

## European Union's response to the Arab Spring: Building a true pole of influence with all our neighbours

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### **Introduction: a historic opportunity for the EU**

The Arab awakening and ongoing uprisings have surprised and unnerved Europe's leaders. Like recent events in Eastern Europe, they have spurred the European Union to examine possible strategies to adopt vis-à-vis its neighbours. As of today it is not yet totally clear that the EU has fully managed to raise its game so as to be equal to the events in progress.

The enlargement policy, amplified by the end of the Cold War, helped give substance to the "EU external policy": today the Arab Spring must lead to the strengthening of another "pillar" of external action – the neighbourhood policy. This policy – launched several years ago and now the object of a welcome renovation proposed by the European Commission and high representative Catherine Ashton – must allow the EU to adapt its strategic vision to new circumstances.

The EU and its member states must build a new relationship with countries whose people desire change, one based on those people's aspirations: Europeans must provide moral and material support, combining short-term and strategic projects.

I will underline two major sets of issues in this perspective:

- The need for a new political vision, drawing lessons from the past;
- The implementation of complementary policies so as to support the economies and the civil societies.

### **1 – A political vision: drawing lessons from the past**

Was there an "Arab spring", that is to say a common political movement of uprising in all the countries of the so called "Arab World"? This is not entirely certain: what is certain however is our ability to look at the "Arab world" as if it was a single one, and to promote our policies accordingly.

Not that we are in autumn, it's all the more necessary to change our perception of this region so as to develop a global political vision drawing at least four lessons from the recent and more ancient past.

### ***1.1. Leaving behind the sterile trade-off between dictatorship and Islamism***

Being equal to the events in the Arab world is firstly a matter of seeing them for what they are – a historic opportunity to leave behind the sterile trade-off between dictatorship and Islamism, and thus also the “security preference” which long weighed down upon relations with countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean. This security mindset has recently led to a disproportionate insistence on the possible negative consequences of the ongoing “revolutions”, in terms of migration or radicalization.

Of course there are risks, as the recent political developments reminded us, be it in Libya, Tunisia or Egypt. But these risks cannot obscure the attachment to democracy, openness and freedom shown by Tunisians, Egyptians and others around the Mediterranean, and this should be enthusiastically encouraged.

The restoration of the Chariah in Libya, or the net victory of Islamic parties in Tunisia can legitimately be seen as worrying trends, and call for EU leaders to remain vigilant.

In this regard, Turkey is an inspiring illustration of the potential to combine democracy and islam.

As concerns the reference to the Islamic law, the Chariah, this already exists in many countries in the Arab world, but its real impact on the political sphere and the society directly depends upon its interpretation and application by public authorities. Morocco and Saudi Arabia are perfect illustrations of how different scenarios are therefore possible.

What is sure is that, if there are risks, they should not in any way make us back through the dilemma between dictatorship or Islamism.

### ***1.2. EU as political actor: Conflicts resolution and state building***

Delivering on a renewed European Neighbourhood Policy also means for Europeans a determined effort to resolve conflicts which threaten the security and stability of whole regions. The populations of some countries have freed themselves on their own, such in Tunisia or in Egypt, but an EU intervention is also necessary in some cases, be it through military operations in order to protect the civilians, as in Libya, or through political pressure and sanctions, as in Syria.

In this country, the EU must keep tightening the noose around the regime through increased economic and political sanctions, strengthening the pressure on the allies of Damascus, and supporting as much as possible the organization of the political opposition in Syria.

But all in all, the EU should be cautious not to apply double standards in the region, and not to feed the accusations of selectivity or “imperialism”.

Beyond the conflict resolution, we face the issue of state building. The EU strategy in these countries should primarily support the democratic transition and promote reforms in governance, including the fight against corruption and strengthening institutions to ensure transparency.

In Libya, where there is no state culture, the EU must also concentrate on building the state with involvement by all its political and tribal forces.

Here again, let's draw the lesson of the past, including the recent one – if we mention Irak or Afghanistan: building or rebuilding the state in many Mediterranean countries will be a very long process, which will require a massive and continuous commitment from the EU and its Member states.

### ***1.3. Differentiation: More for more, less for less***

The European Commission proposes to put more emphasis on differentiation, and the European Council further confirmed it through the motto “more for more, less for less”. This should be welcomed, provided that the lessons of the past are completely drawn.

On the one hand, implementation of these priorities must naturally be subject to detailed negotiation with beneficiary countries, and proportional to their political modernization. But, on the other hand, care must be taken to avoid imposing excessively strict conditions which might delay or reduce the support these countries urgently need.

Similarly, when developing the idea of “differentiation”, the EU should grant further advantages to those countries which commit themselves to tackling their persistent problems of nepotism, corruption, rent-seeking, etc., and be intransigent with those which neglect basic rights – all while trying to support civil societies.

Countries which might benefit from an “advanced status”, such as Tunisia and Egypt, can spearhead the rapprochement between the EU and its neighbourhood: their success is essential and will be seen as a test for other countries, and also for the EU.

### ***1.4. No competition between East and South***

Last but not least, in the current context, it would be particularly incongruous to return to the sterile debate over competition between south and east. I'm all the happier to underline this basic fact in Warsaw.

