



The EU and its southern neighbours: normative leadership or realpolitik?

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This event was organized in partnership with



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

Introduction

This report reflects statements and questions made during a two-hour high-level roundtable organised by Friends of Europe in partnership with the Samir Kassir Foundation in Brussels on 11 July 2023. The debate focused on the European Union's foreign assistance strategy.

On the one hand, the EU invests in human rights programmes and presents itself as a normative leader. On the other, the EU itself as well as its member states often turn a blind eye to some of the most egregious violations of human rights perpetrated by authoritarian partner governments. How can these contradicting tendencies be squared?

The recently published study, '[International Aid to Lebanon's Security and Justice Sectors – The Impact of Donor Assistance on Human Rights and Civil Liberties](#)', served as an inception point for the event's debate. The study was published by the Samir Kassir Foundation with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and explores the challenges that come with providing support focused on advancing human rights and civil liberties in a context shaken by multi-layered crises. This includes an examination of the gap between Western donor assistance to Lebanon's judiciary, security and military institutions, which prioritises the promotion of respect for human rights and civil liberties, and the increase in violations by these exact same criminal justice institutions.

The roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule to promote a free and open discussion. Participants spoke in their personal capacities.

Recommendations

Participants suggested priorities including:

- The EU should increasingly promote 'positive conditionality', meaning incentives instead of sanctions in foreign assistance programmes.
- The EU should use its own digital transformation processes to promote human rights and freedom of expression with the same tools to fight online disinformation as used within the EU.
- The EU and other funders and implementers need to continue and increase investments in training people and developing grassroots organisations to protect human rights, law enforcement and freedom of expression.
- The United Nations should consider introducing the word 'democracy' in all its documents.
- The EU needs to identify ways of measuring and quantifying links between EU funding and resilient peace.
- The EU needs to progressively consider the importance of good optics around EU aid programmes in fragile countries. To achieve this, the knowledge transfer of analyses of on-site conditions and politics to decision-makers needs to be improved.

- The EU needs to improve collaboration with other funders, NGOs and international agencies to identify existing best practices for the promotion of human rights among large international organisations and small EU programmes.
- The EU should change the length of its programmes, considering that foreign assistance strategies are typically in place for longer than political programmes and funding is at risk to be lost without sustainable monitoring.
- The EU needs to support independent media in these countries but should separate that support from political communication.

Event summary

Accounting for accountability

“Europe is too big and too wise not to use all available instruments. There is a smart way to play on several pianos

The best aim of foreign assistance and the reason why leadership is needed is to keep people alive. However, in many countries, it has been seen that if aid, of any amount, is not accompanied by normative requirements, it will be lost to the people who need it on the ground.

When it comes to normative leadership in a world of realpolitik, there is a need to balance aid and control. If money from the EU or other regions is perceived as “pouring in” to places where human rights abuses regularly make the front page, donors must ensure there is accountability.

This can entail creating conditionality around aid. Speakers warned that this creates a delicate situation for EU donors, who hope to maintain neutrality and, above all, to prevent aid from becoming political. It was suggested that “positive conditionality” – incentives instead of sanctions – is likely to have more impact on changing behaviour than aid perceived to penalise fragile regions.

In many non-EU regions, it must be remembered that there is genuine ambition to restore stability and that Europe can further this aim without a political agenda.

UNESCO members have, for instance, committed to upholding rights such as the freedom of expression. This can entail monitoring the global situation through specially developed mechanisms, as well as reporting abuse of freedom of expression, without direct intervention. “Breaking the silence” was mentioned as a first and important step to hold states accountable, for

example, to report the killing of journalists and to prosecute the perpetrators.

Today, there is also a need for a flexible approach to aid, with new tools to counter emerging threats. For instance, most threats to freedom of expression are nowadays taking place online. The European Commission has an opportunity to use the EU's digital transformation to promote human rights and freedom of expression by using the same tools to fight disinformation that it uses within EU member states.

Collaboration and investment in grassroots organisations are both vital. This includes investing in people for human rights training, law enforcement and more general awareness of abuses.

The event also heard that any attempt to play dictators at their own game, namely hoping to change behaviour by remaining engaged in direct dialogue, will lead to "realpolitik à rebours" (reverse realpolitik).

A more collaborative, coordinated mindset – both within the EU and beyond – is more likely to have a positive effect.

Resilient peace

“Peace is not the absence of war. Peace is the strength of institutions in the country.”

EU aid, values and broader cooperation with partner regions and countries always aim to promote peace. Peace itself, however, means much more than an end to fighting and entails far more than the absence of war in some of Europe's most fragile and volatile neighbours.

Speakers suggested that the objective could better be described as positive peace and seen as a measure of societal resilience, with sustainable practices and structures at its core. Peaceful societies should also nurture artistic freedom, fostering a free press and new voices. Measuring the impact of EU funding should find ways of measuring and quantifying this positive peace.

Funding does not always seem to be allocated with peace and freedom as key, indicative measures of success. In Lebanon, between 2014 and 2021, through funding mechanisms linked to the US, EU, UK and Canada, \$324mn was allocated to programmes supporting the development of judiciary, security and military institutions, with only \$20mn allocated to improving human rights behaviour.

