Normative Empire Europe: The European Union, its Borderlands, and the ‘Arab Spring’*

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Abstract
Focusing on the EU’s relations with its periphery, this paper takes issue both with persistent ‘normative’ conceptions of the EU’s international role in the European Studies literature and with the constructivist–rationalist divide in IR theory. The conceptualization of the EU – a vast, composite and ever-expanding entity with ‘fuzzy’ borders – as an empire of sorts bridges the theoretical divide and offers a powerful explanation of the EU’s behaviour vis-à-vis its vicinity. Through the transfer of rules and practices beyond its borders, the EU is indeed engaged in ‘normative’ policies, which however primarily serve the security and economic interests of the EU and its Member States. Thus, the EU’s (allegedly) norm-based behaviour is in itself a utility-maximizing strategy, which also serves the construction of a normative identity. The EU’s response to the Arab uprisings serves to illustrate the argument, with the concept of ‘empire’ resolving the puzzle of seemingly inconsistent EU policies.

Keywords: EU external relations, North Africa and Middle East, empire, borderlands, Arab uprisings.

Introduction
In the specialized literature on the international role of the European Union (EU), the debate on whether the EU is a ‘normative power’ or whether it acts strategically in the pursuit of its interests has been surprisingly resilient. With its acceptance of the concept of ‘Normative Power Europe’, stressing the export of universal norms in EU external relations (Manners, 2002), the scholarly debate presupposes a contradiction between the attributes ‘normative’ and ‘realist’. The dispute in EU studies reflects the much larger debate in international relations (IR) between mainly constructivist approaches on the one hand, and realist or rationalist accounts on the other.

Focusing on EU policies vis-à-vis its immediate vicinity, which involve the export of rules and practices, this paper argues that the instrumental–normative dispute has been

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operating within a false dichotomy. I contend that it can be resolved if we conceptualize the European Union – a vast, composite and ever-expanding entity, with ‘fuzzy’ borders – as an empire of sorts. Throughout history, empires have sought to stabilize the periphery, to draw economic advantages from it, to export the imperial order and cultivate elites there. Moreover, empires have typically engaged in some sort of ‘civilizing mission’, linked to a normative perception of themselves. The main argument of this article is that, by conceptualizing the EU as an empire, we may conceive of the EU’s exporting of rules and practices to neighbouring states as the modus operandi of empires in pursuit of their own interests; this modus operandi also serves the construction of a ‘normative’ identity. Significantly, the rules and practices transferred by the EU are not congruent with the norms postulated in the ‘normative power’ framework, as discussed below. The conceptualization proposed here offers a powerful explanation of EU foreign policy toward the neighbourhood by linking behaviour to the Union’s key features as an empire, thereby resolving the frequently observed contradictions between the EU’s normative discourse and its interest-based policies. The EU’s response to the Arab uprisings that started at the end of 2010 will serve to illustrate my argument. Hence, by relying on a synthesis of constructivism and rationalism in the study of the EU and its borderlands, the paper provides a concrete example of how the ‘normative empire’ concept reconciles interests and identities in explaining EU behaviour toward its borderlands.

The article is structured as follows. Section I focuses on the EU studies debate on the EU’s international role, by anchoring it in the broader IR argument between constructivist and rationalist/realist approaches. The article subsequently discusses the conceptualization of the EU as an empire. I will show that an imperial approach captures apparently inconsistent EU policies toward the eastern and southern periphery, while also accounting for the EU’s perception of itself as a ‘normative power’. Focusing on the EU’s response to the Arab uprisings as further evidence, Section III demonstrates that the EU adjusted its policies without altering the imperial modus operandi. Hence, the article suggests a novel way of understanding the EU’s relations to its borderlands, proposes a concrete way to move beyond the ‘rationalist–constructivist’ debate in IR and challenges a key assumption of the ‘normative power Europe’ approach.

I. Interests, Identity, and ‘Normative Power’

Although IR’s ‘paradigmatic wars’ have lost their prominence more recently, the normative–instrumental divide that prompted the third ‘great debate’ has remained a key feature of the discipline (Fearon and Wendt, 2002; Jackson and Nexon, 2013, p. 555 ff.). As the ancient Greek philosophers were preoccupied with the role of ideas and reason, this debate is of course hardly new. While a review of the complex dispute on norms and rationality in international relations (cf. Kahler, 1998) would go beyond the scope of this article, there have been several important suggestions as to how to move beyond the divide. A number of scholars have called for analytical eclecticism and pluralism (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Benett, 2013; Lake, 2013). Others have tried to show that the rationalist–constructivist dichotomy is by and large an artificial one (cf. Hynek and Teti, 2010).

