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Identity beyond othering: crisis and the politics of decision in the EU's involvement in Libya

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This article focusses on the concept of decision and its significance for identity politics. Constructivist scholarship established long ago that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive and that difference and othering are key for the production of identities. As a consequence, constructivist literature on EU foreign policy has focussed on the role of specific others and explored how interaction with them shapes the EU's identity. Our article turns the attention back inside and looks at the hegemonic struggles around the purpose and meaning of the European project. By analyzing the EU's reaction to the Libyan events in 2011, we demonstrate how a major international crisis dislocates the identities involved and unleashes a struggle for hegemony between conflicting discursive articulations. Eventually this conflict is resolved through a political decision, which reconfigures the entire 'global' outlook on Europe and its role in the world. By defining decision along poststructuralist lines, as distinct from the conventional literature on decision-making, we demonstrate that the use of this conceptual prism helps deepen our understanding of how othering and bordering work to produce and reshape identities. By doing that, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of how identities change in time.

Keywords: decision; identity; poststructuralism; crisis; European Union; hegemony

The concept of identity has been one of the focal points for the discipline of international relations (IR) for no less than a quarter of a century. Ever since David Campbell's landmark study established that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive, IR scholars have predominantly viewed identity as 'constituted in relation to difference' (Campbell 1992, 8). Campbell argues that foreign policy is 'one of the boundary-producing practices central to the production and reproduction of the identity in whose name it operates' (1992, 75). This has been a key point of departure for a whole range of post-positivist scholarship in IR, from liberal (or 'soft') constructivism to radical poststructuralist accounts. Most studies follow

the pattern established by Campbell, as well as by Iver Neumann's (1999) influential book on othering, by looking at how discourses shape identities by articulating relations between the self and multiple significant others.

This general framework has laid the ground for remarkable progress in the field of identity studies. Our intention in this article is to build upon this achievement and make a step further by looking at how exactly particular articulations of self–other relations become dominant. To put it differently, we are interested in what happens before the identity of the self is temporarily fixed and becomes stable enough to enable an observer to examine the patterns of othering and bordering. The 'before' here does not imply something analogous to Alexander Wendt's (1999, 328) fictitious 'First Encounter, a world without shared ideas', in which no social identity exists. Rather, it refers to the poststructuralist assertion that all identities are produced hegemonically, which means they are always only partially sedimented, being open to contestation. What we highlight is that this openness is not a constant: at the moments of crisis, identity change is more probable than at other times.

Any hegemony is unstable; *inter alia*, it can be dislocated by an event.[1] The latter produces an excess of meaning that cannot be immediately accommodated in the hegemonic articulation. Hegemony is thus prone to crises, which lay bare the undecidable character of any particular self–other relationship. In a crisis, it becomes especially obvious that bordering never fully succeeds: the outside can never be completely excluded and is in fact always present within, at least as a trace (Staten 1984; Laclau 1990, 5–41). Eliminating dislocation and achieving some degree of certainty required for the maintenance of social order does not happen by itself: it requires a political act which we, following Jacques Derrida (1988) and Ernesto Laclau (1990), call a decision.

We illustrate the importance of decision for the constitution of identity by looking at the European Union's reaction to the 2011 conflict in Libya. We argue that the existing constructivist literature on EU foreign policy has overly concentrated on the role of othering. This article shifts the focus inside and demonstrates how the events of the Arab Spring, and in particular the Libyan crisis, produced dislocation of the Union's identity and opened up the space for a hegemonic struggle around the meaning of 'Europe'. We then examine the decision through which a new hegemonic articulation was established – an articulation that was based on a much more radical othering of the Libyan regime and thus enabled individual

[1] Our understanding of event is inspired Alain Badiou (2005, esp. 178–83). For the reasons of space, we cannot go into the discussion of this concept here.

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member states to intervene in Libya on the EU's behalf. The decision thus was not limited to the level of discourse, narrowly defined: the crisis eventually led the EU to undertake a foreign policy action with long-term consequences.

In order to achieve our goals, we apply poststructuralist discourse analysis (DA) to official statements and media materials issued during the most acute phase of the crisis in February–April 2011. By focussing on the EU's involvement in Libya, we deliberately chose an 'easy' case of a relatively deep but short-lived identity crisis, which was promptly fixed through a number of formal institutional measures. The ensuing military action by EU member states was not a self-evident solution, given the common sense view of the EU as a civilian power. Our case thus provides a graphic illustration of our contribution to the existing literature on identity politics. First, it shows that event-generated crises are a key mechanism of identity politics, a mechanism by which identities evolve and adapt to new circumstances.

Second, it offers an opportunity to more clearly define the concept of political decision, which plays a crucial role in post-foundationalist political theory, by deploying it empirically. In addition, this exercise highlights an important conceptual difference between the literature on foreign policy decision-making and post-foundationalist approaches. While the former focusses on individual institutional acts which might or might not involve the establishment of a new hegemony, the latter define decision through its main function: to eliminate dislocation, provide cognitive certainty and enable political action.

Third, our article reveals that any political decision does not just fix a certain self–other relationship, but provides a holistic view of the entire 'global' situation. In order to make sense of the event that sparked the crisis, it has to be inscribed in the pre-existing narratives, which requires an adjustment of multiple signifying chains and not just of those directly focussed on a particular relationship. This finding is fully in line with the poststructuralist view of hegemony as an operation involving universalisation of a particular identity: an adjustment in the meaning of the universal by definition affects the discursive field in its entirety.

We begin our analysis by briefly reviewing the existing identity-based approaches to European foreign policy in order to clearly identify the added value of our approach. The third section introduces our key concepts by discussing the poststructuralist view of identity as resulting from a hegemonic articulation and highlighting the role of decision as part of this mechanism. It also provides a detailed description of our method and sources. The fourth section focusses on the Libyan crisis. It shows how the event caused dislocation of the EU's identity by putting in question its

relationship with 'Europe', and how political decision, which involved several distinct institutional measures, sutured this gap by producing a new hegemonic articulation that enabled foreign policy action.

