

The changes in the Mediterranean, the dynamic of the Citizens' Circles and the future of the MCA

Summary, reports and declarations from the
Third meeting of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA)
Volos (Greece), 25th-28th October 2012



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1.Introduction

The recent events in the Mediterranean Basin have demonstrated the determination of citizens to leave a firm and enduring impression on the political and social scenes in their countries. In this context, the initiative of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA), created in 2008, fully acquires its sense and proves its pertinence. The first Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (July 2010 in Valencia, Spain), on the theme of: Mediterranean Dialogues: institutions and citizenship in the Mediterranean, underlined the importance of promoting the emergence of a Mediterranean community of peoples, rooted in Mediterranean political space and Mediterranean citizenship. The second Assembly (December 2010, Tunis, Tunisia), dedicated to Crisis and change in the Mediterranean: citizenship in movement, showed that it is the people of the Mediterranean who are writing their own destiny, with their freedom, their way of seeing things, their history.

On 26th and 27th October 2012, the third meeting of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly was held in Volos. This meeting, centred around the Changes in the Mediterranean, the dynamic of the Citizens' Circles and the future of the MCA, was doubly symbolic. The first Circle of the MCA was effectively created in Greece in 2009; the MCA – by holding this third meeting in Greece – also wished to express its support and solidarity in the face of the serious financial, economic and social crisis that the country is undergoing. The principal vital forces of the MCA – the members of the Advisory Council, the members of the Circles, the Coordination and the Secretariat of the MCA – all participated in the event.

This meeting's aim was essentially to favour the exchange of ideas, experiences, initiatives and perspectives useful for structurally reinforcing and rooting the MCA in the landscape of Mediterranean citizenship. It was also necessary to reflect on the institutional future of the MCA. Representatives from the Thessaly Circle (Greece), the Tirana Circle (Albania), the Circles of Podgorica (Montenegro), Zagreb (Croatia), Rome and Naples (Italy), Valencia (Spain), of Casablanca (Morocco), Oran (Algeria), Tunis (Tunisia), Alexandria (Egypt), Cyprus, Beirut (Lebanon) and Istanbul (Turkey) were present.

¹ With the Advisory Council and the Coordination, the Local Mediterranean Citizens' Circles are at the heart of the logic and governance of the MCA. Conceived as permanent and open spaces for dialogue between citizens, the Circles organise themselves around the encounter of ideas (workshops, round tables), of collective elaboration and evaluation of propositions with a view to contributing to the emergence of new economic, social, cultural and environmental politics.

² The members of the Circles of Malta, of Damascus (Syria), of Nador (Morocco), and of Portoroz (Slovenia) were unable to participate in the meeting.

2. General synthesis

In all, more than 70 members of the local Mediterranean Citizens' Circles and the Advisory Council of the MCA from 16 different countries were present for the third meeting in Greece – which had been organised thanks to the Circle and the University of Thessaly, with the support of the MCA Secretariat and the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind.

The representatives of the Circles were able to tackle numerous subjects, each essential to the future of the MCA. In particular they tried to establish a diagnostic of the ongoing situations in the Mediterranean. They evoked the future of the Citizens' Circles and their projects and formulated proposals for collective action by the MCA. The great diversity and quality of the participants (researchers, journalists, association members, politicians, entrepreneurs, students, teachers, etc.), as well as the strictest respect for the parity and the variety of the countries represented, meant that once again the MCA federated a large and representative spread of people from around the Mediterranean basin.

The first day of meetings was meant to allow for an analysis to emerge of the current situation in the Mediterranean. It opened with a long debate on the world and regional economic crisis and its effects on each country. Given that politics seems powerless in the face of economic forces, it is necessary to find answers on a different level to that of the Nation State: on a regional but also on an international level. Several Greek professors and citizens gave testimonies on the dramatic situation in their country; their interventions led to an analysis of the reactions of Greek society in the face of the crisis. In this context, citizens' initiatives show that it is possible to become involved locally in the reduction of inequality, in a struggle against general impoverishment, with the development of alternative models of production and economic exchanges – in particular when the adoption of a territorial governance reinforces local societies. All these ideas and practices have shown the will and the necessity of reinforcing the notion of citizenship based on collective responsibility, to accord greater importance to the collective in the face of the menacing ambiance of individualism, alienation, and the profound crises facing democratic regimes.