In this regard, one line of argumentation takes issue with the distinction made between an actor’s embeddedness in a ‘thick’ normative environment, which is associated with constructivist explanations, and an actor’s high degree of independence from the social
environment, which typically underscores rationalism (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). Thus, critics have argued that rationalist actors also depend on the social context, even if this context is ‘thin’ and the actor in question is largely autonomous. Significantly, constructivists focus on the development of norms and identities that influence the definition of interests before decisions are taken (cf. Ruggie, 1998; Adler, 1997). Conversely, realists/rationalists tend to study rational decision-making once those interests are known, thus taking them as given. By recognizing that the definition of interests may vary, however, the assumed contradiction between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of expected consequences (March and Olsen, 1998) may be resolved: in both cases actors seek to maximize their value or utility according to their preferences and beliefs about an expected outcome, while acting rationally against the definition of these interests (Wendt, 1999, ch. 3; Jackson and Nexon, 2013, p. 556). By adopting a rather broad conception of rationality, this line of argumentation implicitly assumes that rationality is a product of social construction as well.

Arguably, this proposition may be useful at the theoretical level. However, at the level of empirical research, seemingly distinct normative and instrumental logics often coexist uneasily. This article thus explores a second path to overcoming the divide, by providing an example of how, in practice, an actor’s utility-maximizing strategies and norm-based behaviour interlock, reinforce and constitute each other. More specifically, I explore a case in which an actor’s (apparently) norm-driven behaviour is a utility-maximizing strategy in itself. As explained further below, the article posits that the conceptualization of the EU as an empire of sorts captures the synchronicity and interconnectedness of interest-based and normative behaviour toward its near abroad. Anchored in what could be termed a ‘rationalist–constructivist’ approach, this proposition, while capturing the underlying logic of EU foreign policy behaviour, is also relevant with regard to the continuing normative–instrumentalist dichotomy in EU studies.

Normative Power and Its Critics

EU studies, too, have been affected by IR’s constructivist–rationalist debate. EU scholars have been seeking to define the international role of the European Communities/European Union for decades, starting perhaps in the 1970s with Duchêne’s concept of civilian power. Since Ian Manners (2002) coined the notion of ‘Normative Power Europe’, debates in EU studies on the Union’s normative ‘actorness’ have abounded. For Manners (2002, p. 239), the EU exerts its normative power by diffusing a set of principles – including peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law and human rights – that the Member States adhere to, setting an example in world politics. The EU’s support for the International Criminal Court and the abolition of the death penalty serve as classic examples here (Manners, 2002; 2006; Lucarelli and Manners, 2006). Other scholars have been dismissive of the notion. Pointing to its highly ideological nature (cf. Cebeci, 2012), some insist that the EU is a realist power in pursuit of its own interests (e.g. Hyde-Price, 2006), though possibly disguised in normative clothing (Seeberg, 2009).

Undoubtedly, the ‘normative power’ debate has evolved considerably since Manners’ seminal article.1 Thus, studies have unpacked the construction of EU norms and identity

1 It is impossible to quote all the relevant works on Normative Power Europe here.
by factoring in interests, power and the making of ‘the other’ (e.g. Diez 2005; Risse, 2010). Other attempts to bridge the alleged dichotomy between norm-driven and interest-based behaviour have highlighted the strategic use of norms (e.g. Youngs, 2004; Martin, 2011), or advanced the concept of hegemony when analysing normative power (Diez, 2013). Yet altogether, the literature has reaffirmed the validity of the ‘normative power’ framework (e.g. Nicolaïdis and Whitman, 2013), and with it, the assumption that the EU is predisposed to act in a normative way because of its particular history and normative construction (e.g. Birchfield, 2013).

Three additional points are worth stressing here. First, the ‘normative power’ framework often fails to distinguish between different geographical areas. Thus, with regard to global governance issues, the EU may contribute to the definition of broader international norms, such as in the realm of trade (Nicolaïdis and Howse, 2002). However, in the EU’s relations with its periphery, and especially regarding the repeated rounds of enlargement to incorporate new states, the transfer of the EU’s own rules and norms is central. Thus, EU policies often involve different types of norms, depending on how ‘close to home’ the respective state or region is.

