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## The OSCE and Change in the South Mediterranean: A New Opportunity for the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership?

In the *Astana Commemorative Declaration*, participating States reaffirmed that “security of the OSCE area is inextricably linked to that of adjacent areas, notably in the Mediterranean and in Asia” and pledged to enhance the level of interaction with the OSCE Partners for Co-operation.<sup>1</sup> But when 56 Heads of State or Government gathered in Astana in December 2010 for the first OSCE Summit in eleven years, no one could have foreseen the extraordinary events that would sweep over the South Mediterranean in the subsequent months.

The popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, driven by the most basic human longings for freedom, dignity, and justice, as well as greater political participation and more economic and social opportunities, followed by the promises of reform in Morocco and Jordan and the uprisings in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, have offered a unique chance to build a brighter future for the entire region. What soon became known as “the Arab Spring” or – as many in the region prefer to call it – “the Arab Awakening” has also vividly reminded the world of the power and appeal of democratic values and fundamental human rights, including those enshrined in the CSCE/OSCE *Helsinki Final Act*. These were the very values that inspired democratic revolutions in the CSCE/OSCE area more than 20 years ago – a tectonic shift that produced the 1990 *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, which declared the opening of “a new era of democracy, peace and unity” on the continent and recognized democracy “as the only system of government of our nations”.<sup>2</sup>

For the OSCE, which enjoys a long-standing partnership with six South Mediterranean countries – Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia – the historic change in the region has raised an immediate question as to what the Organization’s role might be in support of democratic transition in the Partner States that have embarked on that road. In a broader partnership context, the unprecedented developments in the region have also pro-

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Note: The views expressed within this contribution are those of the authors and not necessarily official positions of the OSCE.

1 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Summit Meeting, Astana 2010, *Astana Commemorative Declaration – Towards a Security Community*, SUM.DOC/1/10/Corr.1, 3 December 2010, p. 3, at: <http://www.osce.org/mc/74985>.

2 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Paris, 21 November 1990, in: Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 537-566, here: p. 537, also available at: <http://www.osce.org/mc/39516>.

vided a most timely opportunity to reflect on how the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership could be reinvigorated and raised to a new qualitative level.

### *Supporting Democratic Transition in the South Mediterranean*

As the Egyptian revolution was unfolding, renowned British historian and political writer Timothy Garton Ash wrote a commentary in which he argued that “Europe’s future is at stake this week on Cairo’s Tahrir Square, as it was on Prague’s Wenceslas Square in 1989”.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, ever since its inception in 1975, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has been based on the premise that security in the OSCE area and security in the Mediterranean are closely interdependent, while the OSCE’s overall approach to security has been underpinned by a firm conviction that security and stability cannot be sustainable without assurance of human rights and economic and social opportunities.

Naturally, since the beginning of the revolution in Tunisia and the ousting of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 after 33 years in power, the OSCE has paid much political attention to the events unfolding in the South Mediterranean. As early as 20 January 2011, at the weekly meeting of the Permanent Council, the Organization’s main regular decision-making body, participating States discussed the developments in Tunisia and started considering ways in which the OSCE could assist its Partner. The situations in Tunisia and Egypt were then raised at subsequent meetings of the Permanent Council. In turn, Mediterranean Partners displayed readiness to share information and updates on relevant developments in their countries within the framework of the Mediterranean Contact Group, a regular meeting at ambassadorial level held between OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners and chaired by the incoming OSCE Chairmanship. On several occasions, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Algeria briefed the group on the events taking place in the region. In response, a number of OSCE participating States repeatedly stated their support for the ongoing democratic changes and declared their openness and willingness to put the OSCE’s expertise and experience at the service of the Partners, should the latter choose to request assistance from the OSCE and its executive structures.