During the afternoon, the representatives of the Citizens' Circles spoke of the political, economic and cultural situation of each of their countries since the last Assembly meeting in Tunis (December 2011). The Syrian situation was at the forefront of the discussions. The powerlessness of Europe, the immobility of international organisations and the inability to find a regional solution were each evoked in turn; participants went on to lay out the role that international civil society must now begin to play in this kind of situation. Each circle finally presented its own initiatives and activities – in the fields of education, promotion of dialogue, actions of solidarity, cultural actions, the defence of human rights, the protection of individual liberties

– which, when added together, constitute a real plan of action to put the individual back at the heart of regional issues.

The second day was dedicated in particular to the coordination of the activities of the Citizens' Circles, to their autonomy and their financing, but also to developing the content of the agenda of issues which will allow them to make their work known. The future institutionalisation of the MCA was studied, its financing and possible ways to publicise and promote the initiative generally, as well as its relations with the public institutions of the Mediterranean. Finally, ways needed to be found to interest other sectors of society in the concept of Mediterranean citizenship, so important to the future of the region. While the first day had been spent on an explanation and analysis of the Mediterranean situation, the second day saw the participants expressing a real desire to work together on innovative projects.

The third meeting of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly, through the diversity of the citizens present and the quality of the debates, reinforced the conviction of the participants that Mediterranean citizenship is a real fact. The existence and the work of the Circles demonstrated this engagement on the part of citizens, their willingness to act in the face of upheaval and difficulty. They now represent, due to force of numbers, a critical mass and actually constitute a citizens' network which could, in the near future, speak and act on behalf of the Mediterranean citizen. The MCA has proved not only that it is pertinent, but above all that it is necessary.

The MCA has decided that its fourth meeting will be organised in Turkey or Egypt, to reinforce its presence in these important countries. The MCA will also take part in the World Social Forum which will be held in Tunis in March 2013, as well as in the Anna Lindh Foundation Forum which will take place in Marseille in April 2013. The year 2013 should therefore enable the MCA to considerably raise its visibility.

3. Reports of the work in Agoras

The third meeting of the MCA was essentially organised – in addition to the opening and closing sessions at which a number of personalities presented speeches – in the form of Agoras, democratic and pluralistic working groups. The three chosen themes – Diagnostic of the Mediterranean situation; the future of the MCA and the role of the local Mediterranean Citizens' Circles; and propositions for the MCA – were consecutively treated by two working groups each time. This organisation allowed the multiplication of viewpoints while allowing reflection from all the participants on each theme.

3.1 Diagnostic of the situation in the Mediterranean since December 2011 (Agoras 1 and 2)

The Agoras held in Volos were opened around a universally shared precept: the Greek debt crisis and the Europe-wide economic crisis, along with the geopolitical upheaval in the Middle East, have had very real and concrete consequences for the lives of Mediterranean Basin citizens. In the face of these crises and changes, a collective response based on the will, the motivation and the needs of each citizen is necessary.

Diversity of the national situations

Citizenship could in effect reveal itself to be an important factor in the process of the current rapid political changes – changes which will nonetheless demand a long time to take shape and have positive effects as the crisis comes to an end.

In Spain, we are seeing a serious economic and social crisis; the rate of unemployment has reached the record figure of 27% of the active population; for young people the figure is 55%. The diverse peoples which make up the Spanish State are beginning to think more and more in terms of their own national will. This is the case for the Basque people and for the Catalan people, whose demands are presented with greater and greater urgency because of the economic crisis.

In Italy, democracy is suffering, although the present government, which was not elected, is the most popular in twenty years. Corruption has become institutionalised and divisions between the north and south of the country are growing all the time. In addition, unemployment among young people has reached 36%, which is a major concern for the economic future of the country.