Second, the idea of EU norms diffusion has been eagerly postulated with regard to EU enlargement. Focusing on ‘Europeanization’ processes, the adoption of EU rules by candidate countries and new Member States has been highlighted (Schimmelfennig, 2005; Börzel and Risse, 2012). Governance approaches have also looked at EU rule transfer to new ‘neighbours’ (Lavenex, 2004; 2014). While these studies tend to be concerned with formal and legal compliance, scholars working on the EU’s relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have traditionally been more critical of ‘normative power’; first, while the EU adopts a mission civilisatrice toward the ‘neighbourhood’ at large (Zielonka, 2013), the history of European colonialism makes the EU’s supposedly benevolent rule transfer to the south particularly problematic. Second, specific EU actions have plainly contradicted the concept of normative power. These include, for instance, the EU’s traditional lack of resolve in promoting democratic reforms, together with its history of pampering dictators and ignoring persistent human rights violations (cf. Youngs, 2001). This is also obvious in eastern Europe, where the EU continues to co-operate with countries with clear autocratic leanings (Bosse, 2012). The EU’s focus on security and the prevention of unwanted migration from the south, at the expense of human rights (e.g. Cassarino, 2005; Joffé, 2007), also militates against the claim to export democracy. The Union’s traditionally protectionist trade policies on agriculture (Tovias, 2006), the prioritization of energy security over reforms (Nuriyev, 2007), and its weakness in resolving conflicts in its wider neighbourhood (Tocci, 2008; Whitman and Wolff, 2010; Del Sarto, 2014; Gordon and Pardo, 2015) must be mentioned here as well.

The third observation that adds weight to my argument regards the traditional focus on democracy promotion in the debate. According to Manners’ concept, it is assumed that for the EU to be normative, it must seriously promote, inter alia, peace, democracy and fundamental rights. This is often coupled with an implicit assumption of the EU’s benevolent intentions. Of course, some may acknowledge that promoting those values

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2 Assessments of EU policies towards the MENA region were more positive in the early years of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, due to the initiative’s initial region-building approach (Adler et al., 2006). After 9/11 this approach was gradually abandoned.
in neighbouring states is in the EU’s interest as well. Yet by adopting a specific conception of ‘normative’, the verdict on EU policy toward its surroundings is necessarily negative. I argue that the EU is indeed normative, but not in the sense of ‘normative power Europe’, as discussed in the following.

II. Normative Empire Europe

Exporting Rules and Practices

In its relations with the neighbourhood, the EU has been acting in a ‘normative’ way, by exporting its rules, standards and governance patterns beyond its borders (cf. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009). This also entails the transfer of EU practices, defined here as repeated and performative processes that embody, express and reify specific background knowledge on the material world (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p. 6 ff).

The concept of practices is particularly useful as it goes beyond the formal adoption of rules that may result from the signing of agreements. Consisting of the performance of specific actions, which express a meaning on which the parties have agreed beforehand, practices focus on the operationalization and thus implementation of rules. The plethora of practices that the EU seeks to export to neighbouring states ranges from testing procedures for food safety to financial control mechanisms in government agencies and border management practices, to name but a few. Put differently, the EU’s export of its rules and practices is tantamount to disseminating ‘the EU way of doing things’.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2003–4, embodies this approach most visibly. Offering a ‘stake’ in the EU’s internal market, the ENP invited states in the EU’s eastern and southern peripheries to negotiate an advanced type of cooperation. Significantly, access to the EU’s internal market is conditional upon the respective country adopting EU rules and standards (e.g. Commission, 2012a: 5). For instance, the latest generation of EU trade agreements on offer explicitly demands from partner countries that they harmonize their trade-related legislation with the acquis communautaire, the extensive body of legislation constituting EU law.

Likewise, the numerous co-operation programmes on enterprise policy, transport and border management, to name but a few, presuppose the third country’s regulatory convergence with the EU. Referring to the envisaged Common European Aviation Area, which extends to the EU periphery, for instance, the Commission praises reforms made in third countries ‘to move towards EU transport standards’ (Commission, 2013a, p. 13). The (Commission 2013c, p. 15) is also very explicit about its aim of wanting to ‘integrate’ neighbouring countries into the emerging ‘European Research Area’.

Brussels also financially supports the training of public administration officials in all ENP countries on how to apply EU rules. Thus, a ‘Support Programme’ assists third countries in implementing the agreements signed with the EU, so as to ‘benefit from the best practices and experiences of European legislation, rules and regulations on government administration’ (Support to the Association Agreement, 2008). This includes participation in EU-funded ‘twinning’ programmes together with different types

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3 The Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements remain the legal basis of EU–MENA relations; most eastern ENP countries signed a Cooperation and Partnership Agreement. The so-called ENP Action Plans are a marching route of kinds; they are not legally binding.
of technical assistance, such as TAIEX and SIGMA, the latter targeting financial control and good governance. Both TAIEX and twinning, originally developed for eastern accession countries and still managed by the Commission’s DG Enlargement, explicitly aim at exporting the EU’s *acquis communautaire*.\(^4\)

To give some figures, between 2004 and 2012, 12 ENP countries were involved in 156 twinning projects, with an overall budget of roughly €160 million (European Commission and HTSPE, 2012, p. VI).\(^5\) Between 2004 and mid-2013, the operational budget for twinning projects launched in Morocco was €30m, for Tunisia €36 million, and for Egypt €31 million (del Mar Roca Requena, 2013).\(^6\) In 2011, TAIEX training activities accounted for a total of €3 million (European Commission, 2012b: 33). These figures may not be impressive per se, but they express the constant process of training the administrative elites of neighbouring countries on how ‘to do things the EU way’. Hence, through these mechanisms the EU seeks to transform partner country bureaucracies by promoting new practices (also Bahçeçik, 2013).