This approach has stemmed from the understanding of the historic significance and magnitude of change that is underway in the South Mediterranean. Despite all the differences in the situations and contexts, many observers have actually drawn a parallel between the recent and still ongoing changes in the South Mediterranean and the revolutions in Central and East-

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3 Timothy Garton Ash, If this is young Arabs’ 1989, Europe must be ready with a bold response, in: *The Guardian*, 2 February 2011, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/02/egypt-young-arabs-1989-europe-bold?INTCMP=SRCH>.

ern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, given the speed of change in both cases and its spontaneous and regional character. In this context, participating States believe that the OSCE has a number of advantages that enable it to play a useful and meaningful role in support of democratic transition in the South Mediterranean.

First, the OSCE has accumulated vast experience and expertise in assisting democratic transitions. For more than 20 years now, supporting democratic transition in its participating States in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, has constituted one of the Organization's core tasks and activities. Since the collapse of communism, the CSCE/OSCE has offered a framework for democratic change across the region by setting standards and agreeing commitments across the three dimensions of security, including on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In addition to its norm-setting function, the Organization has also provided practical help to the post-communist countries in implementing the commitments taken and in carrying out domestic reforms.

Democratic transition is a multidimensional task. In this regard, the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security has proved indispensable, aiming to advance the interrelated aspects of the politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions of security, thus promoting lasting and sustainable peace and security. The OSCE's expertise and experience has become widely recognized in such areas as democratic institution-building, freedom of the media, police reform, confidence building, protection of persons belonging to national minorities, legal reforms, good governance, rule of law, and the organization and conduct of free and fair elections, while its election methodology and criteria have been seen as an international "gold standard".

Second, in providing support for democratic transition, the OSCE has developed an extensive toolbox that includes a network of field presences (currently 16), the Vienna-based Secretariat with its specialized units, and three permanent institutions: the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and the Representative on the Freedom of the Media (RFOM). The OSCE participating States in South-eastern and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia have all benefited from this toolbox in their transitions. Many instruments at the disposal of the OSCE and its executive structures, such as experts' networks and online resources, compilations of good practices, training modules, handbooks, legislative commentaries, guidelines, and recommendations in all areas covered by the OSCE mandate, are readily available to and can promptly be shared with interested Partners for Co-operation and even adapted and translated to meet their individual needs. An essential element of the OSCE toolbox and approach is its active engagement with civil society, both by partnering to help participating States

with the implementation of OSCE commitments and by providing NGOs with the necessary capacity-building support.

Third, the OSCE's broad and inclusive membership, which brings together the established Western democracies in Europe and North America, Turkey – which has provided an example of balancing Islam with secular democratic values – and Russia, Ukraine, and other states in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, offers a diversity of cultural models and experiences that the Organization's Partners might find interesting and instructive.

Finally, with the Mediterranean Partners being associated with the Helsinki process since its very beginning, the OSCE is not an unknown organization in the South Mediterranean, but one in which the Partners have a say, in which they have increasingly been included in various aspects of political dialogue and practical co-operation, whose working methods they know, and whose principles and commitments they are invited to implement on a voluntary basis.

With this vision and understanding, the 2011 Lithuanian OSCE Chairmanship, supported by the Irish Chair of the Mediterranean Contact Group, was quick to react and actively promote the possibility of sharing the OSCE's experience and expertise with the Mediterranean Partners. On 18 March, the Lithuanian Chairmanship circulated a background paper on the instruments that the OSCE could offer to its Partners for Co-operation, with the aim of informing the Partners and providing food for thought to participating States in devising concrete assistance measures.<sup>4</sup> The paper highlighted areas of potential OSCE involvement such as electoral assistance, legal reform, freedom of the media, migration management, police reform, confidence- and security-building measures, and national minorities. The document also outlined the political basis, conditions and possible ways for the OSCE to support its Partners, taking into account the Organization's rules of procedure and established practices.

