



North-South Centre of the Council of Europe

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Strengthening democratic reform in the southern Neighbourhood

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Conclusions and recommendations

The Lisbon Forum 2012 was organised by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe in partnership and with the support of the Alliance of Civilisations of the United Nations, the host institution - Aga Khan Network and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Portugal. Relevant international actors actively contributed to the event in particular the League of Arab States, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, the International Federation of Human Rights – FIDH... Creating synergies and complementarity between partners and actors is vital. The work of the Alliance of Civilisations and the personal contribution of the President Sampaio, Chair of the Lisbon Forum were underlined with particular appreciation.

The Lisbon Forum 2012 was a direct follow-up of the 2011 Forum which was held on the topic "The Arab Spring: a major step towards making universal human rights real". The Forum was held in the framework of the Programme "Strengthening democratic reform in the southern Neighbourhood", financed by the European Union and implemented by the Council of Europe.

The Lisbon Forum 2012 under the topic "The Arab Season : from change to challenges" brought together more than 200 participants, representing a unique opportunity to gather together the representatives of the civil society, local and regional authorities, elected assemblies and governments – following the "quadrilogue" principle that governs the functioning of the North-South Centre - from both the North and the South of the Mediterranean. This was a useful opportunity of interaction and networking not only between the personalities from the South and the North of the Mediterranean, but also between the South Mediterranean actors themselves. It was a rare opportunity for them to gather and compare experiences. Active involvement of the representatives of the new political élites, youth, women activists and journalists/media professionals as well more interactive feature of the programme characterised this year's forum.

The theme and the focus on the Arab countries' transition and challenges proved to be particularly relevant in the current context. It helped to take stock of changes since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" in January 2011, covering the whole region of the South Mediterranean, in particular Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, but also Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine. It also helped to improve mutual knowledge and understanding and to make recommendations that should advance the transition processes. Rich and varied presentations, deeply rooted into respective national realities fed the Forum's work and conclusions. They often casted diverse and even divergent perspectives on the recent and current developments, adding perspectives from the civil society, parliamentarians and representatives of central and local governments. The participants supported the use of term "Arab Season", proposed last year by President Sampaio, Chair of the Lisbon Forum.

The Arab season is characterised by variety and complexity of transformations. Despite very specific national contexts, common features were outlined:

- We continue to live through the process of transformations with many challenges.
- The degree of citizens' participation has increased considerably.
- The economic problems, marginalisation of certain categories of population, the lack of opportunities for the young, high level of frustration / aspirations of the uprisings continue to impact the transitions.
- There seem to be a need for an increased capacity to deliver on the ground.

Some achievements were reported but also some alarming setbacks. The approach when dealing with human rights issues in some cases raises serious concerns. Challenges include among others:

- developing a sense of belonging,
- promoting national cohesion,
- building / modernising public institutions,
- consolidating democracy,
- ensuring stability,
- fighting corruption.

The transition process is a long term and gradual process. The systemic changes require commitment and wide participation. The managerial deficiency and political immaturity are seen as major obstacles for successful transformations.

There is a sense of urgency in dealing with the issues of gender equality and women's empowerment, which are very essential for the successful transition in the Arab region. It is in fact a matter of democratic legitimacy. In some contexts, women's rights are under attack.

Considering the share of the young population and its relative fragility as well as high youth unemployment, targeting young people in the region should be a matter of priority. In this respect education, both formal and non formal, plays a key role to secure lasting change in the future.

Efforts to better understand Islam, as well as culture and religions from the southern Mediterranean countries, should be made.

Morocco emerged as an example of a country where specific reforms were launched in response to the demands of the street, in particular the constitutional reform. At the same time a need to improve the implementation of the constitutional principles of participation and non discrimination in practice was emphasised. Tunisia and Egypt, where the authoritarian regimes were toppled through popular uprisings still undergo major periods of instability. The conflict between liberal – secular and conservative islamist approaches, is observed. There should be a meaningful and continuous dialogue to overcome polarisation and to find a model that could ensure the respect for the universal rights and freedoms and to recognise the religious and cultural particularities of each country. The minorities should have the possibility to voice their concerns and have their rights respected. The existence of a strong civil society capable to obtain concessions from the government is seen as a positive key asset for the transition. In Jordan the popular calls for reforms combine the aspiration to maintain the political stability.

Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria were affected to a lesser degree by the Arab Season, each country having its own specific reasons for that.

Sectarian tensions continue to characterise the situation in Lebanon. The Syrian drama has direct repercussions on the situation in Lebanon. The situation in Syria is marked by gross human rights violations. It remains a matter of great concern and require a greater engagement of the international community.