Identity and European foreign policy

The field of EU studies, as nearly all others, has been profoundly affected by the burgeoning literature on identity. This concept is now widely used to address the key problem arguably defining the field: how integration is possible despite the multiplicity of interests. As Anthony Smith points out, one of the fundamental reasons for the unabated interest in 'European unification' is, undoubtedly, 'the problem of identity itself. … At issue [among others] has been the possibility and legitimacy of a 'European identity', as opposed to the existing national identities' (Smith 1992, 56). While rationalist theories of European integration display a bias towards agency (of member states, EU institutions and bureaucracies, etc.), constructivism and discursive approaches are concerned with the structural conditions that make action possible and meaningful (Risse 2009; Wæver 2009). Identities and norms define the actors' perceptions of themselves and their place in Europe and in the wider world, and thus constitute essential reference points for policy action.

EU foreign policy has figured prominently in the debates about European identity. This constitutes a distinct contribution of constructivists to a field otherwise dominated by the discussion of the intergovernmental nature of decision-making (Hyde-Price 2006; Toje 2008) and the emerging elements of supranationalism (Smith 2003; Sjursen 2011; Howorth 2012), complemented, as far as the European Neighbourhood is concerned, by neo-institutionalism and the related literature on Europeanisation (Olsen 2002; Featherstone and Radaelli 2003; Vachudova 2005). The key concern here is with the cohesion, effectiveness, and legitimacy of individual policies – and ultimately, with the capability-expectations gap (Hill 1993). The goal remains to establish 'the extent to which the enlarged Union can operate effectively' (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 1) and achieve results such as successful conflict management (Whitman and Wolff 2012) and democracy promotion, while the relationship between foreign policy goals and the idea of Europe remains unexplored.

Constructivists, on the contrary, view the Union's foreign policy as part and parcel of identity construction, a process that involves a constant renegotiation of what it means to be European. Efforts to conceptualize the specificity of the Union as an actor in world politics date back to François Duchêne's (1972) characterization of the European Union as a 'civilian

power' and have been boosted by the introduction of the idea of 'normative power Europe' by Ian Manners (2002, 2008).

Manners' approach highlights the ability of the EU 'to shape conceptions of the "normal"' as the definitional aspect of normative power (Manners 2002, 239). Meanwhile, growing popularity of constructivism in IR has prompted scholars to view the EU not as ontological presence, but as an entity constructed through social and discursive practices. Most characteristically in this context, Thomas Diez (2005) argues that normative power should be seen as a particular EU identity, discursively framed in relation to others. At the same time, the continued uneasiness about the prospective development of the Union's military capabilities testifies to the fact that its normative power identity is still intimately linked with the idea of civilian (i.e. non-military) power (cf. Orbie 2006; Manners and Diez 2007, 177–79; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 21–22).

While the jury might still be out on a number of questions raised in these discussions, the importance of discursive self-construction as a normative power has been accepted by Manners himself (see Manners and Diez 2007, 174, 183–86). It is only this particular aspect of the concept that we rely upon in our analysis. For the purpose of this article, the concept designates a particular type of self-image that the EU has developed since its inception, which implies an ambition to define the universal norm. We refrain from any judgement about the Union's really existing capabilities to influence its neighbours' perceptions of the normal, as irrelevant for our analysis.

In other words, while relying on a certain interpretation of normative power Europe, our study does not seek to contribute to this specific debate. Rather, we position ourselves within the 'discursive turn' in IR theorizing, which is part of a broader trend in the social sciences that emphasizes the importance of linguistic practices for the creation of identities. Unlike the constructivism of Alexander Wendt (1999), which strives for a systemic account of the role identities play in international relations, and the language-oriented approach to international norms pioneered by Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and Nicholas Onuf (1989), ours is a second-image approach which could perhaps best be described as poststructuralist foreign policy analysis. Its key assumption, according to Lene Hansen, is that 'foreign policies are dependent upon particular representations of the countries, places, and people that such policies are assisting or deterring, as well as on representations of the national or institutional Self that undertakes these policies' (2016, 95). It is this latter aspect, the representation of the self-identity of the EU as part of foreign policy decision-making, that we concentrate upon.

As early as in the 1990s, seminal work of Campbell, R. B. J. Walker (1993), and Neumann (1999), among others, established that 'the

constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an "inside" from an "outside", a "self" from an "other", a "domestic" from a "foreign"' (Campbell 1992, 8). As applied to the EU, in particular, this approach draws on the long tradition of the study of European Orientalism: as Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh argued early on in the debate, Europe has always defined itself in opposition to the 'non-European barbarian or savage' (Neumann and Welsh 1991, 329). Over the past decades, researchers have explored discursive construction of identities and analysed how specific identity discourses condition and constrain knowledge and action with regard to various issues, such as conflict transformation (Diez, Stetter and Albert 2006; Pace 2007; Rumelili 2007), the enlargement (Maresceau 2003; Sedelmeier 2003), and European Neighbourhood Policy (Browning and Joenniemi 2008; Joenniemi 2008; Dimitrova 2012).

The others that are commonly believed to be instrumental in European identity constructions are the United States, Russia, and more recently also Islam and the Middle East (Diez 2004; Strasser 2008). In a related fashion, James Rogers argues that the EU constructs its inside as stable and peaceful, as opposed to the crisis-ridden outside (Rogers 2009, 846). The southern neighbourhood, in particular, has been consistently securitized in the EU's discourses (Pace 2010; Schumacher 2015, 387). There are studies showing that Eastern and Western Europe can be seen as engaged in mutual othering (Neumann 1999; Kuus 2004), while external others also take an active part in shaping the identity of the EU (Morozov and Rumelili 2012). Another twist to the argument is added by viewing European nation states as socially constructed partly in opposition to Europe, and vice versa, Europe in opposition to national parochialism (Carey 2002). There is also a crucially important debate about the relative significance of spatial and temporal othering for EU identity (Wæver 1998; Joenniemi 2008; Prozorov 2011).

To summarize, the existing literature has established that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive, all identities are contested, and any political articulation draws boundaries and thus delineates the self in opposition to others. European identity literature has traced the dominant EU foreign policy discourses and representations of Europe's significant others, worked out a theoretical language and used it extensively in the empirical analysis of the EU's external relations.

