

Conclusions

The role of civil society in resolving conflicts was the purpose for the conference held in the European Parliament. The political involvement of independent peace and human rights groups is of utmost importance in crisis regions, and without substitute. Particularly important are the human rights defenders and other local initiatives that promote tolerance, democracy, women's rights, rule of law, and argue against violence in the concerned countries. The representatives who spoke represented 8 of the countries neighboring EU. They have faced serious opposition, such as being criminalized, vilified, and jailed. They have also suffered the persecution and killing of independent journalists and fellow human rights defenders. The reasons for this persecution were that they chose to work:

- For a pluralistic and tolerant Serbia
- For a democratic Russia without war
- For an open society in Syria
- For a non-violent resolution of the Palestine conflict
- For freedom of media in Morocco and Ukraine
- For a return to democracy in Belarus
- For reforms and full rights for other linguistic/cultural groups in Turkey

The concept of non-governmental organizations becoming more involved in advocacy on behalf of the citizen's concerns made its way in Europe in the last 50 years, but it is still seen as a threat in many other countries and is punished or forcefully stopped.

We are convinced that civil protest against injustice and shortcomings of governmental policies is an indisputable part of democracy. Democracy is not only confined within the walls of Parliaments.

This is why we are thankful to the Socialist Group in the European Parliament and in particular to their representatives at this conference, Jo Leinen and Ana Gomes, who remembered that many of their member parties have also started as civil opposition and were struggling in historic battles for liberty, democracy, peace and social justice. By supporting this conference, they have shown their respect and recognition of the role of civil society in politics.

With its Foreign- and Neighborhood-Policy, the EU has made a valuable contribution to support nongovernmental organizations. The EIDHR (European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights) has supported social movements on all continents and has brought about a civil oriented foreign policy which is a first in European history. This historic achievement should be better known and emphasized.

The movements for democracy and civil rights in our neighbor countries primarily need political support, not only material help. There must be no doubt that the EU is giving civil rights a high priority when dealing with their neighbors. There must be a zero-tolerance policy for governments who leave their people unprotected against internal violence, terrorize them, cheat them, torture them or take away their civil rights to any degree. This must be assured in times of peace as well as times of war. In bilateral contacts between the EU and third countries these policy areas must have first priority. The history of the 20th century has shown us what happens if we give way to these fundamental principles.

The interventions of our colleagues at this conference have highlighted the following requests to the institutions of the European Union:

- Support political advocacy through non-governmental organizations as well as non-registered civil society, both inside and outside EU
- More publicity in the EU about activities of civil society in the neighbor countries
- Promote partnership and exchange between European and non-European NGOs
- Freedom of travel, promote the abolition of visa as visa have shown to be no good tool to ban criminality and trafficking but hinder exchange and partnership
- Promote actions against racism and neo-fascism in neighboring countries
- More monitoring of civil society activities in neighbor countries
- Prosecution and punishment for war-criminals and dictators on international level
- Better involvement of experts from civil society background in crisis regions into international organizations such as the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU
- More youth exchanges
- Promote self organized education (as opposed to only state organized education)
- Promote historic research on confrontations and measures to find truth and reconciliation

As an overall request, participants claimed that we don't have to mobilise civil society, we just have to ensure that it is not stopped. Therefore we have to stop bureaucracy and defend the rights of unorganised civil society. Civil involvement doesn't need registration. International partnerships can help to support emerging organisations and can vouch for the spending of taxpayers' money.

Last but not least, the participants of this conference remind the European institutions of the history of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance. While government diplomacy has to compromise, civil society has not only the right, but the responsibility for this resistance. Civil society should not be reduced to being instruments of governments, nor should they be used by political parties or religion, but remain the fresh breeze coming from the people who are striving for democracy and the true realization of human rights.