

# Sofia Platform

## Sofia Platform 2013

31 October – 1 November Sofia (Bulgaria)

Working Language: English and Arabic

[www.sofiaplatform.org](http://www.sofiaplatform.org)

Conference Location: European Commission's Representation

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## Background and Aims

Two years after the popular uprisings that will go in the history books as the Arab Spring, nothing in the MENA region looks the way it should. But skepticism is as predictable as misleading. And a total political reset is as desirable as utopian. Every surge for democracy over the decades has been followed by moments of uncertainty along with questioning the functionality of democratic values and governance. Today none of the countries that embraced the transition to democracy two and a half years ago is comparable to the others, but neither can be described as stable or clearly democratically. While in Syria Assad's regime triggered a full-scale civil war with terrible humanitarian consequences and no political solution in sight, in Egypt the democratic institutions were seized by the military and the ultimate goal of the transition is under threat. Tunisia faces social and economic challenges, among which notably the unemployed and strikingly disengaged youth; while Yemen is on the verge of a humanitarian collapse with more than half of the population in need of relief aid.

With this year's edition of the Sofia Platform we want to take a snapshot of the current state of play in the countries of the MENA region in terms of progress of the ongoing transformations. The comparative perspective is again the core of the sessions. The experience of Central and Eastern Europe, including mistakes, wrong choices and steps not taken, has proven throughout the years to be a helpful starting point for a mutually enriching exchange of views, experience and know-how.

## Programme

**Thursday, 31 October 2013**

*EC Representation, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor*

*124, Rakovski Str, Sofia, Bulgaria*

**13:00 – 14:00 Registration and snack**

**14:00 – 14:30 Welcome Address**

**Nickolay Mladenov**, Special Representative of the UNSG for Iraq (Bulgaria)

**Kristalina Georgieva**, European Commissioner for International Cooperation  
Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response

**14:30 – 16:00 Session 1: Bumpy Transitions in the Middle East: Security vs. Democratisation**

For many years one of the problems of the Western Balkans was that the international community and media around the world perceived the situation there mainly as a security challenge. The democratization process and the economic development were left behind for the moment when real peace was achieved. With the latest developments in MENA the question arises if we are heading for a similar scenario. Is it too early to talk about democracy building before the weapons are locked and bombings are over? Can we say that some countries in MENA are already slipping towards the status of "a failed state"? The Balkans managed to stop this process, so what are the recipes or the remedies?

**Bernardino Leon**, EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean (Spain)

**Anas el Gomati**, Founder of Sadeq Institute (Libya)

**Ahmet Han**, Kadir Has University (Turkey)

**Moderator: Vessela Tcherneva**, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (Bulgaria)

**16:00 – 16:30 Coffee Break**

**16:30 – 18:00 Session 2: From Bosnia to Syria - are Multi-ethnic States Viable?**

What are the scenarios for the MENA states where multi-ethnic societies live? Should some of the policies applied in Bosnia in the 1990s still be followed in the MENA region today? The Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia succeeded to stop the war and the ethnic cleansing but it did not equip the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina with robust state institution, and moreover it did not provide for a functioning political system. The three-ethnic state is still struggling to realise neither the expectations of its citizens, nor those of the international community. So what is the viable solution for building a stable state? What are the pros and cons of federalisation? Are the necessary conditions for a similar strategy in place in MENA?

**Joseph Bahout**, Professor and researcher at Sciences Po-Paris (Lebanon)

**Esref Kenan Rasidagic**, Assistant Professor, University of Sarajevo (BiH)

**Valeri Ratchev**, Centre for Security and Defence Management, BAS (Bulgaria)

**Bassam Al-Kuwatli**, Former member of the Syrian National Council (Syria)

**Issraa Murabit**, Vice President of The Voice of Libyan Women (Libya)

**Moderator: Ognyan Minchev**, Executive Director, Institute for Regional and International Studies (Bulgaria)

**18:00 – 18:15 Short Break**

**18:15 – 19:45 Session 3: The Regional Struggle for Syria**

*convened by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*

Two and a half years after the beginning of an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, Syria is gripped by an ever deepening civil war that is having a significant impact on the entire region. Regional states have emerged as driving forces in the conflict, while they are also battling to contain the impact of tensions rapidly spilling out across the wider area. The panel will explore the competing interests and ambitions of the key regional players such as Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States and Israel. Having opened the door to an ascendant Iranian-led and Shia-dominated axis, the Syria war now represents an opportunity for regional Sunni states to reverse this order.

