

'Concluding action plan' is crucial for Algeria-EU relations

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Interviews

Marek Skolil speaks to Des Hinton-Beales about deepening relations between Brussels and Algiers.



Relations between the European Union and Algeria are set to enter a new phase of cooperation as the country builds up to its 2014 presidential elections. Following on from the positive report from last year's EU election observation mission, Algiers has shown fresh willingness to engage with the European neighbourhood policy (ENP). Head of the EU's delegation to Algeria Marek Skolil, however, was keen to underline the fact that cooperation between Brussels and Algiers has been going on "for 35 years". "We are definitely not newcomers, not in Algeria and not in the region," he added. However, Skolil also admitted that "of course, the political changes and things we have been witnessing in the Arab world and the region over the last two or three years require different approaches across the region and to different countries".

Algeria remains relatively untouched by the effects of the Arab spring compared to some of its north African neighbours, with president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been in office since 1999, responding to a series of protests by lifting the country's 19-year old state of emergency and

announcing a programme of political reforms. The announcement by Bouteflika led to the adoption of a set of laws which includes revisions to the electoral code and measures to improve the participation of women in democratic assemblies. This package of laws was followed up in 2011 by Algeria indicating its desire to open negotiations on the conclusion of an ENP action plan. Skolil said that "Algeria was initially somewhat hesitant to engage in this new framework, but we have from both sides successfully overcome this initial hesitation". He added that this had led to talks on a "specific roadmap that could actually be the framework for advancing relations in the new neighbourhood policy". "These negotiations have not yet been concluded, but we are progressing and we are sincerely optimistic that we are getting to the goal of the action plan."

Despite this current lack of an action plan, the EU has continued to work with Algeria on a regular basis and in a variety of fields. Skolil, however, said that these areas of cooperation featured a "new accent on what are the new ingredients or new dimensions of this approach, which are participation of civil society and looking into the common ground of shared values, which is also linked to political dialogue".

For Skolil the importance of deepening relations with Algeria is self-evident. "It is clear that, if you look at the map, Algeria carries a political weight of its own in Africa and especially in northern Africa. It is obviously a partner of first importance for us both in terms of security and stability in the region and also economically." He also underlined the importance of Algeria's "very enviable geographical position" which left it as "both an African country and a country which has its place in the European neighbourhood".

Another key element in the cooperation between Algiers and Brussels is the diversification of the Algerian economy. In 2011, 98 per cent of imports from Algeria into the EU were energy-based, making the country Europe's third largest energy provider that year. Despite this trade clocking in at a value of €26.8bn, Skolil stressed that "there is no alternative to a diversification of the Algerian economy". "Frankly speaking, this analysis is shared both by Algerian officials and experts and by us. This is not a country of a few thousand, [but of] 37-38 million people." Looking at tackling this need to build variation in Algeria's economic output, Skolil highlighted the EU's involvement "not only in terms of political discussions and dialogue", but also through "cooperation in helping our Algerian partners identify new sources of growth and diversification of the economy, especially with our programme oriented at small-and medium-sized businesses". "These are just examples," he said, "but I could talk about any number of sectors where diversification is clearly a priority".

Skolil also underlined that this "support for the management and diversification of the Algerian economy" was part of "three sectors that have been broadly defined" as key areas for cooperation. The other two primary "domains of cooperation" are "reform of justice and the strengthening of citizens' participation" and a focus on the "labour market and employment of the youth" - which Skolil earmarked as "an obvious priority" due to Algeria's large population.

However, for Skolil it still remains crucial to "carry on and conclude the negotiations for the action plan", which he described as "the roadmap that is defined by the neighbourhood country and by the EU on how to take the relationship ahead". He also expressed his desire to pursue a "communication goal" in Algeria. "We have to communicate more clearly and audibly what the EU stands for, what kind of activities we are involved in together in Algeria, the region and in the world," he added. Skolil stressed the need to involve everyday Algerian citizens, saying the EU was aiming to "reach a broader audience than the one we normally reach, which is the immediate circle of our partners or even civil society, but these are people who know about us. We have a very good basis. If you look into the polling done in Algeria last year on perception of the EU there is a very, very positive foundation," he concluded.

About the author

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