

Democratization in Eastern Europe: A viable model for the Middle East?

Gül M. Kurtoglu-Eskişar*

Abstract:

Almost a decade before the end of the 20th century, most parts of Eastern Europe were still under the communist rule and, with a few exceptions, the Middle East was checker squared with varying degrees of authoritarianism. Almost a decade into the 21st century and many East European countries are now regarded as democracies. The Middle East, however, continues to be dominated by authoritarian regimes. This study outlines some of the factors that can help to explain this contrasting outcome in a comparative framework.

Keywords:

Democratization, Eastern Europe, Middle East, MENA, islamization, terrorism

* Dr. Gül M. Kurtoglu-Eskişar is Assistant Professor to the Department of International Relations at Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey.

Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War and the rapid democratization of Eastern Europe, expectations that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) would soon follow suit ran high.¹ Due to the lack of any significant changes that could be interpreted as a sign towards democratization in that region, however, such expectations were gradually replaced with increasing pessimism. Numerous factors that emphasize the socio-cultural, economic and political characteristics of the region have since been offered to explain the persisting authoritarianism throughout the MENA. Meanwhile, however, any possible impact of the nearby East European transformation—or its absence—over the same region remains unexplored, and constitutes the starting point of this study.

The significance of this issue is self-evident, given the fact that almost a decade before the end of the 20th century, most parts of Eastern Europe were still under the communist rule and, with a few exceptions, the Middle East was checker squared with varying degrees of authoritarianism. Almost a decade into the 21st century and East European countries are now considered as democracies.² The Middle East, however, continues to be dominated by authoritarian regimes. What are some of the outstanding characteristics of the democratic transformation in Eastern Europe? What are some of the conditions that help prolong the lifespan of the current authoritarian regimes in the Middle East? In art, putting contrasting colours together intensifies their effect. Similarly, going over some of the basic points addressed by these questions in this comparative exercise can help to understand any problems identified with them better. It also constitutes the main goal of this simple study. While it does not offer an overarching theory that explains the success of the one and the failure of the other, overviewing some of the factors that have marked the political developments in both regions can provoke some ideas toward constructing such a theory in later stages. On a wider theoretical scale, if pursued further, a comparative overview of these two contrasting outcomes can contribute to the general theories on democratization. From a non-scholar view, it can also form a step in developing policies and measures that can promote international peace and security.

Although studies on the political reincarnation of Eastern Europe or the dearth of change in the MENA are plenty, they have not been conversant with one another. In a few studies that exist, this lacuna is attributed to two factors. One of them is the lack of any dramatic or immediate effects of the East

European experience on the MENA. According to Moore (1994), the relative lack of communication between two regions during the Cold War and certain key differences in the state and administrative structures, have engendered “the model of democratic transformation presented by Eastern Europe . . . generally useless as a strategy to those aspiring for such a transformation in the Arab World.”

The second reason, meanwhile, stems from mundane academic realities. Valerie Bunce (2000: 721) aptly describes it regarding regional studies as: most comparativists have spent their academic lives working on one area. Given the invested amount of intellectual capital, shifting to another area is very costly. Moreover, regional studies tend to develop their own concepts and their own research agendas. Both considerations carry one implication: Regional differences can arise, not because of empirical validity but because few studies cross regional divides and the divides themselves may very well manufacture interregional contrasts. This is a real version of an old problem, that is, case selection determining the conclusions drawn.

Nevertheless, at least two counter-points can be made to justify the necessity of a general comparison between these two regions. One of them is historic. At least some parts of current Eastern Europe, to some degree, share some history with the MENA, due to the Ottoman Empire. As Kreutz (1999) underlines, the southern tier of the former Soviet bloc countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia and even parts of Hungary and Ukraine had for centuries been part of the Ottoman Empire, just as the Arab World had been. The historical Ottoman, and at least the partly Muslim background of countries such as Yugoslavia and Albania which were not Soviet allies but still socialist and anti-Western, was even stronger. Far from being a distant memory, the effects of the Ottoman rule on the contemporary political settings of various parts of Eastern Europe are still debated (Mungiu Pippidi 2006).