Interestingly, Brussels pays, or contributes to, the salaries of dozens of government officials in ENP states, who are in charge of co-ordinating the EU’s training activities (they usually form a separate unit within the ministry of international co-operation or foreign affairs). For example, in mid-2013 the unit in Tunisia consisted of 16 EU-sponsored officials, the one in Egypt counted 18 individuals and the Moroccan support unit included 13 EU-financed staff (del Mar Roca Requena, 2013). Efforts at cultivating EU-friendly bureaucratic elites are mirrored by the co-optation of neighbouring governments with the aim of preventing migration to Europe. The training of border agencies, the selective outsourcing of border control duties and technical assistance figure predominantly in the migration policies of the EU and of its Member States. Concurrently, the process of neo-liberal restructuring prescribed by EU policies has been producing powerful, and generally EU-friendly, economic elites in MENA countries (cf. Guazzone and Pioppi, 2009; also Roccu, 2015).

In short, the EU has indeed been involved in a ‘normative’ process of gradually exporting its rules and practices to the neighbourhood. However, these rules differ considerably from those norms stipulated in the ‘normative power Europe’ concept. Pertaining predominantly to the integration of third states into different aspects of the EU’s internal market, the transferred rules and practices focus on regulatory convergence and efficient economic governance, together with border control practices aimed at preventing unwanted migrants. Significantly, whereas neighbouring states are free to decide on the intensity of their ties with the EU, the rules and practices of co-operation are non-negotiable.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) offers short-term assistance in implementing the ENP Action Plans. Twinning consists of sending at least one resident advisor and a number of shorter missions from the public administration of one EU Member State to the beneficiary. SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) is a mainly EU-funded joint initiative with the OECD (European Commission, 2013b).

\(^5\) The countries are Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

\(^6\) In spite of comparable budgets, the size of these states varies, with Morocco having around 32 million inhabitants, Egypt 83 million and Tunisia around 11 million.

\(^7\) In practice, third countries often implement EU rules according to domestic needs, which, to a certain extent, Brussels seems to tolerate.
It may be argued that EU rules and practices are embedded in broader universal norms, thus justifying the ‘normative power’ concept. For instance, EU best practices aimed at increasing the accountability of public administrations may be subsumed under the notions of good governance and the rule of law. However, while there is an extensive debate on whether good governance and the rule of law are essential for, or conducive to, democracy, it all depends on how they are defined. Indeed, a narrow definition of these concepts is not necessarily contingent on democracy (cf. Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2011, pp. 936–8) – although they may be conducive to a good business environment. In other words, supporting the rule of law does not automatically advance democracy, and EU best practices in the public sector cannot be conflated with the promotion of democratic governance tout court, as some studies seem to imply (cf. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011).

**Impact and Rationale**

What is the impact of the EU’s transfer of its rules and practices beyond its borders? As argued elsewhere, it gradually transforms the ‘neighbourhood’ into EU borderlands (Del Sarto, 2010). Borderlands, as defined here, are hybrid areas in close geographic proximity to a border, which are directly affected by the latter. The notion rests on the growing disaggregation of the different functions of borders, due to globalization and technological innovation. This leads to a distinction between borders that may be physical and thus regulate the movement of people and goods, and functional or legal borders, which circumscribe the application of specific laws and rules. Departing from the Westphalian model of statehood, in which borders simultaneously defined territory, state authority and the ‘nation’, borders are thus conceived of as complex social constructions (cf. Newman, 2003). Seen from this perspective, EU policies toward its near abroad can be conceptualized as a constant expansion of its disaggregated boundaries to the periphery, with variation in pace and intensity across different states and issue-areas. The EU’s periphery is thereby increasingly connected to the European core. Rule transfer thus becomes a form of exerting power on peripheral states, although it does also depend on their preferences and bargaining power.

