



ADDRESS BY HE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS DR ERATO KOZAKOU-MARCOULLIS
AT THE INTERPARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE FOR THE COMMON FOREIGN AND
SECURITY POLICY AND THE COMMON SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY
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“THE EU AND THE ARAB SPRING”

Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Middle East-North Africa region is an area of cycling crises which take one form or another over time. A number of earthshaking events have taken place during these last two years which, even though they may have had similar intentions, they evolved, expressed and materialized in different forms: In Egypt we witnessed demonstrations toppling the Mubarak regime; in Tunisia we saw demonstrations and comparatively minimal violence doing away with the regime, while in Libya we saw an outright civil war during which the leaders of the regime personally led their forces against their people, and lastly in Yemen we witnessed a politico-tribal conflict involving outside forces which in the end may very well prove to have been no more than a power struggle rather than an effort for democratic change.

Lastly Syria, from a case of a violent suppression of demonstrations and abhorrent massacres of civilians, we are fast moving into a state of an all-open civil war with the potential threat of having a huge spill over to neighbouring countries.

People's intentions were common in all cases; to topple their authoritarian regimes and introduce an era of freedom, democracy and equal opportunities for all.

Cyprus, due to its geographical position in the South Eastern Mediterranean area is highly concerned by the events in the region. The Arab world is our neighbor, and everything that happens there has direct consequences for us. There is no other choice for us other than to work towards the stability, peace, security and economic development of these key partners.

Cyprus is confident about the changes in the Arab world, because we believe that democracy, if given the chance, cannot but prevail. While we are confident, we are worried at the same time, because we are aware of the great challenges that lay ahead. The immediate situation brings hopes but also raises concern, including the rise of radical forces. Many democrats fear that their revolution will be hijacked. We do believe, against some common prophecies of a fatal clash of civilizations, that Islam is compatible with democratic aspirations.

We hope that those elected into power will make constructive compromises in their policies and administration, will prove capable of making the transition from opposition to ruling party, will respect the context in which they were elected, will make a success of their countries' economic and social development, will help reduce extremism and will work towards healing the wounds of the past.

It is significant therefore that we follow four major principles: (1) rejection of the use of violence against the people, (2) defense of fundamental rights, (3) respect for the multiparty system and the rights of minorities, and (4) support for fundamental reforms to meet the people's economic and social needs.

In these historical times of tectonic changes, a pressing need arises on the role of the EU. A role that should be characterized by a consistent proactive behaviour, being one step ahead of developments rather than one of an ad hoc, post-event, reaction. While thinking, as we must, of the day after, we have to also develop our vision, and share it with the countries concerned, as to how the region should look like in 10-15 years time.

We therefore have to develop a twofold approach: A short term and a long term one. In the short term we should concentrate on managing the situation on the ground, setting tangible objectives and offering concrete support in aiding the affected societies addressing their pressing needs that may be of a humanitarian, economic, security or electoral nature.

In the long run, a strategic objective has to be pursued in order to solidify and to ensure the longevity of democratic change and to ensure an evolutionary process of no return. This could very well be translated into institution building reforms, active democratic participation of the masses, strengthening of civil society, the rule of law and more. The goal of this process would be to create the proper conditions, in time, so as to facilitate these societies in achieving a self-sustained inclusive and democratic system that will be able to efficiently face the challenges and test of time.

In this regard, our long-term objectives should also include building a major Euro-Mediterranean entity, as a significant asset for Europe and the Arab world in this globalized world of ours. We need the right tools to do this and the Union for the Mediterranean created in 2008 is one of them. Cyprus stands as a firm and loyal supporter of the Union for the Mediterranean and we hope to see even more tangible projects, regional cooperation and fruitful political dialogue. We should make the most of its new secretariat, which has proved its worth, and manage concrete co-operation projects. Also, in this framework we believe the "European Neighborhood Policy" implemented by the European Commission is a strategic tool for enhancing partnerships between EU MS and the Arab countries.

In this respect we are extremely satisfied that the preparations for holding, during Cyprus' EU Presidency, the 2nd EU-LAS Foreign Ministerial meeting, in Cairo, on 13-14 November 2012, as well as the consultations between EU PSC Ambassadors with LAS Permanent Representatives, in the end of this month, in Cairo, first of their kind, are proceeding smoothly.

We strongly believe that cooperation and dialogue between the EU and LAS on issues of common interest should be intensified, enhanced and institutionalized in a substantive way. Projects on Early warning and Crisis response, diplomatic training and training on electoral observation are going ahead and other priority areas for cooperation: human rights and civil society, women empowerment, energy cooperation, tourism, fisheries, as well as legal cooperation and culture, are also very promising for the future cooperation between the EU and LAS.

Distinguished participants,

Differentiation should be taken into account. No two countries are the same, so prioritization should be made. Programs, projects and initiatives have to be tailor-made and be focused on the country as well as on a more localized level. We will have to carefully choose where to place our foundation stone, according to where we see the priorities.

In our approach towards our neighbours in the Arab world, we should be careful to avoid being paternalistic – it is only through cooperation on the basis of a partnership among equals that we can help the region, and ultimately ourselves.

At the same time, we must insist on principles. Respect for human rights, women's rights, minority rights, religious freedoms, must be at the core of the transition of these countries to democracy.

Finally, we must focus on the people. We can promote educational and cultural exchanges, people to people contacts, development of civil society. Education is key in these countries in promoting the transformation process forward.

Democratic transition in the region is not easy, it cannot be put on "autopilot" and it is not a given fact. These societies have struggled under authoritarian regimes and repressive political systems for decades. This trans-generation status quo and perception of politics and governance is not easy to overcome. Historical and cultural particularities are also to be taken into account. As with any new or emerging democracy, a certain grace period should be granted.

Democracy in Europe has taken decades, even centuries to arrive at its present form, with numerous conflicts and wars. It is only to be expected that these countries will need a certain amount of time. I am confident though that this process can only lead to stability and peace in the long run. A previous top-down approach of politics has proved that it can create serious counterweight inside the societies, transforming them to boiling cauldrons ready to release burning steam and to nurseries of fundamentalism.

On the other hand, elections, parliamentary democracy and public consultation can incorporate part of these trends into the system of power, marginalize the extreme or radical voices, while at the same time function as a valve for steam release.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The “new Arab world” is here. Although the Arab Spring has made some spectacular changes, the future still looks fragile and uncertain. We must all work together to transform this Spring into a summer and not let it fade into a fall. Here in Cyprus and in the rest of Europe, this uncertainty has prompted mixed feelings in public opinion.

We have a duty towards the future and we have to write it together in friendship and partnership with the Arab peoples and to turn the Mediterranean into a flourishing area of cooperation and mutual benefit.

Thank you for your attention.