November 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration. Will this date be celebrated or go unnoticed on the political and media radar screens, except possibly (if at all…) in circles limited to the initiated in Euro-Mediterranean issues?

An attentive reading of the 1995 Barcelona Declaration today is not without interest. Indeed, the text contains numerous pertinent passages and a general allure deeply imbued with optimism, conveying very well the geopolitical climate in which the Declaration was drawn up. In any case, what is certain is that the operational implementation of the text after two decades has proven disappointing. The facts have rather progressively contradicted the ambitions initially stated. In 2015, it is most certainly with other words, other actors and other scenarios that we will have to imagine the continuation of this Euro-Mediterranean saga, always exciting, although also perplexing and, in some regards, unsettling. Everything indicates that the future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation will have to be written in different words.

Short-Term Optimism, Emerging Pessimism

At the onset of the 1990s, an atmosphere of euphoria and hope emerged on the international arena. Based on the will to create a pacific, stabilised Mediterranean area, the EU lent the Mediterranean Basin the full attention it deserved, producing the Barcelona Declaration. This marked a milestone in the contemporary history of relations between the European Union and the countries of the Mediterranean seaboard. A Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was established that was divided into three cooperation ‘baskets’: a political and security strand (I), an economic and financial strand (II) and a social and cultural strand (III). The text diplomatically reverberated the idea of a Mediterranean interface between Europe and Africa, with the ambition of establishing an area of integration between the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries. It also represented the hope for an affirmation of a common European foreign policy at a time when the EU, enlarged to 15 Member States in 1995, was building the next stages of its geographic expansion for the onset of the new millennium.

In this positive climate emerged the idea of building a ‘dynamic economy’ based on trade liberalism, fostering the economic globalisation process and generating an increasing interdependence. In the late 1990s, the growth shown by many economies in the region was encouraging. On the north shore, Spain, Portugal and Greece experienced an economic upturn in this period, while in France and Italy job markets were improving. On the south shore, the good economic health of several countries is particularly associated with structural reforms undertaken as of the 1980s, their growing integration into international trade and rising exogenous resources (foreign direct investment, tourism and migrant remittances). In any case, these growth models remained fragile. At the same time, Turkey began an economic takeoff that would be significant over the first decade of the
21st century. Thus the EMP advanced step by step in a relatively favourable regional context. People’s standards of living improved in the majority of countries, although a certain political rigidity persisted. In the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks, it became more obvious that the security agenda would take precedence over the dynamics of democratisation and that, to maintain economic growth and investment, the continuity of political systems was deemed preferable. It is important to recall that the dramatic events in Algeria in the mid-1990s marked people deeply. Add to this the problem of the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The failure of the Camp David II peace negotiations in 2000 unfortunately demonstrated to what point the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995, concomitant with the Barcelona Declaration or nearly, ushered in an ultimately not very auspicious Euro-Mediterranean scenario. In the same vein, it should be noted that the turn of the millennium took place with several conflicts still ongoing in the region (Western Sahara, Cyprus, etc.) and deep uncertainties in the Balkans after the Kosovo War. The Euro-Mediterranean did not become a reality. The truth is that certain spheres of cooperation were not sufficiently addressed (employment and training, agriculture and food, health, tourism) and that nothing was really achieved in terms of democratisation at a time when fear of Islamism prevailed in the region. In the post-September 11, 2001 atmosphere, authoritarian regimes were perceived as ramparts against the risks of terrorism.

Destabilising Socioeconomic Situations

The Euro-Mediterranean vision, devised in a geo-strategic framework that, at the time, could justify an ambitious tone, never truly became a reality over the years. It must also be said, without playing down its importance in terms of operational and readability consequences on regional action, that multiple initiatives have been developed in parallel without necessarily being in synergy. The 5+5 Dialogue, Mediterranean Forum, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – a jumble of institutional frameworks accumulating and often sowing confusion, to the point where it is very difficult to say in 2015 whether the EMP still exists, or if it is now alternately the ENP, the 5+5 Dialogue and the UfM that share the regional arena in terms of cooperation between EU countries and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries (SEMC).

The Euro-Mediterranean did not become a reality. The truth is that certain spheres of cooperation were not sufficiently addressed and that nothing was really achieved in terms of democratisation at a time when fear of Islamism prevailed in the region. In addition to this technocratic proliferation, sometimes lacking in strategic vision and rather reminiscent of the evolutions of the EU itself, there is a profound discredit regarding the means truly implemented after two decades to foster regional Euro-Mediterranean integration. There is no denying that budgets were mobilised and effective investments made that were intended to fulfill the Barcelona goals. But, as with the political-security strand, the economic and social strands seem to be much less positive in 2015 than what had been announced at the outset. A Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (EMFTA) by 2010? It is incomplete and differentiated. Certain sectors have been excluded, such as agricultural products, whereas increasing bilateralisation of relations between the EU and south and east shore countries has prevailed over multilateral economic integration. From 2007 to 2013, Europe disbursed 12.2 billion euros for its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), 7.5 billion of them going to Arab Mediterranean countries and 2.5 billion to Palestine alone. Only 6% of the 12 billion was designated for interregional cooperation in the Southern Neighbourhood. The new ENP for the 2014 to 2020 period was allocated a budget of 15.4 billion euros. Moreover, in the majority of cases, these countries have diversified their trade and stretched their geographical horizons. The emerging South American and Asian powers have succeeded in forging ties with North Africa and the Middle East, not to mention the relations developing between Arab countries and Sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1995 and 2015, Euro-Mediterranean trade has not intensi-
fied. Moreover, the European Union has lost its economic weight in the Southern neighbourhood countries, where foreign investment is increasingly coming from the Gulf States, Turkey or the BRIC countries (i.e. Brazil, Russia, India and China).

