

# A European foundation for democracy: what is needed

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>> The extraordinary political developments in North Africa and the Middle East have triggered many changes in EU policies. Ministers ritually promise firmer support for democrats in Arab states and more broadly across other regions too. A range of European initiatives for enhancing the effectiveness of democracy support is now taking shape. One of these proposals is for a new organisation to deliver democracy assistance, a so-called European Endowment for Democracy (EED). The idea remains controversial and questioned by some member states. Moreover, even if an EED is established, urgent consideration is required of the way in which it should operate. This policy brief lays out guidelines for what is needed if an EED is to enhance the effectiveness of European democracy support.

## A NEW EUROPEAN INITIATIVE

High representative Catherine Ashton and the Commission have supported the idea of establishing the EED, a new instrument at some distance from the official institutions. In July 2011 the EED initiative was endorsed in the European Parliament's Dekeyser report, which also identified issues that require clarification. The strongest push for the EED comes from the current Polish EU presidency and in particular the minister for foreign affairs, Radoslaw Sikorski. He launched the proposal at the EU Council meeting in February 2011 in response to the Arab spring and referred to the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as a reference model for a new EU capacity to deliver more timely and strategic democracy assistance.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The proposal to create a European Endowment for Democracy is welcome and needs broader support from member states.
- Not enough attention has been paid to the way in which such a body would function; there are several operational lessons that still need to be taken on board.
- EU democracy support needs better to distinguish between pre-transition, transition and post-transition challenges.

»»»»» The subsequent detailed proposal drawn up by the Polish ministry envisages a convention-type organisation to be located in Warsaw. The rationale for the EED would be to share knowledge about democratic transitions, as experienced by European countries which made the transition from communism or dictatorship to democracy. Much focus would be on North Africa and the Middle East, but also on the stagnating democratic reform processes in Eastern Europe. The EU neighbourhood would be the first priority, but support should also gradually be extended globally.

Referring to the Council Conclusions on EU Democracy Support of November 2009 representing 'a big strategic step', Ashton expressed support for the EED in her speech at the June meeting of the Community of Democracies in Vilnius. She said: 'I put my support to the proposals put forward by Poland, by Radek Sikorski, for a European Endowment for Democracy – flexible, non-bureaucratic, free of the imprint of government and free of EU bodies, which can help countries find their democratic voice'.

As of September 2011 the EED proposal remains under discussion. As not all relevant actors appear fully supportive of the general idea or of the specific proposals put forward by the Polish government, the outcome of the initiative remains still uncertain. The challenge will be to maximise the EED's value added in relation to existing EU instruments and to develop Europe's specific niche in providing democracy support. It is important that clarity exists about what agenda and methodology an EED should pursue and how it would fulfill its mandate before a definitive structure is designed.

### **EUROPE'S IDENTITY IN DEMOCRACY SUPPORT**

The discussion on enhancing the profile of European democracy support was initiated under the 2004 Dutch presidency at a

European-wide conference at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Deliberations resulted in a set of principles being elaborated under the Czech presidency in 2009 and subsequently adopted under the Swedish presidency in the EU Council Conclusions on Democracy Support of November 2009.

The essential principles are the recognition that democracy is a set of values, institutions and procedures which combine differently for each country. Democracy has no standard template. Each country has to develop its own hardware and software of democracy. It can and should be supported in this process, but democracy cannot be exported. Local ownership of the process, which was demonstrated so tangibly in the people's revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, is paramount for successful democracy support.

This recognition is linked to the European experience in the successful transitions of Eastern and Central Europe that the *method* used in the pursuit of political reforms conditions the outcome. The best method is the roundtable, an inclusive dialogue in which all major political stakeholders engage in discussions about reforms. This is to be supported as a peaceful process aimed at gaining substantial levels of consensus about the new democratic rules of the game, eventually laid down in new constitutions.

