

## Sofia Platform

**The Sofia Platform** is a democracy assistance organization for countries and societies undergoing a process of transition. It seeks to foster the development and consolidation of democratic structures and practices by drawing on the experiences and lessons – learned and not learned – from the years of transition in Southeast Europe.

### Why the lessons from Central & Eastern Europe?

Starting in 1989, Central & Eastern Europe began a difficult but ultimately successful transformation. Over two decades down the road, democratic institutions have grown entrenched, citizen rights and freedoms have better safeguards than ever before, and a market economy has improved life for a growing majority in all of the region's countries.

As the momentum towards a democratic window of opportunity grows, the Arab world has now reached a critical juncture. Popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen and the ongoing civil war in Syria are fermenting a new reality that remains difficult to gauge. However, one thing is clear – what happens in these countries will to a great extent shape the future of the entire region. Driven by “people power”, the Middle East has embarked on its own transition. Citizens of the countries there certainly have the energy, the desire for freedom and the will to reform. But just as in the early days of 1989, it is still not clear where the transition will lead.

While historical, cultural and political contexts in the Middle East and North Africa are markedly different than those in Central and Eastern Europe, we believe that the experiences in post-Cold War Europe – including the mistakes, wrong choices and steps not taken – can provide a very helpful starting point for a mutually-enriching exchange of views, experience and know-how.

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned from our own transition is that one can't impose change from outside. That said, it is unquestionably useful to have access to a resource to learn from, a synopsis of pros and cons that might help you avoid making at least some of the mistakes that others have made before.

### Background

The Sofia Platform was initiated by Bulgaria's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nickolay Mladenov and his team after the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. It has received support from a number of institutions and organizations, among them the European Parliament and European Commission, the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Robert Bosch Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Hans Seidel Foundation and the Allianz Kulturstiftung.

### Activities

A variety of activities have been developed within the Sofia Platform's framework to encourage dialogue and an exchange of views and expertise between NGO representatives, journalists, politicians and practitioners.

They include:

**High-level annual meetings** that look at the transition process from different angles and tackle salient political issues such as (among others) Political Reforms, Transparency and Anti-corruption, Civil Society and Free Media, Justice in Times of Transition, Religion and Politics, Challenges of Transition in Multiethnic Societies.

**Trainings, seminars, discussions and round tables** that are designed to fit stages of transition and topics of interest for countries mainly from the Middle East and North Africa. These include subjects like Constitutional Drafting, Elections Observation Training, Reforms in the Security Sector and others.

**Technical assistance and conflict mediation**, which includes the:

- **Tunisian School of Politics (TSoP)**

The Tunisian School of Politics (TSoP), established in 2012 by the Sofia Platform initiative, the Bulgarian School of Politics, NIMD, DemoFinland and the Center for Mediterranean and International Studies (CEMI). It aims to develop the skills of young Tunisian politicians and provide them with tools to influence political decisionmaking.

- **Egyptian School of Politics (ESoP at a planning stage)**

Similar to the TSoP and in cooperation with the Bulgarian School of Politics, we are exploring the possibilities for the establishment of an Egyptian School of Politics.

- **Establishing credibility through dialogue between Syrian minorities and representatives of the opposition (ongoing)**

Under the umbrella of the Sofia Platform, unique meetings between different representatives of the Syrian opposition and Syrian minorities have taken place over the past 18 months. One of these gatherings has been the first-ever meeting between members of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), various factions and the Syrian National Council (SNC). It led to a joint declaration that served as the first step towards structured dialogue between the different oppositional groups.

Another aspect of our work is looking for approaches to solve disagreements involving the Kurdish question in Syria. This includes talks with minority groups and the KNC on the one hand, and between the SNC, liberal fractions and the Syrian Democratic Forum on the other.

**Networking:** Within the framework of the Sofia Platform, we are carefully drafting an environment where participants come together, share their ideas and experiences and create a common space for future cooperation and synergies. We want to inspire discussions between experts from different backgrounds while stimulating the transfer of knowledge and the exchange of both good and bad practice examples, while at the same time raising awareness of the role and the potential of transitional CEE experiences.

**Advocacy work and media activities:** As part of the Sofia Platform's advocacy work, we undertake public events, media campaigns, public research and polls.

Also key are our **research and publishing activities**, which cover the different aspects of transition to democracy and include all areas of the political system. A comparative perspective is one of the primary approaches when looking at CEE experiences and how they could benefit countries currently undergoing transition.

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