The crucial question arising here concerns the rationale underpinning EU policy. Why is the Union acting in this manner? There are two distinct answers, which, however, are interlinked. The first is that the EU’s modus operandi toward its ‘neighbourhood’ is a cost-effective way of advancing its security interests and economic preferences – particularly in the absence of means of coercion. While the EU/EC’s concern with stability in the MENA region dates back to the 1970s (cf. Bicchi, 2007), the end of the Cold War and the EU’s absorption of post-communist states entailed a new apprehension toward the ‘new’ periphery in the east. The European Security Strategy of 2003 is explicit about the EU’s vested interest in stability in the Balkans and the Caucasus, while defining ‘economic stagnation, social unrest and unresolved conflicts’ (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 8) in the southern Mediterranean as a potential security threat.

The ENP epitomizes these concerns most visibly in its objective of establishing ‘a ring of friends’, tantamount to creating a buffer zone of sorts (Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2005). Stability in the periphery is also vital for securing the EU’s energy supply from oil- and gas-rich states in the east and south, as well as for advancing the EU’s trade interests by consolidating existing export markets and exploring new ones.
The second answer to the question of why the EU aims at regulatory convergence in the periphery is that the EU does what it does because of what it is. This argument could be seen as anchored in the functionalist literature explaining the European integration process (cf. Mitrany, 1975). However, the imperial approach, applied by some scholars to the European Union (Zielonka, 2006; 2013; Colomer, 2011; Gravier, 2009; 2011; Beck and Grande, 2011; Sepos, 2013), is far more helpful here. Empires may be characterized as vast and composite hub-like polities comprising a core and peripheries, territorially unstable over time. They also promote a mission civilisatrice at the top level (Gravier, 2011, p. 418; Motyl, 2001, p. 4).8

Conceptualizing the EU as an empire of sorts has a number of advantages. First, it allows us to account for some of its peculiar characteristics. These include the EU’s vast territory comprising different and unequal constitutive elements; its variable geometry with overlapping but not necessarily congruent functional borders (such as those delineating the eurozone, the Schengen area, the monetary union and the internal market); its ‘fuzzy’ external borders (Christiansen et al., 2000); and its constant territorial expansion to include new members. As Galtung (1973, p. 18) noted more than four decades ago, phases of deepening integration among existing Member States, and phases of expansion with constant issues to include new members, have succeeded one another.9

Second, the imperial paradigm aptly captures the configuration of unequal power relations between the EU and its borderlands. While the EU retains a certain power of attraction, the export of its practices to the periphery ensures the continuity of the imperial order. In this context, as we have seen, the EU cultivates, in peripheral states, political, administrative, and economic elites which share the interests of their European counterparts; a classical aspect of imperial relations (Galtung, 1971; Motyl, 2001, pp. 12–13). With asymmetry and division of labour marking relations between the centre and the periphery, core elites channel resource flows from the core to the periphery and back (Motyl, 2001, p. 4). Interestingly, an ‘imperial geopolitical vision’ has been detected in EU documents post-2004 enlargement (Browning and Joenniemi, 2008, p. 521). With the notable feature of EU expansion occurring by agreement, processes of rule transfer and different ‘buffering’ logics coexist.

Third, the concept of empire is compatible with the EU’s framing of its interest-driven policies in the realm of promoting peace and democracy – even if the outcome departs from these ideals. Reflecting a certain civilizing mission that is anchored in the EU’s own success story of peace and prosperity in post-war Europe, the transfer of rules and practices contributes to the EU’s perception of itself as a benevolent ‘normative power’. This perspective also accounts for the EU’s prescribing of the neo-liberal development model that is deeply anchored in a European concept of modernity.

Finally, applying an imperial approach to the EU explains why the promotion of democracy and human rights in MENA states is not a top priority for the EU, as has been amply documented (e.g. Pace, 2009; Cassarino, 2012; Hollis, 2012). Certainly, the EU maintains civil society and democracy promotion programmes in its borderlands. However, there will be no serious engagement as long as democratization is perceived

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8 The literature on Europe as empire is more complex than the works cited here.
9 These traits distinguish the EU from other powers, including large states, which may also be concerned with stability and economic benefits in third states.
as potentially running counter to the empire’s key interests, namely stability, security and the prospects of economic benefits. This is particularly the case since the Union and its Member States can achieve these same objectives by working with autocratic governments. Significantly, the case is different for prospective EU members. Their transformation from a borderlands country to an EU member, with a say in the decision-making process in Brussels, is conditional on the so-called Copenhagen criteria of 1993, which explicitly state requirements, among others, for adequate institutions to guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, the protection of minorities and a functioning market economy. This resonates with the observation that imperial borders typically distinguish between an internal and an external mode of governing (Gravier, 2011; 2015).

