



European Economic and Social Committee

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Civil societies in the
Euromed region

Brussels, 21 September 2011

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

Promoting representative civil societies in the Euromed region

(own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: **Mr Dimitriadis**

On 14 June 2011, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

Promoting representative civil societies in the Euromed region.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 8 September 2011.

At its 474th plenary session, held on 21-22 September 2011 (meeting of 21 September 2011), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 163 votes to 6 with 17 abstentions.

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1. Summary and conclusions

- 1.1 Since the end of 2010, the countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East have been experiencing an unprecedented and historic shift in their political systems in the wake of fierce popular uprisings in which all social strata and numerous civil society organisations were energetically involved.
- 1.2 In this context the EESC absolutely deplores the use of force against protesting peoples observed in certain countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean (notably Syria and Libya), and calls on European and international organisations to take all appropriate measures to halt violations of human rights, including trade union rights.
- 1.3 EU policies before the Arab uprising lacked imagination and an understanding of the particularities of the local societies, and overlooked local mores, customs, traditions and conventions. EU bodies did not use the services of the EESC or CoR, which could have been an important route for exerting EU influence on local civil society organisations or local authorities.
- 1.4 The new society that has the potential to emerge in the Euromed region, as reflected in the vibrancy of its civil society, requires a diversified, flexible and intelligent response from the EU. In this context, the EESC welcomes the review and update of the European Neighbourhood Policy and in particular the emphasis that is now placed on the principles of conditionality and differentiation and on measures to support civil society¹.

¹ Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean (COM(2011) 200 final, 8.3.2011) and Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A new response to a changing Neighbourhood (COM(2011) 303 final, 25.5.2011).

- 1.5 The EU, which is the biggest donor in the region, needs to insist not only on the inclusion in its bilateral agreements of clauses on the protection of democratic freedoms and individual rights, but crucially also on their implementation. In the past, EU policy in the latter regard has been inadequate. Furthermore, the EESC calls for benchmarks on the treatment of civil society (legislative framework, capacity building, dialogue etc.), human rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights to be included in the assessment of a country's governance.
- 1.6 The EESC calls on the European Commission to support local legal institutions and develop training and educational programmes for judges and lawyers. The delivery of transparent justice is a condition for democracy.
- 1.7 The EESC regards as essential subregional development and development of south-south cooperation, supported by the EU. It therefore urges the Commission to initiate processes and make practical proposals without delay based on its experience in European countries or other parts of the world.
- 1.8 The EESC also endorses redefining the UfM's role and mission. The UfM regional body will only prove useful if, as was the original intention, it is given specific and transparent programmes destined for specific beneficiaries/recipients, including the participation of local civil societies, and is responsible for coordinating various regional European policies and funding in collaboration with the public and private sectors and financial institutions at the local level. It also needs to provide permanent mechanisms for civil society involvement in its initiative. The EESC calls for immediate decisions to be taken on the role, mission, organisation and funding of the UfM.
- 1.9 Women and young people played a pivotal role in the processes that led to these historic transformations, effectively helping to energise and mobilise local societies using the latest social networking tools. It is important to keep up the momentum and ensure that both these groups not only enjoy full political, civil, economic and social rights, but also play a full role in all aspects of society.
- 1.10 The EESC calls for the effectiveness of EU-funded projects and EU assistance to be improved so that greater progress can be achieved in the future. The complexity of EU funding procedures leaves out of the loop many of the non-state actors that have the greatest potential but also the greatest need for support and currently lack the expertise needed to apply for funding. Helping organisations to obtain funds, for example through EU delegation training, should be one of the objectives of the initiative.
- 1.11 The EESC agrees in principle with the Commission's policies on immigration, asylum and free movement of people, but it believes that specific, rigorous measures are needed to

combat illegal immigration and trafficking of people. These should include measures to promote regional development and social cohesion in the partner countries.