In Montenegro, joining the European Union is a priority despite the many problems posed by nepotism and corruption which neither the opposition nor the government are able to restrain. Although the first article of the Montenegrin Constitution adopted in 1992 is explicit - "Montenegro is a democratic, social and ecological State" - environmental challenges and the need to preserve natural resources remain key issues.

The multi-faith and multi-confessional character of the country should provide an example of a country where the feeling of citizenship is profoundly rooted.

In Albania, the Greek economic crisis is having consequences on the economy of Tirana. Many Albanians who were living in Greece are now returning to their homeland, but only to join the ranks of the unemployed.

Croatia will join the European Union in 2013, although the feeling of belonging to a Mediterranean citizenship has been rising sharply for the last ten years.

In Greece, the attacks on social rights and employment have been unprecedented. The cultural, political and economic particularities of certain southern European countries would not appear to be understood by northern Europeans. These problems of perception have their origins in the crisis of the economic development model of the Union over the last few years.

In Cyprus, the integration of the island into the European Union has directly imported the crisis between Greece and Turkey without bringing a solution for reunification.

Turkey is not going through an economic crisis but vigilance is nonetheless necessary: it would appear that there is an autocratic trend with a government that has been in power and in the majority for the last ten years. The question of the Syrian refugees – a potential cause of destabilisation – is beginning to be a real problem for Ankara.

In Lebanon, destabilisation is never far off. The question of Mediterranean Citizenship is complex, because young generations who have known the wars do not believe in it. In addition, the crisis affects the situation: inequalities in education and health (with the growing privatisation of public establishments) are a real cause for concern for citizens. The most affected are Palestinians and Syrian refugees.

Of course if there is a situation which reflects the difficulties of the Mediterranean to live in peace it is that of Syria, where the situation is tragic. Political failure is having major consequences, as witnessed by the movement from peaceful revolt to armed conflict and civil war in the very heart of the Mediterranean region.

In Egypt, the revolution and the departure of Mubarak were a major upheaval for the country, but also for the entire region. It is necessary to closely observe the changes under way, especially those concerning the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi, the debate around the new Constitution and the many recent electoral laws.

In Algeria, the persistent difficulties for civil society in creating associations are an alarm signal, in a country which seems to have been spared the revolts of the Arab world. Social peace has been exploited by certain local authorities to tighten their grip on pro-democratic groups. During the last elections, political Islam failed to impose itself; this could lead to reflection on the possible alternatives in the countries where it has won.

In Tunisia, the national will to pass from theory to practice in the matter of democracy and a legal State is having difficulties. The form of governance in this country in transition is a test for all of the countries concerned by the political upheavals in the Mediterranean. At present the revolution is a source of disappointment to some, because the economic and social solutions proposed appear to be insufficient in the face of too many pressing problems.

In Morocco, a moderate constitutional revision was favourable to human rights in general and womens' rights in particular; on the other hand, conservatives and Islamists have entered government. The question of people's lack of mobility internationally is of equal concern and has consequences on the country's economy. The centre of political and economic power in the country is still concentrated in the same sectors of society.

Shared difficulties

Beyond the cited examples, the participants note that the economic crisis has touched the whole Mediterranean basin. The processes of elections have woken up the forces of tradition and religion. The process of overall change will therefore be long. For it to happen, it will be necessary to favour citizens' participation in order to improve the democracies in the process of being built or rebuilt. Political, economic, social and cultural problems will have to be addressed in many countries in the years to come.

Political problems are already manifold: institutional corruption; the failure to replace the elites of former regimes; danger of the manipulation of public opinion by politicians and the media; political opponents failing to unite against fallen or disgraced regimes; absence of a coordinated European policy in the face of the huge crises, such as Syria, that the region is going through; and not forgetting the role of the European Union and the other major powers, old and new, in the region.

The economic problems are no less worrying: youth unemployment; structural situations which limit the possibility for immediate economic and social transformation; difficulties in transforming local cooperative activities into economically competitive businesses, etc.

