

Barcelona 95, 25 Years on: Some Political Considerations

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A Seminal Moment

Twenty-five years ago, the Final Declaration of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference held in Barcelona in 1995 was approved, kick-starting the Barcelona Process, as it is known. This began a new era in the relations between Europe and the Arab Countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, together with Turkey and Israel. It was a time of great optimism for Europe and the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the decomposition of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR itself. It was the end of a bipolar world in a precarious and tense confrontational balance under the nuclear threat.

The central stage of this contest had precisely been Europe, which had been torn by the confrontation with its eastern half, dominated by the Soviet power. Western Europe, the “free Europe,” had to take refuge under the protective shield of NATO so that, with defence guaranteed by the US’s nuclear power, they could contain Soviet expansionism, which had already engulfed half the continent, taking advantage of the results of the Second World War in the dark, confused, early post-war years.

The 1990s was thus a decade of optimism for Europe and of confidence in the future. Throughout the West it was even believed that this was, as per the renowned book by Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” understood as a history of confrontations. This was to be followed, after the final victory of liberal capitalism over communism, by a sort of “perpetual peace” like the one imagined by Kant two

centuries earlier. Beyond its central arena, bipolar confrontation had been reflected throughout the “Third World,” hindering understanding among countries and intermingling with any disputes leading to confrontation rather than co-operation. In the Mediterranean and the Arab world in general, the new “perpetual” peace would end rivalries between conservatives and radicals, aligned until then with Washington or Moscow.

Putting the Middle East peace process on the right track – with the way paved by the Camp David Accords, the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords – completed the scenario for establishing a project of “*Pax Mediterranea*” based on good understanding and co-operation. The European Union’s basic strategic approach for the new era consisted of attracting neighbours from both the East and the South to its area of progress and stability. The EU was already considered, and rightly so, the best historic experience of a successful project of regional co-operation and integration among countries traditionally at odds for centuries. In the optimistic atmosphere of 1995, the idea was to project its progress and stability by attracting the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean to its camp. To those in Eastern Europe, it would offer aid for their transition to a market economy and democratic institutions, together with the prospect of future integration into the EU proper. To those of the South, it would offer Association and Partnership, through which the shockwave of European progress would reach the other side of the Mediterranean. This was expected to decisively boost the countries of the South so they could take the definitive leap into institutional, economic and cultural modernization. The undertaking was therefore enormous, a major political project of historic scope to create a great, pan-Medi-

terranean area of peace and stability that was to be driven economically by the shared economic progress that a major free trade area would generate. Technical and financial European aid would be available to Southern partner countries for the necessary upgrading of firms and productive sectors, and would also serve to reform economic regulations and policies as well as administrative institutions, education or healthcare systems. It would come in the form of MEDA funds – nearly a billion euros a year – and loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB). These resources would also finance civil society projects of cultural co-operation and exchange that governments vowed to facilitate as a fundamental ingredient of intercultural dialogue and understanding among the peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean.

The Partnership's Evolution

The subsequent evolution of the Barcelona Process and its continuation through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as of 2004 and the Union for the Mediterranean since 2008 has been recounted repeatedly, including by myself and other authors both in the North and the South. But the focus has generally been on the results of Euro-Mediterranean policy as an EU success or failure. I believe that after 25 years, it may be of greater interest to analyse it from the perspective of the South.

In fact, all of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries attending (except for Libya, which was not invited due to sanctions after the Lockerbie bombing) expressed their agreement with the Final Declaration and welcomed it as a historical occasion for their relations with Europe and their own neighbouring countries. The Final Declaration represented a double pact. First of all, it was the result of an agreement among Europeans: the EU and its member states would launch a historical co-operation project in favour of the South, extolled by Europe's Mediterranean countries such as France, Spain or Italy, in exchange for the implementation of a large-scale co-operation project with the East demanded by Germany and the Northern European

countries. Secondly and more importantly, the Final Declaration and the Barcelona Process itself was also clearly a major North-South pact between the EU and its member states on the one hand, and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean partner countries on the other. Europe committed to aid and facilitate the development and modernization of Southern countries by facilitating their exports and via extensive technical and financial assistance and co-operation programmes. The now Mediterranean Partner Countries committed to fostering the economic and social development of their countries through a broad process of reform in order to modernize their economic and social structures. Moreover, in this vein, they specifically pledged to “develop the rule of law and democracy” and “respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and guarantee the effective legitimate exercise of such rights and freedoms,” as well as to “act in accordance with the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”¹ It was assumed that these fundamental United Nations documents encapsulated the values accepted as shared and a basis for all understanding.

