

European Challenges in the Mediterranean: The Lessons of the Past Year

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2009 has been a difficult year in terms of political relations in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The disputes on the degree of participation of the Arab League in the future of the Union for the Mediterranean, the Gaza conflict and the lack of meetings of experts at a regional level have been some of the negative events which have marked the political agenda this year. However, the good expectations of the Union for the Mediterranean, possible thanks to work undertaken since the Barcelona Process, keep the Euro-Mediterranean spirit alive. This is necessarily linked to the neighbourhood policies with the Nordic and Baltic countries, which have actively participated in the progress and development of the Euro-Mediterranean region since the beginnings of the Barcelona Process.

While I am writing this article at the end of 2009, we have behind us a difficult year in Euro-Mediterranean relations. Also to many independent scholars and observers, it is a year of setbacks and frustration. The bold new projects envisaged in the Paris Summit of July 2008 are still just promises. In addition, in many traditional areas of our inter-governmental activities we have been at a de facto standstill. The autumn of 2008 was severely affected by political dispute on the participation – or not – of the Arab League in the future work of the Union for the Mediterranean. This issue was solved at the Foreign Ministers' Meeting in November and the Arab League thus became a full participant at all levels. The real blow, however, was to come in January 2009, when the Gaza conflict broke out and the Arab group demanded a halt of all inter-governmental meetings.

Let us just remember that out of some 15 sectorial ministerial meetings, planned,

discussed and approved in the work plan of Marseilles last November, none was held during the Czech EU Presidency in the first part of the year. Only at the end of June was a ministerial level meeting on the future sustainable development projects in the Union for the Mediterranean convened in Paris. Although a very successful gathering in itself, it was not considered a regular ministerial meeting and it ended without formal conclusions.

Other expert level activities, such as meetings on countering terrorism, promoting trade relations, and the Horizon 2020 or European Security Defence Policy issues have not taken place since January 2009. This vacuum was partly compensated by the activities of our common institutions and NGOs, which continued to keep up the flame of dialogue in a very sensitive situation. I would particularly like to mention the Euro-Mediterranean Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures.

Rapidly and in a timely manner, it concentrated on the effects that the latest Israeli-Palestinian conflict may have on this dialogue, as a widening gap on perceptions of the conflict seemed to appear between the different sides of the Mediterranean.

Moreover, a new synergy was found between the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Alliance for Civilizations in their joint high level meeting in Paris in March 2009. As a result, a pertinent and much needed programme called “Restore Trust, Rebuild Bridges” was prepared and launched. Thus, the leadership of the Foundation, in the person of President André Azoulay and Director Andreu Claret, has lived up to the expectations in these turbulent times. The meetings of the Euromed Parliamentary Assembly, now under the Presidency of the EU Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, have served the same purpose.

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At the beginning of July, a new calendar of ministerial meetings was announced for the end of the year – starting with the Meeting of Financial Ministers on 7th July and ending in the Foreign Ministers’ meeting of November 2009. It is to be wished that the circumstances on the ground and particularly in the Gaza area will let it continue this way. In spite of the difficult period, the building up of the new institution and rules of the Union for the Mediterranean has kept many people busy in the first year after the Paris Summit last year. It is the greatest wish of all in the Euro-Mediterranean family to see the Secretariat at work in the beautiful Palau de Pedralbes as soon as possible. Only when this is accomplished will there be a new Union for the Mediterranean in full operation. The deadline of the end of May

set by our ministers in Marseilles (November 2008) has already been missed. The surprisingly tricky work of formulating the generally accepted policy declarations into legally binding texts still continues.

While not witnessing the progress and dynamics of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership that had been hoped for, the past year has been a year of learning and reflection. The first one that comes to mind is that we are working in a more political, if not politically explosive, environment than was realised by many. Euromed’s work, and particularly its multilateral dimension, is not just a technical cooperation project or an economic programme. It is basically a political project, a political vision, conceived to support the peace process and consolidate the basis for regional cooperation in the aftermath of the Oslo Agreements in 1995. From the very beginning, the first meeting in Barcelona 1995, it was based on an assumption of a full partnership of all participants, working together towards a zone of peace, security and shared prosperity. The status was given to the Palestinian Authority already seen and recognised by many as an embryo for the future Palestinian State. If this statehood is denied, there cannot be true partnership, as the Palestinian representatives have told us in our political dialogue sessions. That is the reason why the freeze, originally meant as a protest against Israeli military action in Gaza, was re-confirmed after the Israeli election in March 2009, as it practically brought the process towards a two-state solution, already established under the previous administration of Israel, to a stand-still.