Second, on an ideological level, the collapse of communism and the fall of socialist ideas from grace worldwide has closely affected those Arab regimes, such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and South Yemen, which based their ideological *raison d'être* at least to some extent on a form of statist, socialist and/or nationalist ideologies at some point since their independence (Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004: 377). Above all, the ongoing transformation of Eastern Europe since 1990s has alerted the existing political regimes in the MENA to

¹ "Eastern Europe" in this study is a general reference to the region consisting of Bulgaria, the former Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland and Romania, which are now also a part of the European Union.

² Democracy is a loaded term with a variety of definitions. Here, it simply refers to the general ability of all political groups to run in the pluralist elections that fulfil the following three criteria pointed out by Przeworski et al (2000: 16) as 1) the ability for incumbents to lose their offices, 2) if defeated, incumbents vacating their offices in favour of the winner promptly following the elections and 3) the validity and application of the first two rules under all conditions.

"[t]he apparent failure of viable alternatives to democracy around the world," as well as the globally emerging idea of spreading democracy as a desirable goal (Moore 1994). These challenges have further given the numerous authoritarian regimes in that region an incentive to seek new ways of prolonging their existence.

Nonetheless, making generalizations across regions does carry certain risks. Despite sharing a common communist past, Rose (2002: 39) warns that "[t]o lump all post-Communist states together is no more sensible than putting the United States, Canada, Brazil and Chile together because they are all in the Western Hemisphere." Referring to the post-Communist world, Kitschelt (2003: 49-50) also points out that "[m]easured in terms of the civic and political rights indexes developed by Freedom House, there is no region or set of countries on earth with a currently larger diversity of political regimes." Similar arguments can also be extended to the Middle East; which both harbors countries like Turkey, which is currently an EU candidate and a democracy, and Saudi Arabia, where whether to allow women to drive or not is still debated.

Differences notwithstanding, this study is based on the assumption that sufficient similarities exist to compare these two regions. This assumption is also supported by other observers, who refer to the "striking subregional similarities" while discussing the political evolution of postcommunist countries (Ekiert 2003: 91). It is consequently propelled by another simple observation that, despite all differences between the region's countries Eastern Europe has achieved something in common: democratization. And the Middle East has not. Any lessons that can be drawn from the successes of the former and the failures of the latter are pertinent to scholars and policy-makers alike. And exceptions, as always, do not break the rules.

Eastern Europe

When communist regimes began collapsing one after another in 1989, the world was prepared to see a politically uniform region with countries suffering from identical weaknesses and dysfunctions that would take cookie cutter steps toward their existing political and economic problems. The world was badly mistaken. The emerging collage from the ruins comprised

a highly diverse set of more than twenty-five sovereign polities with features that range from those of full-fledged competitive democracies with well-protected civic and political rights all the way to authoritarian, personalist, if not despotic, rule. Measured in terms of the civic and political rights indexes developed by Freedom House, there is no region or set of countries on earth with a currently larger diversity of political regimes (Kitschelt 2003: 49-50).

Nevertheless, within this wide diversity, East European countries have emerged with a number of characteristics that have marked their transition to democracy, which also set them aside from the previous reformers in Southern Europe and Latin America. To start with, as earlier mentioned, there is the rich political diversity of the region despite its communist past, which emerged shortly after 1989, and later also affected the progress and outcome of each country in the region. Ekiert (2003: 90) points out that the 'pacted' transitions that took place in Poland and Hungary, the displacement of the communist regime through 'popular upsurge' that occurred in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, or the transformation from above that took place in Bulgaria produced different transitional institutions and patterns of political conflicts. These distinctive modes of power transfer were in part engendered by specific conditions in each country and interacted with both domestic communist legacies and broader regional developments . . . [Consequently] In many countries former communists were able to retain political power; in others newly organized noncommunist oppositions emerged victorious.