Syria has become the battleground for this broader strategic conflict, with devastating, and increasingly sectarian, effect. Other states in the region are complicating the mix with their simultaneous pursuit of more narrow interests, whether they be the strengthening of particular rebel groups, the defence of Israeli security interests or the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region. The panel will also look at the prospects for a settlement in light of the upcoming Geneva II talks as well as Iran's recent overtures to the West.

**Daniel Levy**, Director of the MENA Programme at ECFR (UK)

**Şahin Alpay**, Columnist, writer and professor (Turkey)

**Nadim Shehadi**, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House (UK)

**Moderator: Dimitar Bechev**, Head of the Sofia Office of ECFR (Bulgaria)

**20:30 Dinner**

*Shuttle bus will be leaving to the dinner location at 20:15 from the conference venue*

**Friday, 1 November 2013**

*EC Representation, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor*

*124, Rakovski Str, Sofia, Bulgaria*

**09:00 – 10:30 Session 4: Societies in Transition, Democracy under Construction**

The Arab revolutions of 2011 sparked around the world, yet again, the enthusiasm for the democratic transition. Two years later we are reminded that democracy is not a state of natural equilibrium of society. Democracy is a process with usually unpredictable turnings. It is enough to look how differently the transformational movements developed in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria to realise how simplistic is to brand them all simply as one movement, whether we would call them Arab Spring or something else.

The transitional landscape is becoming even more complex when we look at the recent civil society protests in other countries - Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and elsewhere. What do all these movements from the last two years telling us? Do they suggest that democratisation is the inevitable final direction but the roads to get there are different and unpredictable? Or that history and culture predetermines the different fate of the societal change? Or is it the economy that has the ultimate role? Or the geopolitical interests and interferences? Or maybe we are witnessing a new global trend of civil society demands and political participations? These will be the questions that the first panel will address, or perhaps it will just add more questions.

**Julian Popov**, Member of the Board of Sofia Platform (Bulgaria/UK)

**Hassan Mneimneh**, Senior Transatlantic Fellow, German Marshall Fund of the United States (USA)

**Ahmed Driss**, Director of the Tunisian School of Politics (Tunisia)

**Mohamed Khalaf**, Journalist (Iraq)

**Moderator: Pavol Demeš**, Board Member of the European Endowment for Democracy (Slovakia)

**10:30 – 11:00 Coffee Break**

**11:00 – 12:30 Session 5: The Fourth Estate in Times of Transition: Role and Impact of the Arab Media of Today**

Did the new media started the revolution, or they just prepared it by altering the public environment in the countries of the Arab spring? No matter what the answer we would choose to give, there is no doubt that the new media improved the level of freedom of speech and changed the nature of the Arab Awakening.

Today, with the political process gaining complexity, what is the new role of the pan-Arab media? What is the relationship between media and Islamic movements in power? The popular uprisings that have engulfed the Arab world present a unique opportunity to move away from state-controlled media to a more free and democratic media environment. They offer a prospect to open the gates to professional and independent media which can be critical to the creation and sustaining of democracies. What level of regulation or deregulation is needed and what could be the effects of it?

**Remzi Lani**, Executive Director of the Albanian Media Institute (Albania)

**Lina Attalah**, Editor in chief of Mada Masr (Egypt)

**Zied el-Heni**, Journalist and Blogger (Tunisia)

**Mariya Stoyanova**, Member of the Council for Electronic Media (Bulgaria)

**Hanin Ghaddar**, Managing Editor of NOW (Lebanon)

**Igor Janke**, Author and Journalist (Poland)

**Moderator: Adelina Marini**, Editor in chief of *euinside* (Croatia)

**12:30 – 13:30** Lunch

**13:30 – 15:00** **Session 6: The Shy Engagement of a Historical Interlocutor: What can Europe do better in the Broader Middle East?**

In the second half of the 1990s the US and the EU had a major role in settling the conflicts in the Western Balkans; for many the region became the birthplace of the idea of common European foreign policy. The role of Europe in the Middle East seems to be much less ambitious, yet the EU remains a close interlocutor of the region, for reasons of history, economy and geography. Thousands of refugees leave daily their countries of origin in a pursuit of a better lot in Europe.

What should be the engagement of the EU today on the ground, in the countries of the MENA region? Should it be limited only to humanitarian aid and development assistance or real political and reconciliation engagement is expected? How should the EU respond to the refugee crisis in Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria?

**Nataliya Apostolova**, Head of Mission of the EEAS in Libya (Bulgaria)

**Ibrahim Sharqieh**, Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center (Qatar)

**Jerzy Pomianowski**, Executive Director of the European Endowment for Democracy (Poland)

**Moderator: Vladimir Shopov**, Political scientist (Bulgaria)

**15:00 – 15:20** **Farewell and follow-up activities**

Sofia Platform members