

THE MEDA DEMOCRACY PROGRAM

Recommendations by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU member states regarding the MEDA Democracy Programme

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The following recommendations are made by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU member states regarding the MEDA Democracy Programme (MDP).

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the European Parliament launched a particular budget line B-7050 for the *MEDA Democracy Programme*, an instrument intended to promote the rule of law, human rights and democracy and to strengthen civil society within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The MEDA Democracy Programme forms part of *The European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights* which was launched by the European Parliament in 1994 to bring a series of budget headings specifically dealing with the promotion of human rights together in a single chapter (B7-70).

In 1996, the MEDA Democracy Programme started granting subsidies to non-profit-making associations (NGOs), universities, research centres and public bodies to enable them to carry out their work.

Following the EU Commission's freezing of budget lines of an estimated 500 Million ECU - for which there was no legal basis - a regulation concerning the MEDA Democracy Programme came into force on 29 April 1999.¹

In early 2000, the administration of the MEDA Democracy Programme, hitherto under the responsibility of the DG1B, was moved to a new human rights unit under the External Relations Directorate.

As a regional civil society network devoted to the promotion and protection of human rights in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) has followed the development of the MEDA Democracy Programme since it was first established.

Thirty out of its fifty members are based in the South Mediterranean and are eligible for MDP grants. Approximately ten of these have benefited from MDP funding in the past; more have applied for MDP funding but without success. The EMHRN itself receives funds from the MEDA Democracy Programme, for which it is grateful.

Aware that the Commission is in a process of reforming grant management procedures under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, the EMHRN wishes to bring its experience of the MDP to the EU institutions in order to

¹ The Council Regulation of 29 April, 1999, laying down the requirements for the implementation of Community operations, other than those of development cooperation, [...] contributing to the developing and consolidating of democracy and the rule of law and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in third countries.

help strengthening the programme for the benefit of human rights and democracy in the region.

The EMHRN shares the concerns and recommendations of ten Brussels based NGOs regarding policy, financing and management of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, published on 29 November 1999 on the occasion of the EU Human Rights Discussion Forum.

It also shares the concerns voiced by participants at the Human Rights Discussion Forum on the occasion of the publication of the first annual report on human rights by the EU.²

The EMHRN is aware of ongoing discussions about whether human rights funding in the future should follow a thematic rather than a regional approach. It agrees that a thematic approach is of relevance. However, with the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership a new geo-political entity is in the making which requires upholding a clear perspective with a view to maintaining a focussed and committed *regional* approach to the promotion of human rights and democracy.

The EMHRN has therefore chosen to address issues relating to the MEDA Democracy Programme to help strengthen the implementation of this particular budget line for the benefit of the region.³

IN GENERAL

The EU institutions should consider a more balanced approach to the Barcelona Process by increasing funds available for civil society activities, independently of government interests, in the field of human rights and democracy under the MEDA Democracy Programme.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, launched at the Barcelona Conference in 1995, aims to create a zone of peace, prosperity and stability in the Mediterranean region with the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean zone of free trade by the year of 2010, and with increased cultural, social and human exchange, enhanced civil society participation in the development process and mutual respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law.

Thus, the Barcelona Process is founded on the assumption that economic development, political liberalisation, and the building of democratic institutions,

² Cf. Conference report: The EU Human Rights Discussion Forum, Brussels, 30 November - 1 December 1999.

³ The EMHRN has studied the evaluation report of the MEDA Democracy Programme with interest: Cf. Final Report. Evaluation of the MEDA Democracy Programme 1996-1998. Prepared by Nadim Karkutli and Dirk Bützler, Brussels, March 1999.

based on respect for human rights and a strong, independent civil society, goes hand in hand with creating peace, stability and prosperity.

The EU has allocated 4.685 million Euro for the period 1995-1999, supplemented by EIB assistance in the form of increased loans, to support financial and technical measures to accompany the reform of economic and social structures in the region.

Yet funds allocated to the MEDA Democracy Programme amount to no more than about *one percent* of the total funds allocated by the EU to support the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

As an instrument for the promotion of civil society activities in the field of human rights and democracy, the role of the MEDA Democracy Programme is crucial. It is an important part of the EU's Mediterranean policy and a key funding source for independent and non-partisan NGOs.

Annual reports and briefings of EMHRN members have amply documented how human rights conditions in the Euro-Mediterranean region regularly give cause for grave concern and are in some cases eroded by governments. Civil society in many countries is still weak, and human rights defenders often work under precarious conditions. Meanwhile an increase in government controlled 'non-governmental organisations' has been seen in recent years, organisations which often defend government policies rather than human rights and democratic principles.

The EMHRN therefore urges the EU institutions to seriously consider whether the actual funds allocated for independent human rights, democracy and civil society initiatives are in proper keeping with a coherent policy towards the region.⁴

POLICY

A coherent, comprehensive and transparent strategy for the implementation of the MEDA Democracy Programme should be developed in consultation with relevant civil society representatives.

On a national level, Permanent EU delegations in the partnership countries should be awarded a pro-active role in promoting human rights by organising regular round tables in each country. A large number of human rights and democracy NGOs should be invited to these round tables.

On a regional level, regular consultations should be developed by the EU Commission with relevant regional and international non-governmental organisations and networks.

