

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

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Any democratisation success is based on the extent to which the member concerned is willing to cooperate with EU efforts.

Building on its values and norms that are based on democratic principles, liberal economy and peaceful relations, the European Union (EU) seeks to promote democracy, human rights, good governance, economic development, education, and so on, in its neighbours. However, in practice the EU's democratisation efforts beyond its borders – among its eastern and southern neighbourhoods – have been limited. The EU influence on democratisation in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) region varies across countries from more advanced cooperation in the case of Morocco and Tunisia (post-Arab uprisings) to limited influence in most countries. Any success is based on the extent to which the member concerned is willing to cooperate with EU efforts.

Most of the literature on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and EU democracy promotion focuses on EU security concerns that undermine its will to push for democratic reforms and use negative conditionality for that purpose. Furthermore, the attempt to promote EU values and norms without differentiation or taking into consideration the main needs of the peoples of the Southern Mediterranean region and the different cultures in the neighbourhood, in addition to the “asymmetrical relationship between the EU and the southern partners, together legitimize the choice of the political elite to ignore the pressure coming from the EU for political reform” (Çelenk, 2009, p. 183). Thus, the EU programmes “show little sensitivity for national or local cultures and values, let alone an effort at exploring functional equivalents for Western democratic statehood in weak, failing, or failed states” (Börzel & Risse, 2004, p. 3). This situation leads to strengthening the resilience of those regimes against EU pressures, which are portrayed by those elites and the official media as a new form of colonisation.

The different interests of member states limit the ability of the EU to speak with one voice.

Compared to other regional and international actors, the EU is viewed more positively in the SEM. In the Maghreb 56% of respondents vs. 49% in the Mashreq expressed trust in the EU, as reported by an opinion poll conducted in 2017 (EU Neighbours South, 2017). This positive attitude is due to the EU's normative image (a force for good) compared to other players such as the United States (US). For instance, 62% of Maghreb respondents and 44% from the Mashreq said that they have a positive perception of the EU. Despite some minor differences between the Mashreq and Maghreb, respondents from both sides of the Mediterranean consider the EU to be closely associated with human rights, individual freedoms, equality, freedom of speech, democracy, etc. (EU Neighbours South, 2017). Thus, democracy and human rights are among the top items mentioned by SEM citizens to represent what the EU stands for. The results of the Euromed Survey echo this data as the EU is perceived as one of the least destabilising actors, compared to other international/regional actors and players.

