

Strategies Sectors | **Culture & Society**

# Civil Society in the Mediterranean: An Indispensable Actor between the North and South Shores

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It was the end of one world and the beginning of another. The 1990s, symbolically, opened with the fall of the Iron Curtain, inaugurating the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world. The reunification of the European continent was on the horizon, as was peace in the Middle East. Another world seemed possible, even in the Mediterranean Basin. Indeed, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, Barcelona 1995) aimed to create a framework of new relations between European and South Shore countries, under the sign of peace, shared prosperity and fostering the decisive role of civil society organizations (CSOs) to lend this new policy substance. An unprecedented mobilization of civil society was encouraged, supported and funded. New ties were created between European and Arab civil society, in particular through the Euromed Civil Forums, regular meetings scheduled around EMP ministerial conferences. Numerous networks, platforms and groups were formed covering the entire spectrum of fields: conflict prevention, development, environment, culture, education, youth, women, human rights and many other topics. At the heart of this mobilization of energies were two main goals: first of all, the desire to influence and, if necessary, correct the policy priorities of the EU and its partners, already dominated by free trade and security concerns; secondly, the solidarity of European democratic movements with their counterparts to the south who suffered repression and persecution, with the aim of boosting the forces of democratic change. Naturally, within European civil society, there were rifts between the sectors more active on

the highly "political" issues of civil rights and human rights, and less politicized groups that did not hesitate to co-operate with authoritarian governments. In retrospect, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was considered an extremely fertile period for Europe and the Mediterranean, and a political framework fostering the emergence of sustainable forms of co-operation, mentoring and exchange between civil society on both North and South shores of the Mediterranean.

After 2003, the question emerged of guaranteeing the independence of Euromed Civil Forum processes, including with relation to the European Commission and the governments in the area. In 2005 in Luxembourg, a Euromed Non-Governmental Platform (ENGP) was created to provide a space for the majority of civil networks active in numerous domains, becoming the preferred intermediary of national and EU institutions as well as the organizer of the Euromed Civil Forums. The aim was to establish permanent mechanisms of dialogue between civil society and institutions in (particularly European) public policy decision-making processes.

The main lesson to be learned from this innovative period is that the new general political framework – the EMP – played a positive role in the emergence and structuring of social and civil forces in societies in the Mediterranean macro-region. The political support the Platform enjoyed effectively boosted the voice of civil society and contributed to building strong ties and joint work habits between the two shores. Naturally, a non-negligible, more radical part of the social movements of countries in the area kept itself on the margins of this process, preferring to use bargaining power rather than dialogue in their relations with public institutions.

By 2005, the conclusion was unanimous: the EMP had run out of steam. In an attempt to relaunch the

process, the Union for the Mediterranean was founded in 2008, which *de facto* left no room for civil society and to boot, marginalized the European Union, which lost its leadership. At the same time, the economic, financial and political crises in Europe contributed to drying up the sources of public funding allocated to Euro-Mediterranean civil society. The end of the Barcelona Process had a critical effect on the dynamics involving Euro-Mediterranean civil society, with repercussions on the main non-governmental organizations and civil platforms, which have since been struggling to function without a political liaison framework or sufficient resources.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 reshuffled the cards. The movements spontaneously arising in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Libya all had a strong presence of young activists from the world of associations and NGOs, the latter playing an essential role, especially in the constitutional stage following the uprisings in some cases.

In certain countries, the uprisings had a direct positive influence on individual and collective liberties (freedoms of association, assembly and expression, for instance), creating an environment much more conducive to deploying the work of NGOs and trade unions. But nearly everywhere, these achievements were accompanied by constant attempts by governments to roll back the clock (as in Egypt as of 2013). In this new, changing context, we are witnessing an effervescence of expressions of civil society in all its forms: in addition to classic associations, there are new forms of engagement, namely informal, unconventional forms via internet; moreover, where laws have been modified, thousands of associations, parties and trade unions are emerging. The new forms of citizen association bear witness to an explosion of social and workplace demands.

Nonetheless, a renewed focus on the national agenda and on pressing national social and political concerns are making the reference to the Mediterranean disappear from discourse and from people's spirits. The "Euromed" is progressively giving way to the "Euro-Arab." This change of focus, still ongoing today, has led to a geographic narrowing of the neighbourhood on the Europe-Arab world axis.

More deeply, it is the attitude towards Europe that is changing: its policies are increasingly deemed supportive of the reviled former regimes. The new sense of restored dignity leads to the belief that the EU

should respect the priorities expressed by the countries themselves and not impose its agenda through bilateral relations.

