



## North-South Centre of the Council of Europe

### REPORT

## Civil society actors in democratic transformations: Sharing the experience of Central and Eastern European NGOs

*Organised by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe  
in co-operation with the Italian National Youth Forum (FNG)*

**1<sup>st</sup> Mediterranean University on Youth and Global Citizenship (1 -8 July 2013)**

**3 July 2013, Hammamet, Tunisia**

#### 1. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

This first edition of the Mediterranean University on Youth and Global Citizenship was held at the International Cultural Centre in Hammamet, Tunisia, on the topic “**Democratic Citizenship**”.

The University was organised by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe in co-operation with the National Youth Observatory of Tunisia and in partnership with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, the EU-CoE youth partnership, the Italian National Youth Forum (*Forum Nazionale dei Giovani*) and other youth organisations.

The Exchange “Civil society actors in democratic transformations: Sharing the experience of Central and Eastern European NGOs” was organised by the North-South Centre in cooperation with the Italian National Youth Forum (FNG). It was followed by the 2nd Euro-Arab and Mediterranean Youth Leaders Meeting: Networking and Partnership Development, organised by the FNG, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and the Catalan National Youth Council (CNJC).

Apart from the Exchange, the North South Centre of the Council of Europe held the Round table “New Media and Youth Participation” (2 July), an awareness raising session on Istanbul Convention (3 July) and the 4<sup>th</sup> Training Course for Youth Leaders of the African Diaspora Living in Europe (1-7 July, organised in the framework of the JMA<sup>1</sup>). The exchange “Civil society actors in democratic transformations: Sharing the experience of Central and Eastern European NGOs”, the Round table “New Media and Youth Participation” and the awareness raising session on Istanbul Convention were introduced in the framework of the University by the CoE Committee of Ministers’ decision on the future of the North-South Centre (adopted on 29 May 2013).

Experts from Serbia, Slovenia, Poland, Ukraine, France, Switzerland, United Kingdom (see list enclosed) as well as experts from Belgium, France, “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”,

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<sup>1</sup> JMA – Joint Management Agreement, signed by the NSC and the European Commission in November 2008 and renewed until 2015, covers the Global Education and Youth Cooperation. It aims at contributing to the “culture of democratic citizenship” and at building a global citizenship based on human rights and citizens’ responsibilities. An extension of this programme to neighbouring regions could be considered as from 2014.

Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and the participants of the 2nd Euro-Arab and Mediterranean Youth Leaders Meeting: Networking and Partnership Development (30 persons) participated in the event.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The meeting contributed to strengthening the capacities of the civil society and in particular the youth organisations in democratic processes in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean in light of Council of Europe standards and best practices. It contributed to fostering transregional partnerships between youth and civil society organisations of South/Eastern Mediterranean and Europe, in particular Central/Eastern Europe.

During this workshop the representatives of various dimensions of “quadrilogue” and the participants of the 2nd Euro-Arab and Mediterranean Youth Leaders Meeting identified challenges and opportunities encountered by the civil society both in Europe and in South and Eastern Mediterranean region and formulated recommendations for improvement.

## 3. DISCUSSION AND OUTCOMES

The meeting was moderated by Jean-Marie Heydt, Chair a.i. of the NSC and President of INGO Conference of the Council of Europe in cooperation with other three facilitators - Víctor Albert Blanco, Ricardo Gulletta from CNJC and Gian Piero Carlo Milani from FNG.

The panellists included Robert Kozma (*Grupa 484*, Serbia), Jasmina Vidmar (*Association of Municipalities and Towns of Slovenia*, Slovenia), Igor Kogut (*Agency of Legislative Initiatives*, Ukrainian School of Political Studies, Ukraine), Kinga Brudzińska (*Polish Institute of International Affairs*, Poland), Israel Mensah (INGO Conference, France / Benin), Gérard Greneron (*European Council of Police Trade Unions*, INGO Conference, France), Marie-Madeleine Mialot Muller (*Vice-President of the Regional Council Centre*, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, France) and Ali Ba-Amer (*International Organisation for LDCs*, UK).

The exchange was conducted in an interactive manner, with an active involvement of youth representatives. It started with presentation by panelists of their experiences. Then the panelists and the young participants were divided in three working groups. The results of the working groups were presented at the final plenary.

Bellow follows the summary of discussions and outcomes.

Huge changes have been observed in recent years and decades in Central and Eastern Europe and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. There is no unique model but a variety of transitions, each with its own specificities, risks, challenges and opportunities. Still there are some common features. In overall, the civil society organisations affirmed themselves as credible actors of democratic transformations. Keeping the link with grass root level is key for the success of reforms undertaken by decision-makers. The civil society groups bring invaluable contribution to societies and democracy. In France the civil society sector reportedly provides 10 million jobs.

