

A European Foundation for Democracy

Markus Meckel

Democracy and freedom are among the founding values of the European Union. Its stability and prosperity are built upon the consolidation of democracy, both within the European Union and outside it. It is in the interests of the EU and its member states to promote democracy and, thus, to contribute to security and sustainable economic development in the world. However, there are deficiencies in the EU's foreign policy instruments that aim at promoting democracy. Democracy assistance should become a more visible and more effective element in the EU's external policies. Therefore, the EU needs to establish a "European Foundation for Democracy".

In the enlargement framework, the EU, through its pre-accession strategy, contributed considerably to the development of democracy and the rule of law in those transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have now become members. Without a doubt, the enlargement and integration process has become an effective tool for democratic development and stability in Europe and its immediate neighborhood. Yet the EU lacks instruments to effectively promote democratic change in countries which have no perspective for membership in the near future. This counts especially for countries subject to authoritarian and dictatorial rule.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, EU programs in third countries are generally implemented in cooperation with the government of the country concerned and funds are often disbursed via the government. Hence, where the government of a recipient country has no interest in cooperating with the EU in the field of democracy and human rights, the programs cannot be adequately applied. Secondly, even where the European Commission decides independently and can give funds directly to NGOs and civil society, application procedures and the system of financial control are so complex and bureaucratic, that the programs become rigid. This, for example, is the case with the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which has an annual budget of €100 to 130 million. At present, the time lapse between project proposals being submitted and contracts being signed is between 12 and 24 months. And, it takes even longer for the funds to be paid.

The program has received a lot of criticism from the NGO community, politicians and experts. Recently, the European Commission decided to streamline the application process and to decentralize the program. Now, the EU missions abroad can also grant funding. However, the tendency is still to finance "macro-projects" with a high budget of €300,000 and more and whose application process takes significant periods of time. Small NGOs often do not stand a chance.

Belarus, unfortunately, is an example of the poor record of the EU to directly promote democratic development and to support civil society. One reason for this is that EU assistance within the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) framework required the Belarusian government's consent. Furthermore, civil society in Belarus was not the target of EIDHR until 2004. In 2005, the European Commission decided to fund a €2 million TV and radio broadcasting program, after a long EU internal debate about where the money should come from. The projects include a 60-minute radio information magazine entitled "Window to Europe" and a weekly half-hour TV magazine-style program in Belarusian and Russian languages. These TV and radio broadcasts follow a smaller €138,000 EU-funded broadcasting project which was already underway, implemented by

Deutsche Welle. Both projects were met with criticism from Belarusian democrats, among others, who say that the programs' effectiveness leaves a lot to be desired and that they will have little impact. The EU also provides €600,000 in sponsorship to the European Humanities University, which had to leave Minsk due to pressure from Lukashenka's regime and which is now operating from Vilnius in Lithuania. There are also some further calls for tender for projects under the umbrella of the European Neighborhood Policy and the budget line "Decentralized Cooperation" and EIDHR, for which Belarusian NGOs are eligible.

In general, however, Belarusian democratic forces and NGOs complain that flexibility to provide small-scale and short term assistance and to react to the often difficult situation of NGOs is lacking, especially when the EU is dealing with unregistered entities. For example, the joint candidate of the democratic forces for the presidential elections, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, once complained that his election team did not have enough cash to pay for the petrol needed to run a proper election campaign in rural areas, although he did receive a lot of moral and political support from the EU and the United States. At the same time, the EU decided to sponsor a €2m TV and radio project for Belarus, which started to operate in February 2005, only a few days before the elections.

A European Foundation for Democracy

In order to correct the EU's deficiencies in this area, it should step up its efforts to support civil society in establishing an autonomous "European Foundation for Democracy" (EFD) as a new instrument of European foreign policy. By way of autonomously deciding on the allocation of funding to projects, this foundation would be intended to internationally promote the development of democracy, a strong civil society, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The foundation would complement the current range of tools that exist within EU foreign policy, allowing for flexible cooperation, free of red tape, with the civil societies of other countries, underpinning their efforts, thereby promoting democratic development. At the same time, it would lend weight to the Europeans' ambition to play an important role in the development of civil society and the promotion of democratic change in Europe and beyond, and would enhance the EU's visibility as an international political player. Already in autumn 2004, on the basis of a Polish initiative, the establishment of a "European Democracy Fund" was discussed, the idea being to incite the EU to boost its activities in promoting democracy and civil and political human rights vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbors in the framework of its European Neighborhood Policy. Many experts, dealing with the European Neighborhood Policy, assert the need for a flexible and autonomous European Fund for Democracy promotion. At that time, the Polish initiative met with considerable resistance and now has scant chance of playing a role in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy.

The present initiative for the establishment of an EFD follows on from these efforts, but is wider in scope. The initiative foresees an instrument which would not be restricted to the European Neighborhood Policy and would not replace current instruments, but instead would provide the EU with an effective and flexible instrument which can be used across the world. Experience gained until 2001 with the European Human Rights Foundation can be used in structuring such a foundation. In addition, consideration should be given to whether the EuropAid Co-operation Office set up since then to administer the EU's external aid would need to be complemented.

The instrument provided by a new autonomous foundation of this kind would increase the flexibility of European foreign policy and allow a more individualized approach. It would be like an additional arm, able to act in a complementary fashion as an independent player – on a common basis yet autonomously – without disrupting or impeding official diplomatic relations between the EU and the states in which the foundation was active.

