

AFTER THE ARAB SPRING - HOW CAN THE EU BETTER PROMOTE DEMOCRACY?

By Rosmarie Carotti



Photo: IPW

In the context of the Polish Presidency of the EU, the Pierre Werner Institute, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland, the European Commission Representation in Luxembourg and the Information Office of the European Parliament in Luxembourg held a public discussion on 17 November 2011.

The participants were:

Dr. Marcin Zaborowski, President of the Polish institute of international relations

Dr. Muriel Asseburg, Head of the Near/Middle East and Africa research division of the Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Dr Larbi Sadiki, University of Exeter

Dr Jerome Heurtaux, University of Paris-Dauphine.

Wolf von Leipzig, Moderator (foreign editor of the Luxemburger Wort)

Georges Frieden, Director of the Department of Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Frank Olivier, Director of the Pierre Werner Institute

Georges Bingen, Director of the European Commission Representation in Luxembourg

The discussion looked at how the EU could support the progress of democracy in the Arab countries, comparing the post-communist experience in Poland with recent events in the Arab world, especially Tunisia.

A new instrument EED (European Endowment for Democracy) was presented as an answer of the EU to cry for liberty and human dignity of the Arab world. EED should integrate the other instruments of financial assistance handled by the European Commission and bring a new perspective to the aid of the EU. It could reach beyond financial and commercial aspects and become soft power.

It shall clearly be stated that EED does so far not exist; nor does an official proposal of the Commission exist. EED is a tool to foster infant democracies in Europe's neighbouring countries proposed by Poland's Foreign Minister while Poland has the Presidency of the EU.

Radoslaw Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister, outlines his vision in an article "Fostering Europe's infant democracies" where it reads: "Because flexibility and freedom of operation are of paramount importance, it is crucial that the EED should not become just another EU body. It has to be established as a light structure, perhaps under an international convention making it open to just to EU Member States, but also EFTA members, the EU itself (represented by the Commission and the European External Action Service) and like-minded countries. This original formula would enable the EED to complement existing EU instruments in three ways. First, the EED would have the freedom to support independent media, democratic civic groups and non-registered NGOs. ...".

The idea is interesting and launches the debate on how the EU can support political dialogue with the Arab world and be instrumental in strengthening the democratic movement of the countries which constitute the EU's Southern neighbourhood.

Several participants nevertheless stressed that the wish for democracy has to come from within and that the external world can only support it. They also recalled the experience of former Communist countries and compared the Polish experience to the Arab spring. If, so far, the EU has been ambivalent about supporting democracy in the South, if its instruments have been inadequate and its machinery very slow, now it has the opportunity of going beyond the mere grant culture and of building a community of interest which includes the legal Arab States.

EED must be seen within the normative context of the EU as a trust fund, not another institution, which wants to create facilities and set up the premises for mutuality, equality, reciprocity and partnership. The idea is to reach a decision and to draft a Charter on EED together with national countries and the European External service. A strong independent Board should be put in place to take decisions.

The remaining discussion focused on the evaluation of the freedom movement in the neighbouring Arab countries to the south of the EU. Despite the enthusiasm with which these democracy movements had been met, it was also felt that they should not just be seen as they looked from the west. It was also a question of social problems, the creation of new perspectives and access to the prosperity of Western society. Although Lady Ashton had announced the intention of intervening with the 3 Ms (money, market, mobility), the EU Member States were more cautious regarding the opening of markets and mobility.

Nevertheless, it was thought important to consider how the contributions provided by the Europeans could, in future, be made conditional on better progress in democracy and "governance". Among the Member States, there was a will to implement such a condition, but concerns remained regarding security and the further development of these countries once they had grown into more self-confident societies.

There remains the Polish EU presidency's question of how to create a more flexible, less bureaucratic instrument than in the past, which promotes social mobilization and political party building and supports cooperation also with the forces belonging to political Islam.