As a result, the stated ‘shared prosperity’ has not materialised. The standard of living gap between the North and the South of the basin is not subsiding but rather remains considerable. Thus in 2014, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per inhabitant in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) stood at USD 27,340 for the EU as compared to approximately USD 5,085 on average for the southern Mediterranean. This 1 to 5 gap is comparable to that prevailing in the mid-1990s. Although life has improved in certain territories (generally, cities and coastal areas) in some countries (in particular Turkey), there is no denying that the Euro-Mediterranean project is running up against these still glaring socioeconomic disparities between the two shores. The Southern Mediterranean Basin is, moreover, a very heterogeneous region. There are countries with a dynamic economy such as Israel, and others, such as Algeria or Libya, whose economy is particularly vulnerable and dependent on the oil cycle. Yet at the same time, this growth masks the vulnerability of economic and political systems based on rent and still far from meeting society’s expectations.

In the period from 1995 to 2005, a series of economic, social and demographic indicators showed a general improvement in standard of living, but in a context displaying many grey areas and major disparities between countries. Stalemate in the Middle East, poor economic development, precarious labour and unemployment accentuate the pressure within countries (rural to urban migration) but also between countries along the Mediterranean seaboard (South-North migrations). In this context, European countries as well as south shore countries share a common problem: migration of its youth in search of a more promising future. This is a true squandering of the human resources of all Euro-Mediterranean countries. The unemployment rate of youth in the North Africa and Middle East (MENA) region is one of the highest in the world. Approximately 40% of youth aged 15 to 30 are neither working nor studying or training. Unemployment among graduates is one of the highest in the world, a characteristic present, moreover, in the Mediterranean EU countries, where youth is finding it increasingly difficult to enter the professional workforce. Precariousness has unfortunately become commonplace for this educated youth in touch with globalisation through modern means of communication.

In the absence of inclusive growth on the social and intergenerational levels, many young people, lacking points of reference and in search of a future, respond to the ‘call of the ocean’. Although Mediterranean migration towards Northern Europe or North or South America is nothing new, lately there are more and more numerous departures. The structural trend of North African and Middle Eastern youth deciding to leave their countries for a variety of reasons (including recent conflicts) should not hide the other, economic migratory wave of Portuguese, Spanish, Italian or Greek youth particularly hard hit by the social crisis raging in their countries. The latter, translated by the ballot boxes into protest votes turning the political landscape of Southern European countries upside down, is not comparable to the plural crisis striking south shore countries. There are, however, remarkable similarities in certain regards, the first and foremost being unease amongst youth. It is as if these young people, who nevertheless represent the future of the Mediterranean region, were fleeing an area doomed to live in the past. One youth out of two under thirty is currently unemployed in Greece and Spain. The figure is only slightly lower in Italy and Portugal.

**Is the Euro-Mediterranean Project a Thing of the Past?**

The regional panorama of the Euro-Mediterranean in 2015 is not heartening. Development in the Mediterranean area marks the pace, and economies are stagnating, both on the north and south shores. Social demand is enormous, however. It has made authoritarian regimes in numerous Arab countries falter. States are at the end of their tether, territories are becoming autonomous and new threats are appearing. Current events in the area essentially revolve around dramatic happenings and growing trends towards concern. We needn’t paint too bleak a picture, but it would be foolish to deny the sombre reality. No conflict existing at the time of the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 has been resolved such
that it could be conjugated in the past tense, with the exception of the arrival of peace in the Balkans. Worse yet, new wars have arisen, in Gaza, Iraq, Libya and Syria. The collapse of states does not bode well, neither in the short nor the medium terms. *Daesh* represents a threat to the entire Mediterranean region. Other strategic uncertainties weigh heavily as well, such as disturbances in the Sahel, Yemen or Ukraine, which, combining with other problems, form an arc of crises at the doorstep of an EU frightened by these eastern and southern neighbourhoods in turmoil. After the brief euphoria of the Arab Revolts of 2011, the so-called ‘Spring’ in the region was quickly eclipsed. Only Tunisia presents a truly different political-institutional countenance after its revolution, whose aftermath shook surrounding Arab countries. Other countries have effected reforms to placate social unrest and some, like Egypt, experimented with a dangerous democratic game that soon ended. Israel continues to wall itself in, Turkey is pursuing its solitary course and Iran is attempting to return to the (increasingly discordant) concert of nations.

