The Public Hearing was opened by the Chair Dr Franziska Brantner, MEP in The Greens-European Free Alliance group, who welcomed everyone to the event. She clarified that the Public Hearing will look specifically at the EU’s democracy promotion efforts and why some have worked, while others have not; the hearing will also be asking what has been changed, what has not; why this is the case. Franziska said that the European Parliament, as well as the research community have paid specific attention to the events in the Arab world since December 2010 and proceeded to introduce the panellists. Franziska thanked Dr Michelle Pace for taking the initiative in organizing the event and wished a fruitful discussion and a successful fusion of practitioners’ and academics’ perspectives. Franziska clarified that unfortunately Dr ElShobaki was not able to attend the Public Hearing due to an extraordinary meeting at the Egyptian Parliament. The Chair set up the format of the event to consist of presentations by the panellists first, followed by questions and comments from the audience. Franziska opened the hearing by giving the floor to the first panellist, Professor Mark Webber, Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Prof Webber started by thanking, on behalf of the University of Birmingham, the hosts at the European Parliament, the MEPs Dr Franziska Brantner, Ana Gomes and Sir Graham Watson for
supporting the event. He also thanked the University of Birmingham’s team – Dr Pace and the representative of the University’s office in Brussels, Sophie Lainé, for their hard work in bringing the event about. Prof Webber thanked the speakers, Dr Badr Abdelatty and Mr Hugues Mingarelli, Managing Director for the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood at the European External Action Service. Mark clarified that this is the first in three meetings taking place in Brussels during this week (organized by Michelle Pace for her ESRC project) on the first anniversary of the Arab “Spring”. Although it is still early to take stock of the progress and outcomes of the events since December 2010, the discussions will allow some preliminary verdicts and analyses. On the one hand, there is hope for domestic political transformation in the broader region, which entails a process, challenging both internal as well as external actors, including the EU. On the other hand, there are considerable challenges associated with the process of opening up stagnant, closed governance structures and consolidating the political systems currently emerging. So, by way of summarizing the positives of the events since December 2010, profound change has been triggered. Freedom House has characterized the Arab Spring as the most significant challenge to authoritarian rule since the collapse of the Communist systems at the end of the 1980s. Furthermore, these events confirmed the support for a political trend towards openness. However, in order to escape a charge of Orientalism, it has to be emphasized that democracy is not a monopoly simply of Americans and Europeans. The processes taking place in the Arab world today have their own distinctive features. Lastly, these events showed that oppressive regimes are always fragile, despite their seeming longevity. On the other hand, there are also profound challenges, the most significant of which are for example the difficulties of consolidation, the need for elite bargains, constitutional crafting, institutional reform, gathering external support, regional complexity and the rise of new influential actors, such as Iran and Turkey, which pose new challenges to Europeans. All of these make the discussion today and in the next few days all the more timely.

Next the Chair gave the floor to Mr Mingarelli who started by saying that overall the EU accepts the assessment presented by Prof Webber – that the events in the Arab world since December 2010 indeed signify profound historical changes. For example, the first democratic elections in Egypt since 1952 with a high turnout, which have been judged as free and fair by most observers, took place at the end of 2011. The outcome of these elections was 47 per cent of the seats being won by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). A bit of a surprise was the 25 per cent of the
seats that were won by the new Salafi party. However, this is clearly a reflection of the preferences of Egyptian people. On the EU side, there has been a welcome for the ability of the Egyptians to have their voice heard for the first time in many years. Furthermore, the EU is ready to get engaged with the democratically elected lower House of the Parliament. The elections for the Upper House (the Shura Council) is currently under way and the EU hopes that when they are over, the first circle of elections will be completed, which the EU considers a positive evolution. Once the Shura Council is elected, 100 members of the Constitutional Assembly will be appointed. These people will be in charge of drafting the new Constitution, which will be adopted by referendum. After that, by the end of June a new Egyptian President will be elected democratically. This is a very challenging agenda, which is why the EU will stand by the people of Egypt to ensure that the political process in Egypt will go according to the timetable set out. The EU sees these events unequivocally as positive ones.