Furthermore, the Chairperson-in-Office (CiO), Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis, initiated direct contact with the United Nations Secretary-General and encouraged him to co-ordinate international efforts in the South Mediterranean region. Intense consultations and exchanges of information on planned involvement and activities were conducted at expert level by the Secretariat along with the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS) in order to focus possible OSCE action on areas where the Organization could provide added value and to ensure efficient co-ordination with partner organizations to avoid potential overlapping.

The OSCE has adopted a customized approach, taking into account the peculiarities of each Partner country (e.g. the caretaker nature of post-

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<sup>4</sup> *Instruments that the OSCE could offer to its Partners for Co-operation*, Background Paper, CIO.GAL/41/11, 18 March 2011.

revolutionary governments in Egypt and Tunisia), their individual short- and long-term needs and priorities, and the areas where the Organization's contribution could make a real difference. A bilateral dialogue with interested Partners was therefore initiated by the Secretary General and the Chairmanship in order to identify specific requirements and niches where the OSCE could provide a value-added contribution through the implementation of concrete co-operation projects.

- *Tunisia*

As the first country in the region where the popular uprising brought the old regime down, Tunisia was also the first Mediterranean Partner to approach the OSCE. In mid-February, Tunisia submitted a request for information on the OSCE's experience in assisting democratic transition. Then the OSCE CiO visited Tunisia in mid-April at the invitation of the Tunisian Foreign Ministry. His visit was preceded by an advance team of experts from the OSCE Secretariat and ODIHR tasked with gathering information on outstanding needs and on areas where the OSCE could usefully offer its support.

During the meetings with the CiO, Tunisian interlocutors showed great interest in co-operation with the OSCE. Electoral assistance, media freedom, police reform, migration management, and fighting corruption were identified as the most useful areas of potential OSCE assistance. As a follow-up to the visit, the CIO sent a letter to the Tunisian Foreign Minister offering a list of concrete proposals in the areas identified. In mid-July, Tunisia sent an invitation to the OSCE and other international organizations to observe the elections to the National Constituent Assembly that were scheduled to take place on 23 October 2011. Since OSCE/ODIHR election observation is designed to assess compliance with relevant OSCE commitments, and is therefore limited to the territory of its participating States, the Lithuanian Chairmanship of the OSCE replied by restating the OSCE/ODIHR readiness to provide technical assistance to Tunisia and to deploy an Elections Support Team to support the government and other international actors, subject to the approval of the Permanent Council on the basis of an explicit request by Tunisia. At the same time, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly decided to take part in the observation of the October elections in Tunisia.

- *Morocco*

Since the launch of the reform process announced in the speech to the nation by King Mohammed VI at the beginning of March, Morocco has regularly shared information with participating States on related developments in the country and has demonstrated a keen interest in enhancing its co-operation with the OSCE. Following an official invitation by Morocco, an ODIHR-led delegation containing a representative from

the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) visited Rabat at the end of May to discuss specific areas and ways of possible OSCE support. Contacts with relevant Moroccan interlocutors were also initiated by the OSCE RFOM on a separate occasion.

Whereas concrete requests have yet to be formulated by the Moroccan authorities, areas of OSCE expertise that appeared to be of great potential interest for Morocco included independence of the judiciary, revision of legal texts, capacity building for national human rights institutions, training of domestic election observers, human rights education, tolerance and non-discrimination, media freedom, combating corruption, and money laundering.

- *Egypt*

A bilateral visit to Cairo at the beginning of June by the Lithuanian Deputy Foreign Minister provided a good opportunity to also discuss issues connected with a potential OSCE contribution to the transition process in Egypt. For this purpose, the Deputy Foreign Minister was accompanied by experts from the OSCE Secretariat and ODIHR and held a series of meetings with Egyptian officials and civil society representatives.

Two areas were identified as immediate priorities for co-operation between the OSCE and Egypt: electoral assistance and capacity building for civil society, including political parties. In the long run, once a new government and relevant capacities are in place after the scheduled national elections, the OSCE's expertise in the areas of police reform, media freedom, and good governance might be of further value.