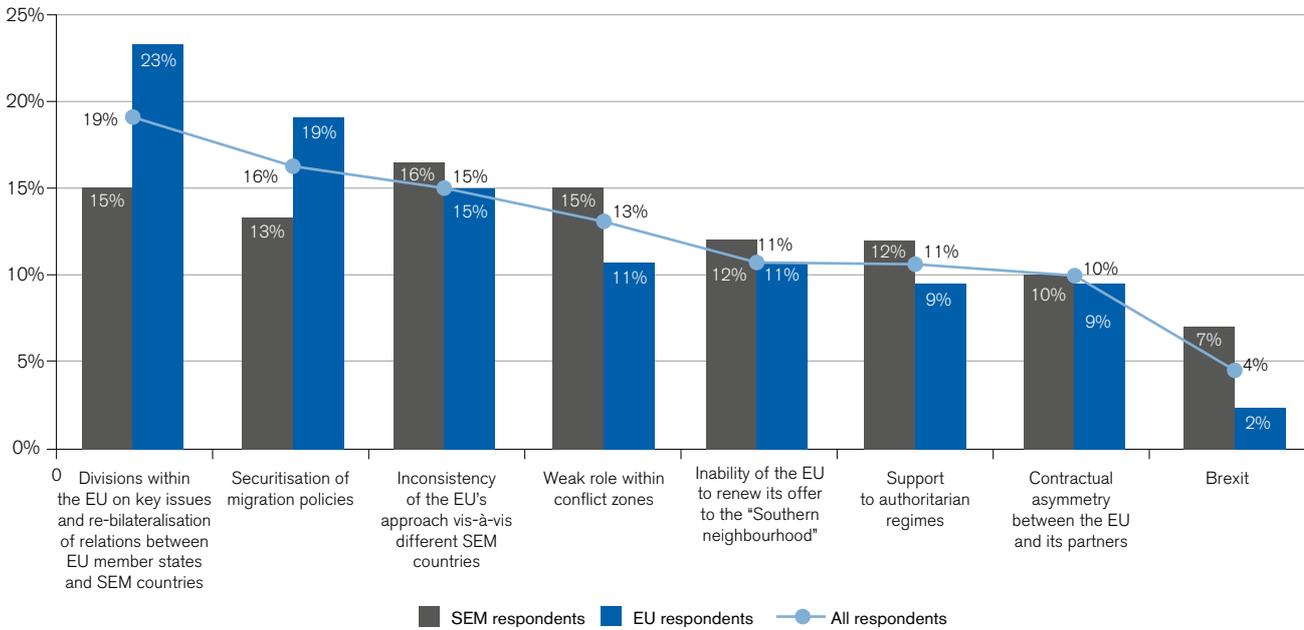
EU credibility in the Mediterranean

The EU's capacity to continue promoting democratic principles depends on its credibility as a foreign policy actor. This credibility of the EU partly depends on its internal coherence and the ability of the EU to speak with one voice. The different interests of EU member states limit the ability of the EU to act, especially when it comes to the SEM region where various interests are in conflict. This is noticed not only among EU member states but also within the SEM countries. When asked what affects the credibility of the EU, 19% of those surveyed in both regions cited the lack of coherence among member states as well as conflicting interests (see Graph 1). This issue is recognised more as a problem for EU consistency within the EU, where 23% said the main issue affecting EU credibility is conflict of interests and inconsistency compared to 15% in SEM countries. Surprisingly, this issue is rated even higher than securitisation of migration, which came second with an average of 16% (13% in the SEM compared to 19% in the EU) or EU cooperation with authoritarian SEM regimes, with an average of 11% (12% in the SEM compared to 10% in the EU).

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Graph 1: What is most likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 8)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

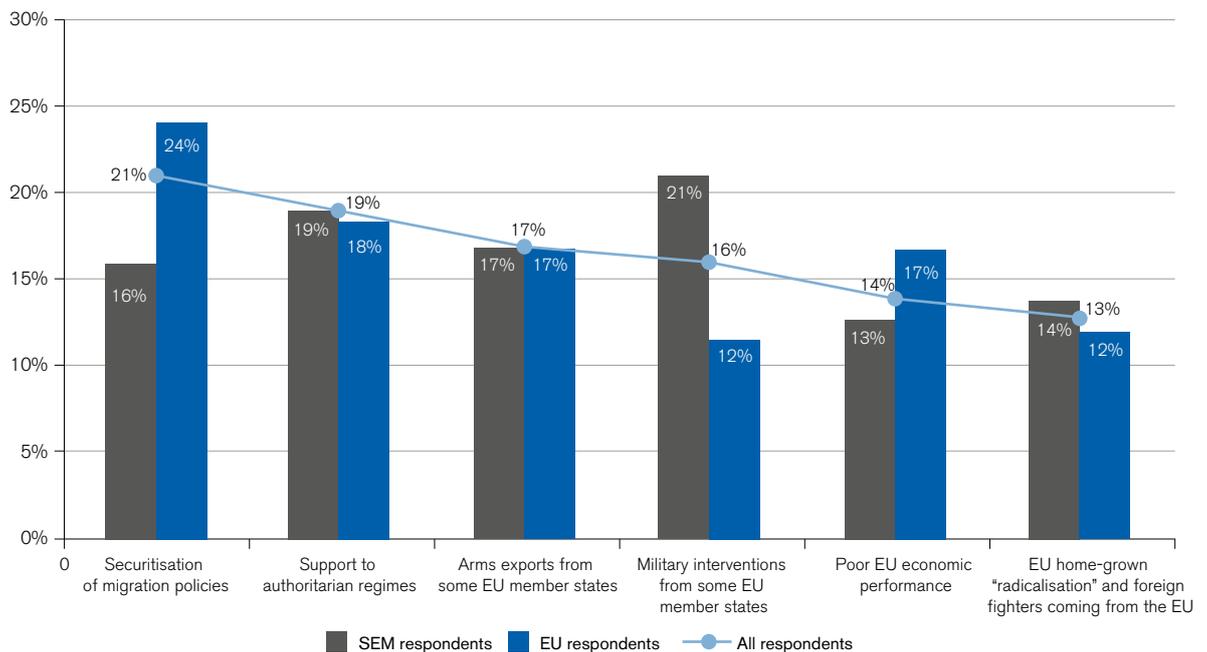
In addition to the lack of coherence and migration, respondents believe that the EU does not have a consistent approach vis-à-vis different SEM countries (see Graph 1). This inconsistency is the result of cooperating with authoritarian regimes on issues of security, economy and migration, while criticising the lack of democracy, human rights and freedoms without resorting to negative conditionality in cases of violations of democratic norms, freedoms and human rights. Furthermore, the lack of a firm approach to the Arab uprisings (aside from the cosmetic reviews of the ENP), especially when the events started in Tunisia, negatively influenced EU credibility. This brings us to another important issue: the conflict of interests regarding security/stability vs. democracy.