As the experience has proved it, the civil society requires structuring in order to effectively move forward its agenda. Several interesting examples of independent, plural, inclusive platforms of NGOs have been mentioned. The exchange of best practices nationally and internationally is particularly important to strengthen the civil society.

There is a need of an adequate regulation of the freedom of association, including the right to form and to join trade unions (Protected by Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights). The practical experience acquired by NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe appears particularly interesting. The civil society groups learned from doing and learned in doing, they learned from difficulties and obstacles encountered. It was a learning of “how to live together, think together, act together”<sup>2</sup>, very essential for democratic societal cohesion, intercultural dialogue and peace. Among

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<sup>2</sup> I. Mensah (CoE INGO Conference, France / Benin)

the difficulties mentioned were the lack of trust and understanding within the civil society and between the civil society and the authorities.

In recent years, we witnessed various types of mobilisations, both in the South and in the North, many without tangible results for systemic changes so far. One of the lessons learned is that there is a need to go beyond mass mobilisations and expression of anger. There is a need to sustain systemic changes and have an impact on public policies. In this respect, the experience of the Council of Europe, its standards, mechanisms and best practices were underlined with particular interest.

The panellists pointed to several interesting initiatives aimed at strengthening the civil society nationally and internationally, including the role of schools of political studies, youth exchanges of good practices, active involvement of recognised leaders and reformers, communication and cooperation involving ministries of foreign affairs, national NGO conferences, international NGO exchanges (*ex. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*)...

It was pointed out that consulting the civil society is not enough, it is necessary to secure real participation in decision-making processes at national and local levels. The civil society organisations need to learn how to work with the government, parliament and local authorities on a number of important public issues (constitutional drafting / reform, migration, knowledge of the other, social cohesion, fighting intolerance and hate speech, transitional justice, education, especially civic education, police reform, environment, health, sports...). Involving the civil society, and especially youth, help to open up the system and promote transparency. It is an essential element of "participatory democracy". Genuine social actors, more than lobbyists, can usefully contribute to reform processes.

The working groups pointed to the following challenges in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean:

- Balance between public security and rights (for governments);
- Reluctance to work with youth organisations, paternalist approach towards youth and civil society (for authorities in general);
- Differences in priorities between authorities and civil society / youth organisations;
- Insufficient civic and citizenship education (formal and non formal) and tools for institutional participation in public life, insufficient Global Education;
- Massive youth unemployment;
- Lack of funding for civil society / youth projects;
- Lack of inclusive consultation mechanisms;

The participants pointed to the following opportunities in the South Mediterranean:

- Chance to start from scratch and involve the civil society and youth in the design of reforms, which could ensure their better implementation;
- The civil society and youth are an important asset; both the authorities and the civil society can benefit from a "win-win" approach and capitalise on it;
- The civil society and youth are willing to create tools for inclusive policies;

The participants underlined the need of more efforts for capacity-building for NGOs, and in particular youth organisations. They also warned about the risks of political affiliation for NGOs.

Consulting of civil society and especially of youth organisations is important for local authorities, parliaments and central government bodies.

Based on the presented experiences, it was underlined that the local authorities are more visible and easy to approach compared to central/ national authorities. The constant dialogue with parliament and government is also essential. The civil society groups need to learn how to be more pro-active.

Participation in consultative mechanisms is not the mere presence. The civil society groups were encouraged to fight for more than participation and consultation – to aim inclusive mechanisms of co-management and decision-making. In many cases, like social and economic committees, the key issue is nomination/composition.

The appropriate consultation mechanisms should be proposed in each specific case. Working together can help to constitute “pools of expertise” on a variety of issues.

The moderator pointed to a practical tool - Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, adopted by the Conference of INGOs in 2009. He underlined that the document was available in 20 languages, including Arabic:

[http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/code\\_good\\_prac\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/code_good_prac_en.asp)

[http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Source/Code\\_Arabic\\_final.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Source/Code_Arabic_final.pdf)

The moderator said that the Code proved to be a very useful tool for civil society organisation and encouraged its wide use.

Finally the participants very positively assessed the event, its interactive nature, practical approach and outputs.

Recommendations:

- To promote structuring of the civil society and its effective participation as an actor of governance at national and local levels, in particular in designing, monitoring and ensuring the transparency of public policies;
- To support the exchange of good practices and the wide use of the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process;
- To ensure an adequate legal regulation of the freedom of association and its effective application in light of relevant international standards and best practices;
- To support capacity building for the civil society and in particular the youth organisations;
- To establish mechanisms for consulting the civil society; to encourage an inclusive co-management of public policies at national and local levels, with the civil society.

#### 4. LIST OF EXPERTS

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