Attempting to break clean with the past to an extent unseen by the earlier democratic transitions in Latin America and Southern Europe constitutes another significant characteristic of the East European transition. Bunce (2000: 717-18) argues that—unlike the earlier experiences in Southern Europe, such as Spain—this rejection has speeded up the democratic consolidation process in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and the Baltic states. In cases where "bridging"—that is, using various devices, including pacts, to tie the old regime with the new one—took place, however, "the consequence was at best many detours on the road to democracy and at worst either dedemocratization or the continuation of authoritarian rule" (ibid). According to Bunce (2008:32), breaking clean with the past in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria excepted) has provided "the political capital needed to move rapidly on the democratic and economic reform fronts. It is only through such electoral breaks with the past that we see both significant and sustained market reforms."

The third distinguishing factor of the East European democratic transition is its speed. As Linz and Stepan (1996: 235) note, many East European countries, "began their transitions almost *before* any significant domestic changes had occurred" in the region. Furthermore, [t]his postcommunist diversity came about in the short window about three years (1990-93). Since that time, new regime structures have been more or less 'locked in' in almost all polities. Countries that by 1994 were more democratic have stayed that way. Countries that were authoritarian have not reversed course and become democratic . . . In a similar vein, postcommunist countries that were leaders in economic market reform in 1992-93

are still in that position by the end of the millenium” (Kitschelt, 2003: 49-50).

Even a great number of those cases that initially fell in between these two categories have become easier to identify as clearly belonging to the one or the other in recent years (Bunce 2008: 26). In the case of the countries undertaking political and economic changes, a leading reason of this haste was related to the fear of failing to “take advantage of the political honeymoon,” which, subsequently, could jeopardize the path to democratization (Bunce 2000: 718).

The fourth outstanding feature of the East European democratization process is its dual nature. Unlike the former transitions in Latin America and Southern Europe, these countries pursued the projects of democratization and transition into market economies simultaneously (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 244; Smith, 2001: 34). This was a risky enterprise, since the exact interaction of political and economic reforms on one another is still not fully understood. Meanwhile, in the case of economic reforms, rising unemployment only constitutes one of the unwanted side effects (Smith 2001: 34; Pravda 2001: 2-3). In some cases, economic reforms also produced ironic results. On the one hand, countries that tried different forms of economic reforms (e.g. Poland and Hungary) ended up exposing themselves to Western finances, and their political influences, which later contributed to their democratization process. On the other hand, they also ended up as one of the most indebted countries in the world, which negatively affected their democratization experience. Contrarily, countries like the former Czechoslovakia where such economic experiments did not occur, such external influences were far less. Yet the lack of foreign debts also eased their path to democracy in the long run (Linz and Stepan 1996: 295-96).

Finally, the impact of external factors has been frequently brought up as the most outstanding characteristic of the East European transition (Linz and Stepan 1996: 235-6; Kopecký and Mudde 2000: 531-32). The starting point is given as the dissolution of the USSR followed by the Eastern Bloc. However, it was quickly supplanted by a variety of actors commonly referred as the “West” in the literature. Putting their differences aside, “[t]o a striking extent, Western states have worked collectively through multilateral European organizations to support democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe” (Smith 2001: 32). This “Western project” involved a wide range of actors, including “governments, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and foundations” (Smith, 2001: 31).

Yet, among these actors, the EU particularly stands out. While the general role of the EU in democracy promotion beyond its boundaries remains

debated³, scholars unite over its overall positive impact over the East European transformation. Among other things, they argue that the tangible benefits that the EU offered through membership have proved a potent propeller for many Eastern European to undertake the necessary reforms. Mungiu-Pippidi (2004: 15) points out that it certainly encouraged these countries to engage in what has since been called a ‘regatta’— a race to be the first country to join the EU. In the early 1990s, not only did the race precipitate the reforms that were indispensable for the transformation of these countries, but since it enjoyed large popular support it also enticed post-communist parties (the strongest in the region) into becoming genuinely pro-EU parties. Kopecký and Mudde (2000: 532) go further ahead and argue that a lot of the reforms undertaken by the East European states were done to ensure the EU membership, rather than a genuine interest to transform the political scene. Finally, the significance of positive EU gestures toward East European countries also stand out when compared with the ongoing candidacy of a country like Turkey, whose ‘European’ identity remains debated (Onis 2004: 4; Kurto?lu Eski?ar 2007).

Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the EU contribution to the ongoing democratization process in that region has been subtle, or indirect. For instance, Vachudova (2006: 2) points out that the EU factor helped to strengthen the hand of liberal forces against illiberal ones: not in a duel where good vanquishes evil, but in an iterated electoral game where sooner or later most political actors—especially political parties—saw the benefits of moving their own agenda toward compatibility with the state’s bid for EU membership.

In retrospect, scholars generally agree that these effects were intensified by some domestic factors. The willingness of the East European political elites to quickly embrace the values and norms promoted by the EU is one of them. Alex Pravda (2001: 3-4) explains it by their “proximity to core, in essence West European, values and traditions. Historical affinity with Europe . . . continues to resonate.” Mungiu-Pippidi (2004: 15) makes a similar remark, while pointing out to the impact of what she calls as “the ‘return to Europe’ myth, as shaped by intellectuals such as Milan Kundera, turned into a powerful anti-communist device . . . [which] was all the more powerful as it seemed to be about identity and not a counter-ideology.”⁴

The role of the EU has not gone unchallenged, however, and numerous arguments on the less than benign, idealistic or altruistic motives behind the zealous support for the democratic reforms in Eastern Europe also exist. Smith (2001: 32), for

³ The impact of external factors, particularly the role of the EU on democratization for various countries is already discussed elsewhere (Pridham 1995: 166-203; Müftüler-Baç 2000; Ayd?n and Keyman 2004: 11; Phillips 2004, Kurto?lu Eski?ar 2007).

⁴ See also Kaldor and Vejvoda (1997:60).

instance, argues that “[p]romoting democracy is not the only Western aim, nor is it even the primary one. Western actors have paid considerably more attention to aiding the economic transformation, and in certain countries, to maintaining stability.” Similarly, the tendency to gloss over the shortcomings of the newly established reforms and their possible long term effects on the quality of democracy exercised in the region have also received criticism (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004; Bunce 2000: 713-14).

Ironically, the positive signals the EU has sent to the political elites and the enthusiastic response of the latter, the impact of the EU may be so subtle as to be missed by the East European public altogether. Urbán (2003: 46), for instance, states that unlike their national governments, key opinion formers outside the capital cities were largely unaware of the immense financial gains that most regions in the accession countries will receive from EU regional support. Despite the fact that some of the regions covered had already received substantial EU aid, most local opinion-makers identified the economic and security dimensions of the Union as being important and ranked the structural funds and subsidiarity relatively low when asked what the EU meant to them.

Middle East and North Africa

Since mid-1970⁵, the “third wave of democratization” (a term coined by Samuel P. Huntington) has swept the world. It began with the transitions in various European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, and Greece, and then spread into Latin America, some parts of Asia, and from 1990s onward to former communist countries, including Eastern Europe. As the 20th century drew to an end, however, the “resistance” of the authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, but particularly the MENA region to join this ‘wave’ started attracting increasing attention.⁵ Indeed, regardless of country-specific variations, as a subset “[a]ll Arab regimes are nondemocratic; no peaceful transfer of power has taken place in any Arab country for decades (except intergenerational such as in Jordan, Syria, Morocco, or Bahrain)” (Schlumberger 2006: 34). Many variables have consequently been brought up in the literature to explain the “Middle Eastern exceptionalism.”