Stability vs. democracy?

The EU's limited effect on democracy promotion has resulted partly from its security and stability perspective in the Mediterranean.

The EU's limited effect on democracy promotion has resulted partly from prioritising security and stability, even if that meant stabilising authoritarian regimes and cooperating with those regimes in fighting terrorism and illegal migration. Given the perceived negative correlation between democracy promotion and security and stability, the EU and other Western powers such as the US acted rationally in supporting the authoritarian regimes that maintained this fragile security. The hope that such support would bring stability seemed shaken with the Arab uprisings that resulted in the fall of several regimes in the region and the weakening of others. On the ground, the EU's support of authoritarian dictators not only affected its credibility among SEM and EU citizens but was also perceived by them as producing the main negative effect on stability in the region (19%, see Graph 2). Security concerns have always been salient in both regions. Although the EU has been critical of the excessive use of force by Arab dictators against their neighbours and citizens, arms exports from EU countries have continued – an issue also considered to negatively influence stability in the region (17%). For example, while the EU has been critical of the war in Yemen, arms exports continue from EU member states to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Graph 2: From the following options that relate either to the situation of the EU or to its policies, which ones are likely to have the most negative effect on the stability of SEM countries?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

The biggest problem of military interventions is the lack of a long-term strategy after toppling dictators, or even clarity on immediate next steps.

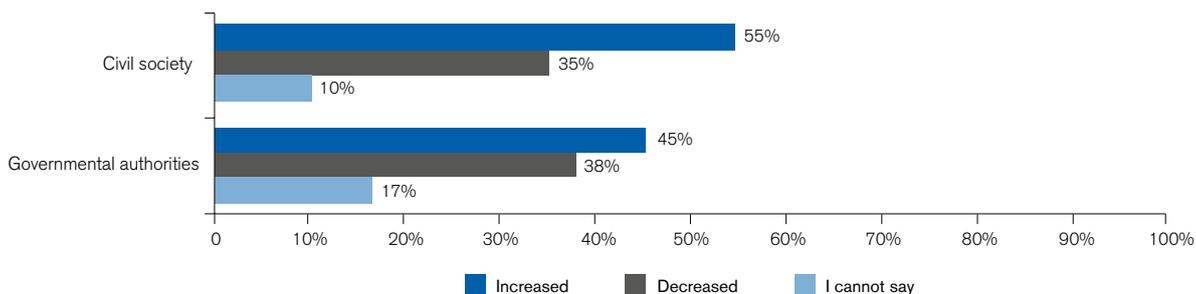
While securitisation of migration is still considered on average to be one of the main causes of instability in the SEM region, the various military interventions have also led to increased lack of security and stability (21% from the SEM compared to 12% in the EU). Notably, the intervention in Iraq resulted in widespread instability, not only in Iraq but also in other Arab countries, with the rise of terrorist groups such as Daesh. Moreover, the intervention in Libya has led to internal conflict and civil war after years of stability under Gaddafi. The major problem of military interventions is the lack of a long-term strategy after toppling dictators, or even clarity on immediate next steps.

Is the EU still attractive?

