

Article Tunisia

There have been many visitors to Tunisia since its historic revolution. And maybe there is a feeling in the country that these many visits did not help to speed up the delivery of results you were expecting. Today, I am coming to Tunisia to discuss exactly that – how can we help to deliver results. We recognise the historic changes that gave freedom and democracy to the Tunisians. We see Tunisia's potential to become a prosperous nation and a force for stability in the region. But the frustrations among Tunisians are also apparent.

The European Union understands your feelings very well. The EU with 27 member countries is founded on the same principles you fought for in your revolution: respect for dignity, decent life, freedom from oppression, stability. Almost one half of those 27 European states have very recent experiences with the fight against dictatorship and a subsequent transformation of their society and political systems. Our changes were neither easy nor quick but in the end, the dictatorships and autocratic regimes fell and people, the citizens prevailed.

I personally lived through such a process. My own country – Czech Republic – walked a similar path. In 1989 young people started a revolution frustrated by the oppression of a dictatorial regime, its corruption and economic failures. After that we had to learn what a democracy is. We had to learn that it is not citizens that are here for the state but the state, the government and parliamentarians, are here for the citizens: to represent them, to work for them and to answer to them. This mental revolution was not easy to realise in 1990. And it is still not easy even today, after 20 years of change. But things are getting better, to a large extent thanks to our partners and friends, thanks to those who helped us with advice, know-how, with their trust and experience. And this is what we, as the EU, offer to Tunisia as your neighbour and friend.

Based on your needs we are ready to share our experience of transition as well as to provide financial assistance. This is already happening. Since your unique and inspiring revolution we have doubled our financial support for 2011 and 2020, with more than €150 million available each year; we have €4 million for a programme to provide micro credits for poor people and are investing in infrastructure in the most impoverished regions through a support programme with a €20 million budget (part of which is aimed at renovating more than 100 neighbourhoods). We also intend to finance the upgrading of primary care health centres (€12 million) in 13 of the poorest governorates and the modernisation of the enterprises in the service sector (€20 million).

In such a process of deep change, I know that many are frustrated by continuing unemployment and poverty, and that not everyone is interested by the political debate.

What I can tell you, as a European citizen who lived through similar times like you: there are no quick fixes. After decades of mismanagement it is not possible to achieve complete change within one or two years. There are many huge challenges. But you are not alone. If you carry on making progress in reforms and transformation, you will win more support and results will materialise.

The European Union and its member States, irrespective of what happened in the past, will be with you, not from a distance, but in practical and tangible ways ready to help when needed. I have come to Tunis to propose the re-launch of negotiations on many trade agreements, notably those for agricultural products, investment and services. These will open the door to the vast EU market for Tunisian agricultural products, and facilitate EU investments in Tunisia. By concluding swiftly these agreements, we will send a welcome message of confidence to all concerning the enormous opportunities that exist in Tunisia today. We are also proposing a new agreement in the aviation area that will multiply the possibilities for air travel, and provide a boost to tourism and business. And we are proposing a mobility partnership that will facilitate the exchange of people between Tunisia and the EU.

Tunisia has much to look forward to. It has considerable human resources and economic and natural advantages. Its people have demonstrated their courage and commitment to democratic values through a revolution which has inspired the region and beyond. I believe in the people of Tunisia. And I look forward to coming to Tunis again.