

In Search of Green Shoots: Assessing the EU's SPRING Programme

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From the viewpoint of policymakers, the mood of change sweeping the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), almost five years ago, was based on a narrative of human rights and personal freedoms, democracy and the rule of law. For those participating in civil protests against uncompromising and authoritarian regimes, however, it was just as much about finding dignity in everyday life, bringing about more socio-economic equality and opportunities and job creation. In an attempt to help consolidate such changes, European Union ('EU' or 'Union') actors were vocal in expressing political commitment to the democratic aspirations of the people of the MENA. In practice, the commitment was translated as financial, but by no means unconditional. To have old and new leaders move in the direction of political reforms, a carrot was dangled in front of partner countries. This bait took the form of allocations for a wide variety of projects stimulating institution-building and economic recovery.

In September 2011, the European Commission – with a sense of optimism and hope that characterised the mindset at the time – presented its SPRING programme (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) as a cross-cutting financial instrument under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).² In line with the ENP, SPRING reflected an incentive-based ('more for more') and differentiated approach. This gave the EU the necessary flexibility for modulating assistance on the basis of progress made by individual MENA countries. In retrospect, the programme, which ultimately only ran under that name until the end of 2013, showed the limits of an external actor in reforming governance models in the Arab region. This contribution reflects on some of the lessons learned. First, it looks back at the fairly short history of the SPRING Programme. Second, it discusses some of SPRING's results in light of its most important features. Third, it examines SPRING's integration in the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) as an umbrella programme.

SPRING (2011-2013): a Brief Overview

Civil unrest and regime changes in the early months of 2011 triggered a re-thinking of the EU's relations with the MENA region. The spring that followed saw a materialisation of the (financial) commitment on behalf of the EU to those pursuing a political awakening. In this sense, the March 2011 Joint Communication of the High Representative and the Commission on "a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Pros-

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² Press release, "EU response to the Arab Spring: new package of support for North Africa and Middle East," Brussels, 27 September 2011. See also: Commission Implementing Decision of 9 March 2012 amending Decision C(2011) 6828 adopting the Programme of Support to the Association Agreement and the Transition Process for Tunisia under the SPRING programme, Brussels, 9 March 2012, C(2012)1439.

perity with the southern Mediterranean" announced the EU's readiness "to support all its southern neighbours who are able and willing to embark on [...] reforms."³ To do so, the EU turned to familiar budget lines, such as those comprised in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and ENP programmes, and converted these into 'Arab Spring assistance.' None of the existing mechanisms, however, were significantly adapted in order to meet the requirements of new political realities.⁴ Within those existing frameworks, new instruments were also created, including the SPRING Programme. Although announced as a flagship initiative, the Programme did not integrate the other previously mentioned budget lines.

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The main aim of SPRING was to support selected partner countries in their transition to democracy. To receive European funding under the SPRING Programme, countries had to commit to establishing deep and sustainable democracies. SPRING was not the revolutionary break with the EU's foreign policy past in Europe's southern neighbourhood that it has sometimes been portrayed to be. The design of the Programme built on and enforced an incentive-based and tailor-made approach that had already been introduced pre-Arab Spring in the ENP. Applying a 'more for more' principle, the EU promised financial and technical support to help transitions. The more a country progressed in its democratic reforms, the more support it could expect from the EU. Ultimately, SPRING would run a budget of €390 million for 2011-2012 and €150 million for 2013, benefiting seven MENA countries in total.

³ High Representative and European Commission, Joint Communication "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean," Brussels, 8 March 2011, COM(2011) 200 final, at 2.

⁴ In May 2011 the High Representative and the Commission presented the renewed ENP, which had been prepared prior to the Arab uprisings. Although it addressed recent changes in the MENA and explicitly referred to them in a neighbourhood context, the basic features of the ENP were not reworked.

⁵ The Agreement Establishing a Free Trade Area Amongst Arab Euro-Mediterranean Countries (Agadir Agreement), signed in Rabat on 25 February 2004 between Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, entered into force 6 July 2006. For the full text and most recent status of the Agreement, see www.agadiragreement.org (accessed 2 April 2015).

⁶ Overview of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument 2007-2013, Annex III.

Spring Forward, Fall Back?

Initially, support went primarily to Tunisia, soon to be followed by Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco (2011). It does not come as a surprise that Tunisia, the first country where protesters had marched, was the first, and remained the largest, beneficiary of SPRING funding. For many years, the country has been the EU's blue-eyed boy in the MENA. Together with Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco (the so-called Agadir Agreement countries)⁵, it had already concluded bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the EU prior to the Arab uprisings. Two other Arab partners in the southern neighbourhood, Algeria and Lebanon, joined SPRING at a later stage (2012), when it was deemed that the right conditions were in place. In 2013, SPRING continued to support projects by the Agadir Agreement partners minus Egypt. In Egypt, which had been the second biggest beneficiary (after Tunisia) in SPRING's first phase, President Morsi's government was ousted later that year. Of the non-Agadir countries, funding dried up for the (already small-scale) 'Programme in support of governance' in Algeria. Libya was welcomed as a new SPRING partner in 2013, receiving the smallest proportion of all countries (€5 million) for projects supporting the media and the constitutional process that year.⁶

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These data clearly reflect a differentiated approach, both in terms of funding received by countries (rang-

ing from €5 to €155 million) and the type of projects funded. EU actions included electoral reforms, civil society support, good governance and social justice projects, as well as waste water treatment and the renovation of neighbourhoods. In Morocco, a country that did not have a regime change, it is interesting to see how European allocations went to vocational trainings, rural health and literacy projects, rather than to institution-building. The case of Lebanon stands out among the others, since SPRING mainly financed infrastructure for Palestinian (in 2012) and Syrian refugees (2013) in the country. Again, those projects are not completely in line with the original SPRING rationale and have a very different finality from, for example, the 'justice preparatory' project in Jordan or the support for the 'association agreement and democratic transition' project in Tunisia.