Intensive engagement with civil society and youth activists was deemed particularly important, given the special role they played during the revolution and the significant contribution that they could bring to the reform process. The OSCE's own experience demonstrates that successful democratic transition requires the full use of the energy inherent in civil society. Following up on the agreements reached during the visit, ODIHR moved quickly to organize a three-day workshop on election observation methodology and human rights in Warsaw for fifteen representatives of Egyptian civil society at the end of July. A second workshop followed three months later, in Budva, Montenegro, for NGOs representatives from Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, focusing on good practices in election observation.

At the time of writing, bilateral consultations between the OSCE and interested Partner States were still under way. For the OSCE to translate its political openness and readiness to support democratic transition in the South Mediterranean into concrete and practical action, an explicit request by the Partner concerned must be received; this is because the Partners' relationship

with the OSCE is based on their voluntary adherence to OSCE norms, principles, and commitments. In addition, any potential activity in a Partner country, i.e. beyond the OSCE area, will require agreement by all participating States, which is then formalized in a decision by the Permanent Council.

Experience with democratic transition in the OSCE's own region demonstrates that international assistance can play a helpful, often instrumental role. The OSCE has also learned over the past decades that democratic transition is a complex, sometimes uneven, and long process that requires political will and determination, commitment, and patience. A revolution is only the beginning of transition, and there is a distance between a nation's democratic instinct and its capacity to build democracy. As underlined by the CiO: "It is my sincere hope that these countries [in the South Mediterranean] will emerge from this difficult period as strong and free modern democracies worthy of the many thousands of engaged citizens who took to the streets and risked their lives to demand a better future for themselves and their children."<sup>5</sup> The OSCE has stated its readiness to be of assistance and offered its advice and expertise to its Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation in a pragmatic and practical way.

### *Reinvigorating the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership*

The OSCE relationship with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation dates back to the origins of the CSCE. A number of Mediterranean countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and Tunisia, were associated with the Helsinki process from its very beginnings. Jordan became a Mediterranean Partner in 1998. The Partnership status provides for dedicated venues for regular dialogue between the Partners and the OSCE participating States and for possibilities of practical co-operation.

Over the years, especially with the adoption of the 2007 *Madrid Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE Partners for Co-operation*,<sup>6</sup> the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has made steady progress, with a broad and consolidated framework for political dialogue and practical co-operation having been put in place and strengthened. Today, Partners enjoy regular access to the weekly meetings of the OSCE Permanent Council and Forum for Security Co-operation in Vienna, sitting at the main table together with participating States. Partners have been invited to all high-level OSCE gatherings, such as the Astana Summit and Ministerial Council Meetings, including the two informal Ministerial Meetings in 2009 and 2010 and the periodic ambassadorial

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5 Audronius Ažubalis, Partnerships for sustainable security, in: *New Europe*, 6-12 March 2011, p. 5, available at: <https://www.neurope.eu/blog/partnerships-sustainable-security>.

6 Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE Partners for Co-operation, MC.DOC/1/07, of 30 November 2007, in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Fifteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council, 29 and 30 November 2007*, Madrid, 30 November 2007, pp. 3-4.

meetings within the frameworks of the Corfu Process and the “V-to-V Dialogue” (“from Vancouver to Vladivostok via Vienna and Vilnius”). They also attend the main annual OSCE events in the three dimensions (the Annual Security Review Conference, ASRC, the Economic and Environmental Forum, EEF, and the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, HDIM) and all the relevant conferences and seminars of interest to them.

The Contact Group with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, which meets roughly every second month, serves as a main dedicated venue for regular dialogue between the Mediterranean Partners and participating States, supplemented by frequent informal consultations at the level of contact points. Since 1995, the annual OSCE Mediterranean Conference has been convened in the autumn, usually hosted by a Partner State. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has successfully developed a vibrant parliamentary dimension of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, for example by holding the annual Mediterranean Forum since 2003 and appointing a Special Representative on Mediterranean Affairs.