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Formally, all the partner countries had such principles already imbedded in their own constitutional texts, so that they did not hesitate to accept and approve the entire Final Declaration. But the reality that would gradually emerge over the years was that none of the authoritarian regimes of the South ever had the intention of truly applying its political and institutional part, neither literally nor in the spirit of said

¹ The Barcelona Declaration, adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference on 27-28/11/95 (www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf)

commitment. Except for the gradual import tariff abatement concretely agreed, the economy was only slightly liberalized, in areas that did not harm the position of the economic and political elite. For its part, Europe understood that the reform process in Southern countries would be gradual but effective, as a voluntarist endeavour by their governments. Economic growth and development would facilitate and boost the modernization of society and mind-sets. Society would, in turn, demand the necessary, progressive democratization of the traditional authoritarian regimes.

Over the past years there has been frequent talk of the EU's failure in its approach and fostering of the Barcelona Process's Euro-Mediterranean Policy, which was fundamentally a European Community policy shared with its Southern partners. But the reality is much more serious than the failure or not of an EU policy. The reality is that the Southern countries failed, to differing degrees, in the great, supposedly shared project of economic, social and political development of their countries, letting the opportunity go to waste due to a persistent refusal to change and reform. And this refusal, this rejection, was not only directed against reforms of a clearly political nature, excluding any hint of democratization of the traditional authoritarian countries. Reforms were only undertaken, to differing degrees depending on the country, when they clearly favoured and did not harm the economic and political establishment, as mentioned above. Privatizations were carried out to the benefit of groups close to those in power; reforms of the banking system were rarely effective; tariff liberalization was usually substituted by all sorts of hindrances or administrative licences, likewise granted to those close to power; etc.

This notwithstanding, countries progressed over the course of these years, although clearly also in variable ways and to differing degrees. It is interesting to note that the countries growing and progressing the most are those that played the game of the Barcelona Process, starting with the first ones to subscribe their Association Agreements with the EU: Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan. From 1995 to 2015, the per capita GDP of Arab Mediterranean countries, excluding Libya and Syria, which never signed an as-

sociation agreement, rose from \$1,741 to \$2,670, with a growth rate of 82%. Tunisia went from \$2,013 to \$3,218, with a growth rate of 92%; Morocco went from \$1,424 to \$2,023, with a growth rate of 101%; while Jordan was the champion, going from \$1,157 to \$2,361, with a growth rate of 362%². In the same period, the EU-28 countries had grown from \$16,522 to \$26,205, with a growth rate of 82%.

From this perspective, therefore, there was some convergence between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean. The average GDP of the Southern countries went from 10.52% of the average per capita GDP of the EU-28 to 14.4% in 2015. But this growth is wholly insufficient for countries in their stage of development. In absolute terms, the North-South difference between the average per capita GDP went from \$14,781 to \$25,775.³ The North's per capita GDP was 9.48 times greater than the South's in 1995, and still 6.93 times higher in 2015. Clearly, at this rate, it would take many decades to reach significant convergence. In absolute terms, an increase of 149% added \$2,605 to the South's per capita GDP, while an increase of only 82% added \$13,599 to the North over those 20 years. The truth is that the Southern Mediterranean countries were starting from far too low a level. To become a new tiger and change status like many Asian countries, an annual growth rate of at least 6-7% is required. Morocco, considered the best "student" of the Barcelona Process, had an average annual growth of 1% of the real per capita GDP from 1990 to 2000. From the year 2000, when the Association Agreement entered into effect and also when the reign of Mohamed VI began, until 2015, this average annual growth rose to 3.4%. It was much better, but still far from emulating the Asian tigers. To reach higher growth rates, the reform process should have been much more intense and devoid of the impediments imposed to preserve the traditional inertias and old and new benefits and privileges.