There is no doubt that the very spirit of Euromed, now seeking to create a viable Union for the Mediterranean, stands or falls on the capacity of the major players to keep the peace process on track. How to move forward, then, with a dual challenge of doing more in a more vulnerable environment? Ever since the initiative for the new Union for the Mediterranean

was launched, it became quite common to say, particularly in the media, that the Barcelona Process had been a failure. I took it as a very political or self-serving argument because it hardly corresponded to the objective truth. But the useful purpose was, of course, to mobilise general support for a more ambitious project.

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Nevertheless, the Barcelona Process was already constantly growing into new areas and new priorities, always on the initiative or specific wishes of the participant countries. If somebody were to write the history of the Barcelona Process from 1995, it would certainly not be the history of a failure. Rather it has contributed to the consciousness of the Mediterranean area of a common destiny and it created links and working methods that never existed before. The fact that the overall situation in the Mediterranean area has not changed enough, and certainly not as much as hoped, is more a responsibility of the rapidly changing international environment, insufficient internal reform processes on a national level and the lack of capacity to solve fundamental political problems. The Barcelona Process, which is now backed in the new Union for the Mediterranean structures, was of course more modest than its successor. It had no formal common institutions, it was less visible (sometimes, to our great sorrow, even ignored by most of the European daily press). But it worked and kept growing through a *modus vivendi*, jointly accepted practices and its own *acquis*. Faced with the present difficulties in building up common institutions, formalising intergovernmental relations, these facts should at least be kept in mind in order to better understand the present challenges.

Even the argument on lack of visibility of the Barcelona Process could be debated again. As a matter of fact, in many sensitive areas this aspect protected us from many risks and dangers, and permitted intensive work to go on. Many times it was easier to just do things under “tacit approval” than to write down solemn principles and seek publicity. This is true, especially if the whole partnership is constantly swinging between hope and despair, and a success for one side could be seen as a setback for the other. But in spite of the absence of written rules, it worked. The process went forward, grew in substance and made progress. In 2005-2006, for instance, we tried hard to write down the rules in a codified way – and also to improve our working methods. This process was later abandoned because we were simply not able to write down even the existing and on-going practices.

When holding the Presidency in the latter part of the year 2006, one of the crucial assets we had was to capitalise on the common trust and confidence that had to be gained from all partners to the benefit of everyone. As a small country, without pre-selected national agendas or hidden interests of her own, Finland was able to keep it going in the aftermath of the devastating South Lebanon conflict in August 2006. In some areas, we were able to take the process forward by making some important reforms. For instance, in the Tampere Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in November 2006 it was decided to organise future Foreign Ministers’ meetings as yearly events, taking place at the end of the year and approving the coming work programme by calendar years. To strengthen the aspect of democracy and rule of law, we reached an agreement in principle to discuss electoral systems in all Euromed member states, first among the senior officials. This debate started in 2007 and continued on a voluntary country-by-country basis until the freeze in 2009. But again, all this took place in

the background of the ongoing Peace Process, and we trust that one day there may be a settlement in the Middle East.

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Now a page has been turned. Whatever the difficulties in constructing the Union for the Mediterranean, our immediate task is to make the new structures work. As a high level representative of the European Commission reminded us in a recent seminar, having difficulties does not give us the right to abandon the project. Indeed it has to be pursued and trusted, the work and the effort to go forward have to continue, and there is no way back. On the basis of the lessons learned from the previous experience, we should be more pragmatic than just spectacular; we should be more effective than just noisy. And we should make more serious effort to put aside narrow national interests, particularly when they hamper the progress towards a common and shared goal. Only in this way can the original objective of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, to create a zone of peace, stability and shared prosperity, now inherited by the new Union for the

Mediterranean, still an unwritten page as I write these lines, come true.

We are often asked about Finland's interest, as a distant country on the Baltic Sea, in Euro-Mediterranean activities. To this the reply is that through Finland's membership of the European Union, since 1995, many if not all Mediterranean issues have come much closer to Finland and in many cases they concern us directly, whether they are to be considered as challenges or opportunities. In many sectors, starting with trade, development, migration, environment, energy or even research and higher education, we are aiming at a common EU policy and coordination. It is therefore only natural that Finland, together with other Nordic and Baltic countries is actively and fully involved when these policies are formulated and implemented in our neighbourhood. We are also eager to see that the European Neighbourhood Policy develops well and in a balanced manner in all directions, both South and East, although institutional solutions and formulas may differ. There is also a good opportunity for synergy between Baltic Sea cooperation in the North and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation with the southern partners, as witnessed by many seminars and gatherings organised by or together with the IEMed.