

25th Award Ceremony of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe

Remarks by the Secretary General, Council of Europe

President of the Portuguese Republic,

President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal,

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Distinguished Parliamentarians of the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic,

Distinguished laureates of the North-South Prize,

Chair of the Executive Committee of the North-South Centre,

Executive Director of the North-South Centre,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to congratulate Nabila Hamza and Leoluca Orlando on winning this year's North-South Prize.

Both of these distinguished individuals have demonstrated their deep commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law:

The values that underpin the Council of Europe and indeed this award.

Ms Hamza, you were selected by the jury in recognition of your strong leadership in advancing the reform of Tunisian family law.

As Executive Director of the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, you have played a pioneering role in raising awareness of women's issues and rights, in addressing misconceptions, and advancing gender equality.

More than that, you have advocated for a stronger civil society and for the full participation of women in public life – and you have led by example.

As one of the first women elected to a local council in Tunisia, you are demonstrating to women throughout your country, and beyond, that for a democracy to be complete, it needs women to be among those who take decisions in public life.

Mr Orlando, your award has been given in recognition of your work to support the integration of migrants and reinforce human rights and the rule of law at local level.

In particular, I know that the jury had in mind the “Palermo Charter” that you created in 2015 in defence of international mobility:

And the “Council of Cultures” advisory body that you established as a means for migrants to elect representatives that give voice to their concerns, needs and views.

These are important, ground-breaking initiatives.

But here too there is more to say.

As city mayor during the Palermo Spring, you denounced mafia practices.

You pushed for dialogue and civic renewal in what become known as the Palermo Renaissance.

And in working for fairness, social justice and good governance - and against corruption and social and economic damage that always accompanies it - you have fought for what is right, sometimes at personal risk.

The decision on this year’s winners was in fact taken back in 2019.

Since then, Europe and the wider world have confronted the terrible reality of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But I think it is right to acknowledge that the response by this year’s winners only affirms the good judgment in presenting them with the North-South prize.

In Ms Hamza’s town, La Marsa, she has supported a coherent response to the crisis and the definition of a social and health plan that has paid specific attention to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

And Mr Orlando has also championed the needs of those people, spoken out about the danger of mafia resurgence and called for international solidarity and a “Marshall Plan for Europe”.

The struggle for human rights, democracy and the rule of law is never “won”.

It is an unending battle, fought over and over, in the face of changing and, often daunting, circumstances.

We see that today, and we are fortunate to have Nabila Hamza and Leoluca Orlando with us, steadfast in the fight.

In winning this prize, they join a list of 50 remarkable laureates chosen from both hemispheres over the course of 25 years.

They comprise a rich and diverse array of experience and talent.

But they share a common outlook and uncommon abilities and achievements.

We owe them a great deal for what they have contributed.

Just as we owe our profound thanks to the Portuguese authorities for their rich and long-standing support for both the North-South Prize and the work of the Council of Europe's North-South Centre.

In the interests of us all, may the bridges it builds be ever stronger.

Again, my congratulations to the prize winners.