

Political and economic convergence in the Euro-Mediterranean process

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As from the seventies, initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen the link between the partners of the two Mediterranean shores although results have always been unsatisfactory.

The expectations raised by the Barcelona process have not been fully achieved. This is witnessed by the failure to bridge the gap between the south and the north shores, the low investments attractiveness of southern countries, the absence of tangible projects for the political stability, the failure to achieve free trade of agricultural produce. Furthermore, most of southern countries have not made great efforts to overcome political rivalry and promote changes in the management of public administration.

The latest initiative is the Union for the Mediterranean (UpM), created at the Paris Summit of the Euro-Mediterranean Heads of State and Government on 13 July 2008. It is the framework of multilateral relations between the EU and the Mediterranean non-EU countries¹. It complements bilateral relations, which will continue to develop under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the pre-accession framework.

The UpM builds on the *acquis* and reinforces the achievements the Barcelona Process launched in 1995. While the Barcelona Declaration, its goals and

its cooperation areas (Political Dialogue, Economic Cooperation and Free Trade, and Human, Social and Cultural Dialogue) remain valid, the UpM gives a new impulse to the Barcelona Process in three very important ways:

- by upgrading the political level of the relationship between the EU and its Mediterranean partners;

- by reinforcing co-ownership of our multilateral relations with a system of co-presidencies (one from the EU and one from the Mediterranean side), by the setting up of a Secretariat, and of a Joint Permanent Committee;

- by making these relations more concrete and visible through additional regional and sub-regional projects, relevant for the citizens of the region.

The UpM has woked out several projects to strengthen the regional cohesion and to better the conditions of growth and integration across the Mediterranean area, such as: the de-pollution of the Mediterranean, the development of maritime highways, including the connection of ports, throughout the entire Mediterranean basin as well as the establishment of an efficient and integrated Euro-Mediterranean Transport Network; a joint civil protection scheme on prevention, preparation and response to disasters, linking the region more closely to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, research and development of all alternative sources of energy particularly the creation of a Mediterranean Solar Plan; a cooperation network

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¹ All EU Member States together with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey, as well as the other Mediterranean coastal states (Albania, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Monaco) and Mauritania. The Arab League and Libya have observer status.

of partner institutions and existing universities from the Euro-Med region; a support of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises by assessing their needs, defining policy solutions and providing them with technical assistance and financial instruments.

Surprisingly, despite the importance of agriculture, both in economic and occupational terms, mainly in the south Mediterranean shore, the project proposals never mention actions addressing the technological, organizational and production development of the agri-food sector.

The agri-food sector is strategic for the integrated economic development of the Mediterranean basin. It is, for the southern countries, a crucial factor for their socio-economic development which responds to their resources. It also helps them achieving a higher level of food safety and a higher rate of production and commercial efficiency. In the meanwhile, it is for the northern countries, a complementarity factor both for their production and commercial activity. For this condition to work, rules are to be defined along with the establishment of institutions able to support and coordinate the development of trade, the adoption of common quality systems, the availability of an efficient logistic organization, transparent production and commercial agreements, the suppression of monopolistic concentrations and activities sustainable for the natural and environmental resources.

The structure of UpM is quite a complex one with a high bureaucratic level, a rotating co-presidency, an active expert committee, decision-making commissions, a secretariat: all that makes initiatives difficult if they are not in equilibrium with the socio-political forces at work.

Top-down decisions do not often find an efficient application and a tangible participation of the civil society in the problem-solving process.

Most issues need a bottom-up approach, with the pro-active involvement of citizens, operators and experts of local problems with the support and control by public institutions which guarantee the legality and success of the initiative.

Rapid and tangible decisions are more than ever needed; their choice descends from the knowledge of the needs of the civil society and from well-defined economic and commercial relations. Conditions which exist on both Mediterranean shores, created by the activity of private economic operators to give a solution to tangible problems and to face the needs of the market.

The economic and political worlds often work in parallel; in contrast, they should converge in order to undertake a pathway of stability and equal development of the whole Mediterranean area. This calls for new tools of fund raising and project evaluation which might provide a tangible answer to common needs, creating partnerships among the stakeholders for the management of projects having a common interest.

This is why the UpM should assign a new dimension to the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, through the identification of a common and integrated pathway able to take up economic, ecological and social challenges with which the EU and Mediterranean countries are faced.

In contrast to the evolutionary trends of the worldwide economy, the Mediterranean area, for its tradition and cultural resources, might become a geopolitical area that may contribute to balancing the disruptive effects of globalization taking up common challenges in the search for a new regional and international equalitarian and sustainable order.