These inclusive dialogues contribute to overcoming deep-rooted distrust among antagonists; provide the setting for learning the practice of unity in diversity; and through ownership of the process, increase commitment and political will to implement reforms. Inclusiveness refers to the need for balanced representation in the political process across gender, regional and minority divisions. It also refers to the need to focus on all the various thematic dimensions of democracy, such as the rule of law, adherence to human rights and fundamental freedoms, legitimate and accountable governance, and respect for human dignity. Democratisation is most sustainable

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when it is predicated upon such broad-based dialogue and consensus.

### CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

These principles should form the backbone of EED operations. The basic concept in democracy support is respect for the authenticity of the local transition process. Assistance is requested, interference is eschewed. Trusted relations, developed over time, with all sides in the process, are needed to be able to provide meaningful support to shifting demands when it matters most.

Democracy is a process and end-goal at the same time. Assistance in facilitating inclusive dialogue processes requires sustained support over a long period of time. The sharing of knowledge about

many aspects of the democratic reform agenda, such as the electoral law, professional administration of elections, funding and regulating of political parties, governing system, devolution of power, bill of rights and civil-military relations are more time-bound.

## The rationale for an EED lies in delivering assistance where the official EU institutions cannot reach

The specific European identity in the field of support for democratic transitions should aim at facilitating inclusive dialogues about needed reforms to enhance stability and mutual trust in adherence to the agreed democratic rules of the game. The spin-off will be better prospects for stability and investment in economic development.

The outcomes of inclusive dialogues are national reform agendas which identify the most important reforms needed, the timing of these reforms and the institutions that need to be built. Within an agreed national framework, or

roadmap, each of the institutions that make up the democratic architecture can receive direct support from their European counterparts, such as parliaments, political party families, judiciaries, electoral management support bodies, and others. Within an agreed national framework, peer-to-peer support has proven to be effective.

From an aid-effectiveness and coherence perspective, national reform agendas can become the reference to inform the agendas for official EU-partner country dialogues. Whereas official EU dialogues are vertical dialogues between national governments and international partners, national dialogues are horizontal in nature, bringing together stakeholders across political divides to develop agreement about needed reforms. Progress in the implementation of national reform agendas and their roadmaps for implementation should inform the benchmarks for applying the new EU 'more for more' approach and the basis for synergies with other, existing EU financial assistance instruments.

If national reform agendas could cover not only the evolution of democracy, but also identify the reforms needed to advance economic development and security, a bottom-up nationally owned 3D – democracy, defence and development - integrated agenda would emerge to which EU assistance and diplomacy could mould itself.

### INITIAL GUIDELINES

To flesh out these broad principles, the EU urgently needs to agree detailed operational questions for the EED.

First, the new body must be independent. The rationale for an EED lies in delivering assistance where the official EU institutions cannot reach. A new tool free of the imprint of government and free of EU bodies would have the advantage that it could fully and solely focus on its mandate of providing democracy support, thereby obtaining



»»»»» the political and professional integrity and autonomy needed for the trusted relations in reform processes with third countries. It should be delinked from other foreign policy, security and commercial policies. The current Polish EED proposals do not provide for such complete autonomy.

An independent statute would recognise that advancing democracy is a collective project which is not the responsibility of governments alone. In its composition and programmes, the EED would consult and use the expertise of European governmental and non-governmental institutions in the field of democracy support, linking governmental efforts with the expertise of such institutions as parliaments, political families, democracy knowledge centres, the private sector and trade unions. Furthermore, it would provide for an institutionalisation of an open-source EU knowledge base and platform for sustained relations with third partners on democracy support. And finally, an independent body would be best able to work together with similar institutions in the Americas, Asia and Africa, demonstrating that democracy is not only a universal value, but that the support for democracy is a universal obligation.

Second, as a general approach, it is important that an EED starts with a focus on a limited number of countries, in the EU neighbourhood. This will allow a track record to be built-up and for the mechanics to be worked out for regular consultations with the EU institutions in-country and in Brussels. Full coordination with the different relevant budget lines and means of accounting for expenditures and results can then be ensured. Support could be broadened out to more distant states after a cruising altitude is reached after four or five years.