In the East of Europe, people are also demonstrating their hunger for reform – in Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and elsewhere. Moreover, the recent events in the region, positive for some (including Georgia, advancing on the path of reforms, and which has just come to an agreement with Russia for its entry in the WTO), but worrying for others (including Ukraine, sinking into an increased politicization of its legal system), all underline the importance of maintaining pressure on the region and further enhancing the ties with these countries.

It would indeed be worthwhile for both regions to exchange good practices, and for the countries from Eastern Europe to share with the Mediterranean their experience of political and economic transition.

## **2 – Policies: support for economies and civil society**

If countries undergoing change can avoid further economic deterioration, then political progress can be consolidated and extended. In order to develop their potential for economic and social growth, a large European aid programme is needed, one which must make use of all the available European and national tools – humanitarian and development aid; loans

from the EIB, the EBRD and national agencies, and investment projects in vital sectors such as tourism and infrastructures.

### ***2.1. A global aid package***

As with the Marshall Plan, the aid package must encourage cooperation between beneficiary countries, and regional integration. This is an area where the multilateral experiences of the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean can bring added value.

The EU interventions must also be fully coordinated with these of International institutions, the USA, Turkey and the Gulf countries, which are also very active in the region. The dispersion of funders can only undermine the effectiveness of funding. The EU needs also to pressure these major donors who promised through the “Deauville Partnership” around a total of 38 billion dollars of funding, loans and other financial assistance to the region, that they will keep their word. The EU can also play an active role in monitoring and channelling these amounts to the real needs in the region.

Financial aid is not just a question of guaranteeing the amounts committed by the EU and other donors but also to ensure that that money is channelled to the effective recipients and does not get kidnapped by vested interests (several of them still very much present and closely connected with the previous authoritarian regimes).

### ***2.2. Further integration through trade***

Furthermore, Europe and its neighbours have a common interest in finding new ways or vectors of economic integration through. Trade is the mere opportunity in this regard. Based on their geographical proximity and complementarities, regional trade contains a huge potential for economic and social growth. This requires modernizing economies and supporting the private sector - particularly SMEs.

However, free trade agreements have so far been to a certain extent unbalanced to the detriment of neighbouring countries. In order to reverse this trend, the EU, who is now negotiating new types of agreements with neighbours, in the form of DCFTA (Deep and comprehensive free trade agreements) or advanced status, should explore some specific ways of economic integration in key areas such as agriculture or services. This could for instance consist in providing for a Euro-Med trade preference for all food products, or for the possibility of skilled and semi- skilled workers to be allowed to offer their services to EU clients on a temporary basis in sectors with proven labour shortages (Mode 4 regime).

### ***2.3. A win-win cooperation on migration***

Signals of openness addressed to civil societies and democratic forces are needed so as to strengthen the choices these forces make. One can regret that past relationships developed with these countries were mainly with the elite, political or economic, to the detriment of other major actors of civil society at large. It is also essential to address them a message of openness – by speeding up the delivery of visas for students and teachers, and of multiple-entry visas for professionals.

Of course we are not talking about an 'open door policy' on migration, that would not be feasible nor credible. We need to rebuild trust by making the management of migratory flows more flexible within limits that will have to be negotiated with those countries. In parallel, it is of course necessary to manage inflows of migrants with the departure countries and to try and control illegal immigration by signing readmission agreements with these countries. But EU leaders are wrong to create polemics over immigrants numbering a few tens of thousands when Tunisia has been struggling to accommodate over 100 000 Libyan refugees.

In the medium term, it is necessary to calmly tackle the debate over migration, in a multilateral framework, between ageing European countries (for whom foreign labour is a solution more than a problem) and much younger neighbouring countries (where some aspire to work in the EU).

#### ***2.4. Sectoral policies: energy and others***

The establishment of the elements of common policy in other areas, such as energy and natural resources at large, should also not be ruled out as they may ultimately structure the very relationship between Europe and its neighbours. The European Union, increasingly dependent on foreign suppliers for its energy supply, has an opportunity to further diversify its supply with its neighbours, both in terms of sources and resources. Given the important potential of the region in developing renewable energy sources for their own need but also to export electricity to Europe, a strong partnership based on the principle of interdependency, co-development, and industrial cooperation would be beneficial for both sides of the Mediterranean. A fully-fledged EuMed Energy Community should be the vector of such a common policy, and offer a solid framework for concrete projects such as the Mediterranean Solar Plan, Desertec or Medgrid.

In the mid to long term, other enhanced models for economic integration with EU neighbours should be explored, be it their integration in the European Economic Area, the Swiss model, or the expansion of the Custom Union with Turkey.

#### **Conclusion - Building a true pole of influence with all our neighbours**

I already underlined that the Europeans should not oppose their neighbours, be they from the South or from the East. Let me add to conclude that the EU strategy also entails developing better relations with two other major neighbours: Turkey on the one hand — independently from accession negotiations - by closely associating the country with the neighbourhood policy and by developing joint policies on a broad range of issues; Russia on the other hand, by making progress towards a stable and constructive partnership with another great neighbour that cannot be ignored.

The EU and its members owe it to themselves to build prosperity and the rule of law in all neighbouring states. The EU has indeed a vital interest to base its relations with all neighbours on interdependence and shared values, and as such to build a veritable pole of influence at the global level involving all EU neighbours.