

Mediterranean Partner Countries' Civil Society Conference Vilnius, Lithuania, 4-5 December

Conference Conclusions and Recommendations

We, the representatives of civil society from OSCE participating States and the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation met in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 4-5 December 2011 to share experiences and lessons learned from civil society engagement in democratic transition, and to develop our vision of future partnership and co-operation.

We believe that transparency, accountability and integrity are important cornerstones of democracy. We stress the importance of advocacy efforts and the establishment of international, regional and domestic networks of civil society groups of OSCE participating States and the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, for mutual solidarity and support, and to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

Noting the changes that have taken place in many Mediterranean states recently, we observe with concern that consolidation of democracy in both our regions remains far from assured, and that civil society groups in particular will need to maintain a leading role in ensuring that transition processes move forward towards greater participation, equality, justice, rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We offer the following recommendations from our deliberations to the OSCE participating States and the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation for consideration. We:

1. Call on the Chairman-in-Office to make the following recommendations public, to distribute and to promote them to OSCE participating States and OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation.
2. Call on OSCE participating States to provide for greater involvement with the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation. This should include a range of support programmes, such as providing expertise, trainings, and other activities aimed at increasing the capacity of civil society organizations, including those observing elections, and working on issues of gender equality, youth and minorities.
3. Encourage OSCE participating States and OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation to promote gender equality, women's rights and the rights of all minorities and young people, including religious, linguistic and cultural minorities, to participate at all levels of society.
4. Recognise that non-partisan election observation is an expression of the right of freedom of association and is central to transparency and democracy. More efforts should be taken to harmonize all aspects of the electoral process with international commitments and standards for democratic elections. We thus call on our governments to respect their obligations and commitments under international human rights law.

5. Acknowledge that other challenges to electoral processes in both regions include pressure on the electorate to vote in a specific manner; the use of state administrative resources by incumbents; election administrations whose composition is not sufficiently inclusive to ensure confidence; the perpetuation of a culture of impunity by failing to hold individuals accountable for election-law violations; media bias, the lack of sufficient will to rectify identified shortcomings, and an uneven playing field for contestants.
6. Support the establishment of sustainable dialogue linking grassroots women's organizations and political actors, focusing on continuous civic education for both women and men, as citizens, voters and political actors.
7. Support civil society actors to assume a more active role in guiding civil society action and to create mechanisms for empowerment of oppressed and disadvantaged groups, including minorities in OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation.
8. Recommend that OSCE participating States foster open and secure access to the Internet, seek technological solutions for countering Internet censorship, and support the use of social and online media to advocate for political and gender equality reform.
9. Recommend that OSCE participating States support youth programmes addressing social and political issues, including the establishment of youth fora, such as youth parliaments, international exchange programs, and leadership and capacity-building training, to allow youth to exchange ideas, co-operate and learn from each other to channel their needs into concrete policies and actions.
10. Encourage OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation to create a conducive and secure environment for political interaction for civil society organizations to work effectively on promoting and protecting human rights.
11. Encourage OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation to base legal reforms on a participatory, inclusive and transparent approach and to base legislative frameworks on respect for minority rights including religious and cultural rights, non discrimination, women's rights and gender equality.
12. Call on ODIHR to support the process of constitutional and legal reform and create a platform to promote an independent judiciary through the translation and dissemination of existing documents, recommendations and related training events and to encourage the integration of professional legal communities including existing associations of lawyers.
13. Call on ODIHR to support capacity building activities and the creation of networks, as well as help promote international human rights standards, e.g. by organizing discussions and training within state institutions and civil society.