The Arab revolutions have undoubtedly had repercussions on civil society organizations in both North and South. In Europe, new associations have appeared as a result of renewed interest in South shore countries, and the emergence of these new actors, including in Arab countries, challenges "historic" organizations to open themselves to change. Insofar as Arab civil networks, they face political differences associated with the latest developments: How to politically interpret the fall of President Morsi in Egypt – was it a military coup or a popular movement? Was it the beginning of a counter-revolution, or the continuation of the revolution that began on 25 January? Another point of controversy, still very topical, was already being discussed in 2012, relating to positions on the Syrian revolution: Can Bashar Al-Assad be considered a repressive dictator or should he be considered a champion of anti-imperialism and defender of the Palestinian cause? These political debates, though not entirely new, carry the mark of the highly complex Near East context dividing the CSOs in the region.

For European institutions, the Arab revolutions initiated a phase of redefinition of political priorities that would lead to a revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (in 2015) with a renewed focus on the role of civil actors. In this framework, 'Structured Dialogue' (SD) was launched in 2014, on the initiative of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission, by Enlargement and Neighbourhood Commissioner Štefan Füle. The SD, a space for exchange, discussion and dialogue between the EU and the southern neighbourhood CSOs, was punctuated by regular meetings (Forums in Brussels from 2014 to 2017) and focused on three priority topics: mobility (migration, refugees, freedom of movement), inequality (poverty and exclusion, economic and social issues, employment) and the constriction of civil society's space (rights and freedoms of association, civil dialogue on the national level, access to economic, social and cultural rights).

Note that the most significant organizations in the area greeted this new channel for dialogue with interest, at least the sector of civil society that considers the work of advocacy before the government a priority. European civil society, for its part, had to

demand its presence in the process, which at first only envisaged a bilateral, European Commission – south shore civil society setup.

After three years of meetings, the process is supposed to lead to the creation of a “regional hub for structured dialogue” during the course of 2017, a sort of civil society hub aiming to “promote citizen engagement and political participation of young women and men, empowering them to assume a central and visible role in addressing common social challenges in partnership with peers to the South and North of the Mediterranean.”<sup>1</sup>

## The new forms of citizen association bear witness to an explosion of social and workplace demands.

This dynamic, at first inspired by a real will to be open to ideas of “Southern neighbourhood country” societies, nevertheless showed its limits, considering the power relations between CSOs, weakened by the return of authoritarianism, and European institutions determined to call the shots. The initial European will was to create a space for political dialogue that, in time, would involve not only the EU and civil society, but also national authorities of southern countries. But progressively, these ambitions were watered down. In addition, “top-down” method of operation characterized the test phase of the “Structured Dialogue” over the course of 2014-2016, with an insufficient degree of transparency and co-decision on important choices (organizations involved, agenda, schedule).

This is regrettable, considering the quality of the stakeholders, particularly the highly professionalized, independent Euro-Mediterranean civil society, both in the South and the North, which is capable of producing qualified proposals, alternative analyses and a critical discourse on the ensemble of challenges crucial to the future of the countries in the region.

As a last remark, one could likewise question the absence of connection between the Structured Dialogue process and the organizations or movements involved, on the innovative topic of “climate justice /

social justice,” another recent dynamic emerging in the wake of the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement.

And finally, this panorama would be incomplete without mentioning the extremely difficult situation the NGOs, association leaders and human rights defenders are experiencing today. Indeed, in this area as everywhere, we are witnessing a phenomenon that has been intensifying for several years: the massive, unprecedented decrease in space for civil society. These difficulties take different forms and are often compound, first arising from the promulgation of new laws limiting freedoms of association, assembly and protest, as well as the freedom of expression. These violations of freedoms are accompanied by very severe restrictions on the funding of CSOs by foreign sources, as well as administrative harassment driven by increasingly complex new procedures and ranging from closing down association headquarters to blocking websites and freezing bank accounts. And finally, new measures required of banks, supposedly for security reason or as part of the struggle against money laundering, have now made obtaining vital subsidies impossible. These practices affect both NGOs and social movements, but they hit individual activists the hardest: harassment, prohibition of personal movement, freezing of personal assets and all sorts of intimidation, and even arbitrary arrest, disappearance and murder.

This attack against the freedom of action of civil society – unprecedented in scale – often finds a pretext in the struggle against terrorism. More globally, it is associated with the regression of democracy accompanying the rise of populisms and a tendency towards national retrenchment experienced by many countries, some of them even in the heart of Europe. The alarm was loudly sounded by Civicus in its 2014 annual report: nearly 70 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, six people out of seven live in a country where freedoms are severely endangered.

Euro-Mediterranean countries are facing a major democratic challenge. Civil society is a stakeholder and a key actor, and is also counting on European support in order to take up this challenge.

<sup>1</sup> Guidelines for Grant Applicants, Call for Proposals: Budget Line(s) BGUE-B2016-22.040101-C1-NEAR Reference: 155559 (page 5).