On the occasion of the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and in light of the prominent role played by the transport projects included in the Union’s founding declaration, it is worth revisiting and analysing the evolution of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the sphere of transport.

In 2003, in these pages, it was noted that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership’s troubled history with regard to transport had finally begun to find its way, focusing on the issues that truly mattered to the region’s countries. Indeed, after several patchy years, the European Commission issued a communication ‘on the development of a Euro-Mediterranean transport network’ and launched two initiatives aimed at developing regional transport: the creation of an action plan and the identification of the region’s infrastructure priorities.

Five years later, progress has finally been made on these aspects of Euro-Mediterranean transport cooperation. Proof of this can be found in a brief review of the main figures involved in the process and the chief activities carried out through multilateral cooperation in the sphere of Mediterranean transport.

There are basically two spheres of transport cooperation in the Mediterranean. On one hand, there is Euro-Mediterranean cooperation for the region as a whole, based on the Barcelona process and, more recently, the UfM. On the other, there is sub-regional cooperation in the Western Mediterranean, headed up by the Group of Transport Ministers of the Western Mediterranean (GTMO 5+5).

This cooperation, despite its sub-regional status, has emerged as the true driving force behind cooperation in the Mediterranean at large.

Indeed, with its dynamism and activities, which will be discussed below, the GTMO 5+5 has obliged the European Commission to adopt a briser, more ambitious pace with regard to cooperation for the Mediterranean as a whole.

Spheres of Cooperation

In the Western Mediterranean it has long been argued, in accordance with the region’s countries, that transport cooperation should be based on the analysis and status of regional infrastructure. This insistence on the part of the GTMO 5+5 is what ultimately ‘helped’ the European Commission build its activities around these issues.

Thus, in recent years, the European Commission has promoted several main activities in the region: first, contemplation by ‘Europe’ of extending trans-European transport networks to neighbouring countries; second, the adaptation of the Regional Transport Action Plan (RTAP), which serves as a road map, setting out the targets and actions to be promoted and carried out; and, third, the definition of a trans-Mediterranean transport network, including the identification of priority projects.

The RTAP is a plan to intensify regional cooperation and to create an efficient transport system, which is seen as a critical and necessary condition for economic growth and integration in the Mediterranean.

The current Plan covers the 2007-2013 period and was formally requested by the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference of Marrakesh. The RTAP comprises a series of 34 actions in different transport sectors (maritime, road, rail, air and multimodal) and primarily seeks regulatory (institutional) reform and the planning and implementation of a trans-Mediterranean transport infrastructure network. It moreover includes sustainable
development, security and institutional considerations.
Many of the actions – in particular, those relating to regulatory reform – are to be implemented at the national level, but monitored at the multilateral level within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Transport Forum, with technical support from the European Commission through EuroMed regional projects (SAFEMED, MEDA-MoS Motorways of the Sea, GNSS and the EuroMed Aviation Project) and technical assistance and twinning programmes at the bilateral level.
The actions relating to infrastructure envisage the detailed identification of projects based on the main transport corridors linking Mediterranean countries with each other and/or with the European Union with a view to paving the way for investment decisions at the multilateral level.

The Impetus of the GTMO 5+5

Under this heading, the actions included under the RTAP acknowledge both the consideration given to extending the main trans-European transport corridors to neighbouring countries and the initiatives of the GTMO 5+5 and its technical secretariat, CETMO. The aim is to design a strategic infrastructure network for the Mediterranean as a whole, the Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network (TMN-T), similar to the Trans-European Network (TEN-T), so as to ensure that the reference points and technical tools for analysing flows and exchanges in the region are the same in European and southern Mediterranean countries.
The initiative is a continuation of the work already performed by the GTMO 5+5 for Maghreb countries, which the European Commission has adopted as its own with a view to extending it to include the entire Mediterranean.

Indeed, at the ministerial meeting held in Tunis in November 2008, the GTMO 5+5 approved the Maghreb countries’ multimodal transport network (see maps), thereby turning it into a model to follow for southern Mediterranean countries at large (and even African countries, as expressed by the European Commissioner for Transport).

For the Maghreb countries, priority has essentially been given to projects relating to the region’s main land transport corridors

Parallel to the TMN-T, efforts are being made to identify priority transport infrastructure projects in southern countries. These priorities are identified based on technical criteria and by consensus with each country, but also multilaterally. To this end, whilst in the Western Mediterranean, and thanks to the existence of the GTMO 5+5, the Maghreb countries’ priorities had once again been identified by the start of the year, problems have arisen in the Eastern Mediterranean due to the political conflicts in the Middle East. For the Maghreb countries, priority has essentially been given to projects relating to the region’s main land transport corridors, in particular to the Maghreb Union Motorway and the modernisation and interoperability of the trans-Maghreb railway.

However, all of these initiatives, which constitute major progress in terms of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, are nevertheless insufficient to meet the high expectations placed in this cooperation by southern countries.

The Touchstone

The key question remains unanswered, namely, how to finance transport infrastructure projects. This is what southern countries have been asking for from the start of the Barcelona Process.
With regard to financing, the emergence of the UfM should help to address the issue, as well as with the identification and availability of the necessary mechanisms and funds to overcome the impasse of earlier years.
The solution lies in a combination of instruments and measures. On one hand, mechanisms are required to ensure long-term performance and institutional guarantees for investments. On the other, public grants for investments in priority infrastructure projects must be significantly increased. Finally, the development and adoption of a regional system providing legal protection for infrastructure investments must be encouraged in order to generate confidence in investors and increase the return on projects.

As for public grants or donations, the GTMO 5+5 has taken an initial step, tabling a proposal to address the constant requests made by southern countries for help from the European Union in the form of ‘donations’ to improve transport infrastructure. The proposal encapsulates the spirit of the joint declaration from the UFM’s Paris Summit, which speaks of cooperation on ‘equal footing’.

The GTMO 5+5’s proposal is to set up, within the framework of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, a programme, with the necessary funding, to develop the Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network similar to the programme in place for the Trans-European Network. A fund would be created for the TMN-T, which, like the European fund, would work by means of calls for projects, the assessment of submitted proposals and the allocation of funds to those proposals receiving the highest scores.

This would make it possible to meet the needs of southern countries through a process, at both the technical and institutional levels, similar to that used in Europe. However, rather than redistributing funds previously contributed by the countries, as is the case with the Trans-European Network, it would consist of a donation of European development aid funds.

This proposal would break the cycle of unanswered requests for funding for transport infrastructure in the South. It would moreover require southern Mediterranean countries’ projects to meet higher technical standards, obliging them to compete against each other during the assessments.

The amount to be allocated to the fund can easily be included in the European Union’s development aid budgets, whether within the framework of the Neighbourhood Policy or other complementary policies.

The creation of the UfM, with the aim of promoting specific projects, is an opportunity to resolve the thorny issue of funding for transport infrastructure projects, which is indisputably the touchstone for the credibility of all European policy on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.