Currently the protracted conflict between Israel and Palestine contributes to feed persistent tensions and divides in the region. A comprehensive two States solutions should be implemented requiring mutual concessions and recognitions, with clear borders and commitments to respect minorities. The historical decision to grant Palestine the status of a non member observer State in the United Nations should contribute to resume meaningful negotiations in the short term.

The countries rich in natural resources like Algeria have the capacities to play down the “demands of the street”, but the reforms are required to provide a long term stability.

An enhanced dialogue is needed in each country, to listen all the voices within societies and take preoccupations of all categories of the population into account when designing and implementing reforms. During the popular uprisings the peoples demanded dignity, freedom and social justice. The aspirations for universal values entirely deconstructed the so called “Arab exceptionalism”. The demands of the people demonstrate that social economic and civic and political rights are connected an interdependent.

The priorities for the national reform processes include the need to conduct constitutional reforms through an inclusive process, guarantee the independence of the judiciary, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular the freedom of expression and the respect of women’s rights, to conduct local government reform.

Building inclusive and empowered societies is the best precondition for the stability and social cohesion in the long term. The societies in the South Mediterranean as they are in the North are diverse and in some cases fragmented. There is a need to further promote national and social cohesion, bridge polarised views. There is a need to anchor even more firmly the dialogue to overcome social divisions.

An opened and sincere dialogue should be reinforced between the North and the South of the Mediterranean to tackle in common major challenges, which are often highly interconnected, and involve both the North and the South. The level of interdependence has increased significantly. The principle of solidarity and partnership of equals should contribute to feed the renewed cooperation. Facilitating exchanges especially among the young people should help to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes and improve mutual understanding. The role of education and enhanced intercultural dialogue are key in this respect. More efforts are required to overcome religion related bias.

The Arab Season coincides with a crisis period in Europe, marked by and anxiety and uncertainties. There is an urgent need to put the issue of solidarity high on the agenda. The solidarity within the societies, in Europe and transregional solidarity are more relevant than ever. Solidarity is required to ensure a better respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and overcome the current difficulties.

The principles of dialogue, solidarity and partnership, as well as promoting the universal values are core to the mandate of the North-South Centre.

Opportunities and challenges to cooperation were outlined.

The Council of Europe instruments and mechanisms have the capacity to contribute to the progress of the ongoing transformations in Arab countries – in the framework of the Council of Europe policy towards its immediate neighbourhood – policy proposed by the Secretary General and approved by its Committee of Ministers. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe adapted their responses to the changes in the Southern Neighbourhood and reinforced their cooperation, creating synergies and using the added value of the Council of Europe instruments and mechanisms.

Accession to the Council of Europe partial agreements such as North-South Centre, Venice Commission and Group of States against Corruption offers opportunity for targeted assistance and cooperation in the fields of intercultural dialogue / global education / youth, constitutional and electoral reforms and reforms to support good governance and fight corruption. principles and standards included in the Council of Europe non opened legal instruments (such as the European Convention of Human Rights) and the work carried out by Council of Europe bodies (European

Court of Human Rights, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance – ECRI) could provide inspiration for the reform processes.

Partnership for Democracy Status with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe offers a framework for sharing experiences of democratic transition with parliaments.

An extensive use of the Council of Europe experience in accompanying transitions can be useful.

Considering the recognition and expertise acquired, the North-South Centre and the Alliance of Civilisations should further enhance their cooperation and synergy.

The North-South Centre's action on youth, intercultural dialogue and education is a essential asset to be further developed in the future.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations actions in the Mediterranean through the its regional strategy on intercultural dialogue and cooperation should be further supported and developed.

Further cooperation and joint action should be developed between the North – South Centre and the United Nations Alliance in the Civilisations in the southern mediterranean countries,

Countries have their specificities and different needs, the programme offers targeted cooperation based on the demand-driven approach.

The launch of the new ambitious Programme "Strengthening democratic reform in the southern Neighbourhood" offers new opportunities for an enhanced cooperation between Europe and the South Mediterranean countries.

The seeds of success of the transitions are in the respective countries and contextual realities. But sharing successes and shortcomings of transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, can bring useful perspectives and elements for designing and implementing reforms. The experience of transition in Portugal is equally interesting in this respect.

We have common universal values and the shared future, and our diversities should be celebrated and respected, creating more opportunities to discover better each other and ourselves. The walls of fear are being destroyed, but we need to build trust, stronger partnerships and further enhance cooperation (increasing the level of engagement).

Presented by : Ms Antonella Cagnolati, Executive Director of the North-South Centre a.i., and Director of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe