrative. Yet, basic contradictions between the EU's mission and its engagement with South Mediterranean societies remain unresolved – the main problem being the impossibility of a hegemonic project of region-building as well as the persistence of mutual stereotypes. As Dandashly (2018: 5) argues: 'While one would expect a reframing of EU democracy to better reflect the needs and differences among Southern Mediterranean partners, the discussion shows the dominance of the Western liberal democracy frame fused with security concerns'.

Without doubt, there is need for a reassessment of the EU's approach, producing alternatives that, following Giaccaria and Minca (2011: 346), better reflect the Mediterranean as a 'plurality of voices'. In order to move beyond the unsatisfactory status quo, it is necessary to arrive at understandings of 'Mediterranean Neighbourhood' that reflect not only one-sided political visions and differential visibility but also a wider recognition of its everyday cultural images, social representations and internal political aspirations. This would open an opportunity for the re-positioning of civil society as a generator of alternate visions of Neighbourhood, especially by acknowledging non-formal modes of political agency and its geopolitical significance. Such dialogic instead of normative understandings imply developing imaginaries of Neighbourhood as a contact point and a point of contestation (see Dines et al., 2015).

Such re-imaginings of Neighbourhood are demanding as they require new open-mindedness towards the complexity of relations and interaction between the EU and MENA states, both at the level of policy and academic reflection. On the analytical side, the use of in/visibility strategies as a generator of restricted notions of Neighbourhood requires more attention. Politically, the EU's reduction of complexity need to be reconsidered as it limits potential alternative conceptualizations of Neighbourhood that could in the long term prove more productive. Up to now, in/visibility has been used to help the EU monopolize notions of Neighbourhood instead of supporting its creative development. In accordance with Laine's (2017) arguments, Neighbourhood can be conceptualized as a context of interaction that is politically framed in very general terms but that in detail is composed of many different spaces of contact and exchange that are interlinked in complex ways. A more viable EU–Mediterranean Neighbourhood might therefore emerge as a patchwork of relations rather than merely as an asymmetric cooperation policy, border regime or geopolitical rationale.

## Funding

## Notes

1. See the website at http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/. Last accessed 30 August 2016.
2. See the EU's Neighbourhood Policy website at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood_en. Last accessed 31 July 2017.
3. The term Mediterranean Neighbourhood is in fact frequently invoked by the EU, particularly in relation to environmental cooperation. See: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/enlarg/med/med_neighbours.htm. Last accessed 31 July 2017.
4. The notion of framing has been borrowed from media studies, where it indicates 'the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness' (Entman, 1993: 51–52). Within a political context, framings set the stage for individual discourses, providing salience and the limits of what can be said (Matthes, 2012).
5. The acronym 'NGO' is used in this text to describe 'non-governmental organizations' operating either at a national level within a formalized organizational structure (e.g. as a think tank or a business association) or at a global scale as part of a larger organization. 'CSO' stands for 'civil society organization' and denominates all forms of civil self-organization that may assume formalized structures but often remain informal and temporary.
6. Based on a study of the roadmaps for engagement and documents outlining the renewal of ENP (Concord, 2015, 2017; European Commission, 2017; European External Action Service, 2014a, 2014b).
7. Interviews with representatives of an international youth exchange organization based in Cairo and operating in several South Mediterranean states as well as the EU. Interview date 18 August 2017.

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