At the same time, the bulk of this literature concentrates on Europe's construction against a singular and obvious anti-self. We still lack a comprehensive understanding of how the EU's identity takes shape in relation to multiple others and with due regard to the various modes that othering can take (Rumelili 2004; Hansen 2006). Similarly, it has been acknowledged that there exist mutually constitutive social relationships

and competing norms at various levels of EU governance (Wæver 2005, 39; Diez 2013b; Carta and Morin 2014a, b). As Diez (2013a, 202) argues, the interaction between the European and national levels of foreign policy-making is more adequately described in terms of contestation rather than coordination. What is missing, however, is an account of how contestation produces unity to enable political action on behalf of the EU.

In our view, a key reason for the persistence of this lacuna is the excessive focus on othering at the expense of other aspects of identity construction. In order to overcome it, it is imperative to shift the focus back inside and to look at how, despite never-ending contestation and the push and pull of multiple significant others, the EU's identity still manages to consolidate up to a point where it can empower political action. In order to do that, it is first necessary to duly take into account the significance of hegemony as an operation which 'selects' particular self–other relationships among the endless variety of discursive elements and endows them with identity-constituting significance. While the hegemonic character of political identities is absolutely essential for poststructuralism, too little work has been done on the mechanisms of hegemonic fixation of signifying chains. To eliminate this blind spot, we foreground the concept of decision, which has been explored in poststructuralist philosophy, but never systematically used in the empirical study of identity construction.

Hegemonic struggles and EU foreign policy identity

Poststructuralist theory of hegemony starts with the ontological assertion that the social is defined by excess: no particular articulation establishing a social order can ever match the infinite richness of potentially available meaning (Laclau 1990, 90–91; Howarth 2013, 12). There is an unlimited play of discursive differences that ultimately undermine any attempt at totalisation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 95–96). Constituting a community and differentiating it from the outside world thus involves somehow rising above the immediately given realm of differences and postulating equivalence between all individual elements that belong on the inside. This is only possible if there is a difference of a higher order: 'what is beyond the frontier of exclusion is reduced to pure negativity – that is to the pure threat that what is beyond poses to the system (constituting it in this way)' (Laclau 1996, 38). *Mutatis mutandis*, this is how the constructivist concept of othering can be reinterpreted in poststructuralist terms.

Since constitutive outside is indispensable, any identity is haunted by non-closure (Staten 1984; Laclau 1990, 5–41). As distinct from the constructivist logic of multiple others, resulting in multifaceted identities, poststructuralism insists that a hegemonic move provides some degree of

stability, even though relative, temporary and contested. It might be said, again as a matter of transition from constructivism to poststructuralism, that a key aspect of hegemony consists in 'choosing' a particular other to negate. This, in turn, implies that hegemony is always about producing universality out of an infinitude of particularities: one particular articulation of 'society' (and its outside) establishes itself as universally valid, even as alternative articulations continue to contest it.

Discursive referents of this flawed and elusive universality are empty signifiers, which provide the symbolic means to represent order as such – that which holds together multiple and even contradictory demands in a precarious unity (Howarth 2013, 82). A signifier has to be empty to signify the universal, because, as Laclau explains, in this case 'we are trying to signify the limits of signification – the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense'. Any differentially defined sign by definition refers only to the part of the whole, so

> it is only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such signification is possible (Laclau 1996, 39).

Typical examples of empty signifiers include 'Europe' and 'democracy'. Their meaning in political discourse is always situational: for instance, 'Europe' can be articulated as a closed community based on the Christian tradition or as one structured around the values of openness and tolerance.

Such 'privileged sign[s] around which the other signs are ordered' are called nodal points: 'the other signs acquire their meaning through the relationship to the nodal point' (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 26), by being slotted into chains of equivalence, thus momentarily fixing the common identity (Norval, Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). Nodal points arrest the free flow of discourse and organize it into an articulation. They are defined differentially, in contrast to empty signifiers, in which the differential aspect is subverted and subsumed under the function of signifying the universal. It should also perhaps be noted that empty signifiers are always rooted in a particular historical context. The adjective 'empty' must not therefore be taken literally: it indicates a tendency rather than an empirical fact. The meaning of 'Europe' is never a matter of voluntaristic choice: under normal circumstances, it is relatively fixed, although always contested.

The fact of contestation implies that even in stable periods full suture is out of reach: there is always dislocation inherent in any social order, regardless of how stable and sedimented it is. Dislocation becomes particularly visible at the moments of crisis, when hegemonic articulation

'is confronted by new events that it cannot explain, represent, or in other ways domesticate' (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 16).

In this paper crisis is conceptualized as structural dislocation in which political routine is suspended, the fragmentation of the self due to the presence of competing hegemonic moves becomes visible and generates the need to re-establish order by restoring or re-articulating the dislocated discursive structure (Edkins 1999, 136–37; Hay 1999, 331). Our use of the term is distinct from the Gramscian concept of 'organic crisis' employed, *inter alia*, by Laclau in his last major book (Laclau 2005, esp. 177–78). The latter concept implies much deeper contradictions in the social structure. In linking crisis with event, our approach is similar to that adopted by institutionalist literature (see Krasner 1984). However, while institutionalists focus on 'the state's capacity to maintain control' (Skowronek 1982, 10), we are interested in how crises affect identity and, consequently, the humans' ability to make sense of the world, in both cognitive and practical terms.

In his important book, Dirk Nabers (2015) equates crisis with dislocation as a defining feature of the social. We agree with him that some degree of dislocation is there at any moment. However, in our view the term 'crisis' must be reserved for situations where an event, such as the Arab Spring, lays bare the contingent nature of norms and habits, which in ordinary times is occluded by common sense (cf. Hopf 2010). This opens up a terrain for competing hegemonic moves striving to eliminate the crisis by renegotiating the identity of the self. It is at crisis times that the emptiness of empty signifiers becomes particularly visible, as catastrophic dislocation creates opportunities for a radical re-definition of the universalia.

Dislocation and crisis are often seen as the root of discursive and ideological shifts (Hay 1996, 253). This, *inter alia*, has been illustrated by the studies of the discursive construction of 9/11 and its lasting impact on the US foreign policy (Croft 2006; Nabers 2009). Michal Natorski (2016) has challenged this interpretation by arguing that during crisis actors seek to recover the sense of order by going back to the established epistemic standards. His approach explains the resilience of cognitive and institutional orders, but the relationship between discursive stability and change is best seen as a dialectical one. From Laclau's perspective, a political project is more likely to succeed if it is articulated in accordance with the 'ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society' (Laclau 2000, 82). Thus, a crisis, or even a revolution, can never wipe out the old order completely, but it does create a moment of openness in which the fragmentation and vulnerability of the self becomes visible and thus necessitates some more or less radical rearrangement of the signifying chains.