This European Foundation for Democracy is intended to provide support for civil society activities and structures in other countries in order to boost the spread of democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights across the world. Its activities would, therefore, be essentially aimed at supporting long term processes of change. The idea is to fund as many activities as possible, run by not-for-profit and non-governmental organizations with a direct impact on society and the general public. Such projects might concern building up and supporting independent media, or independent trade unions, or support for churches and social projects or community organizations, or – in authoritarian systems – support for democratic forces. Where competent and experienced partner organizations, such as foundations, exist in the countries concerned or in neighboring EU Member States, or in member states with a particular commitment, the EFD should, where possible, cooperate with these organizations in selecting and running projects.

Experience in Europe since 1989 has shown that political reform processes sometimes unexpectedly take on a dynamic of their own. Every process of democratization offers short term “windows of opportunity” in which the potential for democratization is particularly large. For this reason, long term strategic work to underpin democratic institutions and procedures should be complemented by a “rapid reaction facility”, allowing for swift and flexible reaction to opportunities for short term democratic change or acute human rights crises.

The Foundation should be recognizably an EU institution. It should be set up by the European Commission and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and control by the European Parliament should be guaranteed. Working on the basis of structures used in the private sector, and tried and tested by many foundations, it would seem sensible to have a director responsible for the day-to-day management, along with a managing board to play a central role in decisions on the work program and priorities. This board would also take decisions on the award of contracts for projects up to a certain ceiling and implement a process of pre-selection and assessment of project applications for larger funding volumes. In addition, the Foundation would have a board of trustees, or a “supervisory board”, which would set general guidelines for the Foundation’s work and decide on project applications with a particularly large volume of funding.

Consideration should be given to appointing to the Foundation’s bodies not only members of European Parliament and representatives of other EU institutions, but also persons who have gained similar experience in the member states as national parliamentarians or actors of civil society. The decision making structures of the Foundation must be structured in such a way as to also permit more small scale funding (compared with the amounts of funding otherwise usual in the EU) to be provided to smaller NGOs, since it is these NGOs in particular which often play an important role in situations of change and in democratic transformation processes.

The EFD should be funded by means of lump sum allocations from the EU budget. Furthermore, it should be possible for it to receive additional funding from third parties, for example, from other foundations, private companies or member states and use this to provide support in the framework of the Foundation’s aims. The EU could couple allocations from its budget to conditions concerning the use of the funds, such as the distribution amongst a) individual countries, b) regions or c) certain issues.

Will the European Union Move Forward?

There is some hope that the EU will step up its momentum of assistance to democratic development outside its borders since it is currently reviewing its strategy in this area. At the end of 2006, the EU’s current financial arrangements expire, and there is not yet agreement on what will replace the current instruments for democracy promotion. Nevertheless, there is

awareness in the European Parliament, in the European Commission and in the Council of Ministers that something has to be done. The European Commission has recently issued a communication on human rights and democracy, and the European Parliament has stated in a report that it “considers it useful to establish a special European fund to support, in an efficient and flexible manner, initiatives promoting parliamentary democracy in neighboring countries” (Resolution on the EU’s Neighborhood Policy on 18. January 2006). In the context of discussions on the next 2007 to 2013 financial perspective, the European Parliament also calls for a separate instrument of financing or budget line for the promotion of democracy and human rights. This could form the basis for allocations to the Foundation. In order to have an impact internationally, an allocation from the EU budget of around €50 to 70 million should be aimed at in the medium term, in addition to the volume of EIDHR.

Further, on the initiative of Edward McMillan-Scott, Vice-President of the European Parliament, the all-party “Democracy Caucus” of the European Parliament developed a proposal for a “European Fund for Democracy through Partnership” (March 2006), which is very similar to the initiative proposed here. This proposal calls for a Foundation which “[...] should provide a flexible funding instrument to support democratic reform processes and programs, capable of operating at a greater level of suppleness, responsiveness and risk than would be appropriate for the EU institutions themselves. The Foundation would enhance the European profile in worldwide democracy assistance and could at the same time enrich the debate about democracy within Europe”

There are also some members of the European Parliament and experts who are arguing for the establishment of European political foundations, which are affiliated to the parliamentary groups in the European Parliament, rather than a multi-party foundation. This debate is to be welcomed. Political foundations would not constitute a contradiction to the establishment of an autonomous EFD. In countries under transformation with a politically differentiated and more developed civil society, political foundations find partners and actors for their work. Where this is not the case, the work of politically independent actors can be more efficient.

It is hoped that such initiatives will come to fruition. The EU would be in a better position to react to new challenges such as the support of democratic movements in Belarus and elsewhere. From today’s perspective, the political future of Belarus looks bleak. The dictatorial regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka seems to be firmly in place. Lukashenka has secured a third term using a fraudulent presidential “election”. He continues to suppress civil society and democracy. Independent newspapers have been closed, the opposition is deprived of free access to state TV and radio, NGOs are required to register with the state authorities, and many of them have not been able to continue working because of newly imposed restrictions. Opposition leaders are constantly being harassed and some of them or their aides have been imprisoned, as are people who peacefully demonstrated against the election fraud.

On the other hand events during and after the pseudo-presidential elections in March 2006 also show signs of hope. We did not witness a colored revolution, as in Serbia, Georgia or Ukraine, but thousands of Belarusians stood up for freedom and democracy, protesting on October square in Minsk and elsewhere in the country against the falsified election result. The democratic opposition has a common and credible leader, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and, in contrast to the previous elections, is more united. The election campaign was much more professional, and especially many young people seem to see their future in a free and democratic Belarus rather than in a country ruled by someone who takes away their rights and destroys their perspectives for the future.

It is not only in the interest of the EU to support democratic movements outside the EU, it is also its duty. A European Foundation for Democracy would signal to the people of Belarus, but also to other people across the world, who are standing up for freedom and democracy, that the EU takes its self proclaimed aspirations seriously.