While political scientists and regional experts were busy trying to understand the lack of widespread political protests similar to those experienced in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the world was abruptly shaken by a string of terrorist events perpetrated by radical Islamists taking place in the heart of numerous western cities, ranging from New York to

Madrid. Many of the terrorists carried a Middle Eastern passport. What hitherto had been a more-or-less scholarly conundrum with regional consequences thus quickly became a Western concern. The rapid pace of democratization in many parts of the world, but especially in Eastern Europe had already alerted the scholars that something was going wrong in the Middle East. The terrorist attacks starting with September 11 have convinced many policymakers and scholars in the West, led by the USA, that spreading democracy is the most effective way of eradicating the rising security threat believed to emanate from the MENA. The EU has similarly stepped up its efforts in promoting stronger political and economic ties with the region through its strategically developed the European Neighbourhood Policy. In the meantime, catching up with the recent developments in the region, scholars have started to become more interested in reversing the earlier question of why democratization has not occurred to why authoritarianism has proved so persistent in the MENA. As a consequence, several new arguments, including the following, have been developed to explain the phenomenon.

Earlier studies had sought the roots of authoritarianism in the Middle East in its culture. According to this debate, Islam and/or the Middle Eastern culture—Arab culture in particular—is inherently averse to nurturing democratic values and institutions.⁶ Based on simple yet powerful assumptions (e.g. Islam’s inherent incompatibility with democratic institutions), such primordial explanations persist in popular imagination and nonacademic circles. Nevertheless, their validity has never been definitively proven in academic studies.⁷

This is not to reject the significance of cultural factors altogether, however. New research indicates that, unlike the political elites in Eastern Europe, moderate⁸ political Islamist movements in the MENA, which remain the most resilient strain of political opposition against the existing authoritarian regimes in that region, for instance, often explicitly express their misgivings about democracy as a style of political regime, especially as practiced in the west. The general Islamist tendency is to treat European democracies as a cultural artifact produced by the European civilization instead of a set of political institutions based on shared universal values and norms (Kurto?lu Eski?ar 2008). This view may be related to the emergence of political Islam as a counterparadigm . . . that offers an ideologically rich and inspiring alternative to the liberal democratic vision (in contrast to the experience of Eastern Europe after the fall of communism). Although Islamist

⁵ See Karatnycky 1999: 121.

⁶ The literature on the subject is too vast to discuss in detail here. Some of the prominent works include Huntington 1996; Ben-Dor 1996; Lewis 1993: 89-90; Kedourie 1994: 5-6.

⁷ See, for instance, Midlarsky 1998; Tessler 2002; Fox 2001; Fish 2002.

⁸ Moderate in the sense that they advocate peaceful means to reach their ultimate goal, i.e., building an Islamic state, as opposed to their radical counterparts, who advocate immediate and violent action to achieve the same result.

ideologies need not be posed as an alternative to liberal democratic world views, they often are developed in this way for reasons of political expedience (Bellin 2005:35).

Meanwhile, on a wider scale, for Islamists and nonreligious groups alike, unlike in Eastern Europe, political liberalization is often associated with the Western colonialism, which further diminishes the general willingness to mobilize for democratization in the region (ibid). More specifically, in countries like Egypt, "democracy is indeed associated with the colonizing West and its attempts to dehumanize Muslims, to take away their identity and authenticity" (Korany 2006: 88). The mistrust in the Western motives is exacerbated by the conflicting signals coming from the West itself, which bolster the hand of the existing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (Smith 2001; Shahin 2005; Youngs 2005; Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 384).

While discussing the economic factors behind the persistence of authoritarianism in the MENA region, scholars also often underline the rentier structure of many Middle Eastern states, used as a device to sustain the existing authoritarian regimes for decades. Giacomo Luciani (1994: 131) defines a rentier state as one "whose government most or a substantial part of its revenue from rents accruing from the outside world." As such, they differ from the "production states" where the chief government revenue is accrued through taxation (ibid). Since the argument assumes that with taxation comes the demand for representation, its absence enables the ruling regimes to continue their authoritarian policies. Although the classic definition of rentier regimes is based on those states deriving their wealth from the export of hydrocarbon revenues, other types of rent incomes, especially in the form of foreign aid and borrowing also exist (Anderson 1987: 10). Rentier states are assumed as able to resist the pressures for democratization as long as the conditions that nurture the rent-based structure (i.e. hydrocarbon revenues or other rents and their distribution pattern) remain intact.