For its part, the EU is playing it by ear. On the internal level, it is having a hard time after the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 and the financial crises affecting the majority of Member States since the end of the 2000s. Various nationalist sentiments are being expressed, whether on the level of countries defending their interests to the detriment of the constructive EU consensus, or on the level of territories demanding greater autonomy or even independence. Disoriented by the internal crisis of confidence of a good number of its citizens with regard to its political project, it is likewise destabilised by the turbulence amid its neighbours. Discredited within, it remains, paradoxically, desired at times along its borders. It is increasingly tending, moreover, to contain them rather than handle them through mechanisms of strengthened cooperation. This isolationism of the EU, symbolised by its essentially security-oriented responses to migratory issues, enters into contradiction with the spirit of openness and solidarity characterising the European Community project at the outset. The ENP, established in 2003 then revised in 2011, attempts to provide responses to a new geography. There are now 28 EU Member States, that is, almost double the number at the time of the Barcelona Declaration. The EU’s centre of gravity now tends more towards the East. Though the Arab revolts concerned it, the attention the EU has lent to Ukraine demonstrates that there is a double standard with regard to neighbouring countries. In order to meet the challenges of its neighbourhood, the EU will clearly first have to overcome its internal difficulties. What credibility will it have in the international arena if one of its Member States, financially floundering, finds itself excluded from a union whose name is beginning to be mistreated?

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It is undoubtedly necessary to change the mentality used to approach EU-South and East Mediterranean relations for, although the Barcelona ambition remains alluring, the actors are not quite the same and Euro-Mediterranean ‘joint action’ is less desired. Moreover, as in the Middle East, where the Sykes-Picot border demarcations have been shattered, there is still a significant problem regarding the geographic limits of the EU. How far should it (can it?) expand? What types of borders should be proposed to its neighbours, particularly the Mediterranean ones, which are few to walk the path towards democracy and above all display increasingly flagrant differences between them, to the point where the ENP framework, renewed in 2011 (‘more for more’ and the three Ms – ‘markets, mobility and money’), already seems obsolete. It is likely that security issues will override all other dimensions in the Mediterranean region. It is now also certain that even cooperation between the EU and SEMC will be primarily designed to attenuate tensions and threats. Twenty years after the vibrant Barcelona Declaration, now more than ever, the Mediterranean region is challenging. While international geopolitics are becoming increasingly complex and territorial, so-
Social and economic balances in the world are resetting, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, in the absence of impetus and enthusiasm, is slowing or stalled. And finally, the achievements accrued over the two preceding decades seem quite fragile against the emergence of new challenges and the unpredictability still marking the region. The period when trust, determination and will mutually combined seems to have passed, for turbulence, the risk of rupture, incomprehension and confusion pervades the current Euro-Mediterranean period, in a profoundly transformed geostrategic environment.

How pertinent is the Euro-Mediterranean concept to the future? Can it still be revived and relaunched when in 2015, a new institutional European Union has been established and the Barcelona Declaration will turn 20? On what geographic and financial basis? With what institutions and what actors (states, local and regional authorities, businesses, civil society organisations, etc.)? Targeting what sectors and investing in what segments of the population? Should not everything be staked on a minimum number of major strategic issues to attempt to maximise the impact of Euro-Mediterranean policy? How can a new horizon be built for the Mediterranean and how can we overcome the triple crisis – economic, cultural and social – bogging Europe down? Europe must adapt to the realities and context of the 21st century and undertake initiatives to attempt to improve the situation, not only inside its borders but also beyond them.

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One cannot fight geography. Europe should thus ensure its proximity with the southern and eastern Mediterranean seaboard, a proximity that is equally historic and socio-demographic. But for this Euro-Mediterranean concept to take wing, it must also be fostered by the SEMC. Moreover, although the new rules of the social and political game are still to be invented in countries throughout the region, it must be acknowledged that the growing difference between these countries hampers the dynamics of integration. The economic cost of a ‘non-Mediterranean region’ is doubtless exaggerated, but in any case, are we ready to roll with the geopolitical punches of such a ‘non-Mediterranean region’?

Putting Politics Back at the Centre of the Game

The populations on both shores of the Mediterranean have evolved greatly over the past few years, and today, institutions and political actors should do the same. Can Europe continue without reviving its citizens’ engagement with the EU? Europe should revise its priorities and return to centre field the social issues, values of solidarity and cooperation that are the pillars upon which the EU has been built in order to both renew enthusiasm among populations and implement a more farsighted strategy in its neighbourhood, to which it cannot become a spectator.

Despite the frustration and complexity of the current situation in a region of structural political seismicity, must the concept of the Euro-Mediterranean be buried or, on the contrary, should we seek solutions so as not to squander it? If the Europeans and Mediterranean peoples wish to be more than just neighbours and become joint owners of a common future, they must take this opportunity and not disregard their interdependencies. The role of the UfM could be to nurture multilateral dynamics in the region, but above all to promote specific initiatives fostering human development (including on the social and geographic levels) in the long term. The Euro-Mediterranean project should not be discarded, but should certainly be revised and adapted to the new realities.