In contrast, over the last three to six months there have also been some rather worrying events. Firstly, there has been an increasing use of force against civilians. Secondly, there have been reports of violations of different human rights and military trials for civilians. The EU has condemned all these developments. Thirdly, in contradiction to the promises given a year ago, the state of emergency has not been lifted yet. Although recently there has been a partial lifting of the state of emergency, the EU does not think that this is enough. The state of emergency has to be lifted completely. Furthermore, the crack-down on NGOs in the last two months is unacceptable. For a new democratically elected Parliament, NGOs have to be left to work freely. There is no democracy without a vibrant civil society. Finally, freedom of belief has to be defended. Minorities (Christians, Jews, non-believers) should be able to live in this great Muslim country. The last point of concern is that democratically elected authorities should control the army. At present there is a feeling that the military in Egypt is reluctant to ensure this. The budget of the military has to be controlled by elected authorities. The events of the last year have also had an effect on the economy – a drop in tourism and foreign direct investment as well as numerous strikes. In turn, these have had a direct impact on national output and living conditions. After months of hesitation the Egyptian authorities have engaged in a serious discussion with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The EU hopes that there will be an agreement soon, which will enable the putting in place of balance of payments support for Egypt.
Next in his presentation Mr Mingarelli focused on spelling out the main undertakings in EU policy in the context of the Arab Spring. He said that in March and May 2011 two joint communications were adopted on how the EU responded to the Arab Spring. Transitional authorities in Egypt have been reluctant to take any commitment by signing contracts with the EU. In Tunisia the EU has been welcomed from the start. Nevertheless, from March 2011 the EU has put together a package to help Egyptian NGOs (in particular those working on women issues and in the context of preparations for elections). In Egypt, an election observation mission was not welcomed. Things have also not been easy on the Egyptian economy. On the economic front the EU tried to step up its assistance programmes. The EU has proposed two important actions – firstly, a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, which will require Egypt to take on part of the EU’s acquis. This has been welcomed in Morocco and Tunisia. Secondly, a debate on migration and security has taken place. The ultimate aim on this track is to put in place a visa facilitation agreement, that will enable movement in the EU of third country nationals (TCNs) for a few months. Such an agreement is in place with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. In return, the EU wants the signing of a readmission agreement. Other issues are labour migration, border management, visa and security. Egyptians are not ready to start cooperation on these fronts. The Egyptians, however, wanted cash. The EU is not able to do this without an IMF agreement. Therefore, overall, it has been difficult for the EU to engage with the Egyptians up to now. Hopefully now, with the democratically elected new Parliament engagement will be easier.

The next speaker to take the floor was Dr Michelle Pace, Reader in Politics and International Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK and Principal Investigator of the ESRC project mentioned above. She started by saying that 2011 changed the assumption that the Arab partners of the EU will retain their previous regimes. Michelle said she would like to pose the following questions: how did the EU react in the Egyptian case; has the EU learnt any lessons from past mistakes; how about the long-standing competing EU policy objectives of achieving security and democracy in the region simultaneously; how about the EU’s relations with Political Islamists who have for a long time now been regarded as enemies of the EU’s foreign policy goals? Dr Pace said she will map out her take on these issues and open the floor for other contributions.

The EU’s response to the events in the Middle East, according to Dr Pace, was weak. It was not able to act as a serious international actor. The EU’s approach is institutionally oriented. The EU
froze Mubarak’s assets. On the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU came up with the idea of ‘more for more’, which implies greater use of the EU’s financial resources. Some EU initiatives, such as mobility, are particularly attractive for the Egyptians. Now we have heard from them what their needs are. Initially the Egyptians refused IMF funds. Today, however, they are more optimistic about the future. The challenge is that the Egyptian public expects action, not rhetoric. The EU should have a collective response to the Egyptian peoples’ expectations. The Islamists’ victory is a result of good organization and effective campaigning but not a mandate for a rule based on popular ideology. The new government in Egypt should focus on providing economic development, employment and stability. For many the big question is Egypt’s foreign policy, what it will do with regards to the Middle East “peace process”. The EU should shift its policy from democracy promotion to state-building. The EU can help police force reforms in Egypt.