If we set aside the difficult goal of attaining the same per capita GDP as the EU, which means comparing yourself with precisely the most advanced, wealthiest countries in the world, it is true that the Mediterranean partner countries have significantly changed

² SIGILMASSI, Fatallah, *L'Avenir de l'Europe est au sud*, Rabat, 2019

³ Ibid.

over these years thanks to the efforts of their entire societies, though clearly to insufficient levels. The illiteracy rate in Morocco, to continue with this significant example, fell from 58% in 1995 to 30% in 2015. This is a big improvement from the previous, hyper-catastrophic situation, but it is certainly not enough and indicates what is still one of the country's most important problems. Today, 98% of the youngest sector of the population is enrolled in primary school, although there is a great deal to be improved regarding the effectiveness and quality of the educational system, a fact admitted even by its own government. Although it reveals a high degree of social injustice, it must be noted that the country's governing elite enjoys a very high level of education, which, though unfair, is still clearly one of the country's assets, which can explain its good management and substantial improvement over the past 20 years.

Despite all the limitations, the societies of the Arab world in general have evolved extraordinarily over the past 25 years. Youth and professional classes have entered modernity

Despite all these limitations, the societies of the Arab world in general have evolved extraordinarily over the past 25 years. Youth and professional classes have entered modernity in various aspects, with outstanding changes in outlook, education and aspirations, clashing in turn with the immobilism in the traditional authoritarian Arab States. The revolutions sparked in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 went precisely in this sense, but their expansion to the rest of the Arab world has had different effects on three distinct groups:

1. Countries where change has progressed the most, via revolution as in Tunisia, or via reform as in Morocco or Jordan.
2. Countries having gas or oil-based income and thus having avoided reform by increasing civil servant salaries and all sorts of subsidies, as in Algeria and, on another level, the Gulf States.
3. Countries in which the revolution has failed, some returning to the stability imposed by an authoritarian regime, as in Egypt, while others flounder in the disasters of war and destruction, fuelled by all sorts of external actors, as in Syria and Libya.

It is also interesting to note that the countries that have best managed to channel change have been precisely those that played their Barcelona Process and Euro-Mediterranean Association cards more fully, such as Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan.

A European Neighbourhood Policy for Integration

This was facilitated by the evolution of the Barcelona Process, which has been extraordinarily strengthened on a bilateral level by the ENP since 2005, and by the progressive implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) since 2008 as a general framework for Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The ENP is governed and applied in the different countries by virtue of their Association Agreement, the child of the Barcelona Process. As Romano Prodi, the then-President of the Commission, announced in 2004, the ENP allows each country to advance in its process of economic integration with the European economic area, progressively entering the "European Internal Market" to the measure it desires. To do this, it need not be an EU member state, as clearly demonstrated by the cases of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, which have been part of the European Economic Area (EEA) since 1994 through the agreement between the EU and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA); or Switzerland, which also became part of the EEA through its own bilateral accords with the EU. They are all part of the Schengen Area as well, with the abolishment of interior borders and a common exterior visa, without belonging to the EU. There is thus a possibility of progressively establishing some sort of **Euro-Mediterranean Community of Economic Integration** that would include the EU and other EEA countries, together with willing Mediterranean partner countries. It means, certainly, that the latter should be ready to lose and transfer part of their national sovereignty in the process of integration, which may prove difficult to truly accept.

As a setting for dialogue and negotiation, the UfM has a broad scope of work in this progressive horizon, although it is realistic to believe that the specific agreements will most likely have a bilateral nature within the framework of the ENP. The ENP has progressively stepped up and deepened the co-operation and incipient economic integration of Mediterranean partner countries in this EU-Euromed economic area (in order to take a stake in the European interior market, as President Romano Prodi put it), according to their individual possibilities and effective will, through negotiation and the implementation of the respective Action Plans. The funds of the new European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) accompanying them and substituting the former MEDA funds from 2007 have been wholly insufficient to lead to the changes intended. But at least they have doubled over the last ten years, going from some billion euros per year to approximately two billion. At the same time, EIB loans to Mediterranean partner countries through the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and other instruments have generally doubled ENI figures.

