

The Quest to be a “Human Rights Promoter”: The European Union and the Case of Vietnam

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Summary

Recently the political weight of the European Union (EU) in international relations has come under scrutiny. Alongside economic influence, normative power is among the key factors shaping the EU's foreign policy. In spite of the EU's efforts at establishing legitimate norms that can be globally exported and applied and its actions to promote these norms in other countries, the results of these efforts have been questioned with regards to their overall level of success. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to examine the reasons for the EU's ineffectiveness in portraying its self as a “human rights promoter” in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, and especially in Vietnam. Two social-scientific explanations will be explored: (1) how coherent the EU is in its human rights policy and (2) the differences in values between the two sides, particularly regarding two aspects: culture and political regime. As to the first explanation, the coherence of the EU's human rights policy is examined as the internal factor. The term “coherence” in this paper is understood in the sense that the EU's human rights policy is consistently promoted without negotiation of or being affected by other factors, for example economic benefits. The second explanation is about differences in values, addressing specifically cultural and political aspects. We argue that the human rights policy of the EU will be more effectively implemented in countries that share the same or similar norms with the Union. Otherwise, dissimilarity in values will lead to a limitation or even a rejection of the EU's human rights projections.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) as a global player and power has caught the attention of academics, the media, and policymakers in recent times. Besides economic influence, normative power is among the most significant factors currently shaping the EU's foreign policy (Manners 2001). Portraying itself as a normative power, the EU has in the past few years been seeking opportunities to build up a model of regional cooperation that is committed to democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and good governance (European Commission 2007). This effort is defined as the way “in which the EU is able to spread its core norms and values beyond its own borders” so as to “shape conceptions of ‘normal’ in international relations” (Manners 2001: 10), notably in countries now heading towards regional integration — such as those in the ASEAN (Garelli 2012).