In 2007, the OSCE Partnership Fund was established, financed through extra-budgetary contributions. The operation of the Fund has made it possible to foster closer relations with Partners by supplementing political dialogue with practical co-operation projects and activities, as well as by supporting the increased participation of Mediterranean representatives in various OSCE events. The OSCE Ministerial Troika meeting with the Mediterranean Partners convened on the occasion of the OSCE Ministerial Council at the end of each year serves to summarize the progress achieved in the course of the year and to provide political guidance for the future.<sup>7</sup> In addition to relations with the Mediterranean Partners, the OSCE has also built solid links and co-operation with regional organizations in which Mediterranean Partners are members, especially with the LAS.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of substance, the OSCE Partnership essentially serves two main functions. First, reflecting the political nature of the OSCE itself, the Partnership provides a broad platform for regular political dialogue between the participating and Partner States on a broad range of issues of common interest, where Partners bring a Euro-Mediterranean dimension to the OSCE’s security debates. Second, participating States see the Partnership as an instrument to promote OSCE experience and values in the neighbouring

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7 For more details on the evolution of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership see the background paper “*Co-operation with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation and with the Asian Partners for Co-operation*” prepared by the Section for External Co-operation for the 2010 Review Conference, RC.GAL/23/10/Rev.1, 22 October 2010. For a more analytical recent assessment of the development of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership see Monika Wohlfeld, *The OSCE and the Mediterranean: Assessment of a Decade of Efforts to Reinvigorate a Dialogue*, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2010*, Baden-Baden 2011, pp. 351-368.

8 See Oleksandr Pavlyuk, *Engagement with organizations outside the OSCE area*, in: *OSCE Magazine 2/2010*, pp. 9-10.



regions. Although the Partners are not formally bound by OSCE norms, principles, and commitments, participating States have repeatedly invited them to consider voluntarily implementing those and offered their support to this end. Both regular political dialogue and the sharing of the OSCE *acquis* are meant to contribute to the strengthening and expansion of the area of common peace and security.

Despite the fact that much progress has been achieved, however, neither the Partners nor the participating States have seemed to be fully satisfied with the state of the Mediterranean Partnership in recent years. The Partners have often expressed disappointment that the Mediterranean Partnership has not been practical enough to address their interests and needs and has lacked a results-oriented approach and implementation strategy, while the discussions within the frameworks of the Contact Group meetings and the OSCE Mediterranean Conference have been seen as self-serving in the absence of concrete and practical outcomes and a binding decision-making mechanism that could enforce the implementation of any recommendations made.<sup>9</sup> Faced with the detached attitude of some Partner countries, and realizing the limitations of the Partnership, participating States for their part have been gradually losing interest. The latter point was reflected formally in their low levels of attendance and commitment to the work of the Contact Group meetings.

This situation and the resulting lack of momentum in the Mediterranean Partnership in recent years could be explained by several factors. For one thing, more than 35 years after its launch, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership remains a predominantly Vienna-based endeavour, mostly of a politico-diplomatic nature, driven by permanent representatives of the OSCE participating States and ambassadors of six Partner countries. The involvement of NGOs, civil society at large, and even officials from state institutions other than the foreign ministries has been limited and ad hoc. Despite the holding of Mediterranean conferences in Partner countries, the Partnership's visibility in all six has been low: High-level political attention has been insufficient and sporadic, while the general public has very little knowledge about the OSCE, its goals and capacities.

