

Mediterranean Countries: Friends or Foes?

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The optimism throughout the last decade regarding future relations between the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries has gradually faded into dark pragmatism. The Barcelona Process has come to a blind alley and so to the hope of rebuilding the Mediterranean mosaic into the region that Fernand Braudel has taught generations of historians, economists, geographers and political scientists to admire. The Mediterranean again becomes a mosaic in which competition trumps over cooperation, nationalism over regionalism, bilateralism over bilateralism and euro-centrism over poly-centrism.

The turning point of the Mediterranean fate, and particularly the Euro-Mediterranean project as an area of shared prosperity, is the recent establishment of the European Union Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); through which the process of region-building and future-sharing is reduced to a set of bilateral Action Plans.

In order to understand the dynamic of this process, and to identify the directions for future socio-economic research in the area, it is necessary to look to the achievements of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the logic behind the ENP.

The official rationale behind the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership - launched on the 27th of November 1995 (exactly 900 years before the first crusade was launched by Pope Urban II in the French city of Clermont) - was to strengthen the previously Renewed Mediterranean Policy (1992-1995) and move towards a more multilateral approach to cooperation in the region. The main political goal was to reduce the existing economic gap between the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries in the hopes of lessening the push and pull migration factors and to guarantee political and social stability. At the root of this political design there was also a strong commitment to recreating a "Mediterranean-ness", i.e. a Mediterranean cultural and political identity that

would re-establish the bridge between Mediterranean Europe and the North African and Middle Eastern countries. The forums, conferences, publications and research produced during the mid-late nineties showed a genuine commitment to European civil society, academia and participation between intellectuals from Mediterranean and partner countries alike.

However, this multifaceted approach was still threatened by a strongly biased neoliberal economic and political ideology and more so by the Eastern Europe lobby in Brussels. The Ricardian principle of comparative advantages dominated decisions as to where and how development funds should be allocated in the Mediterranean. As a result, the Euro-Mediterranean trade regime is still asymmetrical (agricultural products are still subject to calendar restrictions and other kind of non-tariff import barriers in the EU) and has not been able to change the traditional North-South pattern. Furthermore, foreign direct investments have failed to reach the expected magnitude - except following the privatisation of good and sound public companies. Consequently, FDIs have remained very limited both in absolute terms and in comparison to regions distant from the EU (such as Mercosur for example). The dream to replicate the experiences of the Greek, Spanish and Portuguese "miracles" who rapidly became both de facto and de jure members of the European club in a relatively short time span, soon became a nightmare. Income gaps and migration flows increased steadily and with that, headlines of desperate attempts to cross the waters, only to lose their lives to drowning or shootings. After ten years, one can state that the extreme reforms and structural adjustment programmes supported by the EU MEDA funds have produced less than desirable results. Even the cultural dimension of the Partnership has been defeated by an increasingly euro-centric European Union as demonstrated by the recent events in Denmark.

Following the 11th of September, and then the 11th of March, the EU has increasingly taken a paternalistic role concerning security and develop-

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ment in the region. In 2003, the EU Commission established the ENP which put countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Southern Caucasus in the same development category as the Mediterranean Partner countries. In this way the European Neighbourhood Policy establishes a ring of friends that includes the neighbour acquired with the last enlargement. But this friendship is not unconditional; the EU offers the neighbour the opportunity to learn and share in European values. It is an asymmetrical relationship, where, even though the official discourse describes these values as being “common”, they are in practice defined by the EU. This demonstrates that the guidelines the EU has set for itself and for the neighbour countries are imperialistic in nature. EU development aid is a good example, it is of course dependent upon neighbour countries adapting EU “spaces” (economic; freedom, security and justice; cooperation the field of external security; and a space of research and education including cultural aspects).

To get a stake in the internal market, countries must show their ability to learn, apply and understand the “common values” defined by the EU. The ring of friends is therefore a set of rings in which “good” friends are given preferential treatment over “bad” friends. The EU's new backyard should not entertain any illusions of entering the EU house. Clearly, the message is that the ENP is not an enlargement policy, but is a post-enlargement strategy (“all but institutions”). The polycentric approach deployed under the Mediterranean Partnership has been replaced by the concentric approach of the ENP. The Mediterranean “Partners” are hereby downgraded to “friends”. Action Plans will define the cooperation over the next three to five years. Then, these will be replaced by European Neighbourhood Agreements to set long-term objectives. Finally, a financial instrument (the European Neighbourhood Instrument) is created to support this process.

In this scenario, socio-economic research is then focused on the EU “security” priority. Judicial and migratory issues, the reform of the public sector and of the legal system, food security and animal disease control issues prevail in this agenda. But what about the need to stimulate employment-generating activities in the micro and small enterprises sector? How do we improve the utilization

and securitization of migrant workers' remittances? Or enhance integrated rural development strategies? Or develop appropriate technologies for stimulating cooperation between the enterprises of the Southern European countries in both traditional and advanced sectors? These are local issues with a regional dimension and therefore cannot be dealt with in a set of simple bilateral action plans or Neighbourhood Agreements. Is the EU so blind as to repeat the same “bi-lateral” mistake of Euro-Mediterranean Agreements? What will it take for the EU governments to bring the ship back in the harbour and improve the cooperation and discourse towards the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries in a less imperialistic way? Or will Southern Mediterranean countries again become - as 910 years ago - the foes of catholic Europe?

The Mediterranean countries stand today before a new fork in the road: to work for a stake in the EU Internal Market, continuing with reforms and paying the price of lessened internal stability or to chose a Mediterranean economic model which is based on the integration of southern markets, trade and investments exchanges with emerging countries such as Brazil, China and South Africa for example, and strengthen the existing links of solidarity with the diasporas abroad.

The structure and institutions of the Mediterranean economies cannot bear another wave of structural adjustment. Each year the labour market of the Mediterranean Partner countries must create 4-5 million jobs. The industrial sector is mainly composed of micro and family enterprises with very limited innovative capacity and great dependency on the purchasing power of the population. Another cut in public spending would lead to the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of workers. In the textile sector alone, the recent wave of trade liberalization has inhumanly inflated the informal sector which is already at the threshold of survival. The real question is then, who will gain from a “stake in the internal market”?

Again, EU development aid and the bilateral cooperation towards the Mediterranean friends are focused on security while the issue of distribution is completely abandoned. If this strategy will make the Mediterranean societies more friendly or not is an issue that was already settled more than 900 years ago.