- 1.12 The EESC calls on the Member States to show solidarity with the EU Mediterranean countries which are facing migration pressures.
- 1.13 The EESC believes that the wave of immigration to EU countries can only be stemmed by providing practical help to the societies of North Africa and the Middle East, based on specific economic and social assistance programmes aimed at improving the competitiveness of their economies, supporting local SMEs and agriculture, regional development and social cohesion, and the opening up of remote regions.
- 1.14 The EESC also believes that within the southern partners' countries economies the agricultural sector – and rural development in general – play a pivotal role in delivering solutions for local development and generating employment for a young workforce. The sector is also key to resolving the existing food crisis in these countries and therefore should be targeted as a priority. The renewable energies sector meanwhile is an area of huge potential which can generate major benefits in terms of employment, social development and climate change mitigation on both shores of the Mediterranean.
- 1.15 The EESC believes that social dialogue between employers and workers in the Mediterranean region should be stepped up and that its Employers Group and Workers Group could contribute to the achievement of this objective. In addition, the EESC calls for structured social dialogue to be promoted through a Social Forum. The EESC will continue to cooperate closely with the ILO to promote social dialogue in the region.
- 1.16 The EESC welcomes the Commission's plan to provide additional resources of over EUR 1 billion until 2013 to address the urgent needs of the region. It also asks the Commission to bring funding together within a specific policy and social framework in the beneficiary countries which would promote democratic principles, political and trade union freedoms, development of education and lifelong learning, protection of the environment and broadening and deepening of political cooperation with the EU Mediterranean countries.
- 1.17 The EESC underlines that in this endeavour the social partners, civil society organisations and the Economic and Social Councils of the Member States have a vital role to play in terms of sharing experiences and knowledge, disseminating information, benchmarking, transfer of know-how, and administrative resources. The EESC is ready to take on specific projects to underpin and strengthen civil society in cooperation with the Commission and the HR/VP.
- 1.18 As the body representing civil society at EU level, the EESC can play an active role in the new European framework for cooperation with Mediterranean societies in particular by:

- documenting the situation of civil society in the region through an open, democratic and regular dialogue with a broad spectrum of players;
- helping to define specific criteria and processes for accepting an organisation as truly representative of a sector of society;
- supporting the capacity-building efforts of independent and representative civil society through its expertise in a wide range of fields including social dialogue and economic and social rights;
- helping local economic and social councils by providing expertise on participatory democracy;
- taking part in Commission programmes to strengthen socio-economic organisations.

1.19 The EESC believes it is essential to work together with the EU institutions in supporting emerging civil society organisations in the southern Mediterranean countries. The EESC will readjust its network of Euromed ESCs and similar institutions and will continue to promote regional cooperation through this network and in doing so adhere to the principles of conditionality and differentiation set out in the revised ENP.

2. Learning from the past

2.1 Critical analysis of previous European Union activities

2.1.1 The complete absence, with a few exceptions, of a democratic environment has obliged the EU, not always defensibly, to adapt its policies on pragmatic grounds and to accept as interlocutors figures that could by no means be described as democratic representatives of their peoples.

2.1.2 Constrained by formal European policies and positions taken by the other EU bodies vis-à-vis the sitting governments in North Africa and the Middle East, and by the policies and economic guidelines of the Barcelona Process, and with a very limited budget, the EESC took a pragmatic position and cooperated with economic and social councils and official civil society organisations that did not always have sufficient democratic legitimacy and did not adequately represent civil society.

2.1.3 During the whole Barcelona Process, the EU communicated and cooperated very little with civil society organisations that were not approved by governments, thus missing an opportunity to influence political and social developments. The EU nevertheless remains the only major power in which local societies have invested their hopes in relation to establishing peace, introducing and entrenching democratic freedoms, and support for local economies.

2.1.4 Before the Arab uprising, the views of policy-makers in the EU Member States on the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, while pragmatic, were fractured and divergent, and they were thus unable to understand the critical processes taking place at political,

economic and social level and were taken completely by surprise at the intensity and scale of the events that led to these unforeseen changes.

- 2.1.5 In the wake of these events, the EU must talk to local societies, learn from the past, become familiar with local mores, customs and traditions, get to know the culture of the individual societies (each country's being very different) and cooperate with a view to supporting the governments that will emerge with genuine and free democratic procedures.

3. **Current situation and outlook**

- 3.1 The EESC believes that a number of issues - grievances of local societies that had been coming to a head for many years – need to be addressed urgently: the use of manufacturing infrastructure (means of production) in countries in North Africa and the Middle East by certain groups with interests and contacts in the previous regimes which did not have demographic legitimacy; the uneven or unequal distribution of wealth and prosperity; the explosion in prices of basic food staples, which eventually became unaffordable for ordinary people; the need to protect individual rights and social and trade union rights; and the demand for economic and social welfare and education.

- 3.2 The current political situation in most of the Mediterranean countries of North Africa and the Middle East is characterised by:

- i. a hope that free democratic states will be set up;
- ii. a need for assistance to restore economies;
- iii. the first indications that some free civil society organisations and socio-economic bodies - both established and new - are operating;
- iv. the need for coordinated and well-organised international support, both from the EU (which after the Lisbon treaty has the mechanisms it needs to pursue a common foreign policy), the High Representative and Commission Vice-President (HR/VP) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as other international organisations (UN, ILO, IMF, EIB, etc.). Contacts with research institutions specialising in the Euromed region (for example IPEMED, FEMISE) would be very useful here.

The EESC believes that the EU must speak with one voice.

- 3.3 Common themes across the southern Mediterranean region are that democracy must be established and entrenched, economic and social progress stepped up, and training and jobs provided for the younger generations.