Following the established tradition in the poststructuralist literature (see, in particular, Derrida 1988; Laclau 1990; Norval 2004), we call the act of such rearrangement a decision. The meaning of the term in poststructuralism is significantly different from more conventional usage, such as, for instance, in the literature on political decision-making. A decision can involve an act of formal authority, but cannot be reduced to the latter. Instead, what defines a decision is its function of fixing chains of signification around nodal points in a certain way, thus eliminating dislocation and reducing undecidability. An undecidable situation with no clear distinction between right and wrong becomes 'readable', starts to make sense again. Viewed in this light, the decision does not just restore 'epistemic coherence' disturbed by the crisis (Natorski 2016), but ensures ontological security by eliminating or at least reducing uncertainty about the identity of the self (cf. Mitzen 2006).[2]

At the same time, decision has foundational significance: it does not just eliminate dislocation, but serves as the only possible ground for the social order as such. In the final analysis, any hegemony is instituted in an act of decision (Norval 2004, 145–46), or, speaking empirically, through a sequence of decisions on varying scale. By (re)establishing a hegemonic order, the decision (re)creates a universal system of coordinates enabling the actors to distinguish between right and wrong. It is thus the fundamental precondition for the emergence of such notions as common good, common (e.g. national, European, etc.) interest, which delineate political boundaries by identifying spatial and temporal others, thus effectively creating the identity of the self and enabling political action.

It must be stressed that the dislocatory impact of any major crisis is not limited to the communities directly affected. Even if direct destruction is usually limited to particular localities, its representation in the media generates discursive dislocation on a much wider reach. As existing studies seem to suggest, the public in most member states did expect the EU to do something in response to the crisis in Libya (Overbeck 2014). In a situation of undecidability, however, the specific course of action cannot be immediately clear, which gives rise to multiple discourses that compete to heal the wound. None of them offers just an isolated solution to the crisis: the solution must be based on a claim to universality, start by defining what 'we' as a community believe to be right.

Coping with a crisis can be analysed, *inter alia*, using conventional foreign policy analysis, focussed on the rational cost-benefit calculation, or

[2] The connection between decision and ontological security is a fascinating theme to explore, but we have to leave it until later lest our argument become unnecessarily complex.

practice-oriented approaches, which demonstrate how success in promoting a particular course of action depends on negotiating skills and resources (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). These theories assume that the actors' identity remains stable, while their motives are a function of their 'material' interests. In contrast, our approach highlights the re-definition of the actor's identity as part of any major political decision, and demonstrates that this re-definition is essential for the rationalisation of the new, post-evental reality. A choice between different courses of action affects how the actor sees itself and the surrounding world, and hence also the priorities of the decision-makers. As a corollary, the most far-reaching political decisions establish a new version of the hegemonic order, adjusted to the change in external circumstances.

In the empirical section below, we illustrate this point by examining the way in which the EU dealt with the Libyan crisis. We analyse conflicting interpretations of the events and show how a reconstructed identity consolidates up to a point where political action can be taken. We do this by tracing the evolution of EU foreign policy discourses, which is intended to demonstrate how different articulations of the Union's identity play out in the hegemonic contestation opened up by the event and how undecidability is eliminated in a decision, leading to a relative stabilisation of the identity. The key criterion for the establishment of a new hegemony is the convergence of mainstream political voices around one relatively coherent discourse, which reduces dislocation by providing a way to make sense of the events. This is followed by a series of formal institutional moves that fix the decision and often make it practically irreversible.

The fact of discursive convergence is established by performing a deep qualitative DA of the pan-European debate during the most acute phase of the crisis (February–April 2011). We assume that this debate was waged in Brussels as well as all over Europe, but our source selection is limited due to our choice of qualitative method. Accordingly, we have examined EU declarations, statements of top European officials and national political leaders, as well as editorials and opinion pieces of major newspapers. As a standard practice in qualitative DA, our preference was for texts that do not just have formal authority and are widely read and attended to, but also clearly articulate identities and policies (Hansen 2006, 82–87). This has led to our sample being biased in favour of some member states (Germany, France, the United Kingdom), but we believe this is justified since their governments were most vocal in articulating their positions and thus had greater influence on the pan-European discourse.

To facilitate source selection, we used major EU-level outlets – *EU Observer* and *EuroTopics* – which monitor and aggregate official statements and media publications from all over Europe. Within this array, we

went through all significant texts on the Libyan topic, and in addition randomly consulted media materials outside of our main body of sources to make sure there was no major trend that was missing from our analysis. In the empirical section below, we have been able to quote only a limited number of sources. Still, we believe our findings to be valid and replicable, since the same discursive patterns are repeated in the entire body of texts that we analysed.

Our study is rather narrowly focussed on the pan-European elite discourse, which implies certain limitations. The latter, however, do not affect the validity of our claims, since we are primarily interested in how decision-makers seek to legitimize their policy choices by linking them with particular representations of the European self. While doing that, they have their own motivation and keep in mind different audiences and constituencies. Other scholars (e.g. Bucher *et al*. 2013; Fabbrini 2014) have already looked at how the interplay of European and national identity politics, as well as more 'materialist' considerations (such as upcoming elections) affected the positions of individual member states, especially France and Germany, on the Libyan issue. It would be interesting to revisit their findings from our perspective. This, however, would involve adding an extra level of analysis and dividing the EU case into several national ones. As this is clearly beyond what one article can achieve, we have chosen to limit our analysis to the resulting common European hegemonic language and to bracket off the question of the reasons why particular leaders behave in a certain way.