As mentioned above, promoting democracy and good governance requires committed partners, willing to cooperate. Similarly, it also requires that partners, including civil society organisations (CSOs), continue to perceive the European model as attractive. Therefore, the question is whether recent developments in the EU approach and the various reviews of the ENP after the Arab uprisings have affected the EU's attractiveness in its southern neighbourhood. Prior to the Arab uprisings the EU engagement with the SEM region focused mostly on cooperating with Arab authoritarian regimes. The role of CSOs was in the best of cases limited due to the oppressive nature of the regimes that did not allow CSOs to be created or to operate freely. When the Ben Ali regime collapsed and Tunisia started the reform process, the role of CSOs increased. This is also reflected in the increased EU engagement with CSOs such as in Tunisia.

The strengthening of EU engagement with CSOs has been reflected in EU policies. Since 2012, “the EU decided to take its longstanding support to civil society a step further. Major policy changes have been adopted to support civil society organisations (CSOs) not only as implementers of development assistance but also as key development policy actors, in their own right,” according to Stefano Manservigi, the European Commission's Director General for International Cooperation and Development (European Commission, 2017, p. 5). Euromed Survey results seem to indicate that this greater engagement with CSOs led to increased EU attractiveness for CSOs with 45% of respondents believing that EU attractiveness has increased following the Arab uprisings (see Graph 3). This is in sharp contrast with the position of governmental authorities, where 44% believed that EU attractiveness had decreased compared to 27% who said otherwise.

Graph 3: Overall, since 2011, the EU's attractiveness for the following actors has increased or decreased? (only SEM country respondents)



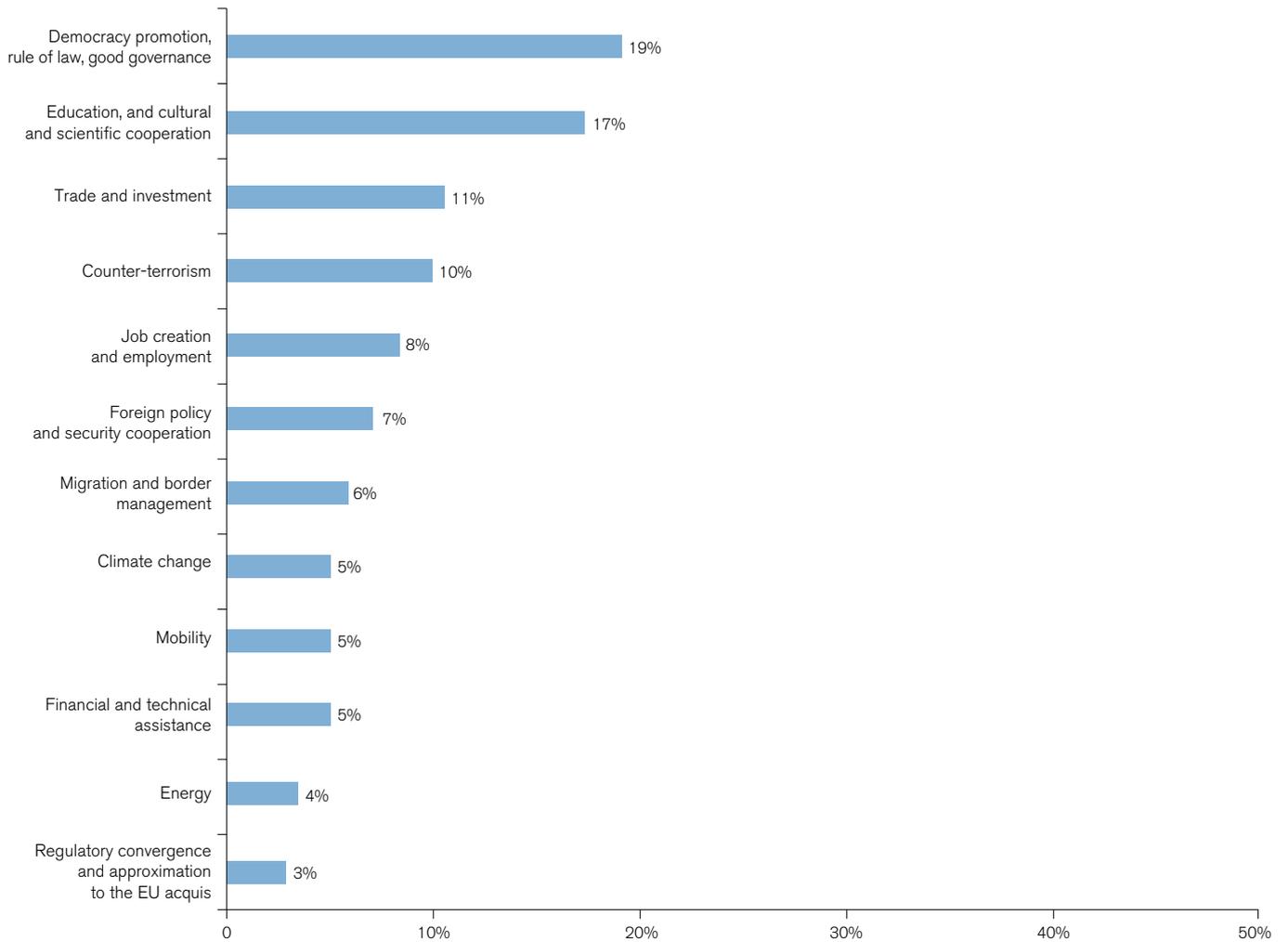
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Democracy Promotion is not an Outdated Concept