The next speaker was Dr Badr Abdelatty, a holder of a PhD from Cairo University. He started by saying that it is always a pleasure to be at the European Parliament with Mr Mingarelli and colleagues from the University of Birmingham. He said that he will try to be very specific in his presentation and will point to three main issues. Firstly, present an account of what happened in Egypt last year; secondly, discuss where Egypt is at the moment and what is expected in the future; and thirdly, look at what Egypt expects from the EU.

Starting with the first point, Dr Abdelatty said that in reality what happened in Egypt in 2011 was a revolution (and not an uprising). This was the last wave of democratization, which was now taking place in the Middle East. Furthermore, this was done by the young people. What happened was a real popular revolt. Only for a second or third time in Egyptian history a change was taking place from the bottom-up. The Egyptians are proud of the Egyptian army as it aligned itself with the people from day one of the revolution.

As far as the second point is concerned, Dr Abdelatty stressed that Egypt is a tanker, not a small ship. We need to understand Egypt’s cultural paradigm. When the events started to unfold, the Egyptians did not have a term of reference; experience in how to administer the revolt. But the Egyptians learned by practice. It is challenging but the Egyptians are due to finish in a few months what was started a year or so ago. We need to respect the will of the people.
With regards to the third point, although there are many challenges, the end game is to build a brand new Egypt. Achieving this will be difficult and it will take some time. Parties will have to work together to learn how to build coalitions and how to build a new future. On 31 January 2012 the Muslim Brotherhood and other parties had to sit together and work together.

It is very important that our partners in Europe do not jump to conclusions over what the Islamists will do. The Freedom and Justice Party had an interview on Al Jazeera saying it will honour all previous commitments by Egypt. Today public opinion plays a very important role. After the revolution the people did not want to engage with the IMF. This is a new Egypt. With regards to the way ahead, the big question is what type of Republic (Parliamentarian/Presidential) will be established. And the answer to this question is up to the Egyptian people, not to the Europeans to tell the Egyptians. With regards to the EU’s financial support, the Egyptian future lies in the successful tackling of the current socio-economic challenges.

Thus, right now Egypt needs financial support. Now it needs liquidity. The urgent issues need to be addressed now. For example, on 31 January 2012 the Minister of Interior said he cannot provide security without laws to punish theft, etc. Now Egyptians have to respect the laws that exist at present. It is not acceptable to have NGOs that open branches in Upper Egypt without government permission. The laws may have to be changed to allow for this. But such a decision is up to the Egyptians. At this point Franziska intervened saying that the idea of NGOs is for them to be able to act without government permission.

Next the floor was taken by Ana Gomes, an MEP from the European Socialist Party. She said that she is concerned with how the EU acts with regards to what is going on in Egypt. Currently the EU is in a bad shape internally, which affects the way it deals with changes in the neighbourhood. The Arab Spring came at a time when the EU’s foreign policy structures were undergoing change. This explains why the EU was slow to react, and was weak institutionally. In some respects, the European Parliament was at the forefront, pushing other EU institutions. But the European Parliament has its limits. The attitude of Tunisia was very different from that of Egypt. Egypt is the most important country in the Muslim world. Tunisia, for many reasons had a different interaction with the EU. Ana Gomes said however that she was shocked to see Egypt’s refusal to have an election observation mission as such an observation would surely strengthen what will come afterwards. Thus, it was surprising to see Egyptians not grasping this
opportunity. Furthermore, with election observation comes assistance for preparing for the elections. Although people were happy to have voted, the realization was that the elections could have been conducted even better.

Ana stressed that democracy requires the military to be in their barracks. As she herself comes from Portugal where it was difficult to persuade the military to go back to the barracks during Portugal’s transition period, she is very well aware of the difficulties that arise when an effort is made to confine the military to the barracks. Therefore, the EU’s idea of ‘more for more’ makes sense. Delivering on the economy is central but external pressure is also crucial. Political demands are very important. She agreed that the police force was a crucial element. Rebuilding the police is a crucial element but this goes in parallel with building a democratic society. No one learns democracy in any other way but by doing it. The main concern is not whether Egypt will respect its international commitments. For her, this is not going to be the decisive element in the EU’s relationship with Egypt. Political Islam grew stronger as dictators were supported by external powers. Therefore, Ana Gomes said, let’s allow the Islamists to govern. In a similar way the Communist Party was very strong in Portugal immediately after the fall of the dictatorship. Thus, let them govern.