A clear expression of the ENP's progressive nature was most certainly Morocco's Advanced Status with the EU, established in 2008 to step up their relations and whose goal was already "Morocco's progressive integration into the interior EU market..." Granting Advanced Status was a clear expression of political support for Morocco's good progress as an associated country, with few immediate practical effects. But it was an important declaration of principles that could serve as a blueprint for further agreements to be reached.

The ENI will now be substituted by the new, forthcoming Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), that will consolidate all the EU's financial instruments for external action. This could prove a good opportunity to establish a significant increase in available funds, added to the amounts earmarked for associated countries through the new major Next Generation EU solidarity project set up to deal with the serious crisis generated in Europe by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, €96.4 billion has been proposed for all EU ex-

ternal action financed by the NDICI, including €11.4 billion for the Next Generation Programme in its international aid facet. Of all of these funds, in their geographic component, at least €22 billion are to go towards the Eastern and Southern ENP. This should reach some €28 billion, if one includes the thematic components of the NDICI for promoting human rights and democracy, civil society organizations, stability and peace, and the Global Challenges generally associated with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This would mean practically doubling the €15 billion that the ENI had available during the 2014-2020 period. It continues to be insufficient, since the target figure should be an annual €10 billion⁴ instead of €4 billion. But at least it's an important step towards attaining significant figures, above all if they are distributed with drastic differentiation among the countries wishing to carry out effective reforms to join a future **Euro-Mediterranean Community of Economic Integration** based on the shared values of Democracy and Human Rights. All the better if such countries are distinguished with a clearly differentiated status that can be envied by all, with visible, significant practical effects on the political, institutional and economic levels.

The Labours of the Union for the Mediterranean

As a result of the July 2008 Mediterranean Summit, followed by the ministerial meeting that would concretize its results in December of that year, the Barcelona Process or Euro-Mediterranean Association was enormously strengthened, this time in its multilateral facet, by the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the establishment of its Secretariat as an international organization based in Barcelona. The UfM, in its initial proposal by President Sarkozy, intended to substitute the Barcelona Process, renationalizing the project and therefore excluding the EU institutions and non-Mediterranean European countries. This absurd initial project had to be corrected and ended up reinforcing the Euro-Mediterranean Association to a large extent. From its Sarkozian roots, it has retained a dimen-

⁴ FLORENSA, Senén: "The Euromed Dream in the New Hobbesian International Wilderness," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*. IEMed, Barcelona, 2015

sion of projects with the ambition of structuring the Mediterranean space, though without the financial means nor the competencies to do so. But above all, it has gradually become consolidated as a central platform for Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, both on the political level and in the different sectoral configurations of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conferences.

Hercules, the hero later raised to Olympus, did not attain the golden apples of the Garden of the Hesperides until completing eleven of his famous twelve labours. It is difficult to ascertain at what labour the UfM project is now, but it's clear that the apples are still far away. Which does not mean that its work is not important. On the contrary, the UfM, and in particular its Secretariat, had a complicated beginning. Attempting to exclude the European Community Institutions from the Euro-Mediterranean project with no budgetary means or competencies other than those of the EU was not a great idea. The good professionals at the Quai d'Orsay knew this, though the project came from the Elysée Palace and its venture-some advisors. At times, ignorance is extremely daring. How could you launch a Union for the Mediterranean excluding the EU and its non-shoreline member states when, separately from the EU, France and the rest of the EU members cannot even take the first step of any economic integration project, namely the preferential trade agreements? Exterior trade and tariff policies have been the exclusive purview and responsibility of the European Community (and afterwards the EU) since 1957! Today, member states have already transferred to the EU such an extensive, crucial part of their sovereignty as to turn a proposal of a Union for the Mediterranean excluding the EU institutions and most of its member states into a mockery for the Southern partner countries. And if no budgetary means are even offered other than those of the European Commission, which is excluded and is out of the game, the proposal is difficult to qualify. It is true that in 1995, a reunified Germany was building privileged relations with Central and Eastern European countries, its former, natural historical and economic space before 1945, but it was doing so with its own means, with a governmental approach and private investments to attract these countries to Western Europe and NATO. Russian troops, whether Soviet or not, had been pushed from the Brandenburg Gates (in reality, from the