The object of our research are explicit articulations of European (and only European) identity which lay ground for a political decision. Consequently, we classify certain articulations as hegemonic when they serve as the basis for formal institutional acts, with new hegemony revealing itself both as a discourse and political practice. The Gramscian concept of hegemony presupposes a consent of the audience, but does not imply unreserved support from all corners. The existing literature makes it clear that even though some member states were less than enthusiastic about the military intervention, the Council did endorse both the air strikes by the individual member states and the subsequent humanitarian operation (Fabbrini 2014, 185–88). Public opinion on the issue across countries was divided (Bucher *et al*. 2013; Clements 2013, 122–23), but the attempts to mobilize the anti-interventionist attitudes succeeded, to a limited extent, in some individual countries (such as Italy, see Coticchia 2015). The dissenters were unable to explain how staying away from the conflict could be reconciled with the Union's identity as a normative power.

This approach is in line with the Gramscian understanding of hegemony as resulting from an active effort by the ruling classes, which must rely on

certain elements of the mass common sense but are never driven by it (Robinson 2005; Liguori 2009). Put differently, a political decision links the eclectic common sense of the masses with the plane of the universal, while still leaving space for alternative articulations that might pick other elements from the pool of meaning present in the discursive domain. Any decision eliminates dislocation only partially and temporarily, but it still commits political actors to a certain course of action and therefore can have material, irreversible consequences.

EU's involvement in the Libyan crisis

The eruption of unrest throughout the Arab world in the early months of 2011 caught the world by surprise. Even though it was the population of these countries that was most directly affected, the events also had immediate consequences for the entire international community. The reading of the situation by individual member states, however, was rather different: while the calls on the EU to act were common in France and the United Kingdom, German opinion leaders were largely in favour of letting the Libyan people decide for themselves (Bucher *et al.* 2013; Fabbrini 2014). Yet even in Germany there were voices deploring the fact that 'the popular movements in the Arab world have generated surprisingly little political resonance in the streets of European capitals' (Münkler 2011).

As established by the constructivist literature reviewed above, the hegemonically established identity of the EU as a normative power was grounded in a strong equivalence between the Union's self and the idea of Europe. At the same time, it was to a large extent based on the othering and securitization of the southern neighbourhood and did not envisage any possibility for a democratic breakthrough (Pace 2010; Schumacher 2015). It was difficult to reconcile with the new perspectives opened up by the popular movements against the authoritarian regimes.

This gap empowered disparate discontents, which had been simmering on the margins but now burst into the mainstream debate and eventually consolidated into an alternative hegemonic move. As a result, the EU came to be accused of having failed to stand up to its own ethical standard by backing authoritarian regimes as a trade-off for stability in the region. Consider, for instance, this statement by the Dutch historian Geert Somsen (2011): 'the post-September 11 dichotomy simply no longer holds, the confusion is total. Muslims turn out to be democrats; the West appears to support terror'. In the same vein, the Spanish daily *El Pais* (2011) in its editorial maintained that 'the dogma that dictatorship was a lesser evil compared with the threat of Islamic religious fanaticism' led great powers to committing 'uncountable historical errors in the Maghreb and in the

Middle East', and they were about to 'add a new error of planetary dimensions' by ignoring the people who risk their lives for democracy.

Against this general background, the Libyan uprising against Muammar Gaddafi's regime, which began on 15 February 2011, was a major event that did not immediately let itself be inscribed in the pre-existing hegemonic discourse on the meaning of Europe. The crisis thus did not just reopen the capability-expectations gap: the Union was expected to act (Overbeck 2014), but it was not immediately clear which particular course of action would be most appropriate to re-assemble the Union's identity at a new level. In order to understand how the new hegemonic articulation came about, it is necessary to examine the state in-between, where no decision is yet taken. Our account follows the timeline of formal institutional measures adopted by Brussels. However, as the events in Libya unfolded at an extraordinary speed, the entire debate was taking place almost at the same point in time. Our narrative is to some extent an artificial reconstruction needed for the sake of clarity: it follows the internal logic of the competing hegemonic moves rather than their daily chronology.

Discursive struggles over the meaning of Europe

As the initial reaction to the outbreak of the crisis, two hegemonic moves became discernible in February 2011. They articulated contrasting visions of EU identity and demanded different lines of action. We call these discourses 'New Partnership' and 'Let's Not Disturb'.

The discourse on the 'New Partnership' constructed the Libyan crisis as a democratic uprising against an oppressive regime. By using repression, Gaddafi's government thus stood not only against the peaceful protesters but also against Europe and its values. Differences between Libyans and Europeans were played down, emphasizing the allegedly universal craving for democracy, freedom of expression, justice and human rights – all values which represent the 'silver thread' of the European project (Ashton quoted in European Commission 2011). Moreover, authors from across the ideological spectrum came together in characterizing the insurgents' demands as being 'free of Islamist and anti-imperialist ideology' (*Economist* 2011; see also Somsen 2011; Žižek 2011). Gaddafi's otherness, in turn, was emphasized by labelling the regime as 'brutal', 'violent', and 'illegitimate'.

The previously prevailing understanding which associated Europe's security with regime stability was incompatible with the 'New Partnership' discourse. Commissioner Štefan Füle (2011) acknowledged this when he said: 'We must show humility about the past. Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region'. In the new chain of equivalence security was linked with democratization, while

the Arab Spring was presented as a reincarnation of the East European democratic revolutions: 'The street scenes from Tunis, Cairo and Alexandria bring to mind Prague, Leipzig and Bucharest in 1989', Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal wrote (2011; see also Ashton 2011a; Barroso 2011b).

The 'New Partnership' discourse thus continued to imagine the EU as a normative power by assuming the European model was not just superior but universal and transferable: 'Ultimately this is about people's deep quest for freedom, justice, dignity, social and economic opportunities, and democracy. These are indeed universal values', President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso (2011a) insisted. The representation of Libyans as essentially sharing Europe's values was therefore constitutive of the EU's identity and implied the responsibility to promote those values beyond the Union's borders. Taken together, these factors created a powerful incentive for external action.

The 'Let's Not Disturb' discourse, on the contrary, presented the crisis as Libya's internal issue. The two main reasons for that were the need to preserve stability and the scepticism about the idea of exporting democracy, as summarized by the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt: 'It is not about supporting one side or the other. It is about trying to bring stability and equitable development. In situations like this you have to be realistic and say that our ability to concretely influence is relatively limited' (Sveriges Radio 2011).