Social and cultural problems are not lacking either: difficulties for civil society to attain autonomy from party politics; the danger of the retrenchment of communities based on identity or religion; inability of minorities to have their rights respected, difficulties of individual movement, etc.

Common propositions and solutions

The importance of local solutions and the use of existing resources in the face of the global crisis was highlighted many times during the Assembly. The discussions led to a number of proposals.

On the political level, it will be necessary to consider giving a more precise definition of Mediterranean citizenship (as was done for European citizenship), but equally to support the defence of common Mediterranean values, to consider a redefinition of the concept of democracy adapted to the Mediterranean environment, to support the promotion of the principle of collegiality and local participative democracy, to ensure the creation of a real local democracy, to put the collectivity back at the heart of political and social action, to favour the creation of regional decision making and power centres for citizens, to support the representation of young people and women in the process of democratic change, to promote a clear definition of the rights and duties of the Mediterranean citizen and, finally, to continue promoting the belief in a shared common destiny.

On an economic level, it will be necessary to assure the development of agricultural cooperatives, support the mobility of individuals in the Mediterranean area and outside of it, but also to actively fight against corruption at every level. New economic and social tools must be found to accompany political change and support collective solutions rather than individualistic ones.

On a social level it is necessary to guarantee the exchange of knowledge and experience common to Mediterranean citizens, to participate in the evolution of attitudes to reconcile the European character, the African character and the Mediterranean character, to support the respect of differences, to ensure the promotion of the link between Mediterranean citizens, to avoid conflicts and move beyond neo-colonialist reflexes.

Finally, on a cultural level, numerous proposals were formulated. Most important is the need to continue discussing the difficulties encountered and to pool ideas aimed at finding solutions to common problems. It will also be necessary to support the teaching of local history and values, fight stereotyping by learning about and knowing each other, building on the past and studying one's origins to be able to approach the future with confidence, support the expression of citizens and the promotion of new ideas. Finally, a real educational programme aimed at combatting islamophobia needs to be developed.

3.2 The future of the MCA and the role of the Citizens' Circles (Agoras 3 and 4)

The 2012 Volos meeting was an occasion to present the numerous projects carried out by the MCA and the Citizens' Circles already in existence. It was also a privileged moment to envisage a multitude of new projects – such as the constitution of new Circles throughout the Mediterranean. The accent was also placed on the strengthening of relations between the MCAs and the international Euro-Mediterranean and Afro-Mediterranean institutions. Finally, the representatives of the Circles were able to get to know each other better and define new common objectives, allowing for the consolidation of interactions between all their members.

Results of the Circles' activities over the 2010-2012 period

The Circle created in Valencia in 2010 organised debates with students in universities, about the dramatic social situation Spain is currently experiencing. It is also preparing diverse cultural actions – for example it created an itinerant cultural museum project. The Circle created in Rome in June 2011 organised several events: the promotion of a book, demonstrations of Mediterranean food, organised a meeting between Egyptian and Tunisian journalists to debate the election results, then organised a meeting on the Syrian situation attended by members of parliament. Finally, an information letter is regularly sent to some 150 local contacts. The Naples Circle was created after the Tunis Assembly (December 2011). Projects for common events with the Circle of Rome are being considered. The Tirana Circle was created in 2009 and concentrates its action on questions of sustainable development, as does the Podgorica Circle in Montenegro. The latter also promotes cooperation with the other Circles, notably those of the Balkans. The Zagreb Circle, in Croatia, was created in the summer of 2012, with the support of the Podgorica Circle – despite the conflict which divided the two countries in the 1990s. This is without any doubt a strong symbol of reconciliation, as is the welcome provided in Dubrovnik for the Consultative Council in 2012. The Thessaly Circle, established in 2009, sees itself as very active on questions of local development. A big event about the crisis was organised in Larissa with nearly 80 people (not only university professors and students), even if the national situation was keeping members very busy outside the framework of the MCA. The creation of Circles in Crete is planned.

In Istanbul, the Circle, newly created by international relations professors, hopes to reinforce relations with other professors in the country. In Cyprus, the Circle includes active members of civil society who have assured the promotion of the principles of the MCA in local NGOs. The major objective is to bring together people from the North and the South of the island.