Sir Graham Watson, a Liberal Democrat member of the EP, took the floor thereafter. He started by saying that last year a series of events took place that reminded us that humanity can change the pace of history. He said that he was not surprised that the first session of the Egyptian Parliament was chaotic since this was the first democratic election in many years. It also became clear that Egypt wants some form of Political Islam. The hope in the EU is that it will be a form of Political Islam open to dialogue. However, Sir Graham Watson said he was not convinced that Egypt knows what it wants. The question for him was whether the time-scale for change can be respected. The revolution was about dignity. Currently urgent action is needed and therefore everyone is pressed for time. The Muslim Brotherhood, Sir Watson thought, will make a deal with the SCAF, which will most likely entail immunity from prosecution, etc. However, military domination will remain in place. If it does not work the Egyptian people will show this. The release of Michael Nabil shows the importance of the people. There are three important anniversaries in Egypt, which can all become important points for demonstrating people’s discontent in case such exists.
With regards to the EU’s role Sir Watson said that Europeans should recognize that most Egyptians do not want an EU intervention or a heavy European influence. They want to see the EU acting on the points it professes. The EU needs to keep engaging with political parties but also with ideas. The areas, which the EU should offer help are visas, and so on. Rule of law and capital markets by themselves are not enough. One needs to open up to new ideas, new societies. Hopefully, the EU will be able to clarify what the concept ‘more for more’ stands for.

After the panellists finished their presentations, the floor was opened for questions and comments from the floor. The first participant from the audience pointed out that last year the Europeans experienced an important lesson. Furthermore, not only did the revolutionaries lecture the Europeans but they also showed the double-standards that exist. These double-standards are practices in the own backyard of Europe, even in the European Parliament. The participant asked how do the Europeans interpret the results of the Egyptian elections? None of the Europeans visiting the area expected the good performance of the Islamic forces. The Palestinian case from 2006 showed how the Europeans fail to understand the region. Thus, the Europeans have to shift their understandings and actions vis-à-vis the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Mr Mingarelli’s intervention at this hearing showed how the EU currently does have a good understanding of what is of importance for the region. The participant thanked Franziska and Michelle for leading and organizing such an important and stimulating debate.

The next person to take the floor was the Egyptian-born Marwa el Ansary from Oxfam. She pointed out that the EU decided to deepen its economic relations with Egypt despite human rights violations. This was considered as aid as per Egypt’s request. But the participant questioned to what extent such an approach is effective. On the issue of ‘more for more’ and the review of the ENP, Marwa wanted to find out how this will be implemented in light of the ongoing human rights violations. She thought that what was missing from the current discourse was the underlining threat to women’s rights movements. She thought that there was a danger that women’s rights will be sidelined; this is the feeling of women’s rights organizations in Egypt at present. Thus, Marwa thought there was a real danger of losing the achievements to date of the women’s rights movement. Marwa commended Dr Badr’s focus on the end-game and not the process, as well as his optimism. She wanted to hear his reactions to the process put forward by
Michelle on the main priorities of state-building and the reform of the police force. Also, she asked him to expand on the NGO reform not being a priority at the moment.

Next Dr Haifaa Jawad, an academic from the University of Birmingham, UK made three comments. Firstly, to the Europeans, she pointed out that the Egyptians are hesitant. Dr Jawad wondered whether Egyptians now need time to understand their feelings. Until a year ago, after all, Europe was supporting a dictator. Secondly, with regards to the issue of the NGOs and minorities, she wondered whether Europe should now stop talking in sectarian terms. Christians in the Arab world are Arabs. Thus, Dr Jawad thought that the focus should instead be on collective citizenship. With regards to this, the American role in Iraq really failed. Thirdly, given that Dr Badr talked about cash, Dr Jawad wondered whether Egypt will not turn to the Arab Gulf for money since the EU is itself in a difficult financial position at present.

