

The EU and the Arab Spring: a vision for our neighbours

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The ongoing uprisings in the Arab world 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 clear that the EU has managed to raise its game so as to be equal to the events in progress.

A historic opportunity for the EU

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 terrorism.

If there are risks, these 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 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.

Two priorities: support for economies and civil societies

If countries undergoing change can avoid further economic deterioration, then political progress can be consolidated and extended. A massive 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; investment projects in vital sectors such as tourism and energy; and reciprocal trade liberalisation, including in agriculture. The EU interventions must be fully coordinated with these of International institutions, the USA, Turkey and the Gulf countries, which are also very active in the region. As with the Marshall Plan, the aid package must encourage cooperation between beneficiary countries, and regional integration. Implementation must naturally be subject to detailed negotiation with beneficiary countries, and proportional to their political modernisation – but care must be taken to avoid imposing excessively strict conditions which might delay or reduce the support these countries urgently need.

Signals of openness addressed to civil societies and democratic forces are also needed so as to strengthen the choices these forces make. EU leaders are wrong to create polemics over immigrants numbering a few tens of thousands when Tunisia is struggling to accommodate over 100 000 Libyan refugees. 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 it is just as essential to address another message to them – by speeding up the delivery of visas for students and teachers, and of multiple-entry visas for professionals. In the medium term, it is necessary calmly to 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 the majority of people will be employed domestically, but where some aspire to work in the EU).

A major challenge for the “European neighbourhood policy”

The enlargement policy, amplified by the end of the Cold War, helped give substance to the nebulous “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. Concerning its southern and eastern neighbours, the EU has a vital interest in a relationship based on interdependence and shared values, one which might create a genuine pole of influence at the international level. This strategy also means a determined effort to resolve conflicts which threaten the security and stability of whole regions, as in Libya – where the EU must concentrate on hastening the departure of the current leadership and on rebuilding the state with involvement by all its political and tribal forces.

In the current crisis context, it would be particularly absurd to relaunch a debate on possible South/East competition. In the East of Europe, people are also demonstrating their thirst for reform – in Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and elsewhere. The EU and its members owe it to themselves to build prosperity and the rule of law in all neighbouring states. The EU could do better by mobilising more resources than those announced in the immediate short term, and also during the upcoming negotiations over the financial framework.

Similarly, in emphasis of the idea of “differentiation”, the EU must grant extra advantages to those countries which commit themselves to tackling their persistent problems (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, but also for the EU.