The EU must back up its rhetoric and provide meaningful support to Tunisia

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Mass demonstrations were held in Tunisia on 29 March to protest against terrorism following the attack at the Bardo Museum that killed 22 people. The attack prompted the European Council to issue a statement in which it committed the European Union to pursue greater co-operation with Tunisia to help combat terrorism and strengthen the country's social and economic development. **Iván Martín** *assesses the EU's approach to Tunisia since the ousting of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, and outlines some tangible measures the EU could put in place to help the country continue its democratic transition.*

In the wake of the terrorist attacks carried out on 18 March at the Bardo Museum in Tunis which led to the deaths of 22 people, commentators were unanimous in pointing to the fragility of the Tunisian democratic transition process and, in particular, its vulnerability to jihadist terrorism and economic difficulties.

Calls were also made in Europe to mobilise additional resources to support the only transition process emerging from the Arab Spring that seems be heading in the right direction. "This is an attack on Europe and Europe has to respond", stated the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Along the same lines, the European Council meeting held two days afterwards committed more cooperation: "The European Union and its member states will intensify cooperation with Tunisia to counter this common terrorist threat, to strengthen Tunisia's promising democracy and to assist its economic and social development."

This sense of urgency is based on the wide consensus that a quick improvement in economic conditions, particularly a reduction in unemployment, is crucial for stabilising the country and undermining the social basis on which jihadism might thrive. However, it is nothing new: analysts have been calling for increased support along these lines since 2011.

EU assistance since the Tunisian Revolution

The EU has indeed done its best to mobilise resources and enhance its engagements with Tunisia in the last four years. In fact, in order to support Tunisia it has stretched the limits of its European Neighbourhood Policy and its financial cooperation instruments. Right after the Arab Spring, the EU reviewed the ENP approach, first with a Communication on A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity published in March 2011 (the first joint Communication between the Commission and the new High Representative, only two months after the demise of Ben Ali in Tunisia, a record time to approve a new Communication) and then in a more systematic way in May 2011.

It also swiftly created a new fund, the SPRING Programme (Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth), with €350 million of additional resources for Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan in 2011-2013. This was an extraordinary commitment in the midst of a seven year financial framework (given all EU budget funds had been allocated in advance for that period). Tunisia benefitted from €20 million in 2011, €80 million in 2012 and €55 million in 2013, almost half the total. The EU also agreed to establish an imprecisely defined "Privileged Partnership" with Tunisia in September 2011.

All this brought the level of EU commitments to Tunisia in the 2007-2013 period to a total of €775 million, doubling the level of assistance for 2011-2013 in relation to the period before 2011. In 2014, under the framework of the new Action Plan for 2013-2017 approved in April 2013 to implement that Privileged Partnership, the EU committed a record €169 million in bilateral assistance to Tunisia (only exceeded by the €180 million committed in 2011). In 2014, the EU also granted to Tunisia Macro-Financial Assistance of €300 million (to be disbursed in 2015).

Picture taken during the demonstrations on 29 March, Credit: Amine GHRABI

But this high level of financial commitment is not sustainable for the EU, even if, for the 2014-2020 financial period, the European Neighbourhood Instrument has been one of the few EU budget items to grow by more than 30 per cent against an average reduction of 5 per cent for the EU budget as a whole. Under this framework in September 2014, the EU committed up to €246 million for Tunisia for the 2014-2017 period, roughly €60 million per year (this is less than €6 per inhabitant and per year).

The three priority sectors agreed were socio-economic reforms for inclusive growth, competitiveness and integration; strengthening fundamental elements of democracy and sustainable regional and local development. These are figures that can hardly resist the comparison with the one billion dollars promised in March 2015 by the United States for the three coming years, or the aid supposedly committed by the Gulf countries, amounting to 5 billion US dollars over five years.

The scope for increasing these funds under the EU's external cooperation framework is limited. The ENP is one among many external policies of the EU (for instance the Ukrainian crisis and humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees, just to mention the most urgent ones). All of these policies demand increasing resources from roughly 10 per cent of a frozen EU budget which has, in any case, already been approved and allocated until 2020. It is therefore difficult to see how increased support to Tunisia can take the form of an increase in financial assistance.

What can the EU do to help Tunisia?

The difficulties in providing further financial assistance do not mean, however, that the EU lacks powerful tools to help Tunisia. European Neighbourhood Policy was originally intended to offer neighbouring countries 'all but the institutions': meaning full participation in the EU's single market and even EU policies, but without the integration guided through the EU's institutions.

There are in fact two EU policy areas where concessions might have an important impact on Tunisia's economy. First, there is the area of *facilitated migration*. The EU signed a Mobility Partnership with Tunisia in March 2014. It established a comprehensive policy dialogue framework on mobility and migration around four priorities: legal migration, the fight against irregular migration, migration and development, and international protection.

But it does not provide for any additional legal migration possibilities to the EU. This essentially remains a competence of EU Member States, but at least the ten Member States which have joined the Mobility Partnership should demonstrate their level of engagement with Tunisia through concrete measures, and the future Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area might include concessions on temporary entry of workers for the provision of services (so-called Mode 4). Under the current unemployment circumstances in Tunisia, this would be perceived as a very welcome sign of engagement and solidarity, even if the numbers of migrant workers involved are small.

Second, there is the *extension of regional policy.* While some form of extension of EU regional policy to neighbouring countries (in particular Morocco and Tunisia) was discussed between 2008 and 2010, this has largely been put off the agenda in the period since. However, reviving this idea would be an excellent way of mobilising development dynamics in Tunisia. It would not be necessary to effectively mobilise structural funds immediately (this would be legally and financially impossible under the framework of the current financial framework covering 2014 until 2020). But defining a clear Road Map for accessing those structural funds after 2020 (while the EU prepares the legal and political conditions to make this possible) would radically change the socio-economic prospects (and hence the social stability equation) in Tunisia.

Demonstrators on 29 March, Credit: Amine GHRABI (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

It would also contribute to the empowerment of local and regional authorities and establish a more territorial-based approach to development. It might also be a catalyst for the much needed national covenant on economic policy (equivalent to the one on the political transition that paved the way for the new Constitution in late 2013, signed by the Government, the UGTT trade union, the UTICA employer's organisation, and the Tunisian League for Human Rights).

Ultimately this would require a fundamental change of approach in EU assistance: from a sectorial, project, and budget-support approach, toward a structural and territorial approach. This strategy has been implemented with notable success in less developed regions within the EU, but never with regions or countries outside of the EU. So far, despite the rhetoric, ENP assistance has been managed and considered as a form of external co-operation, using external co-operation financial instruments and treating neighbouring countries as third-country partners. It is time to put to the test the claim that the attack on Tunisia was 'an attack on Europe' and prove that the EU is serious about its 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity'.

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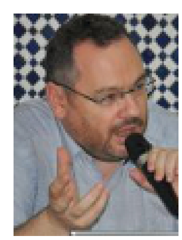

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