Nevertheless, the classic rentier system as a variable seems unable to explain the persistence of authoritarianism on its own. Data from 1950s to the mid-1980s indicate that in at least several Middle Eastern countries, where democratization or democratic consolidation remains a problem, taxation rates were quite above the expected levels (Henry 1996: 4-5; Heydemann 1993). Furthermore, while the oil crises that shook the rest of the world helped to consolidate the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East during 1970s, the conditions were reversed with the collapse of state-led economies and the rising unemployment fueled by the increasing birthrates throughout the region since 1980s (Albrecht and

Schlumberger 2004: 382-83). Bread riots began surfacing in countries like Algeria and Egypt. The conditions were getting ideal for a political transition. Contrary to Eastern Europe, however, the expected regime shifts never occurred. In fact, to this date "popular mobilization on behalf of political reform remains weak. Nowhere in the region do you see mammoth cross-class coalitions mobilizing on the streets to push for reform" (Bellin 2005: 35).⁹

Even so, the Islamist terrorist attacks worldwide have increased the Western inclination to support the spread of democracy in the MENA. Similarly, the mounting political opposition posed by the nonviolent and widely popular Islamist groups at home has increased the pressure on the existing authoritarian regimes to find alternate ways to maintain their grip over the political scene. Reinventing the classic 'rent' structure to disperse the current pressures on the authoritarian regimes has been a result of their quest. New research on the changing rentier structures outlines this process well. Gandhi and Przeworski (2006:13), for instance, argue that in our model 'rentier states,' which need little or no cooperation to generate rents, make substantial policy concessions whenever the power of the dictator is threatened. This conclusion goes against the vast rentier state literature, which typically claims that dictators in resource-rich countries counter political threats only by distributing rents.

Meanwhile Pripstein Posusney (2005:7) underlines that while decreasing rentier resources can eventually lead to some form of political pluralization, it may or may not lead to democratization in the long run. Indeed, a rising number of new studies refer to the ability for the existing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East "to make use of inconsistent Western interests in their struggle for regime maintenance [and] . . . successfully turned constraints into opportunities" (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 384).

Thus, the Arab governments in particular have generally responded to the increasing Western pressures for democratization in recent years in three ways. One of them has been to use the democratization discourse to channel funds—a la rents—to promote or prolong their regime. Ironically, after September 11 attacks, the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have discovered a new income—or rent—in the form of the rising Western interest and consequent aid in democratizing the Middle East (Menéndez and Youngs 2006; Shahin 2005). In fact, as Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004: 376) brilliantly summarize Arab incumbents quickly learned the lesson of what was expected internationally and adopted the 'democracy language'; talking the 'donor talk' became a prerequisite for political rent-seeking. 'Democracy-money' that results from the successful adoption of this language is extremely attractive to Arab regimes because it consists almost exclusively of

⁹ Such observations have even been made for Turkey; one of the few existing democracies in the region (Yalcin Mousseau 2006: 304).

nonrefundable grants and does not increase the state's financial burden as much as economic development assistance, where the share of loans is higher.

In cases where they have been unable to control the grants directly, the same regimes have attempted to infiltrate the existing non-governmental organizations and/or form their parallel 'grassroots' organizations. This is considered an extreme attempt to suffocate any kind of dissent among the public, claimed to even surpass the undemocratic methods employed by authoritarian governments elsewhere, including the former East European regimes (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 383-386). Consequently, unlike in Eastern Europe, where the NGOs generally become mouthpieces of their societies' demand for change and democratization, those that exist in the Middle East have been moving in the exact opposite direction. Compared with the East European countries, the whole situation constitutes an irony, since "[c]ivil society in many countries was rightly considered the celebrity of democratic resistance and transition" (Linz and Stepan 1996: 9).¹⁰

