



BULLETIN

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Support for NGOs in Tunisia after the Arab Spring

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In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, the newly created non-governmental organisations warmly welcomed international attention and related financial assistance. Independently of the first success of democratic transformation, i.e. the adoption of the new constitution, effective support for Tunisian civil society is still desirable. Poland should keep assisting North Africa's democracy champion, and include it in the next Multiannual Development Cooperation programme for 2016–2019. In spite of limited financial resources, Poland can implement tailor-made projects from which civil society may truly benefit.

Democratic Transformation. The adoption of a new constitution on 27 January 2014, the first since the ousting of President Zayn el-Abidin Ben Ali, means that Tunisia is once again the leader among the countries undergoing systemic transformations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Not only was Tunisia able to avoid the scenario of turbulent transformation seen in Egypt, Libya and Syria, but it also managed to pass the constitution, praised as one of the most progressive in the Arab world. Thanks to the engagement of civil society groups in preparing the new constitution, the right to access to information, freedom of association, assembly and demonstration (one of the demands raised in 2011) were guaranteed. In total, close to 300 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) participated in the work of the six committees of the National Constituent Assembly. Moreover, the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian Bar Association, and the Tunisian Human Rights League were able to play a non-partisan moderating role between the different political factions, and helped to reach a consensus at the beginning of this year.

As opposed to Egypt, where the political forces began to accuse each other that their NGOs were financed from abroad and thus represented external interference in Egypt's internal affairs, the post-revolutionary authorities in Tunisia were liberal in this regard. They adopted a progressive regulatory framework, which the government has not yet tried to restrict. The decree-law 88, which regulates the nature, founding conditions, and finances of NGOs, was adopted on 24 September 2011. According to this law, both domestic and foreign associations can register by notifying the authorities within a few weeks. Financial support to NGOs, including from abroad, requires no prior approval by the authorities, except when funds originate from countries that do not maintain diplomatic ties with Tunisia, or from organisations that “defend the interests of those countries.”

The liberal regulatory framework, and financial assistance from abroad (in 2011 alone, Tunisia received support, for both the official and non-governmental sectors, from 25 countries, worth €614 million) were warmly welcomed by the newly created NGOs. Due to a lack of experience in running NGOs, and the lack of the national funding opportunities, the non-governmental sector needed both financial and technical assistance. The development of the NGO sector is reflected, for example, by a growing number of the NGOs. In 2010, 9,000 NGOs were registered in Tunisia, and there are 15,000 today.

Support from Poland. As with other countries, Poland expressed its support for systemic transformation in Tunisia, including civil society, in 2011. Tunisia and Libya were added to the list of priority countries in the Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme for 2012–2015. Therefore, the financial support for NGOs has increased (since 2012, aid has been distributed mainly under the framework of the “Support for Democracy” programme run by

the Solidarity Fund PL). To compare, Poland allocated around PLN 160,000 (€38,000) in 2011, while in 2013 the support amounted to some PLN 1 million (€238,000). Non-governmental support also represented a greater percentage of total developing aid than before (22% in 2011, compared with 85% in 2013). The thematic areas of support have been expanding too, from study visits at the very beginning, to projects that support the emerging leaders of transformation and democracy, aim to strengthen the rule of law, and broaden access to thorough and objective information.

It is worth mentioning that Poland was also one of the main proponents of establishing the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), the foundation that has supported the democratic transformations in the European Union's neighbourhood since the second half of 2013. The EED assists pro-democratic civil society organisations, young leaders, media and journalists, movements and individual activists acting in favour of a pluralistic multi-party system. The EED currently funds nine projects in Tunisia, worth PLN 1.41 million (€338,300), including two projects directly related to the observation of the upcoming elections by local NGOs.

Ongoing Challenges. Continuing, effective support to Tunisian civil society is desirable, independent of the first success of democratic transformation, i.e. the adoption of the new constitution. The NGO sector still faces several challenges. In the near future, especially given the parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in the second half of 2014, one can expect even greater NGO activity. Simultaneously, Tunisia will face the emergence of the watchdog organisations, which are crucial for the rule of law to function properly. In order to scrutinise the authorities effectively, the watchdog organisations need independent funding. Therefore, foreign funding to the NGOs, at least at the beginning of the process of the transformation, could be necessary.

Foreign donors should make use of the authorities' liberal approach, and continue supporting Tunisian civil society to ensure that Tunisia builds on the gains it has made. International support for the civil society organisations during transitions is generally a low-cost, but high-return investment. What are still needed now are training and mentoring about NGO management (focusing on increasing financial transparency, which makes NGOs more reliable for citizens), building the capacity of civil society so that it can effectively hold government accountable, and investments in NGO infrastructure development (by supporting the organisations that offer tailor-made trainings, information, consultations, and exchange of experience).

Stakeholders should also learn from their mistakes in the past. First, the lack of donor coordination, reflected in endless meetings, interviews and conferences about similar topics, caused "NGO burnout" (EED could help with better coordination of projects, as this is one of its main goals). Second, the focus of international attention on Tunisia favoured a "hit and run" approach, which served donors' public relations at home more than it benefitted Tunisian civil society.

Recommendations for Poland. Continued Polish aid to Tunisia increases Poland's credibility as a country to which democracy and human rights are dear, and raises the chances to develop closer social relations that could form the basis for fruitful cooperation elsewhere. Given the Polish engagement in Tunisia since the beginning of the transformation, and Poland's first-hand knowledge about the needs of the non-governmental sector, it should keep Tunisia as a priority country in the MENA region in the next Multiannual Development Cooperation programme for 2016–2019. This can help to improve Poland's standing as a reliable partner, and one that, given its own experience in democratic transformation, is aware that such changes do not happen overnight. What is more it, could help develop social relations and broaden the networking possibilities for future joint projects in other sectors. Given the recent developments in Ukraine, Poland will most probably increase its funding for supporting transformation in its neighbouring country, but it would be worth keeping at least one of the countries from the EU Southern Neighbourhood (Tunisia) in the development assistance programme. In general, the diversification of aid increases the credibility of Polish democratisation policy, while helping to avoid the suggestion that Poland only supports countries in which it has a vested interest.

In spite of limited financial resources (in the last three years, Poland's total support amounted to roughly the amount that the EED gave in a single year), Poland can implement tailor-made projects relating to, for example, advisory services or sharing experiences, from which civil society may truly benefit. A project dedicated to strengthening the capacity of managing the newly created NGOs should be extended. Another idea would be to fund workshops for potential watchdogs. The experience of Polish organisations, such as the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, would be valuable for Tunisian NGOs that plan to hold the government accountable for its actions.

It is worth revisiting the idea of creating a Polish–Tunisian Institute for Democracy and Development, which emerged in 2011. This initiative could be given an international dimension, as in the case of Moldova (the Local Authorities Information Centre in Moldova was created thanks to the financial support from the USAID), or a regional one, as Europe in cooperation with the EED. Cooperation with the USAID or the EED could help to raise the money necessary to set up and run such an institute. For a start, given the rich but different Polish and Tunisian transformation experiences, such an institute could carry out comparative analysis of the democratic transformations in both countries and their regions. In the future, it could transform into an umbrella organisation for the think tanks from both countries, stimulating joint projects and providing networking possibilities.