

Just the start

Jerzy Buzek discusses the importance of the upcoming elections in Tunisia, the role of the EU's election observation mission and why the spirit of freedom is running high across North Africa

Last week Catherine Ashton and I hosted an event in the European parliament with Jimmy Carter, Joe Clark, Janez Lenarcic and other representatives of the signatories of the declaration of principles for international election observation.

The people of Tunisia go to the polls on October 23, and Egyptians and Moroccans will follow them at the end of November. This year across North Africa, we have seen the power of popular movements to overthrow oppressive regimes – but what comes next is just as important.

It was nine months ago that Mohamed Bouazizi created the spark that ignited a continent, leading

to Tunisian president Ben Ali fleeing from office. But the path to freedom and opportunity officially starts at the ballot box, and in a fortnight's time, the people of Tunisia will start to see for sure what their revolution has brought them.

What they want are genuine multi-party elections – transparently and efficiently organised – that will bring them a political system which is accountable to its people. There is celebration and anticipation in Tunisia as the election day approaches –

but also there pressure on the fledgling democratic institutions to make sure that voters' expectations are met.

A bad election is a recipe for further strife. There are still massive tasks in the weeks ahead – these are tasks for Tunisia itself, but the EU can help.

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Speaking the same language

Former US president Jimmy Carter has praised the work of election monitors, saying they help to ensure “honest, free and safe” elections. Speaking in the European parliament last week, Carter, now aged 87, went on to say that monitors from the EU and elsewhere had made a “remarkable” contribution to the pursuit of human rights and democracy around the world.

But he also appealed to the EU and member states to raise the profile of observers, saying there was a lack of public awareness of what they do. Carter, now a member of the so-called Elders, a group of elder statesmen headed by Nelson Mandela, said that through their work, democracy had been introduced all over the world. He said, “When I was president, for instance, most of the countries in South America were dictatorships. Nowadays, most of them are democracies.” Carter, a single-term president in the late 1970s who won the Nobel peace prize in 2002, was in Brussels to take part in a meeting on international election observation.

Other attendees included former Canadian prime minister Joe Clark, who, speaking at the same news conference, said that more consideration should be given to the recommendations made by electoral observers. He said, “Far too often, their recommendations are not followed up. They make practical, accurate recommendations and we need to find ways of making better use of what they tell us.”

Parliament's president Jerzy Buzek, another involved in the meeting, said the event was an “an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to promote democracy abroad”. Buzek said, “There is a renewed democratic momentum worldwide; not only in the Middle East and north Africa. This lends a new sense of urgency to the cause of democracy support. While we cannot impose democracy from the outside, we must do everything to support the legitimate aspirations of those that seek it.” The Polish deputy added, “However, it is important to underline that we observe elections only when we are invited and we do not want to change this practice.” He said that in the last years, parliament and the European commission have been working together to

“enhance the added value” of EU election observation missions. He added, “But I believe it is important that all actors work together – both the EU institutions but also the UN, OSCE, the Carter Centre, NDI other NGOs and national governments. We need to show that when it comes to democracy promotion, we not only bring our strengths to the table, but we also speak the same language.”



When I was in Tunisia in March, I met with civil society and I felt the deep desire for dignity. I talked to citizens in the street and I saw a lot of hope in their eyes. Against all odds, they have won back their dignity. They stood up for their rights. Nobody will ever confiscate this spirit of freedom.

In the run-up to the polls, the independent Tunisian interim election commission has registered a large number of new political parties – a sure sign of the hopes placed in these elections. One of its priorities now is to ensure that voting lists are as full and as accurate as possible, that sufficient ballots get to all the polling stations on time, and that the counting and announcement of the results are properly managed.

For the Tunisian media, the emergence of hundreds of new parties poses a real problem in terms of equitable coverage – another issue of concern for the commission as it works with media monitors to establish fairness and professional oversight.

It is Tunisia's interim institutions which will administer the process, and make the decisions that are most appropriate for the Tunisian people.

The EU has offered technical support, training and equipment to the election commission. And independently of its help in the preparations for the elections, it will also join other international election observers in giving a sound and honest assessment of the process and results, as it sees them.

The EU has observed nearly 100 elections over the last 15 years, facing challenges and different situations. It will do the same in Tunisia before, during and after election day.

The mission, headed by Michael Gahler MEP, arrived in Tunis on September 8, and will make its findings public two days after election day. But its work does not end there. It will then work with the Tunisian authorities, the election commission and civil society organisations to make sure that its recommendations become part of the domestic dialogue on political reform.

As always, a delegation from the European parliament will be integrated into the EU mission and will enhance the political side of the mission. It's a long standing practice that EU institutions join forces and closely cooperate on election observations. Elections alone cannot bring peace, stability and prosperity: it is a real democratic culture and strong democratic institutions which make a vote a thing worth having. The EU offers its support in building those, too.

One reason why EU election observers are invited – even when their analysis might be critical – is because Europe's partners know that a commitment to freedom of speech, assembly, the right to stand in elections, and the right to vote is central to Europe's fundamental values.

