

EU presence: delegations, modus operandi and the Arab Spring

It is now nearly three years since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in December 2009. And what a three years it has been for the three spheres of the Europe Union that occupy most of my daily attention: The European Union institutions, the European Union Member States, and the European Union's Neighbourhood. I think you would be hard-pressed to have found someone at the end of 2009 that could have come anywhere close to predicting where we find ourselves at the end of 2012.

Weaknesses in our collective crystal-ball gazing aside, it has been our ability to effectively respond to these enormous upheavals, that for me, goes a long way to justifying why the Lisbon Treaty was introduced. These changes to the way we work have made the EU more responsive, they have strengthened our capacity to build internal consensus and have better enabled us to reach out and engage with our external partners. For me the establishment of the European External Action Service has been the keystone in allowing us to achieve this. No question it has been, and will continue to be, a challenging journey, not least due to the financial pressures that we facing here in Europe. And of course there are always

dissenting voices, both from within and without, but for me, as the British proverb says, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". So lets take a sample and you can judge for yourselves:

Naturally I talk to you largely with the 'view from Beirut', but from where we are standing this new evolution of the role of the EU Delegation has been extremely successful. The EU now has an identifiable foreign policy role that is of utmost importance – crucially we bring Member States together to enhance coordination on foreign policy issues. What does this mean in practice for our work in Lebanon? It means that together as the EU we meet key political actors; we develop joint messages, hammering out any differences between us behind closed doors. I am sure you can easily imagine our enhanced impact; arriving as we do at the door of this or that political figure to deliver a clear and unified message. We regularly meet to keep one another informed about political and security developments in the country, we work together on crisis preparedness, and we coordinate the delivery of development and humanitarian assistance. This last point is of particular importance, because the European Union is among the biggest donors, not only in Lebanon but throughout the world. The EU's new formulation enables us to effectively marry the political aspect of the EU

with our cooperation assistance in a way that was not possible in the past.

All these elements of course change the way in which we interact with Member States on the ground – more constructively, towards identifiable common goals, and more productively. Perhaps more importantly it also changes the way our interlocutors see us – never before has the European Union as a whole been so close to the top of their minds.

The Arab "Spring", (in fact I prefer to talk of Arab "Uprisings", as I am sure you will agree these fundamental changes, in both a literal and figurative sense, span much more than a single season), was an enormous test for this new EU set-up still in its infancy. I think it is a testament to the resilience of these new institutions and the outstanding work of the EU High Representative Cathy Ashton and her team that we can honestly be proud of the achievements made. It is certainly not a coincidence that a large majority of the High Representative's energy has been directed towards this region – visiting it, talking to its leaders and emerging leaders, engaging with its civil society actors, and dedicating to it increased EU resources.

The Arab Uprisings may have had a common thread, but the circumstances of each country, even of each region within each

country, has experienced this period in vastly different ways. And yet the EU has managed to develop a regional approach through its revised Neighbourhood Policy – in record time mind you – that has taken account of this diversity, while holding together these common threads. This new approach seeks to tackle immediate needs but also has a firm eye on the long-term objectives – by laying the roots of a 'deep democracy'. We have put substantial sums of money on the table (EUR 1.24bn in all), we have mobilised new actors that have been successful in other arenas (such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), and we have linked our assistance to tangible improvements on the ground (namely through the policy of "more for more"). We are not focusing only on money, but also markets and mobility – both of which are pivotal factors in the neighbourhood's long term prosperity and fruitful interaction with the EU. All of this has been done against the backdrop of financial and economic turmoil in the EU itself – that in itself is no mean feat.

Crucially in Lebanon's case we have also made sure that those countries which may not have been directly touched by these Uprisings are however being directly addressed. In Lebanon, additional funds are being made available specifically aimed at consolidating 'deep democracy', beyond the roughly €50m they already receive annually from us in cooperation assistance. I

think the level of our involvement at all levels goes a long way to meeting expectations. Of course there is always more that can be done.

In this respect Syria stands out as a particular, and quite horrific, challenge that as yet we have been unable to dent in a meaningful way. It is of course with great sadness that I say this, having lived and worked in Syria for several years – with friends and associates throughout the country, many of whom are looking desperately to those outside to offer some kind of solution. Of course we continue to give substantial humanitarian support to both those in Syria and refugees in neighbouring countries, but we are constantly looking for ways to bring closer a peaceful end to the conflict. No doubt we are ready to help where we can, but it is with resignation that I admit that little can be done without clear interest of those involved to find a lasting political solution. In the current environment, certain elements seem bent on preserving their own interests no matter the cost – casting themselves as players in a zero-sum game.

In the meantime, again with a pertinent view from Beirut, what remains within our power to influence, is the potential overspill of this conflict into Syria's neighbouring countries and Lebanon in particular. Lebanon is no doubt volatile and fragile, and this situation is certainly not helped by targeted assassinations such

as we saw in Beirut only a month ago. But as the EU we do have the tools to help strengthen Lebanon's institutions, to help the country build its resilience and stand on its own in the name of stability and prosperity – and these tools we are putting to work on a daily basis. Indeed these commitments – of support to Lebanese institutions and of support to help Lebanon cope with the influx of refugees – were exactly the ones made by HRVP Ashton during her visit to Beirut just three weeks ago. They remain our top priority.

Today we have a unique opportunity to build deep and lasting democracy and prosperity in our Neighbourhood. This requires vision, perseverance and a team effort from all involved – a combination of factors that the new EU institutions provide a fertile breeding ground for. While we can lay down the roots today, real change takes time and will be measured in generations not in seasons. It is my hope that in fifty years time that the EU is once again a laureate for a peace prize, but this time for its success in extending peace and stability in its neighbourhood.