Certainly, the EU displays some unique features of our times, such as multi-level and transnational governance, globalization and high mobility of capital and labour. Also, the empire analogy may have its limits when applied to the internal functioning of the EU. Similarly, the role of the Member States must be accounted for. In this vein, we may think of the EU as a type of empire in which some of its constituent entities may act autonomously in the pursuit of even more specific interests in the periphery. The Member States’ historical legacy and ‘special relations’ with single states thus explain the cacophony in EU external relations; one which, however, may still be conceptualized as a cacophony within the logic of normative empire. Indeed, Brussels remains in charge of EU trade policies while also managing the export of rules and practices through a plethora of co-operation programmes.

Thus, as Zielonka (2013, p. 36) has put it, the EU certainly does not resemble the empires of nineteenth-century Britain or Russia; it has neither a clearly defined centre of authority, nor a sizable military. However, it has all the key characteristics of empires, and it does what all historical empires have always done.

Hence, to synthesize, the EU is exporting its rules and practices to neighbouring states because it is an empire of sorts and because this is how empires behave in pursuit of their security interests and economic benefits vis-à-vis their borderlands. Significantly, this also entails the reproduction of the EU’s normative identity. In other words, by exporting rules and practices, the EU is normative indeed. Yet, while these rules cannot automatically be conflated with broader norms, their transfer to the borderlands becomes a means to an end, serving the empire’s interests. The imperial approach thus reconciles utility-maximizing strategies with norm-based behaviour and explains EU policies toward the neighbourhood, including its alleged contradictions. A discussion of the EU’s response to the so-called Arab spring will serve to illustrate my argument further.

### III. The EU and the ‘Arab Spring’

**Revolts in the Borderlands**

The popular uprisings in many Arab countries, which started in December 2010 and led to the ousting of long-term rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, are a complex phenomenon with uncertain outcomes and great variation across the region. What the uprisings had in common, however, was popular revolt against the political and economic order prevailing in the MENA region. The EU and its Member States, it is worth
remembering, had supported that same order by co-opting authoritarian regimes while pushing for economic reforms under the neo-liberal banner.

Indeed, notwithstanding its grim human rights record, Tunisia under Ben Ali was the model student of market reforms. While also co-operating with the security services of some Member States in the fight against terrorism, Tunis became a major beneficiary of EU funds. Similarly, Libya under Qaddafi, although not interested in EU trade agreements, co-operated in the prevention of unwanted migration to Europe. In return, it obtained substantial financial support and technical assistance, which also increased the country’s leverage over the EU and its members (Paoletti, 2011). Morocco, for decades heralded in Brussels and other European capitals as an example of democratization in respect of tradition, also followed the path of economic reforms, albeit without seriously democratizing. As the largest recipient of EU funds among MENA states, Brussels rewarded Morocco, together with reform-resistant Jordan, with ‘advanced status’. Egypt similarly showed remarkable economic growth. However, in the absence of meaningful political reforms, its process of economic liberalization led to the emergence of new economic elites, linked to political power through a complex patronage system. This was by no means a new phenomenon, Anwar as-Sadat’s intifah policy of the 1970s being a case in point (e.g. Hinnebusch, 1993).

Thus, before the Arab uprisings the MENA region exemplified the negative consequences of combining authoritarianism with market liberalization and privatization, opening the door for clientelism and rampant corruption. As a result, the elites increased their wealth and power, the gap between rich and poor grew wider, and unemployment, particularly among the youth, soared. Unequal human development, the global financial crisis, the regimes’ lack of accountability and increasing access to alternative information only added to the level of discontent. The ‘Arab spring’ also debunked the myth of the automatic process by which economic liberalization would lead to democratic reforms.

How did the EU react to the revolts in its southern borderlands? As discussed in the following section, it responded exactly as was to be expected from an empire of sorts, whose main objective is to keep the periphery stable, link it to the core and thus advance its own economic preferences and security interests.

**EU Responses to the Arab Uprisings**

In light of the unfolding events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the EU first decided to wait and see (as did, in fact, most actors). Thus, at first, Brussels was silent vis-à-vis the popular protests in Tunisia that started with the self-immolation of vegetable seller Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010. It then stated that negotiations on Tunisia’s ‘advanced status’, which had started in May 2010, would continue, albeit with a stronger focus on human rights. Eventually acknowledging ‘the courage and determination of the Tunisian people’ (Council, 2011), the EU decided to freeze the assets of the president and his entourage. However, this did not occur until after Ben Ali had left the country in January 2011 (Bicchi, 2013). Brussels was a little faster in expressing support for the demonstrators in Egypt, and it reacted relatively swiftly to the unfolding events in Libya. In the latter case it called for an arms embargo and the freezing of the assets of the ruling elites (Pinfari, 2012).
The EU’s initial response to the ‘Arab spring’ also demonstrated the usual cacophony among EU Member States. In all cases, specific security and economic interests, ‘special’ ties and considerations pertaining to domestic politics motivated the Member States’ reactions. For instance, Paris initially offered French expertise to quell the popular protests. The French government had also authorized a shipment of tear gas grenades to Tunis just two days before Ben Ali was toppled from power (Willsher, 2011). In Libya, conversely, France was the first EU member to recognize the National Transition Council, with France and the United Kingdom – two countries with more diversified trade with Libya than other EU members – also joining the NATO-led military intervention against Qaddafi’s forces under UN Security Council resolution 1973 of March 2011.10 Facing a growing number of migrants from North Africa, as Qaddafi’s role in preventing migration to Europe faltered – and considering its extensive economic and security ties with Qaddafi – Italy, on the other hand, initially sought to prevent a harsher EU response (Phillips, 2011). Rome eventually sided with France and the UK – unlike Germany, which opposed military action in Libya, mainly for reasons of domestic politics.