One of the lessons of the protests that erupted in Tunisia by the end of 2010 and spread to the rest of the region (e.g. Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain) is that the EU's longstanding approach in the region has not been successful. This was reflected in EU reviews of the ENP; for example, the 2011 review stated the uprisings “have shown that EU support to political reforms in neighbouring countries has met with limited results” (European Commission, 2011, p. 1). The EU focus on security showed sharp contrast with the aspirations of the SEM people, whose main interests have been in democracy, equality, and education before any other policy (including trade, investments, migration, climate, mobility, assistance, energy, job creation and employment). This is reflected clearly in the results of the Euromed Survey, where the most recurrent dimension identified by SEM respondents as what the “most important aspect when it comes to my country's relationship with the EU should be” is democracy promotion (see Graph 4). Democracy promotion, rule of law and good governance seem to be the most important aspects in relations with the EU across SEM countries and Turkey (see Graph 5).

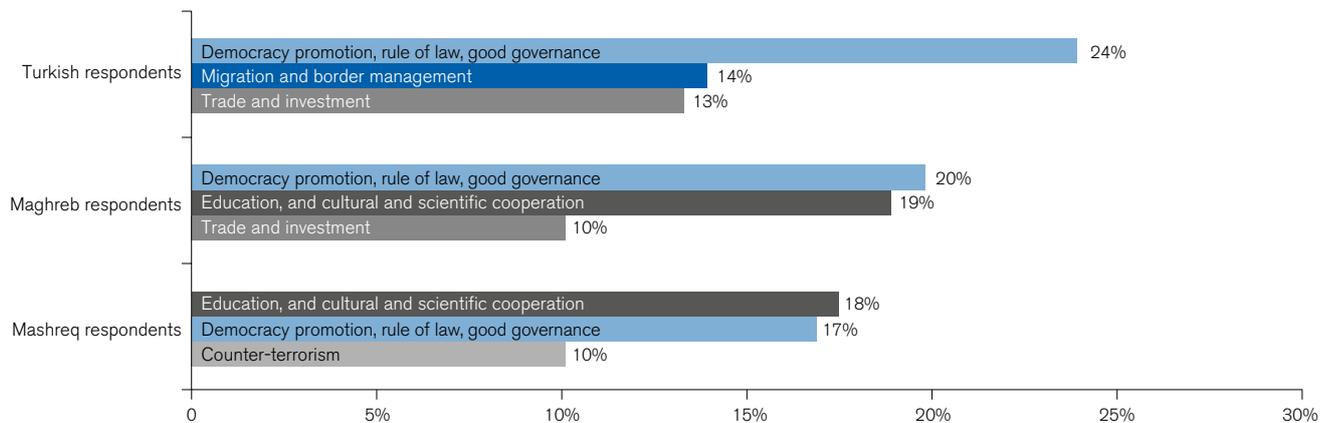
The EU focus on security showed sharp contrast with the aspirations of the SEM people.