The funding was judged to have had only a “marginally positive” effect on the ground. Officials were sent to public human rights events and trained to speak better human rights language but had no clear intention to incorporate human rights into a long-term strategy. In the worst cases, foreign human rights assistance was seen simply as an opportunity to receive funding.

This has exacerbated a breakdown between the Lebanese people and the security forces supposed to protect them.

“The current situation is catastrophic in Lebanon. The big question is when will the big bang happen?”

Speakers said the situation is exactly the same in countries such as Iraq and Jordan.

At the same time as saying human rights should be respected all around the world, the EU was also perceived to be supporting a Tunisian president who openly attributes immigration to the racist ‘great replacement’ theory. It was criticised that the EU apparently agrees that a ‘cash-for-migrants’ deal with Tunisia should be the blueprint for other neighbours, without making any progress towards ending dangerous boat crossings for migrants.

“ Do we want to deal with the root causes of the migrant crisis in Europe or only the symptoms

In talks with donors, speakers said, there was no perspective longer than 12 months. Western partners leave aid programmes regularly. This makes it difficult to work on multi-year rebuilding programmes in countries facing humanitarian crises.

A failure to foresee a situation that threatens the EU, after years of post-Cold War ‘luxury’, leaves Europe in a position of wondering what leverage it still has.

Contrary to European fears, some speakers said, there is always room for some leverage around donor assistance. The question is how to encourage the EU and other like-minded regions to use this leverage.

“The political elite is not what it used to be.”

Others, however, warned that “aid should not be so conditioned – otherwise, it is intervention.”

There are fears that if any conditions are attached to aid, China and Russia will immediately replace the EU in rebuilding countries.

A new fault line has also emerged around LGBTQ+ rights in neighbouring countries, with governments able to openly flout EU values in this area without fear of being penalised by a loss of aid.

Optical illusion

“ Until a lot of this changes we’re going to be stuck in a situation where the EU finds itself more compromised than able to make a difference.

The EU was also warned to be aware of how its behaviour towards neighbours may appear. Speakers recalled the EU being described variously as “a charity,” “a life coach” and “an ATM” by locals. The EU was in many cases perceived not to be using its leverage for good and instead going along with authoritarian regimes.

On some occasions, senior EU officials’ actions even appeared “extraordinarily disconnected” from political convulsions on the ground. Extreme examples were given of a high-profile official going on a family holiday in a country that was experiencing a military coup and another official’s speech praising one side of a historic conflict against a backdrop of popular protests. These optics remain in people’s minds for a long time and matter in terms of how the EU wants to be perceived and can act.

Europe was told to work more closely with civil society groups and grassroots organisations to change perceptions on the ground. One single mother or young person may, in some cases, offer more insight into realities facing the EU than any number of summit meetings.

“ As long as we can have engagement, we must stay engaged. As long as there are institutions we can strengthen, we must try to strengthen them.

European values-based diplomacy

“The EU remains one of the last values-based principled bastions upholding rule of law through international diplomacy.”

There was general agreement that EU diplomacy must continue to stand up for the safety of citizens and freedom of expression violated by authoritarian partner governments.

The EU needs to reconcile and acknowledge that some countries within the bloc of 27 member states are themselves at odds with EU values. However, this should not deter its leadership position on human rights and human security.

It was acknowledged that the EU does not have the same bargaining power on international cooperation and foreign assistance as 20 years ago. The panel also warned that there is often a disconnect between European expertise on the ground in fragile countries and decisions taken at the EU level.

The EU has great people on the ground in third countries, participants heard. The challenge is how to get that real-life knowledge to “trickle up” to decision-makers.

The event heard that the problem is exacerbated by challenges communicating between the great number of EU officials working today. Media reports cannot be the basis for communicating changes in policy within the institutions.

The EU holds human rights dialogues with some 160 countries every year. In addition, the ‘multi-crisis’ affecting Europe in recent years, including the financial crisis, Brexit, coronavirus and Russia’s war in Ukraine, make it impossible for anyone within the EU to keep track of events.

A historic refrain that was quoted, attributed to former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, “Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?” seems now more appropriate than ever.

It is important that Europe does not overestimate its capacity to intervene. Instead, there is a need for an element of realism – an understanding of what is inside a society and what is needed.

Polarisation is, however, now a problem facing the whole world, not just Europe, panellists agreed. This return of power politics and the spread of disinformation make it more important than ever to form working alliances.

“We cannot perform miracles, but we are not alone.”

Fortunately, Europe is not acting in isolation. Partners include big players like the US and the UN. The panel heard calls to have the word “democracy” (re)introduced into all UN documents. Its absence suggests that partners wrongly care more for inclusiveness than for the protection of values.

The Council of Europe is another values-based organisation developing guidelines to promote human rights and a democratic transition. This should mean progressively creating a free legal space to counter, for instance, sexual trafficking of women and children: a long-term process and objective that should result in countries being anchored in international standards.

Other projects to mainstream conversations around human rights and freedom of expression include renewed principles for effective media development and support to journalism, approved by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in June 2023.

As co-chairs of the Media Freedom Coalition from July 2023, EU members Estonia and the Netherlands will also promote freedom of expression by protecting the human rights of journalists and media workers around the world.

First and foremost, it is the duty of each country and its population to establish and uphold the rule of law. This is not a task for the EU alone.

*“ Human rights are universal. This is our approach.
They have to be respected in all circumstances.”*



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