

# CHRONICLE

## Turmoil in the Arab World: OSCE Offers Assistance for Transition

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### **1. Turmoil in the Arab world: osce offers assistance**

The political unrest in the Arab world is spreading like wildfire. After the surprising

disappearances in disgrace of the long-time authoritarian leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan dictator Khadafi decided to combat the rebellion against his long-lasting dictatorship with brutal force against the civilian population. This resulted in a UN-sanctioned military intervention by NATO and Middle Eastern forces to protect the civilian population against brutalities by the forces which are still loyal to the dictator. Serious unrest is also erupting and spreading in various other Arab countries, like Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria and Morocco.

As a matter of fact, the OSCE is hardly involved in these developments which came as a surprise to almost everybody in the world, as until recently the Arab region seemed to be very stable under usually long-time authoritarian or sometimes even outright dictatorial leaders. Nevertheless, the revolutionary changes in the geopolitically important Northern African and Middle Eastern region will have still unpredictable political consequences and it should not be excluded that the OSCE with its democratization, post-conflict and rehabilitation experiences will be able to play an important role in some of these countries which are connected with the OSCE as its so-called 'Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation'. These Partners are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. For political reasons the more dictatorial regimes of Libya and Syria never joined the OSCE as a Partner nor did Lebanon. It goes without saying that the OSCE participating States are following the developments in the Mediterranean region with great interest, as they will have serious security consequences (civil war in Libya with a highly uncertain outcome, flows of refugees, lesser border control in the North African countries to stem the illegal immigration of African refugees etc.). At the same time the OSCE may also be a supporting partner in the transition process. At the end of March the Lithuanian Chairman-in-Office announced the OSCE's willingness to share its experiences and expertise in democratic reform processes with countries such as Morocco. It is also obvious that in Mediterranean Partners such as Tunisia and Egypt a substantial reform of the security sector will be necessary in order to build up more democratic structures. In this area the OSCE has also gained vast experience in areas such as the Balkans, the southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Besides, the OSCE's unique experience in the sphere of elections may be a useful help for the Mediterranean countries.

In a speech to the United Nations Security Council on 15 February 2011, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis, stressed the OSCE's readiness to share its experience with its Partners for Co-operation, including in the Mediterranean region. 'The participating States of the OSCE cannot and should not seek to guide the course of events in these countries – their citizens must write their own destinies. But to the extent our partners believe it would be useful, the OSCE stands ready to share its own experience in helping participating States to manage difficult democratic transition processes, to build strong democratic institutions and promote vibrant civil societies, and to prepare and conduct free and fair democratic elections', he said.

Only time will tell whether the OSCE will indeed have a role to play in the transitional processes in the Arab world, but it seems that the organization could play a certain role and should be prepared in case the new leadership in the various countries will request its support.

## **2. Lithuania new Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE**

After the overall successful chairmanship of the OSCE by the Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, the chairmanship was taken over by Lithuania as of the 1st of January 2011. This small Baltic country will be facing a daunting task in dealing with the many ongoing and often protracted disputes in the Eurasian area. Not only the various protracted 'frozen' conflicts continue to occupy the OSCE agenda, the instability in Kyrgyzstan and the Georgian-Russian conflict will undoubtedly require further attention as well. The growing concerns about

the deteriorating situation in the human dimension in various OSCE participating states have to be mentioned as well. Growing resistance against the OSCE's election observation activities in countries such as the Russian Federation is a clear example of the challenges facing the organization.

Lithuania will definitely not be able to solve the many problems, but it is expected to play an important role in providing political leadership to the consensus-based organization. Lithuania's leadership already started with a hot potato on its doorstep: the Belarusian government decided to close down the OSCE Office in Minsk after the presidential elections in mid-December with the simultaneous political turmoil in the country. It is clear that the Belarusian authorities are tired of the OSCE's criticism of their flawed election processes. Although Lithuania made efforts to keep the OSCE Office open, it did not achieve any results.

Not surprisingly the new chairmanship has indicated that the various protracted conflicts in the OSCE area remain one of its top priorities. It does not intend to 'solve' any of these conflicts, but to keep negotiation and mediation processes going in order to avoid the use of force. It will be interesting to see how this small Baltic country will be able to influence OSCE policies, although its EU membership may lead to a more coherent EU common foreign policy in OSCE matters. One may not expect any 'expensive' new initiatives from the Lithuanians though, as it has only a budget of around US\$ 3,5 million allocated for its chairmanship, just a fraction of what the Kazakh government had available. Most of the Lithuanian money may have to be spent on the organization of the Ministerial in Vilnius at the end of the year.

One of Lithuania's tasks, left over from the Astana Summit meeting in December, is to acquire consensus on an Action Plan which will aim at revitalizing the organization. The Kazakhs failed to get consensus on a text, due to Russian opposition resulting from Moscow's deep involvement in the protracted conflicts in the OSCE area, in particular in its relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia: two regions which are internationally considered as just break-away regions from Georgia, but which Moscow decided to recognize as 'independent' states after the brief Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. The Astana failure was already preceded by various other failures in getting consensus in the past few years and it would be a miracle if Vilnius would be able to achieve a success at its Ministerial at the end of this year.

### **3. Civil society lobbies for OSCE steps against Belarus**

The turmoil caused by the rigged presidential elections in Belarus in December last year continues to reverberate. The Belarusian decision to close down the OSCE Office in Minsk seems to be irreversible and the authorities continue their preparation to prosecute a number of their political opponents. International human rights organizations have made a public appeal to the OSCE to trigger the so-called Moscow Mechanism of the Human Dimension which implies the dispatch of a mission of rapporteurs to Belarus for which the support of only a limited number of OSCE participating States is required. More than 100 civil society organizations from 27 OSCE states have signed the statement. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, Freedom House and Article 19 are among the signatories. It remains to be seen whether this action will be successful, as the Moscow Mechanism has only been rarely applied in the past fifteen years. Moreover, a mission of rapporteurs would probably require entry visas to Belarus and it can be taken for granted that such visas will be denied. A similar situation occurred in 2003, when the mechanism was triggered against Turkmenistan with the support of a ten OSCE States. Nevertheless, it is one of the few steps the OSCE could undertake against the increasingly repressive Belarusian regime, as the Moscow Mechanism is one of the rare occasions within the OSCE where consensus is not required. Even if the effort would be successful, the outcome would be a factual report on the events in Belarus and recommendations for improvements which


could serve as a basis for dialogue. In any case, the Mechanism would de facto mainly play a role in blaming and shaming the regime in Minsk.

#### **4. Next chairmanships of the OSCE**

At the end of last year it was decided that Ukraine will be the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE in the year 2013. It will be the second time that a former Soviet republic will chair the organization after Kazakhstan's chairmanship in the past year. It will be another chairmanship that a number of Western countries will anticipate with some concerns, since the current Yanukovich government in Kiev is clearly more pro-Russian than the preceding governments that ruled the country after the Orange Revolution in the winter of 2004-2005. Also concerns about its human rights and democracy record are growing.

The present Lithuanian chairmanship will be followed next year by Ireland which is plagued by a deep economic crisis which may also affect its effectiveness in leading the organization.





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