- 3.4 Most countries of North Africa and the Middle East face the challenge of having predominantly young populations, which means that they must urgently find a solution for this highly productive element of their societies by boosting employment. Adequate training

and educational programmes should be boosted to this end, while enhancing civil rights and gender equality.

- 3.5 It will only be possible to establish democratic values and processes by adopting the principles of representative democracy founded on free elections and independent political parties and by supporting and strengthening civil society and socio-economic organisations that operate under secure, free and independent conditions.
- 3.6 The EESC calls on the Member States to show solidarity with the EU Mediterranean countries which are facing migration pressures:
- a) by cooperating through FRONTEX;
 - b) by introducing special economic measures and backing these up;
 - c) by helping the partner countries in the region to alleviate human suffering in targeted countries or regions.
- 3.7 The EESC welcomes the appointment by the EU's Council of Ministers of the Spanish diplomat Bernardino León Gross as the EU's Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean in response to the events of the Arab uprising. His appointment is a clear sign that the EU wishes to maintain its initiative in the region. The EESC calls on the special representative to work closely with civil society, which is playing a crucial role in the region, and to use all available EU channels for that purpose.

4. **New European neighbourhood policies**

- 4.1 The EESC welcomes the two Joint Communications of the Commission and the EEAS², which evaluate progress made to date in Euro-Mediterranean relations and take a first look at the opportunities and prospects created after the Arab uprising. The EESC would like to make the following points in particular:
- 4.1.1 The EU should on no account remain a passive observer of events.
- 4.1.2 The EESC has studied in detail the Joint Communications of the European Commission and the HR, and endorses all the development measures proposed in that text, while also noting that the EU wasted a great deal of time, after the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, before evaluating and reprogramming these measures.
- 4.1.3 The EU should implement without delay the new "partnership for democracy and shared prosperity" in the Mediterranean.

² See footnote 1 above.

- 4.1.4 Within a new partnership, a different approach must be adopted for each country to reflect political and social developments. Countries that are further advanced should have access to more funding and be able to step up their political and economic cooperation with the EU. Relations with all countries should be founded on an explicit set of principles (democracy, protection of individual rights, etc.) and specific incentives linked to certain political goals (combating corruption, an independent judiciary, independent information media, etc.). Specific safeguards should also be put in place to reduce or suspend funding as appropriate in cases where commitments are not honoured or deadlines not met.
- 4.1.5 The holding of free and fair elections is a preliminary non-negotiable precondition for establishing partnership.
- 4.1.6 Grassroots support from civil society is a basic prerequisite for underpinning the new democratic governments and safeguarding economic and social rights, protecting the environment and for social and economic development. The EESC is ready to contribute to these efforts with the experience it has gained from its activities throughout the world as well as the expertise of its members through specific assistance measures in cooperation with the Commission, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions.
- 4.1.7 The Arab uprising owes much to the key role played by young people and women in the uprisings, and therefore particular emphasis should be placed on guaranteeing their rights and enhancing their role in the new democratic states. To this end the EESC calls for all countries in the Euromed region to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women.
- 4.1.8 Open social dialogue between employers and workers, which is a prerequisite for maintaining economic and social stability, will play a very important role in entrenching democracy and safeguarding trade union rights.
- 4.1.9 Fighting corruption, ensuring good governance and creating an efficient public administration are fitting and necessary conditions for economic prosperity and to attract the absolutely essential Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that will shore up the democratic governments and generate new jobs.
- 4.1.10 Establishing mobility and infrastructure partnerships in the Mediterranean countries in relation to borders, migration and asylum will enhance security in the region.
- 4.1.11 Setting up SMEs in the Mediterranean countries is an important prerequisite for economic growth and job creation within a healthy regulatory framework and constructive financial environment. The Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and the European Investment Fund (EIF) are called upon to play a key role here.

- 4.1.12 Illiteracy is one of the most pressing social problems in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, and strenuous efforts must be made to address it. The European Union can and must play a supportive role here. It should also provide support for business training and skills development.
- 4.1.13 The EESC backs the setting up of a European Endowment for Democracy that would use targeted measures to support democratic processes in the southern Mediterranean countries, promoting the creation of political parties and free mass media, and above all reinforcing civil society (associations of employers/employees, NGOs, farmers, women's organisations and other social partners). On the basis of its own experience, the EESC considers a special process to support civil society, such as the proposed ENPI civil society facility, to be indispensable, and calls for the funding to the facility to be increased. The EESC is very willing to be involved in the facility together with the other European bodies and to offer its expertise. The EESC also calls on the Commission to recognise the special role which the socio-professional organisations can play in the ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument), particularly in the civil society facility that is to be set up.
- 4.1.14 The EESC agrees with the EU institutions that the Mediterranean region has for a very long time been in a state of constant tension owing to the Israel-Palestine conflict, which impedes every attempt at dialogue or joint action, and it calls on the HR/VP to continue her intensive efforts to find a mutually acceptable solution. The EU must speak with one voice on this highly sensitive issue.
- 4.1.15 The EESC backs the Commission's position on visa facilitation for selected partners in the Mediterranean and visa liberalisation in due course for those countries that can cooperate more closely with the EU on issues relating to mobility, asylum, return to country of origin and combating illegal immigration and people trafficking.
- 4.1.16 The EESC considers respect for both religious and civil freedoms to be basic human rights that should be fully protected in a region characterised by religious and political diversity, and calls on the countries that have not yet ratified the existing universal and regional conventions and agreements on political, civil and cultural freedoms, and on economic and social rights, which are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to do so without delay.
- 4.1.17 The media in the Euromed region play a key role in relaying and projecting the outcome of the transformations taking place. EU support needs to focus on initiatives to improve the professionalism and independence of existing media and foster the conditions in which media diversity and freedom can flourish.