Moreover, since 1998, when Jordan joined as the sixth Mediterranean Partner, the group has remained stagnant, with limited outreach to the region. Some participating States have traditionally been cautious when it comes to outreach activities beyond the OSCE area of responsibility. Others were not in a position to join the consensus when Palestine twice formally requested Partnership status with the OSCE. No other indication of interest in becoming an OSCE Partner has been received from the broader Middle East and South

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Considerations of the delegations of the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation for the attention of the members of the Panel of Eminent Persons on Strengthening the Effectiveness of the OSCE*, PC.DEL/379/05, 13 May 2005, or *Statement by the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation – Strengthening the Mediterranean Dimension of the OSCE*, PC.DEL/873/05, 14 September 2005. Further papers on these issues have been individually circulated on various occasions by Egypt and Morocco.

Mediterranean region, nor has the OSCE displayed much pro-activism in publicizing itself and its mission, values, and philosophy. This lack of dynamism characteristic of the Mediterranean Partners' group has contrasted sharply with the OSCE Asian Partnership, whose composition grew from three to six members between 2003 and 2010, bringing fresh perspectives and new issues to the table.

Add to this the persistent problems in relations among the Mediterranean Partners themselves, perpetuated by the unresolved conflicts and enduring tensions in the region. These problems have frequently hampered possibilities for constructive and substantive dialogue and co-operation in Vienna. Most unfortunately, but to nobody's surprise, reaching an agreement on which country would be hosting the next Mediterranean Conference has become the biggest annual issue for the Mediterranean Partnership, with the process sometimes taking months and requiring the investment of a great deal of political effort before the necessary consensus could be secured. While Egypt has hosted such conferences five times, some Partner States have not even held one.

Finally, the nature of the political regimes in some of the Mediterranean Partner countries has been reflected in their selective interest in OSCE norms, principles, and commitments, especially those in the human dimension. This resulted in a sort of "à-la-carte" dialogue and co-operation with the Mediterranean Partners: In recent years, the Partnership has focused mainly on an important, but still narrow, set of issues, such as tolerance and non-discrimination, migration and water management, and combating terrorism, rather than covering the entire spectrum of the OSCE *acquis* in an open-minded and interactive manner. The OSCE Mediterranean dialogue has hardly touched the areas of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Against such a background, limited expectations and weakened commitment have become widespread among OSCE participating States.

Under the prevailing political circumstances, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has in a way reached a certain artificial limit, while occasional efforts to inject a new breath of life into it, for example by appointing the CiO's Special Representative for the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation under the 2009 Greek OSCE Chairmanship, have not significantly changed the overall situation and the entrenched atmosphere.

In this context, the democratic transition process launched in Egypt and Tunisia and the ongoing change in other countries in the region have produced the historic moment in the South Mediterranean that might not only open the door to concrete and practical OSCE support to interested Partners, but could also give the long-needed new momentum and dynamism to the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership as a whole. The emergence of democracy in the region will hopefully make the Partners broadly more open to the OSCE *acquis*. After all, the values so enthusiastically and courageously em-

braced by millions of people in the region in recent months are also core values of the OSCE.

It is therefore a unique and very timely opportunity to elaborate on where the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership should go further and to reflect on the next steps to be taken and adjustments to be made.

Should the partnership be more oriented towards the specific needs of the Partners in the future? Can the OSCE become more pro-active in reaching out to broader audiences and sharing its experience and *acquis* with Partner countries, neighbouring regions, and other interested states? Should the participating States show flexibility and empower executive structures to conduct certain activities in the Partner countries, such as seminars and workshops, when requested? Should the OSCE further strengthen its relations with regional organizations in North Africa and the Middle East, and particularly with the LAS, including partnering in joint projects and activities? Will Partners be ready to move actively and in practical ways towards voluntary implementation of OSCE norms, principles, and commitments? How can the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership be expanded beyond foreign ministries and even governments?

The new context calls for new thinking and creative approaches. Within the OSCE, the revived interest in the Mediterranean Partnership is huge. The attendance at meetings of the Mediterranean Contact Group in 2011, the highest in years, is a strong indication of this interest and of the newly-raised expectations on both sides. Within the framework of the 2011 ASRC, the Lithuanian Chairmanship organized a special session to discuss the strengthening of the OSCE's interaction with Partners for Co-operation, with a particular focus on the Mediterranean Partners and Afghanistan. Some participating States went as far as suggesting that the OSCE expertise could be of potential interest to Libya, should it choose to join the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership.