Referring to the grassroots organizations established and maintained without any foreign support in the region, some observers offer a contradictory view, and argue that in countries like Egypt, "[t]he expansion of civil society . . . is best understood as a reflection and cause of local states' declining effectiveness and legitimacy. Civil society has served . . . as the base from which Islamist revolutionaries have launched an impressive challenge to the status quo" (Berman 2003:13). Pointing out to the vibrant civil society that existed during the Weimar Republic and its inability to prevent the later catastrophe, Bunce (2008:29) similarly warns against the "cliché to argue that the best investment in democracy is the expansion of civil society" and adds that in the Weimar case, "a large civil society could not compensate for . . . the anti-democratic agenda of many of these associations and the striking failure of civil society networks to bring diverse groups in German society in contact and collaboration with one another." Even if most grassroots organizations in the MENA region are indeed infiltrated and operated by the political opponents, the latter is mostly represented by political Islamists, whose attitude toward democracy and democratic institutions as understood by the west remain mixed, at best.

The second response of the Middle Eastern governments has revolved around creating new sources of rent in the form of foreign aid propelled by the existing fears on Islamist terrorism since September 11 attacks to exacerbate the existing suspicion between the West and their opponents. Internally, it has given them a new excuse for repressing political opposition. For instance, Shahin (2005:

126) argues that The Egyptian government has been exploiting this state of indecisiveness to pit domestic and external actors against each other. It has intimidated the pro-reform movements and the independent, nongovernmental organisations by raising issues of national sovereignty, violation of the country's independence and even treason.

Meanwhile, in Jordan the new measures enable the state to prosecute any movement that violates the "integrity of the state." The latter term is conveniently left without an explicit definition to fit into the needs of the existing regime (Bank and Schlumberger 2004: 53). The fact that many of the organized opposition movements throughout the Middle East also display varying shades of Islamism and anti-systemic characteristics has also played into the hands of the authoritarian governments.

Finally, there is the attempt of the authoritarian regimes to divert both the Western and domestic focus from democratization through controlled economic liberalization. Perthes (2004: 24) points out that in recent years the governments of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia have all placed emphasis on securing the skills and knowledge of technocrats with economic expertise or have at least tried to incorporate business people and private sector representatives into formal decision making or consultative structures.

The underlying idea is to depoliticize the public sphere by emphasizing the necessity of implementing economic reforms before launching into the political realm. While propelled by a genuine concern to modernize the economic system of their countries to some degree, the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East nevertheless also seem devoted to circumscribe any sparks that can light the political field against themselves (Bank and Schlumberger 2004: 50-52).

Conclusion:

The recent political and economic transformation of Eastern Europe remains one of the most outstanding events of modern history. Meanwhile, the lack of wide-sweeping democratic transitions in the MENA is similarly noteworthy due to its increasingly alienated status in the face of the ongoing worldwide democratization trend. A subject awaiting further inquiry for scholars is the impact of the political transformation or democratization of the former Eastern bloc on the—now—neighboring the MENA region. An implicit—yet unexplored—hypothesis of this paper is that the successful political transformation of Eastern Europe has raised the stakes of the democratization attempts in the MENA. If nothing, it has increased the pressure over the authoritarian regimes there to find new ways of justifying their prolonged existence.

¹⁰ See also Berman 2003:13; Bunce 2008:30). Here the term "civil society" follows the definition of Linz and Stepan (1996:7), who describe it as "that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests."

In recent years, the EU has stepped up its efforts to promote democratization in the Middle East, most recently through the European Neighborhood Policy. Within the EU, such attempts are often spearheaded by the former colonizers who desire to foster stronger cultural and economic ties with the region (Attinà 2003: 191; Emerson et al 2005: 177; 217). However, its Eastern European members need not be a bystander in this process either. In fact, with its transition experiences still fresh, this region has more to offer than the consolidated democracies of the West. Meanwhile, for academicians, the remaining lacuna between these two bodies of literature remains real and requires bridging.

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