5. Enhancing EU cooperation with civil society in the Mediterranean region

- 5.1 Following the Arab uprising, all European bodies caught unawares by the developments, and with no alternative immediate response strategies except to provide humanitarian assistance,

accepted that in future the EU must focus in particular on civil society organisations and other independent social and professional bodies.

- 5.2 The two communications of the Commission and the HR/VP already contain specific chapters on measures to support civil society through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean.

6. **Role of the Commission**

- 6.1 Help must be provided to the southern Mediterranean countries to set up and consolidate mechanisms that will promote the proper organisation and functioning of civil society and socio-economic organisations (legislation, fixing rules of operation, strengthening institutions, requiring open and inclusive democratic dialogue, etc.).
- 6.2 Cooperation with the Member States is crucial, and it is necessary to redefine the role and mission of the Union for the Mediterranean³ and organise active participation of recognised civil society organisations in its programmes.

7. **Specific role of the EESC**

- 7.1 As the body representing European civil society, the EESC can take an active part in the new European framework for cooperation with Mediterranean societies by taking the following measures:
- documenting the situation of civil society in the countries of the southern Mediterranean through an open, democratic and regular dialogue with a broad spectrum of players;
 - assisting in the definition of specific criteria and processes for accepting an organisation as truly representative of a sector of society that operates democratically and independently while cooperating with other bodies;
 - supporting the capacity-building efforts of independent and representative civil society through its expertise in fields such as social dialogue, economic and social rights, vocational training, good governance, equality in the labour market, sustainable development, social cohesion, consumer protection cooperatives, SMEs, advocacy capacity, migration, rural development and women's rights;
 - helping local economic and social councils by providing expertise on participatory democracy;
 - taking part in Commission programmes to strengthen socio-economic organisations.
- 7.2 The EESC believes that social dialogue between employers and workers in the Mediterranean region should be stepped up and that its Employers Group and Workers Group could

³ See Committee of the Regions resolution on *Dealing with the impact and consequences of revolutions in the Mediterranean* of 12 May 2011 (OJ C 192, 1.7.2011, pp. 1–3).

contribute to the achievement of this objective by setting up a communications network with relevant stakeholders. In addition, the EESC calls for structured social dialogue to be promoted through a Social Forum.

- 7.3 The EESC believes it is essential to work together with the EU institutions in supporting emerging civil society organisations in the southern Mediterranean countries, especially those directly involved in the uprisings at the origin of the revolutions, so that they get the political recognition and the financial support that they need in order to continue playing their role in the democratic processes.
- 7.4 The EESC has already initiated a series of missions to countries in the southern Mediterranean (Tunisia and Morocco) and is preparing to hold a symposium with Euromed NGOs (in September 2011), as well as its annual summit with broad civil society participation (November 2011 in Istanbul). It has formulated recommendations in its opinions and resolutions on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation⁴ and in its final declaration at the Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions held in Rome in 2010. That declaration contained a number of recommendations on subjects of topical interest to Euromed civil society, such as setting up an assembly of economic and social councils and similar institutions within the UfM structure. The other issues on the agenda were decent work and sustainable development in the Mediterranean region, professional training to drive competitiveness and job creation, establishing a more equitable society in the Euromed region and agricultural policy in the UfM countries.. The EESC also works closely with the national economic and social councils of the EU Member States in the Mediterranean region.
- 7.5 The EESC will readjust its network of Euromed ESCs and similar institutions and will also continue to promote regional cooperation through this network, which can act as a forum for exchanges between civil society partners in the North and the South.

Brussels, 21 September 2011

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson

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See EESC resolution on *The situation in the southern Mediterranean countries* (CESE 508/2011; OJ C 132, 3.5.2011 pp. 1-2); opinion on the *European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR)* (CESE 53/2009; OJ C 182, 4.8.2009 pp. 13-18); and opinion on *Freedom of association in the Euromed partner countries* (CESE 772/2008; OJ C 211, 19.8.2008 pp. 77-81).