This year's Mediterranean Conference, which was held in October, focused on the challenges and opportunities in the Mediterranean region brought about by the ongoing changes. The event was hosted by Montenegro, the OSCE participating State with the most recent experience of democratic transition. This held special significance because it provided an occasion for presenting first-hand experience of how the OSCE can support democratic transformation by promoting human rights, democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, strengthening freedom of the media, and by addressing issues related to the role of the police and armed forces in democratic societies. The event was also an opportunity for sharing with the South Mediterranean region the merits of the OSCE's comprehensive and co-operative approach to security, for raising the awareness of the OSCE experience and capabilities, and ideally for identifying specific co-operation activities.

The conference paved the way for the Mediterranean Partnership to take a prominent place at the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Vilnius. Four

years after the *Madrid Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE Partners for Co-operation* was adopted, 56 participating States agreed on a decision on Partners for Co-operation,<sup>10</sup> which restates the OSCE's readiness to offer support and to further develop the dialogue and practical co-operation with its Partners. Whether and how this vital momentum is used and sustained is in the hands of both sides.

The Vilnius Ministerial Council Meeting was preceded by a civil society conference for Mediterranean Partners, bringing together NGO and civil society representatives from the Mediterranean region, both from the Partner countries and OSCE participating States. This is a new and innovative development that reflects the critical importance of civil society and consequently the high level of attention paid to engaging more with youth activists and NGOs. In the past, the OSCE made some attempts to reach out to civil society in the South Mediterranean by organizing side events for NGOs on the margins of the Mediterranean Conferences held in Tel Aviv in 2007 and in Amman in 2008. Those initiatives were welcomed and were helpful in building networks, even though these were of limited scope and participation and had no continuity in subsequent years. The civil society conference in Vilnius was attended by several dozen civil-society leaders from both the OSCE region and the South Mediterranean, and resulted in a series of recommendations that were presented to the Chairperson-in-Office, which publicly call for stronger engagement between the OSCE and the Mediterranean Partners and encourage joint efforts in consolidating democracy, including through the enhanced involvement of civil society. This may open a new page of active engagement with NGOs in the Mediterranean region, which hopefully will develop into a long-term partnership and systematic interaction, contributing to strengthening civil society in the South Mediterranean, as well as to raising the knowledge about the OSCE and its security concept and approach.

### *Conclusion*

The South Mediterranean is in the midst of unprecedented change, with history in the making. At this stage, no one can anticipate how the situation might evolve and what turn the transition might take. What is clear is that the ongoing change has ushered in a historic opportunity for the region itself and for its neighbours. It is also clear that the path towards democracy will be a long one. Perseverance, long-term vision and commitment will be needed on the part of the countries involved and those willing to support them.

The OSCE and its participating States have a major stake and interest in the success of democratic transition in the Mediterranean Partner countries.

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10 OSCE Ministerial Council, Vilnius 2011, *Decision No. 5/11, Partners for Co-operation*, MC.DEC/5/11, 7 December 2011.

The vision of a free, democratic, common, and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok and rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments, and common goals, as outlined by the Astana Summit, will be much more difficult to achieve if the South Mediterranean region remains insecure and unstable or reverts to authoritarianism or radicalism.

The OSCE also has a role to play. This is probably the moment for which the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership was launched more than 35 years ago. The present challenge, for both the OSCE and its Mediterranean Partners is to seize this opportunity, to reinvigorate the spirit of the Mediterranean Partnership, and to translate this spirit into practice and concrete action by providing tangible support to democratic transition in the region and by fulfilling the OSCE Partnership of Co-operation's mission to extend the area of security and co-operation by sharing OSCE values, principles, and commitments.