Drawing on the pre-crisis defaults, this discourse continued to Orientalize the Libyans by pointing to the 'complicated tribal structures' (Hoyer 2011) and the lack of 'structural preconditions' for democracy (Münkler 2011), with Gaddafi's regime seen as holding together a fragmented nation and preventing an all-out civil war (Siddique and Hammond 2011). In some cases, Orientalization led to securitization: 'If Gaddafi falls, then there will be bigger catastrophes in the world', Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg warned (Philips 2011). Mass uncontrolled migration was presented as particularly threatening: according to Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, it could amount to 'a Biblical exodus' (Squires 2011). Another heavily securitized element was the Islamic identity of the protesters, which was linked with the threat of religious radicalism and terrorism. The historical parallels that were drawn here were not with the velvet revolutions, but with the Yugoslav wars (Hoyer 2011) and, most importantly, Iraq (Abdelkader Benali in Preston *et al.* 2011).

The most revealing difference between the two discourses was at the level of premises rather than prescriptions. While the 'New Partnership' discourse described the European values as universal, the Libyan people as part of the European self and saw democratization as a guarantee for

security, the 'Let's Not Disturb' discourse insisted on the difference between Libyans and Europeans and thus portrayed the former as not ready to embrace democracy. According to this latter understanding European values had limited validity outside of the Union's borders, which were thus constructed as cultural and political and not just geographical.

The most important similarity between the two discourses at this early stage was that both reproduced the EU's identity as a civilian power. As High Representative Catherine Ashton (2011a) insisted,

> The EU is not a state or a traditional military power. It cannot deploy gunboats or bombers. It cannot invade or colonise. It can sign free trade agreements or impose sanctions only when all 27 states agree. The strength of the EU lies, paradoxically, in its inability to throw its weight around. (Ashton 2011a; see also Frattini 2011; Hoyer 2011)

Local ownership of democratization was emphasized along with the need for multilateral cooperation – with the United Nations, the Arab League, the African Union, NATO, the International Criminal Court and the 'relevant member states'. The Union was to encourage political and economic reform, support civil society and offer enhanced economic cooperation (European Council 2011c). No military solution was envisaged as of yet.

The emergence of the hegemonic discourse

On 23 February 2011, in response to the escalating crisis in Libya, the High Representative issued a declaration on behalf of the EU (European Union 2011). This was the first formal institutional act adopted in response to the crisis that provided a concrete reading of the entire situation and relied on the authority of the Union in an attempt to establish a new hegemony. The interpretation of the events in the declaration followed the main thrust of 'New Partnership' – that the Libyan people deserved a democracy to a no lesser extent than Europeans. In doing that, it established a new set of signifying chains around the empty signifier of Europe, which drew on some key elements of the pre-crisis articulation. Accordingly, this was a major step towards inscribing the event (the Libyan uprising) into the pre-existing narrative of the EU as a normative power capable of establishing universal moral standards. It offered a prism through which something that was previously incomprehensible was starting to make sense, could be reconciled with established common sense. At the moment of adoption, the principles fixed in the declaration were far from self-evident. It emerged from a series of hegemonic struggles around the meaning of 'Europe', which had to be related to the key nodal points, such as 'democracy', 'stability',

and 'sovereignty', in a way that would produce a meaningful account of the developments.

As we shall see below, the construction of the EU as a guarantor of universal norms became a reference point for concrete political demands. Those were rooted in the new hegemonic reading of the 'global' situation that conceived of Libya as a country in transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The policy based on the 'New Partnership' would consist in adapting the Neighbourhood Policy so that it would 'develop and strengthen democratic institutions, giving civil society every opportunity to strengthen the economy, reduce poverty, and address social injustices' (European Council 2011d). The European self envisaged in the declaration was open to the Libyan people, whereas the role of constitutive outside was played by the oppressive regime.

In the meantime, the continued escalation of violence in Libya produced ever more dislocation: as indicated by our sources, the Union's actions were seen by some member states as well as by the wider public as inadequate and thus its identity as the embodiment of European values continued to be strongly contested. 'The free West should not look on impassively as the tyrant of Tripoli who has been branded the godfather of international terrorism, exterminates the Libyans who demand democracy and freedom', urged the conservative Dutch tabloid *De Telegraaf* (EuroTopics 2011). It was argued that the EU was standing 'on the wrong side of history' as 'too many European countries are still more worried about stability in the Middle East than about democracy' (*Economist* 2011). While acknowledging that '[i]t's not our job to change the leader of Libya', Finnish foreign minister Alexander Stubb still insisted: 'it is the job of the leadership of Libya to listen to its people. And to be quite honest, listening to people doesn't involve using a machine gun' (*Spiegel* 2011).

The new hegemonic move did not stop at redefining the meaning of the Libyan developments, but envisaged a new role for the international community. It called on the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the Arab League to adopt concrete measures 'to prevent further bloodshed' (European Parliament 2011a). In this context, the future role for Europe was described in terms of acting at the frontline by enforcing UNSC decisions and introducing effective sanctions against Gaddafi. The demands for EU sanctions became even more vocal when the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1970, imposing a range of international restrictions and referring the Libyan case to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

As previously, the new hegemonic move was not left unopposed: the new hegemony was still in the making. Some member states were against any EU interference, with Italy protesting most vehemently. Frattini warned that

'[b]etween 200,000 and 300,000 migrants from Libya could flee the country if the regime collapses, 10 times the Albanian refugee phenomenon of the 1990s' (Euractiv 2011).

In the end, the EU decided to impose sanctions on Libya on 28 February (European Council 2011a). From a discourse-analytical perspective, it appears that the demand for sanctions was successful exactly because it provided a solution to the dislocation problem. First, while it was possible to argue against the interpretation of the Libyan events as a 'transition from authoritarianism to democracy' and warn against an intervention citing the examples of Afghanistan and Iraq, depicting the regime's response as 'extermination' raised the stakes to the level where ignoring the calls for solidarity would amount to a patent repudiation of core European values. Second, however, the proposals for sanctions were integrated in the wider hegemonic discourse: they were presented as the only way for the Union to uphold its norms by protecting human rights and bringing democracy to the Arab world. The universalist elements of the EU's normative power identity were thus firmly linked with the idea of 'action' and even 'intervention'. The opponents of sanctions, on the contrary, failed to go beyond particularist security-related arguments. In 2011, the fear of mass migration and terrorism was not strong enough to justify an abandonment of the universalist agenda so closely linked with the European idea.