To prevail, those values need to be cherished on a daily basis. Europe's own peace and democratic stability have been – and remain – hard won. Theirs will be too. Indeed, elections are just a start, but such a crucial one. ★



Jerzy Buzek is the president of the European parliament

Bio revolution

The contribution of bioplastics in developing Europe's bio-economy was the subject of a recent conference in the European parliament. **Brian Johnson** reports

Bioplastics are a “clear and tangible” example of the bio-based economy. This was the main message to emerge from an awareness raising exhibition and conference on plastics and the bio-economy held in Brussels late last month. Dutch centre-right MEP Lambert van Nistelrooij said bioplastics were a “clear and tangible example of the bio-based economy at work”, but warned that the industry still faced “a number of obstacles” on the road to reaching its full market potential within the EU. He told the event, organised by the industry’s umbrella association, European Bioplastics, that he welcomed the opportunity to assist in, “developing more synergies” for the fledgling industry “against the tough realities” that bioplastics businesses currently find themselves in. “Bioplastics offer great opportunities for smart, green and inclusive growth and there are already several EU supportive measures regarding bioplastics “But, it is vital that EU policy focuses on implementing them in the short term.”

Bioplastics are plastics that are bio-based, biodegradable or



Lead market?

Concrete policy measures are needed if Europe is to fully realise the potential of bioplastics, argues Andy Sweetman

The bio-economy offers great opportunities for smart and sustainable growth in Europe. Bioplastics can make a crucial contribution to help this vision become a reality. Across the world, the awareness for bioplastics is growing. Huge investments are being made or planned and more and more brand owners are crossing the threshold of introducing bioplastics on a large scale to consumers worldwide.

To safeguard its top position in this evolving industry, Europe has to increase its effort to remain an attractive location for these future-oriented investments. The EU is strong in R&D, but highly qualified jobs are being created elsewhere today. The political framework conditions are a decisive key factor for investment decisions. Bioplastics have already been recognised as a promising key technology within the EU lead market initiative, but concrete supportive measures are still missing. European Bioplastics strongly calls upon European policymakers to create a favourable and coherent landscape for the uptake of this promising industry sector.

A first appropriate step would be the inclusion of bioplastics as a specific topic in the upcoming European commission communication on the bio-economy. Beyond adapting the bio-economy strategy, the EU and member states should support the market introduction of bioplastics through a bundle of specific political and legislative measures. The European bioplastics industry has developed and presented a set of recommendations for policymakers, ranging from feedstock access over waste management issues to consumer information policy. Let's now move on to implementing them, in order to realise the potential of bioplastics for Europe.

Andy Sweetman is business development and sustainability manager at innovia films and chairman of European Bioplastics

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Driving the EU's bio-economy

The upcoming EU bio-economy strategy will benefit the fledgling sector by creating stronger coherence between policies and funding, writes Maive Rute

The developments in bioplastics over recent years are stunning, as evidenced by their increasing range of applications: packaging, automotive, medical, agriculture, etc. The main drivers in their development are, firstly, their innovation potential for delivering similar or new functionalities as compared to conventional plastics; the reduction of dependency on fossil resources, and, in some cases, environmental benefits such as biodegradation.

Bioplastics are a tangible and central part of the bio-economy, that is to say "the part of the economy that generates growth and jobs from the development, processing and use of biological resources in an environmentally sustainable manner".

The European commission is currently preparing a bio-economy strategy that will propose a framework for stronger coherence between the various policies and funding instruments at EU and member state level in the bio-economy area. Such a strategy is timely and relevant in light of the adoption of the forthcoming framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon 2020.

With its proposal of an €80m budget for Horizon 2020, a 46 per cent increase as compared to the combined budget of FP7 and the CIP programme, the commission has made it clear that research and innovation are essential for the advancement of Europe.

Within Horizon 2020, the importance of the bio-economy is in turn reflected in the proposed allocation of €4.5bn to the area of "food security, sustainable agriculture, and the bio-economy". This is more than double the budget allocated under FP7. Furthermore, biotechnology is also integrated in its 'leadership in enabling and industrial technologies' section.

Maive Rute is director of biotechnologies, agriculture and food at the European Commission's directorate for research and innovation

"Bioplastics are a tangible and central part of the bio-economy"

both. They are produced from a range of plant-based materials such as corn, sugar cane, wood and straw and the resulting polymers can be processed into a vast number of products using conventional plastics processing techniques. European Bioplastics chair Andy Sweetman said it was essential that the issues affecting the bioplastics industry were recognised and understood by policymakers and that the industry was "seen" within the EU policy framework. "It's clear that the bio-economy is an important issue at EU level, [so] we have to encourage greater awareness of the bioplastics industry, its



"Bioplastics offer great opportunities for smart, green and inclusive growth"

Lambert van Nistelrooij

products and their benefits." According to Sweetman, under the right conditions, bioplastics can reduce CO₂ emissions by 30-80 per cent compared to conventional plastics and demand is growing at a rate of 20 per cent per year. "There is no doubt that the market is going to grow," he said, "but the big question is how big, how quickly and where?"

Europe's share of global bioplastics production capacity is currently around 27 per cent. However, that figure is set to drop by almost 10 per cent by 2015 as some of the industry's big players set up or expand production facilities in Canada, the US, South America and south east Asia. "The predictions are that everywhere will grow faster than Europe; we obviously don't want that to happen," said Sweetman. His concerns were echoed by Marc Verbruggen, the president and CEO of NatureWorks, the world's largest bioplastics producer, based in Nebraska, who warned that the industry was at a crucial crossroads regarding its future.

Outlining the current EU policy initiatives related to the sector, Maive Rute, director of biotechnologies, agriculture and