In Alexandria, the Circle is currently being created. In Oran, the objective is to promote discussion about important social questions, while favouring interactions with other Circles on sensitive subjects: such as the Western Sahara with the Casablanca Circle, for example. In Tunis, the Circle created in March 2012 aims to increase its membership and diversify the profiles of participants. Several contacts have already been established to develop other Circles outside the capital. The priorities defined range from education to citizenship and the question of human rights. But they are threatened with seeing their autonomy reduced given the current expulsions of certain associations financed from abroad. The Casablanca Circle was created in May 2010 and includes members of all ages and from all backgrounds. It has organised events around humour, culture and poetry and art and was present at the World and Maghreb Social Forum, as well as at other events in Rome and Cyprus. Its support allowed the creation of the Nador Circle, in the north of the country and helped toward the creation of the Rabah Circle.

The action of the Consultative Council

The Consultative Council was put in place to promote the process of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly. It is made up of volunteers from the Mediterranean region, chosen for their ability to mobilise on a local or regional level, their expertise, their public visibility and their capacity to play a facilitating role with citizens and institutions.

The role of the Consultative Council is to help the Coordination of the MCA to carry the project politically, and support it in defining its strategic choices, to contribute to the editing of documents on strategic thinking in political, social, cultural and environmental domains, while helping to evaluate the creation of Citizens' Circles. Several meetings of the Consultative Council were held between 2010 and 2012: in Valencia, Casablanca, Tirana, Tunis, Florence, Dubrovnik and Volos.

3.3 Propositions for the future (Agoras 5 and 6)

The Circles' projects for 2013-2014

Regarding the organisation of the Circles, it is necessary to support communication and cooperation between the different Circles, to open them to diverse socio-professional sectors, to continue to constitute them formally, and to get more students involved in the actions of the MCA. Finally, regional poles for coordination between the Circles should be created, based on the different geographical areas of the Mediterranean.

In order to promote dialogue between Mediterranean citizens there is a need to firmly embed education about Mediterranean citizenship, to bolster the place of women in the public arena, to reinforce the dialogue between communities in order to bring together people in their struggle. It is also necessary to propose an alternative to the Israeli-Palestinian problem in the framework of MCA events on common themes (governance, agriculture, etc.) uniting citizens from all horizons in order to be able to create Circles in this zone.

Regarding the content of events and the subjects developed in the Circles, it is also necessary to favour the emergence of new themes, such as sustainable development, and promote projects common to several Circles. To widen awareness of the activities of the Circles, it will be necessary to approach the media more often, create a centralised information newsletter, improve the MCA's database and make it available to all, to improve the website, and to organise ambitious collective events. These common actions could be such as proposed, for example, by the Valencia Circle, the creation of a Mediterranean museum to be financed by the European Union; or the publication of a book about the Mediterranean poet Constantin Kavafis; or the production of a disc of Mediterranean music. The Zagreb Circle proposes exchanges between young people via Citizens' Circles, to allow them to learn about daily life in other Mediterranean countries. Other proposals have been made, such as the idea to organise an exhibition of photographs on the Mediterranean.

Challenges and proposals for the MCA

One of the major challenges of the 2012 meeting was to discuss all together the question of the institutionalisation of the MCA, and whether or not to give it a legal structure of its own. Although there is a near consensus on the need for this, the participants are unable as yet to define the legal status best suited, nor the location where the structure should be registered. The Secretariat and the Coordination have been asked to make proposals on these questions in the coming months.

It was also the occasion to reflect on the local legal existence of the Circles. Should they become associations, or incorporate themselves into existing associations, for example. The question of the future financing of the Circles is crucial and must be looked at seriously in order to enable them to organise more ambitious, unifying and inspiring local events.

Finally it is primordial to maintain the diverse, independent and not-for-profit character of the Circles, but also attempt to influence political institutions and spread locally in an effective way the principles and values contained in the MCA's Founding Charter.