From the no-fly zone to the intervention

The sanctions were not, however, effective enough in the eyes of some member states, in particular France and the United Kingdom. Gaddafi ignored Resolution 1970 and continued fighting his own people. On 6 March, government forces began to advance against the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. The news about the atrocities undermined the hegemony emerging around the previous decisions and once again opened up a space for critical discourses, which presented the Union as weak, divided and irrelevant. While the early reactions to the Libyan uprising were full of optimistic reminiscences of 1989, a much more sombre historical analogies with Srebrenica, Rwanda and Darfur were now starting to inform interpretation of the events on all sides (European Parliament 2011b; Rettman 2011a). Just as Yugoslavia had been seen as the first big test of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a test that the EU had failed due to internal squabbles and the lack of a vision, the Libyan conflict was now construed as the 'first big test on the EU's doorstep' after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty (Black, Watt and Wintour 2011).

Moreover, the continuing escalation of violence made visible the tensions within the Union over the role and mechanisms of the CFSP

(Fabbrini 2014). Guy Verhofstadt and Martin Schulz, leaders of, respectively, the liberal and socialist groups in the European Parliament, expressed consternation over the position of some member states: 'Have they learned nothing from the tragedy of the Bosnian war? This is a defining moment in Europe's foreign policy. Will we be up to the mark or spend the next ten years lamenting our inaction when it could have made a difference?' (Verhofstadt 2011; see also Schulz 2011). The Union's powerlessness in the face of yet another major challenge in the neighbourhood was contrasted with the decisive attitude of the United States and NATO. Thus, *The Guardian* argued that 'Europeans live closer to Libya than Americans. Like Bosnia, it's on their patch. It's their problem. But without the US, it seems, they cannot help themselves' (Disdall 2011).

At the same time, while pushing for action, British and French leaders had to take on board certain arguments of the 'Let's Not Disturb' camp. Thus, in the early days of March, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé repeatedly confirmed that 'a military intervention of the NATO powers' would not 'be well received in the southern Mediterranean. It could be counter-productive' (Juppé 2011a). Similarly, if a military intervention were to become necessary, it could only be a multilateral endeavour, 'under a United Nations mandate and with the participation of the Arab League and the African Union' (Juppé 2011b; see also Schulz 2011).

Moreover, the proponents of action also adopted some more alarmist and particularist elements of the opposing discourse by securitizing Libya as a potential threat. Libya was presented as physically close, a potential source of instability in the energy sector, mass migration and terrorism, and an area of a humanitarian catastrophe. To quote just one example, UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (2011) argued:

> North Africa is just 14 miles from Europe at its closest point, what happens to our near neighbours affects us deeply, at the level of human migration from North Africa to Europe, at the level of trade and investment between Europe and North Africa, and its importance to us in terms of energy, the environment and counter-terrorism.

Unlike the earlier securitizing discourses, however, this one no longer advocated political continuity in Libya. On the contrary, it engaged in a radical othering of Gaddafi by describing his conduct as an ongoing large-scale massacre (e.g. Sarkozy 2011; Verhofstadt 2011) and envisaged his removal as the only feasible way to deal with the threat to Europe's security – a position eventually agreed upon by the European Council at the 11 March extraordinary meeting (European Council 2011b).

Securitization, deployed in this manner, worked to reproduce the equivalence between Libyans and Europeans and thus to reconfirm the

Union's universalist identity as a normative power. Thus, UK Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that 'the risk is again of a failed pariah state festering on Europe's southern border, threatening our security, pushing people across the Mediterranean and creating a more dangerous and uncertain world for Britain and for all our allies'. At the same time, he reminded that 'around the region people continue to campaign for change and their aspirations have not yet been met' (Cameron 2011). French President Nicholas Sarkozy (2011) echoed by saying 'the values being put forward today by the Arab peoples are values the European nations adopted a very long time ago'. The underlying assumption of European values as universal thus remained a foundation of the hegemonic discourse.

At first High Representative Ashton ruled out any immediate armed undertaking, arguing that it would not line up with the core values of the Union (Ashton 2011a), while also worried about the lack of consensus among the member states (Fabbrini 2014, 184). This was perhaps the moment when the EU's long-established identity as a civilian, as opposed to military, power most explicitly played out in the debate. The opponents of the intervention, most prominently the German ones, emphasized that the revolution belonged to the local population. 'We're not in a position to eliminate oppression throughout the world', German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (2011) warned, while reminding of the need 'to take into account the lessons learned from our recent history, also from recent military operations', especially those in Afghanistan and Iraq. British MEP Nigel Farage, who also opposed military intervention, even drew an analogy with Vietnam (European Parliament 2011b). They also insisted that it would risk expanding the conflict and strengthening Gaddafi by allowing him to insist that his country is again a victim of colonial aggression (Bucher *et al.* 2013, 534).

While domestic considerations undoubtedly played a decisive role in shaping the positions of the key players (especially the Germans and the French, see Fabbrini 2014, 185), in search of legitimation all of them still had to align their discursive strategies with the more widely shared idea of Europe. As a result, a consensus was slowly emerging around such points as the need for a multilateral approach and the illegitimacy of Gaddafi's regime. The call on him to step down, issued by the 11 March summit, was an obvious move to make. At the same meeting, the European Council decided that a no-fly zone could only be imposed if three conditions were met: a demonstrable need, a clear legal basis in the form of a UNSC resolution, and support from the region (European Council 2011b).

If anything, the EU's identity as a civilian power was strengthened by the outcome of the summit: it was agreed that it would be the member states which would decide whether the use of military means was justified and

take the appropriate steps, while the Union's role would be 'to look together as 27 at the humanitarian, economic and political issues' (Ashton 2011b). At the same time, the universalist idea of normative power did not disappear, either: the Libyans were still envisaged as close to the European self. All actions undertaken by the EU, whether civilian or military, were supposed to ensure protection of civilians and, eventually, Libya's transition to democracy.