In the course of events the EU, to some extent, adjusted its policies. However, these adjustments occurred within the same logic that had underwritten EU policies toward its borderlands hitherto, thus hardly representing a truly new approach (Schumacher, 2011; Tocci and Cassarino, 2011; Teti, 2012). Reflecting key imperial interests, the EU continued to prioritize stability in its borderlands, security in the broad sense (including the prevention of unwanted migration) and the economic advantages of the Union and its Member States. The ‘new ENP’, consisting of a ‘new partnership for democracy’ and a ‘new response to a changing neighbourhood’ (Commission, 2011a; b), can be read exactly in this light. With the end of the ENP’s revision process coinciding with the Arab uprisings – the review had started in 2010 – the new ENP documents are surprisingly self-critical, particularly regarding the EU’s lack of resolve in promoting democracy and human rights. Hence, Brussels now emphasized the need for democratic transformation and institution-building, respect for fundamental freedoms, judicial and constitutional reform and the fight against corruption, in return for which the EU offered a substantial increase in financial support.

Five aspects of the EU’s response to the Arab uprising are particularly indicative of the EU’s *modus operandi* as normative empire. First, the new ENP is plainly framed in normative terms. Concurrently, the EU’s support for peace and democracy in the neighbourhood is explicitly linked to the Union’s own history and international identity, in a somewhat self-congratulatory way (Commission, 2011a, b, 2012a, 2013a, b).

Second, while Brussels stressed that its ‘new’ approach would be incentive-based (‘more for more’), increased assistance is made conditional on co-operation in the fight against irregular migration to the EU. To this end, the ‘Partnership for Democracy’ document of March 2011 specifies that the post-revolutionary governments would have to co-operate with FRONTEX, the EU’s border agency. Similarly, the so-called Mobility Partnerships are meant to offer visa facilitation for ‘desired’ migrants (such as skilled workers and business people) while demanding substantial co-operation from third governments in the so-called readmission – that is, expulsion – of unwanted migrants from Europe.

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10 The decision of France and the UK to intervene militarily also aimed at ensuring economic pole position in post-Qaddafi Libya, while asserting a leadership role within the EU on military matters. Moreover, it was meant to garner domestic (and in France, electoral) support (Pinfari, 2012, p. 42).
Third, in spite of the EU’s outspoken support for democratic transitions, Brussels did not cease co-operating with authoritarian governments. The civil war in Syria, and Assad’s brutal suppression of the revolt, represents an exception, prompting the EU to suspend co-operation. However, relations with oil- and gas-rich (and reform-resistant) Algeria, which witnessed some protests in early 2011, have been proceeding as usual. Co-operation with Egypt has been continuing on a barely reduced scale, although al-Sisi’s regime is even more repressive than Mubarak’s rule. Brussels also recently ‘rewarded’ Morocco, where the king implemented some reforms in response to the protests but retained ultimate authority, by beginning negotiations on a DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), the first such discussions with any MENA country.

A fourth example of how the EU has been adjusting its policies within the logic of empire regards the developmental model pursued within the new ENP. On the one hand, the EU has grown slightly more sensitive to issues that are of concern to MENA countries, such as job creation, education, financial assistance and liberalization of trade in agriculture. An EU-funded study had in fact pointed to the negative social impact of trade liberalization in the absence of mitigating policies (Impact Assessment Research Centre, 2007). On the other hand, however, the EU’s developmental credo remains unchanged. Thus, the new trade agreements on offer, the DCFTAs, may seem attractive to MENA countries, as they aim at also liberalizing trade in services, government procurement and agriculture; however, oligarchs in peripheral states and European companies are expected to profit most from liberalization in services. Thus, the EU’s response to the Arab uprisings depicts the ‘old paradigmatic foundations [...] in its continuing over-reliance on neo-liberal, capitalist market-economy recipes, economic growth, and an almost sacred belief in liberalization and privatization’ (Schumacher, 2011, p. 110). Concurrently, Brussels pushed co-operation on those issues of particular interest to the Union and its members: namely energy, anti-terrorism and, once again, migration.