Elbe and Saal) 1,500 km eastwards. But the true guarantee of security and stability, for Germany and all of Western Europe, consisted of attracting Poland, Hungary and other Eastern and Central European countries towards the EU and NATO's economic, political and security zone of influence. It was therefore considered a major European Community project, whose fundamental instruments and goals were those of the EU. This being the case, Chancellor Merkel had to explain to President Sarkozy that it was not a good idea for Germany to have an area of preferential relations to the East of the EU, and France another to the South of it. This would divide the EU and was even dangerous; it could reawaken the worst demons of Europe's past, that had fortunately fallen into oblivion, thanks precisely to the historical success of the EU integration project. The initial fuzziness of the Union for the Mediterranean idea was thus corrected and the UfM was born as a genuine continuation of the Barcelona Process.

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The Euro-Mediterranean Association was strengthened by the UfM in this new stage through greater co-appropriation of the project by Southern countries. A North-South co-presidency system was established and it was lent a permanent General Secretariat in Barcelona. But it took years to truly recover the trust of European Institutions. The latter could obviously not transfer the responsibilities, budgets and traditional programmes of the Barcelona Process, which was the EU policy for the Mediterranean, with all of its budgets and instruments, en masse to a multilateral organization co-partnered by 43 members. But it was likewise not necessary nor admissible to leave the new organization and its

Secretariat destitute. Fortunately, the situation has gradually been corrected. The budgets for the UfM and its Secretariat continue to cover only its administrative expenses, with no capacity for budgetary action to foster the projects it was entrusted. But the most important thing is that the UfM has increasingly become the platform for dialogue, negotiation and consultation to advance the project of progressive Euro-Mediterranean integration.

Dialogue, agreements and association with their European neighbours continue to be the best path for Arab countries towards economic and social development

Clearly, the UfM can neither absorb nor substitute the ENP, which is a substantial part of the EU's own policy towards the Mediterranean. Moreover, at this point, the EU's bilateral agreements with Southern partner countries cannot be substituted by trade or other multilateral UfM agreements because it seems impossible to gain mutual concessions among the Southern countries themselves, at least so far. But consultation and dialogue are constant through the Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs), the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conferences in their various sectoral and thematic formats, under a North-South co-presidency and with the active participation in all of them of the UfM's General Secretariat, which thus gains a notable role as a driving force. Annual UfM Forums provide a more informal, dynamic framework, with intergovernmental and civil society participation. The "major structuring projects" of the Mediterranean area, including "labelled", concrete projects, have been progressively understood as

spheres of activity that are a priority for the economic and social development of Mediterranean partner countries. Such spheres range from economic and business development and job creation, to energy and climate change, not to mention higher education and research, women, youth and civil society, water and the environment, or transport, infrastructures and urban development.

In the meantime, the Mediterranean has become an increasingly complicated, troubled area. The Middle East conflict is further from a solution than ever. The execrable wars of Afghanistan and Iraq have projected their pernicious effects on the Mediterranean region and the Arab world, with an exacerbation of international terrorism that has reached the entire world, although hitting mainly Muslim victims. The wars in Syria and Libya have shown the worst face of fratricidal civil confrontation and the perverse effects of their manipulation through interventionism of third-party powers. The Arab world in particular, and the Islamic one in general, continue to struggle between the urge for modernity and reactionism, in a tension unresolved in their recent history. But certainly, dialogue, agreements and association with their European neighbours continue to be the best path for Arab countries towards economic and social development. And it is by advancing towards a **Euro-Mediterranean Community of Economic Integration** that Europe and the whole of Mediterranean countries can progress. They should then work together to co-operate with the remainder of countries in their new extended neighbourhood, both African and Arab, establishing a wider Partnership to build a better world for their peoples and for the whole of the International Community. Europe will have to meet the challenge of accompanying the development and modernization of both the Arab world and Africa through a decisive partnership. It will be difficult and expensive, but any other alternative would prove to be much more so.