

# The Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Strategy: A Path for Civil Society

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The activities of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, the Ministerial Conference on Culture held in May 2008 or the recent launching of the Union for the Mediterranean are important initiatives for the development of cultural policies in the region. However, there have been almost no effective results in civil society, especially in southern Mediterranean countries. The lack of artists' mobility or the incapacity of management by governments are only some aspects of the daily reality in the cultural field. Progress in this respect must necessarily have the participation of civil society, exclusively capable of expressing and managing the resources for the development of effective cultural policies in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

In May 2008, for the second time in the history of the Barcelona Process, the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Culture was held. The most interesting result, and with possible concrete effects, was the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Strategy, consisting of two main lines: intercultural dialogue and cultural policy.

In 2005, the European Commission and the governments of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. According to its promoters, this was to be the instrument allowing the implementation of the content of the report of the Group of Wise Men brought together at the initiative of the then President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi. In its short but eventful existence (three different directors in four years), the Anna Lindh Foundation does not seem to have yet

consolidated its mission, halfway between the desire to represent civil society through its national networks and the clear obstacle of being an inter-governmental institution in which the directors of the national networks are directly appointed by the governments of each country – except in the case of France –, with all its consequences. Another fairly perplexing aspect is the vast field of action of the Foundation, which embraces the whole “basket” 3 of the Barcelona Declaration; an extensive programme which, for the time being, has not yet been fully articulated. Despite this situation, the Anna Lindh Foundation is at present the only Euro-Mediterranean institution created for culture or, rather, for the dialogue between cultures.

To implement the mandate of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers for Culture, the European Commission has asked a group of experts to write a report based on a question-

naire and a series of interviews with cultural agents from the southern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans, including some countries which do not form part of the European Union. In fact, two months after the Athens Ministerial Conference, on the initiative of France, and with quite an eventful trajectory, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership became the Union for the Mediterranean, also being extended to countries such as Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro. We should recall that the new structure foresees the two-year co-Presidency of a country from the North (currently France) and another from the South (currently Egypt), the establishment of a Secretariat in Barcelona with six different secretaries, appointed by the same number of countries, and the development of six projects related to the following issues: de-pollution of the Mediterranean, maritime and land highways, civil protection, alternative energies, higher education and research, and company development. None of the projects affects the cultural field, and even less civil society.

The parenthesis of the Union for the Mediterranean is necessary to appropriately define the action of the European Commission in this new phase: will culture characterise it in the framework of the new structures? In fact, on 12th October 2009 in Brussels a seminar was held to which 28 of the agents and artists of the South and the Balkans were invited along with representatives of the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Euromed Non-Governmental Platform. The objective of the seminar was to discuss the report and issue proposals. However, both in terms of the report and its discussion, the panorama of the situation has turned out to be practically the same, if not worse, with the only exception of the Balkan countries, which come from very different political situations.

The total or partial lack of freedom of as-

sociation, of expression and of creation; the lack of funding or, even worse, the clientelist adscription and the incapacity of governments to manage the funds is the reality in which southern agents and artists continue to work. The increasingly more difficult mobility of people and works of art rounds off a desolating panorama of a “list of grievances” which does not seem to have ended.

Moreover, although the conclusions of the Athens Ministerial Conference are probably among the most innovative produced until now in these kinds of meetings, the influence that the European Commission can exercise on the autonomy of the southern governments is almost non-existent. Thus, what could this Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Strategy be?

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Once again, it is not possible to do without civil society in the region, as it is the only actor which can express the reality and the artistic and cultural needs, as well as undertaking the necessary action so that the right to art and culture, in its widest possible sense, can be exercised. And, in this task, the European Commission can undoubtedly be a “virtuous accomplice” in the action of linking civil society and governments. How? In the simplest way, by putting at the disposal of those involved instruments allowing their activities with full respect for their independence: infrastructure and project funding programmes, and supporting the creation of national, regional and inter-regional networks. Perhaps this is “Columbus’ egg”, an exercise in “lateral thinking”, but it is the only path that remains to be followed to

achieve a dual objective: to allow and promote the free exercise of cultural and artistic activities and, in parallel, to encourage the governments in a kind of positive competition. To this

end, the Euromed Non-Governmental Platform seeks to be a space of dialogue and meeting for the development of the Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Network.