These issues were tackled by the panellists. The Chair, Dr Franziska Brantner, said she agrees that the EU should talk about individual rights, especially women’s rights. She asked Mr Migarelli if the deep and comprehensive agreement is really going to help the average Egyptian, Tunisian, Moroccan, etc citizen. Thus, perhaps the EU needs to change its mandate. With regards to the issue of macro-financial assistance, currently the EU cannot provide such assistance without the IMF. It is not an EU political decision. There have been attempts to change this regulation but it cannot be done. Thus, again she asked Mr Mingarelli if the Europeans knew if the liquidity that goes into the system will make a difference. Another question was what was happening to the frozen assets. What for and when were the Egyptian debts to the EU member states incurred? However, if one wants money, one needs to break up the military rule. This is how the economic performance will be improved. Today in Egypt there is a curfew of the media, of the law. This goes against the fundamentals of democracy, which require the freedom to create an organization on whatever one wants to create an organization (even if you are a racist, for example). Thus, there is a big difference, Franziska pointed out, between learning a lesson and making a difference afterwards.

Dr Badr Abdelatty started his response by saying that the way the army was talked about at the Hearing was as if it will stay in power forever. However, this is far from the case as the military will transfer its powers in June (2012). No one in Egypt will accept anything but the rule of the people. The army has now transferred powers to the elected Parliament. And all the executive
power is due to be transferred to the President. On the NGOs, Dr Badr clarified that he was talking about foreign NGOs. Egyptian NGOs are of course free. Foreign NGOs have to be transparent. In the US, for example, the rules for foreign NGOs are very strict. After the transfer of power due to take place by 30 June 2012, one will have to deal with the representative government of the Egyptian people. On the question about Arab Gulf money / countries, Dr Badr said that these countries have already channelled money to Egypt. However, Egypt also needs the EU and the US. On the IMF issue, a mission has met in Cairo with all the principals involved. Currently it is waiting for the European partners to also step in and offer help through the macro-finance instrument.

On the question of women, Dr Badr admitted that Egyptian society and culture was not helping. In order to deal with this, a societal dialogue was necessary. On the Arab-Israeli conflict he clarified that he did not want to mislead the participants, business was not as usual any more. So, if Israelis do injustices in Gaza, the Egyptians will be pressed by public opinion to respond. The revolution was about freedom and dignity for the Palestinians as well. The new Egyptian Constitution will decide who / which countries Egypt will deal with.

Mr Mingarelli took the floor next by saying that a lesson that has been learnt is that the EU needs to pay more attention to civil society. For partner-countries, it is about removing non-tariff barriers. The prevailing view is that the EU’s policy is good for everyone (however, Mr Mingarelli stressed that he is not saying that this is the right view). The EU cannot control the use of funds. All the EU can do is make sure that there is sound financial management, so as to ensure in this way that funds are well spent. If the EU takes a project approach, it will take years until the money is actually given. Thus, the current arrangement is the fastest one. On the question of frozen assets, Mr Mingarelli said that legally this is an issue for the EU member states to act upon.

Sir Graham Watson said that there is a cause for optimism in Egypt with regards to the prospects for liberalism and liberal developments. In politics, he argued, one needs most of all to be in tune with the times. Currently Egypt needs to find someone who is in tune with the times to take up the position of President. If Egyptians succeed in this, Sir Watson said he would be optimistic about the future.
Franziska took the floor last by saying that there is a link between the question of NGOs on one hand and Palestine and Egypt, on the other. In Germany she said there is criticism over Israel’s efforts to have control over foreign NGOs as it argues that these are helping the Palestinian cause. The EU, and she herself, are very critical of this policy. For her this is an issue intrinsically related to democracy. The EU also needs to increase the staff of the EU’s Representation Office in Egypt, to include individuals who are ready to take some risks and who will ensure that the EU implements projects at a much faster pace on the ground than it has done in the past. The EU also has the option of giving loans. These will go a long way towards alleviating the current economic problems in Egypt.

The Chair closed the Public Hearing by thanking all the speakers and participants for a very lively and fruitful debate and pointed out that the issues brought up will continue to be followed closely and deliberated.