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The fluctuation in partners and in funds allocated was a result of the conditionality approach adopted. Firstly, not all MENA countries that received SPRING allocations managed to keep promises to the EU.⁷ One of the reasons may be that SPRING did not seize the opportunity to present MENA partners with incentives that were appealing to political leaders in the

long run,⁸ such as the long-promised realisation of the 'stake in the market' for Arab countries and the conclusion of mobility agreements striving for broader labour-related mobility.⁹ Moreover, SPRING's budget remained relatively small, and, simultaneously, included very diverse projects, making an overall assessment tricky.

From a historical perspective, the Arab uprisings remain very young and fragile. Each MENA country will have to go through complex processes in order for a sustainable democratic climate to take root. The EU's provision of technical assistance to help the authorities organise elections in line with democratic standards is a case in point. Despite good intentions, the outcome fell short of expectations: in Egypt, an elected government was overthrown and in 2014, Libya's highest court ruled the general elections unconstitutional, leaving the country without an official government.

While SPRING's trial and error approach can be condoned for the above reasons, the EU's approach in measuring and communicating SPRING's results cannot. EU actors reported that results of the SPRING Programme in the southern region were generally positive, although quite diverse. Tunisia and Morocco (where no regime change took place) did significantly better than Libya and Egypt.¹⁰ Yet, a more detailed self-assessment of SPRING is not publicly available. From the International Monetary Fund, we learn that modest economic recovery in most countries (with the notable exceptions of Libya and Egypt) is still overshadowed by high unemployment across the region.¹¹ EU Reports assessing the progress made lack the level of detail to distinguish the contribution of SPRING amidst other initiatives. By not sharing performance measurement and evaluation plans, it has been impossible to track progress of initiatives and to allow for external control on appropriate budgeting.¹² EU actors have always been

⁷ E. Burke, "Running into the sand? The EU's faltering response to the Arab revolutions," Centre for European Reform, December 2013, available at: www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2013/esy_eb_arab_18dec13-8216.pdf

⁸ For a more profound discussion see: J. WOUTERS, and S. DUQUET, "The Arab Uprisings and the European Union: In Search of a Comprehensive Strategy" in *Yearbook of European Law* 2013, 32(1), 1-36.

⁹ R. AYADI and S. GADI, "The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Development Assistance: Past Trends and Future Scenarios," *MEDPRO Technical Report No. 32*, March 2013, p. 3, available at: www.ceps.eu/system/files/MEDPRO%20TR%2032%20RA_SG%20Euro-Med%20Partnership.pdf

¹⁰ Overview of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument 2007-2013, p. 8.

¹¹ International Monetary Fund, Report, "Arab Countries in Transition: Economic Outlook and Key Challenges," October 2014, Washington DC, at 4.

¹² See, for example, the criticism of the European Scrutiny Committee of the House of Commons in its 30th report, 15 January 2014, considering the European Court of Auditors Special Report No. 4 2013 on EU Cooperation with Egypt in the Field of Governance.

vague about the long-term viability of SPRING initiatives, providing little information that details how SPRING initiatives would continue without EU assistance. Remarkably, throughout its lifespan, SPRING has also been bypassed by the European Parliament, Court of Auditors as well as civil society. This allowed for SPRING's silent disappearance, contrasting the bravura with which it was once announced.

A New Spring for the EU and MENA

Under the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework, SPRING funds were replaced by the so-called Umbrella Programme funds. These funds are now laid down in the regulation of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).¹³ Effective from 2014 to 2020, the ENI seeks to streamline financial support. It partially remedies the fact that funds were incoherently distributed through a variety of instruments, of which SPRING was just one example.¹⁴ ENI aims to concentrate on a more limited set of agreed policy objectives than SPRING and to make programming shorter and better focused, so that it is more effective. However, SPRING's full integration in the ENP did not change its key principles or its partner selection practices. In 2014, Tunisia was the first recipient

of Umbrella funds with an amount of €50 million. SPRING also inspired the creation of a twin programme in the eastern neighbourhood, called the Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation ('EaPIC') 'umbrella' Programme. Much like the original, EaPIC draws on the same incentive-based and differentiation principles of the revised ENP.

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In sum, as has been the case with previous experiences with conditionality in the framework of the ENP, the use of financial assistance as a 'carrot' did not automatically generate sustainable human rights and democracy.¹⁵ However, despite difficulties and setbacks, the EU has financed important initiatives, which in the short term have led to small democratic gains. As regards the long term, however, MENA countries still have a long way to go before they will be able to reap the fruits from deep democracy.

¹³ Regulation (EU) No 232/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument, *OJ* 2014, L 77/27.

¹⁴ MENA Countries were eligible to receive funding under several thematic instruments and programmes, for instance: the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Instrument for Stability (IfS), the SUDep Sustainable Urban Demonstration Project, the Mediterranean Sea Programme and various other ENPI/ENI instruments, such as the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF).

¹⁵ For further reading, see: C.Ch. MUGURUZA *et al.*, "Report mapping legal and policy instruments of the EU for human rights and democracy support," *Frame Report Series*, 2014, available at www.fp7-frame.eu/reports/.