International consensus on the imposition of a no-fly zone was achieved on 17 March, as Gaddafi's forces were being positioned for an assault on Benghazi. By a 10 to 0 vote, with Germany abstaining alongside Russia and China, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1973, which legitimized military intervention in Libya. It took the Union less than a month to forge a new hegemony around the decision to endorse a military intervention by its member states and allies, while stopping short of an EU-led military operation. Germany's abstention was predictable in view of its earlier scepticism about promoting democracy by force but cannot be interpreted as a challenge to the re-established hegemonic order. On the contrary, German diplomacy had difficult times justifying its choice: in the end, Berlin 'could not reclaim the moral high ground as a civil power and found itself isolated from its NATO allies – in a camp with China and Russia' (Weiss 2016, 8).

Looking back at the intra-EU discursive struggles triggered by the crisis, one can see nearly the same pattern in operation at all stages. Each hegemonic move trying to eliminate dislocation and make sense of the crisis was making a universalising claim by attempting to fill in the empty signifier of 'Europe'. Each did this by re-articulating the signifying chains around key nodal points, such as 'democracy', 'peace', 'security', and the memory of both glorious and tragic European past (symbolized, in particular, by 1989 and Srebrenica). Each struggled to overcome the tension between the need for action – and thus for an intervention of some sort – and the EU's entrenched identity of a civilian power and ensuing aversion to the use of military means.

Our case study confirms the constructivist view of bordering and othering as key identity-producing practices. In the Libyan case, the key question was where to draw the border between the European self and the threatening other. Our study highlights that the position of this line in crisis times is far from self-evident, while some certainty must be achieved before action becomes possible. Before the Union could authorise military action by individual member states, it had to make the choice in favour of securitizing (and perhaps even demonizing) Colonel Gaddafi and, most importantly, including the Libyans as part of the self. This political decision took several institutional measures to achieve and quite a bit of struggle

before the reconfigured identity settled down and President Herman Van Rompuy could proudly declare: 'From the beginning of the crisis, the European Union was at the forefront … Without Europe nothing would have been done at the global level or at the UN level' (Rettman 2011b).

Conclusion

Our analysis of the intra-EU discourses on the Libyan uprising demonstrates how a major event outside of the Union's borders opened a void at the core of European identity. This confirms our assertion that any significant political crisis produces dislocation in all the identities that somehow relate to the event, even if they are not directly affected by the developments on the ground. Our empirical analysis further reveals that the hegemonic articulation that eliminates dislocation produced by the crisis cannot be limited in scope to a particular self–other relationship. Instead, it fixes a certain view of the entire 'global' situation – not in the geographical sense, of course, but in terms of encompassing the entire system of signification. In the case of the EU's reaction to the events in Libya, this meant that any viable policy response to the crisis had to be coordinated with the Union's view of itself as the embodiment of European values, as normative power Europe.

Our analysis adds important insights into the workings of hegemony in the construction of political identities. Any identity is inscribed in a hegemonically established signifying system, organized around empty signifiers, whose function consists in signifying the system as a whole, as opposed to any particular difference. A hegemonic move fills empty signifiers with concrete meaning, while at the same time drawing a border around the self, dividing the political space between the inside and the outside.

Othering plays an important role in this process, but, as our analysis confirms, the identity of the self never fully depends on any particular self–other relationship. Conventional patterns of othering can be disturbed by an event, which lays bare the undecidability of the social and produces an identity crisis in which empty signifiers lose their established meaning. Thus, the Arab Spring had a profound unsettling effect on the European identity: it broke apart the equivalence between the EU and the notion of Europeanness, exposing the empty signifier of Europe to a range of competing hegemonic moves that struggled to fill it with specific content. An inevitable consequence of this crisis at the core of European identity was the blurring of boundaries between the self and its constitutive outside. Some articulations attempted to make sense of the new situation by shifting the border between Europe and non-Europe, as it were, inside Libya: the

Libyan people were included in the European self, while the oppressive regime of Gaddafi took a central position as Europe's other.

The dislocation produced by the external crisis thus necessitated a dramatic re-articulation of signifying chains, which could only be achieved through a political decision. In our empirical case, the decision involved several formal steps taken by the EU, beginning with the adoption of a political declaration providing a common assessment of the events and leading up to the introduction of sanctions and support for a no-fly zone. However, poststructuralism views decision as more than a set of formal measures taken by particular institutions. Before any concrete steps can be taken, a new reading of the situation must be available, making it possible to fix, if only partially, the dislocated signifying chains and provide cognitive certainty which is an absolute precondition for action. The new articulation and the ensuing action thus form an inseparable whole which is the decision proper: the material consequences of the action consolidate the discursive certainty achieved in the decision and make it in some ways irreversible. The interpellation of Gaddafi's regime as a key threat to Europe's security logically involved authorizing and enforcing a no-fly zone, while the air strikes that followed meant that the EU could no longer back down from its support of the rebels against the regime.

On a more theoretical note, what defines a decision is, firstly, the very fact that a new hegemonic order has been established: obvious dislocation has been eliminated, identities partly fixed, and the events that upset the common sense worldview have been inscribed in the mainstream historical narrative. Second, a political decision, as opposed to an institutional act, is self-grounded: its only ontological foundation is the decision itself. This must not be taken as saying that a political decision is arbitrary: as our case shows, all competing hegemonic moves generated by the Libyan crisis invoked elements of the pre-crisis hegemonic articulation and hence were grounded in the past. However, none of these moves was *in essence* 'better' or 'worse' than the others. Each offered an interpretation of European identity in which consistency could only be achieved by what Alain Badiou (2005, 400–09) would call 'forcing', that is by establishing problematic equivalencies and deciding the undecidable from the point of view of 'the situation to come', of the yet-uncertain future, which is a precondition for political action and the key attribute of subjectivity.

In this regard, it is very telling that today's view of Libya and the Mediterranean neighbourhood as a whole is much closer to the 'Let's Not Disturb' discourse than to its 'New Partnership' rival. In other words, while the EU's initial response to the 2011 uprising tended to embrace the Libyan people as part of the European self, the subsequent evolution of the mainstream view led to the ever more intense securitization of the cultural

difference, at present strongly associated with such threats as mass migration and terrorism. With a hindsight, it is possible to claim that the EU saw the rebellion through rose-coloured glasses and underestimated the danger of Islamic radicalism, but it is equally possible to accuse Europeans of not doing enough to help the Libyan people build a democratic society, missing a unique chance to create a stable and secure neighbourhood. The ideological narratives that legitimize both alternatives are still there, and the choice between the two is always a wager – which is to say it is politics all the way down.

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