Graph 4: The most important aspects, when it comes to my country's relationship with the EU should be:
(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 12, only respondents from SEM countries)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Graph 5: The most important aspects, when it comes to my country's relationship with the EU should be:
(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 12)

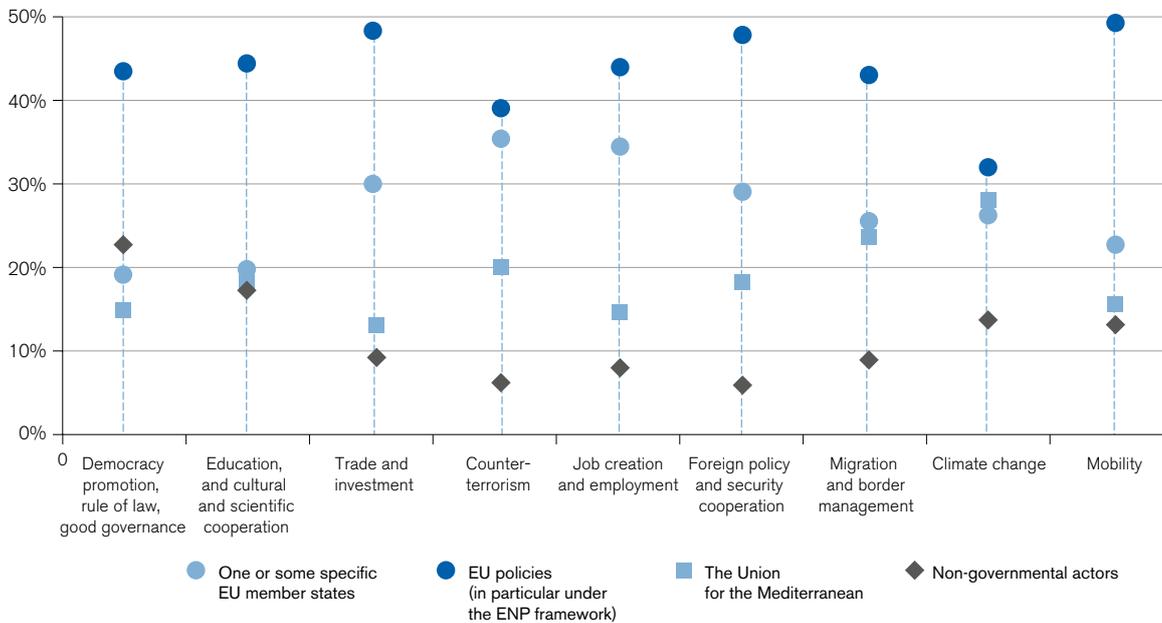


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

To achieve the main aims of democracy promotion, rule of law and good governance, most respondents believed that EU actions under the ENP framework are the most suitable (43%) compared to 23% who believed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the most appropriate for implementing democracy promotion policies (see Graph 6). This result is due to the weak role NGOs have played over the years, given tight regime control over freedoms. This is changing slightly in some countries, such as in Tunisia, as a result of the uprisings and regime change.

Democracy, rule of law and good governance are the most important aspects of EU relations with the region.

Graph 6: In order to achieve Q9 most important priorities, the most important partners or frameworks should be:



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Conclusion

Despite the importance of democracy promotion in EU documents in its relation with the SEM region, EU democracy promotion efforts have not been successful due to divisions among member states and the focus on security and stability at the expense of democracy. While this is considered to affect EU credibility, as reflected in the Euromed Survey, the EU is still the most attractive player in the SEM region compared to other international and regional players such as the US, Russia, Gulf countries and Turkey. The Euromed Survey showed that the peoples of the SEM region aspire to functioning democratic systems, which they consider to be the most important aspect in relations with the EU.

In light of this Survey, the EU should take the SEM people's aspirations more seriously in relations with the region. Furthermore, the EU should be consistent in its democracy promotion approach and should not use it as a tool but as a goal. In other words, the EU should not promote democracy only when it feels its interests (such as security and stability) are protected but this strategy should be a priority throughout the SEM region.

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