Finally, an even greater emphasis on regulatory convergence characterizes the new ENP. The DCFTAs are based on the EU’s acquis communautaire, requiring an even more rigorous adoption of EU rules by MENA states. Moreover, there has been a significant increase in EU-funded training and technical assistance, in the form of TAIEX and twinning, provided for instance to post-revolution Tunisia.11 As explained previously, these programmes are explicitly based on the acquis.

Thus, the EU has undoubtedly been adjusting its policies to the new realities post-Arab uprisings. However, it has nevertheless continued to operate according to the logic of normative empire toward its borderlands. This entails a continuation of the basic idea that neighbouring countries should gradually accept a pre-defined set of EU rules and practices, without being offered any say in the EU’s decision-making processes. Brussels’ response to the Arab uprisings also displays the same old primary concern for stability in the periphery, together with the prioritization of the security and economic interests of the EU and its members. As EU policies are framed in normative terms, rule transfer also reproduces the EU’s identity.

11 The indicative budget for Tunisia for TAIEX programmes was €107,000 in 2010. In the middle of the political turmoil in 2011 it dropped to €45,000, and increased to €140,000 in 2012 (del Mar Roca Requena, 2013).
Conclusions

The article has advanced the conceptualization of the European Union as a normative empire in explaining EU policies toward its borderlands. Thus, it takes issue with a resilient key assumption of ‘normative power Europe’ approaches: that is, the Union’s presumed predisposition to act normatively in world politics because of its specific history and normative construction. Certainly, in essence the EU does not rely on the use of force in its external relations. However, the article has shown that the ‘normative’ action of transferring EU rules and practices beyond its borders primarily serves the economic and security interests of the European core vis-à-vis the periphery.

This conceptualization has four major advantages. First, it highlights the compatibility of an actor’s utility-maximizing strategies with its norm-based behaviour in a concrete case, showing that both modes interlock and reinforce each other. This finding underscores the argument that ‘scholars have constructed IR’s leading “paradigms” around groups of theories [...] that are in fact not mutually exclusive’ (Benett, 2013: 463). In fact, the normative empire concept espouses a synthesis of rationalism and constructivism, thus adopting what could be termed a ‘rationalist–constructivist’ approach.12

Second, the normative empire concept resolves the apparent contradiction between realist/rationalist and normative conceptions of the EU’s international role in the EU studies literature. It accounts for a central, but generally overlooked aspect: exporting rules and practices to neighbouring states is a cost-efficient way of seeking to stabilize the periphery, while advancing the security and economic interests of the EU and its Member States. The expansion of the imperial order beyond institutional borders also entails the cultivation of EU-friendly elites, which share the interests of the core. Thus, exporting rules and practices is constitutive of ‘normative empire Europe’ in pursuit of its interests. The logic of empire is clearly reinforced by the EU’s civilizing mission, which derives from the Union’s specific raison d’être: namely to prevent the recurrence of war through growing economic interdependence. Hence, from the EU’s perspective, it makes sense to rely on the rules and practices that succeeded in achieving this objective in Europe. And so, the modus operandi of the normative empire also reinforces, and becomes constitutive of, the EU’s normative identity.

Third, a conceptualizing of the EU as a normative empire sheds light on interests and unequal power relations in EU–periphery relations, two crucial aspects that EU studies tends to gloss over. While the ‘normative power’ framework has been focusing on the EU’s quasi-benevolent export of broader norms, such as democracy and human rights, the concept advanced here emphasizes the transfer of quite a different set of rules, namely those pertaining to trade, efficient economic governance, border controls and administrative practice. It highlights the fact that promoting the regulatory convergence of bordering states is a formidable form of exerting EU power over those states, even though it is contingent on agreement and depends on the preferences and relative bargaining power of peripheral states. Certainly, the notion of EU power per se needs to be qualified, given the EU’s limited ability to influence events in the neighbourhood at large. However, the

12 For the question of whether constructivism may be reconciled with realist approaches on ontological and epistemological grounds see Hynek and Teti, 2010.
imperial paradigm underscores the interests of the EU and its Member States in the transfer of rules and practices, and their not-so-benevolent way of pursuing this end, including the customary attempts to exert pressure on peripheral governments, when European interests are at stake.

Finally, the normative empire concept helps to explain EU policies toward the immediate vicinity that may seem contradictory, such as the rhetorical commitment to human rights while advancing trade relations with authoritarian regimes. By acknowledging that the EU has adjusted to changing realities, while maintaining the modus operandi of a normative empire, the inconsistencies in EU policies are resolved.

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