Third, the EED must combine transparency and flexibility. Work in the most closed countries requires some discretion to protect democracy activists from the long arm of their autocratic regimes. But for all other activities, full transparency and accountability for results and

efficient use of finances should be the standard for those who endow the EED with its financial resources. Implementing the democracy mandate requires the highest levels of integrity.

There is perhaps no other field in which Napoleon's observation that 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy' is as pertinent as in democracy support given the unpredictability and volatility of political processes and the context specificity of each country. Hence, financial regulations should allow the EED the necessary flexibility to respond when it matters most and to focus on obtaining results. The outcomes should be clearly defined, the paths along which they are achieved should allow for flexibility.

Fourth, the issue of the name is important. The initiative has now been officially referred to as the European Endowment for Democracy. The name flags Europe's commitment financially to support those at the frontline of democratic change. Although funding is required, supporting democracy is not in the first place about transferring money to projects. It is about investing in partners and partnerships, facilitating dialogue for national reform agendas. It is advisable to consider another name, a name which would project the specific European identity in providing democracy support and with less of a financial connotation upfront. Despite the proposed name, the current Polish proposal does not actually take the form of an endowment. A different name would also avoid the new body having to answer concerns about it adopting a 'US-style approach to democracy'.

#### **PRE-TRANSITION, TRANSITION AND POST-TRANSITION**

Consistent with the suggested guidelines, the EED must establish different patterns of operation across different types of political regimes. One pillar should be a Pre-transition Programme aimed at countries under highly autocratic leadership, like Belarus, Burma or Zimbabwe. Here the EED should specialise in

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building up strong ties with opposition movements, encouraging them to engage each other to overcome divisions, and assisting with training in preparation for a future transition. Support to democracy activists suffering under repression of repressive regimes should be part of this programme. The investment should be geared towards establishing trusted relations that will come to fruition at the moment transitions start to unfold and the switch from opposition to transition politics has to be made.

The second pillar should be a Transition Programme, aimed at the expertise and tools necessary to provide early and sustained assistance when a transition to democracy starts to unfold. Here the role should be partnership, mentoring where possible and providing direct assistance where required. All such support should be designed with the aim of facilitating people to get together to discuss a transition roadmap and provide access to relevant knowledge as and when demanded by the local partners. Respect for the authenticity of the process and sustained support should at all stages be the hallmark of an EED approach. Libya is likely to provide an early test for such transition support.

The need for political party development is a sensitive issue. Political party development is a key factor in a successful transition, as is the need for reducing polarisation between political parties and civil society organisations. To avoid adding to antagonisms in the fragile stages of transitional processes, national agreements should include a chapter on how political parties can be aided from the outside. A code of conduct to that effect should be monitored to ensure a level playing field.

The third pillar of an EED should be a Post-transition Programme, which focuses on countries that have gone through the first phase of transition and are now striving for democratic consolidation. Such countries would preferably have a national democratic reform agenda for the institutionalisation of democracy. Engagement of specialised European organisations, such as trade unions and employer associations, parliamentary

support offices, political party families, civil society organisations, agencies in the fields of constitutional and electoral reform processes and specific pieces of legislation will all need to be mobilised. The funding of such activities would require close consultation with existing EU instruments to ensure complementarity and avoid overlap.

The three-programme concept will allow a gradual and managed transfer of the flexible and responsive support provided by an EED during especially the first two phases of transitional processes to the established EU cooperation instruments.

In all three programme pillars, a focus on engagement of women and of the young generation should be a priority. Also, the use and availability of social media, which play such an important role in today's communication, should be utilised in innovative ways.

### A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Establishing an identifiable European tool for democracy support is expected to enhance Europe's profile on what is the founding value of the EU, democracy. It has the potential of becoming a positive European project at a moment when the European project is challenged. The geo-political developments across the EU's southern border in North Africa and the Middle East leaves the EU, as a custodian of democracy, no option but to support the peaceful struggles for democracies.

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