4. Declarations by the Consultative Council

Declaration on the situation in Greece

In the last three years Greece has been going through an unprecedented crisis, of multiple dimensions (economic, political, social, cultural), which is having a serious effect on a great many people. In fact, this situation reveals the close interdependence between the crisis and the challenges facing the Mediterranean region and the South of Europe today. Greece has therefore become the scapegoat of a caricatured perception of Southern countries which in the end concerns the whole of the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA) calls for the mobilisation of all the vital forces of the country and the synergy of all the social actors of the Mediterranean. By encouraging the values of solidarity, respect for others and responsibility – values which are part of the common heritage of the Mediterranean area - it is possible to collectively create innovative actions and propose viable alternatives to the programmed austerity.

Declaration on the situation in Syria

For the last 19 months the Syrian people, who are expressing their desire for liberty and dignity, have been being violently attacked. This revolution remained peaceful for many months; it is now accompanied by armed resistance, a struggle also aiming to be heard by a so-called international community which is unreceptive to people's suffering.

Despite the absence of an international will to recognise its real nature, a humanitarian crisis is taking place in this country. It has created several million homeless, hundreds of thousand refugees and tens of thousands of deaths. The stalemate in which the timid diplomatic process has found itself underlines the weakness of UN institutions and is a foretaste of the chaotic developments which could eventually affect the entire region.

The participants of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA) express their complete solidarity with the Syrian people and condemnation of the violence they are suffering. They call for a citizens' mobilisation to support the Syrian citizens in their struggle for liberty and dignity. They remind international institutions of their responsibility to protect civilian populations. They are working, in the framework of their respective Citizens' Circles, to alert their members and their governments to the gravity of the situation in Syria. Finally, they will support and participate in all humanitarian operations in order to contribute, in any way possible, to reducing the suffering of civilians.

On mobility in the Mediterranean

During the first meeting (Valencia 2010), the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA) proclaimed that: citizenship, the real motor of change, crosses frontiers and that civil society should be supported; that the relationship between towns and the local Circles must reinforce the Mediterranean space; that mobility must promote the transfer of knowledge, particularly where young people are concerned; that the Mediterranean space is a solution to the crisis even if the Euromed project has failed; that reduced mobility reinforces existing prejudices; that mobility favours social inclusion and the knowledge economy, and that it is at present limited by the restrictions on visas; the establishment of a treaty of free movement of individuals must be envisaged; and finally the mobility of young people must be vigorously promoted. These same elements were brought up again during the second Assembly (2011), insisting once more on mobility as an answer to the hopes of young people.

Continuing in this vein, the MCA meeting in Volos (October 2012) decided to retain mobility as one of the federating themes of its fourth Assembly – which will be held in 2013. Each of the existing Circles would study this theme, make a list of the opportunities and blocks to this mobility – especially that of young people, actors in civil society and creators of dialogue in the Mediterranean, and that of different categories of workers (intellectual and manual). The MCA is in effect convinced that, in the crisis which is having an impact as much on the South as on the North of the Mediterranean, mobility is a factor for relaunch and development.

Declaration on the situation in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean is going through a period of crises and conflicts. On the one hand, the people of several Arab countries are engaged in a process of democratic transition, new Constitutions are being drafted in several countries. On the other hand, the economic and social crisis which is particularly affecting the European Mediterranean countries is calling into question the role of democratic institutions in the face of the power of the “market”. Inequalities and social injustice are growing.

The Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly (MCA) considers that the moment has therefore come to work towards governance based on the objectives of social justice, solidarity, institutional transparency, sustainable development and the safeguard, for the good of all, of common goods. The MCA believes that these objectives are shared by the majority of the citizens on both sides of the Mediterranean; their expectations must be satisfied.

The MCA considers that a federating initiative, based on Mediterranean citizenship, is indispensable; this citizenship is seen as a constitutional principle and the motor for inclusive and responsible forms of governance. The MCA will promote the sharing of experiences of the new practices of participatory governance within its Citizens' Circles, and support the growing commitment of civil society organisations in the region.

The MCA understands and shares the call of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) for international actions favouring the defence of economic and social rights of populations.

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