The Barcelona Process is based on the recognition of the importance of mutual

⁴The general recommendation should not be interpreted in the sense that an up-grading of funds for the MDP takes place at the expense of other budget lines under the EIDHR.

dialogue, exchanges and partnership, as well as on the essential contribution civil society can make to the process of the development of the region. In Stuttgart, April 1999, the Partners confirmed the goals set out in the Barcelona Declaration, and stressed that non-governmental organisations should be more closely allied to the process.⁵

The EMHRN acknowledges the past efforts of the EU Commission to base its programmes on local initiatives in the region, as well as the relevance of many projects financed under the MEDA Democracy Programme. However, members of the EMHRN report that selection procedures today still appear to be unclear and based on a blurred agenda bearing no obvious relation to local realities.

The spirit of the Barcelona Declaration would be promoted, and the impact of the MEDA Democracy Programme greatly enhanced, through regular consultation with local and regional civil society representatives on the development of multi-annual country and regional programmes for the promotion of civil society, human rights and democracy, and through the subsequent making of such policies public.

PRIORITIES

The MEDA Democracy Programme should be aimed at supporting and facilitating the activities of independent representatives of South Mediterranean civil society. Government vetoes to the funding of projects that are eligible within the framework of the MEDA Democracy Programme should not be accepted.

Based on the list of projects that were funded in 1996, 1997 and 1998, a rough estimate of the funds allocated under the MEDA Democracy Programme shows that at least 33 percent of the funds were allocated to organisations based in Europe while 7 percent went to governmental projects.⁶

The MEDA Democracy Programme was established as an instrument to promote civil society, human rights and democracy in the South Mediterranean. That the major part of funds are allocated to South based non-governmental organisations should therefore be ensured.

In the case of Tunisia, government interference has stopped funding of projects that were eligible and approved within the framework of the MEDA Democracy Programme. The EU should make it clear within the framework of bilateral talks that such vetoes run counter to the commitments embedded in the Barcelona Declaration.

⁵Chairman's Formal Conclusions from the third Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Foreign Ministers in Stuttgart, 15-16 April 1999.

⁶ Approximately 14 percent were disbursed for activities based in Israel.

GRANT SIZE

The very raison d'être of the MEDA Democracy Programme should not be forgotten at the expense of administrative considerations.

The recent tendency for the MEDA Democracy Programme has been to give priority to large scale projects which are beyond the capacity of a large number of non-governmental organisations. Many of these carry out a huge task often on a voluntary basis and under strenuous conditions; even small-scale grants would significantly improve their working conditions.

Large scale projects favour North based NGOs. Large scale project funding lowers the total number of grants and does not promote the bottom-up development of civil societies. Project administration should be adapted to the needs of South Mediterranean civil society, and the necessary resources should be allocated in order to ensure that local needs are met.

MANAGEMENT

Clear information on the MEDA Democracy Programme guidelines and application procedures should be readily available, and funding should be allocated in a timely and transparent manner. Furthermore, the Commission should move its emphasis from 'audit to management'.

The feedback from EMHRN members confirms the conclusions of the MEDA Democracy evaluation report in saying that application, selection and reporting procedures are difficult to understand for many operators, and that substantial delays in preparing contracts and the disbursement of payments negatively affects the efficiency, effectiveness and overall impact of projects, as well as the credibility of the EU as a reliable donor.

While letters and projects sent to the Commission have in several cases remained unanswered (or have disappeared), the demands of the Commission for receipts for even the smallest items of expenditure are heavier than those of other major funders, which often contributes to delays in releasing the payments.

To remedy this situation, clear information on the programmes, guide-lines and application procedures should be readily available in Brussels and at the level of the

EU Delegations.⁷ Funding should be allocated through a call for proposals, indicating clear dead-lines for applications and a time-schedule for the signing of contracts and disbursement of payments.

⁷The commission Guide Line of Applicants and Grant Application Form under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights and subsequent appeal for proposals might serve as a starting point for the reform of the MEDA Democracy Programme.

In addition, the Commission should move the emphasis from 'audit to management', paying less attention to individual receipts and looking more closely at the quality of projects being funded and whether they provide value for money.

IMPLEMENTATION OF REFORMS

Delays in human rights funding should be avoided under the ongoing reform of the MEDA Democracy Programme. Steps taken and plans for the future should be made public in order to strengthen dialogue with civil society in the region and to help NGOs organise their work.

Reports from EMHRN members suggest that the momentum created by the establishment of the MEDA Democracy Programme in 1996 is weakening, and that insecurity caused by lack of information about the reform of the Programme is widespread. They also point out that the situation created by the freezing of the MEDA Democracy Programme in June 1998 in several cases is only about to be remedied, two years after 'the freezing'.

MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

Sufficient staff resources and human rights expertise should be made available for a sound, qualified management of the MEDA Democracy Programme.

Taking into account the complexity of the human rights situation in the region, and comparing it to other funding agencies, the MEDA Democracy Programme has been under-staffed.

A sound and efficient administration of human rights projects in the region, according to the recommendations presented above, requires sufficient and qualified staff, as well as human rights expertise in each of the EU Delegations and in the Commission in Brussels.

The MEDA Democracy Program was launched as an instrument to promote the rule of law, human rights and democracy and to strengthen civil society within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The EMHRN hopes that these recommendations will help to strengthen this Programme to become an instrument for the genuine, decisive and strong promotion and protection of human rights in the region, bringing greater coherence to the overall development of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

EMHRN May 2000.