



Remarks of President Petros Efthymiou
Mediterranean Forum
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As prepared for delivery

Dear colleagues and representatives from the Mediterranean partner states,

It is a pleasure again to see the delegations from Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. We salute you for your active participation in this forum and our Assembly at large. Our body is a stronger one because of your involvement.

We hold this event each fall, and this year, I know the current state of democracy and stability in this region is on all of our minds, but for a moment let us leave the present.

Think about where you were when you were 26.

At 26 most people may still be in their first job; perhaps they are considering raising a family or buying a home.

When I was 26 I was teaching Greek to secondary students, working as a journalist, and trying to develop a political movement in my country.

When Mohamed Bouazizi was 26, he was selling produce as a street vendor in Tunisia.

Most his life was still ahead of him, but he had lost hope.

How can one have hope for change when since he was three years old his country had been ruled by one man?

How can one hope for a fair and just future, when since he was a teen he had known nothing but government harassment for just trying to make a living selling fruits and vegetables.

So he lost hope.

And when he set his body afire it sparked a transformation in millions of people across the Mediterranean region who also had tired of tyrants and dreamed of democracy.

This meeting is about creating an area of freedom, security and justice in the Mediterranean, which is all Mohamed Bouazizi had wanted. Which is all any of us want. The freedom to sell our goods. The security to know we won't be harassed for a bribe. And justice that in the end says we live under the rule of law, not rulers.

In the end, we all want what the OSCE was created to protect. But too often, organizations like ours feel we need to wait to act. Wait for the invitation. Wait until they call for help. Sometimes there is the presumption that people in the Arab world do not want our help, and our Assembly has rightly voted that the OSCE should only assist when we are asked to do so.

But if we always wait for the call for help, then we assume transitional leaders know about us and what we can offer.

Most of the people who took to the streets in Tunis and Cairo and Benghazi in the past nine months have never heard of the OSCE. We know their story. We must tell them our's.

After all, with Tunisia and Egypt already scheduling elections, and protestors aiming to turn their passion into functioning political parties, who better than us, elected parliamentarians, to meet with them and support a precedent-setting fair electoral process?

We are a tool in the work-shed for democracy which we all have been called upon to build.

We are still hammering away at creating a Europe, whole and free. We are not there yet, but we remain committed to that goal for as long as it takes to ensure basic rights are enjoyed by all citizens, not just from Vancouver to Vladivostok, but from Tromso to Tunis – the Arctic to Africa.

I'm pleased to see more North-South Mediterranean co-operation occurring today, not just in forums like these, but in the field. Twice in the past month Vice President Migliori of Italy has been in Tunisia to visit with election officials, civil society and media to support the democratic growth there and prepare for our upcoming election observation mission.

The strong interest from our Members to observe this historic vote is a tangible sign of our willingness to partner with new leaders in the region toward our common goals.

On freedom of expression, that means embracing new, online technologies and turning away from a past of internet repression.

On security, that means continuing bilateral dialogue. With a region influx it is critical that diplomats maintain their communication.

OSCE security work in the southern Mediterranean should be based on international co-operation aimed at eliminating the social and economic causes of instability; reinforcing democratisation; and restoring an inter-cultural dialogue.

It is widely recognised that huge disparities of wealth and environmental resources between the countries on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean can destabilise the region. Poverty breeds resentment and alienation, fuelling support for radical movements.

The Mediterranean region is a special place with its own unique dynamics and security challenges. Therefore, the OSCE model of co-operative security can be proposed to, but not imposed upon the region.

I look forward to our discussion today about how we can promote this co-operation and be a partner for progress in a region about which we all care so much.