

The Partnership in the Year of Intercultural Dialogue

Panorama

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Ten years on from their last meeting, Ministers of Culture of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership convened again in Athens on 29-30 May 2008, under the Slovenian Presidency. The Council of Europe subsequently held a new ministerial conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, on 2-3 December, while the French government was organising the Mediterranean Cultural Forum on 4-5 November. These are just three of the initiatives that took place in 2008 to celebrate the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, which this author was able to participate in.

The outbreak of conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, the increase in hostility displayed by Europeans towards people from outside the European Union and the consequent security measures taken by European governments and the so-called “terrorist emergency” declared immediately after 9/11 are all factors that have finally led the cultural option, particularly intercultural dialogue, to be considered as a possible instrument for problem resolution.

The Euro-Mediterranean civil society has always used common projects in the cultural arena as indispensable instruments for spreading mutual knowledge throughout the different Member States. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, on the other hand, has focused on policies that safeguard heritage (Euromed Heritage) and audio-visual material (Euromed Audio-visual). In fact, the Anna Lindh Foundation, created in 2005, is the first and only structure specifically dedicated to intercultural dialogue. Despite the diffuse nature of its actions, the Foundation remains an inter-governmental instrument with all the restrictions of accessibility and representation that this implies.

The Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Culture in Athens

The two key stages of the conference, the meeting of the ministers and their conclusions, should be distinguished in order to gain a realistic overview. The conference itself served to publicly present work carried out at other moments in time, which preceded the conclusions but could give a reasonably accurate idea of how things stand. Most of the ministers made reference to what constitutes historical heritage in their own culture and –particularly governments in the South– sought recognition for what they claimed to be a major role in the creation and definition of a common cultural context, while any kind of reference to what constitutes contemporary cultural and artistic production and the concept of cultural diversity was entirely absent from the debate.

This approach is symptomatic of the standpoint most governments adopt regarding culture, and therefore, the possibility of dialogue, often seen as a remote consideration; an attitude reflected in the almost total absence of support for independent cultural activities from governments in the South, and in the marginal support from some governments in the North, as is the case in Italy.

Considering culture exclusively in terms of heritage or claims for recognition is not conducive to a favourable orientation of a government’s cultural policies, whether on a national or international scale. If freedom of expression, of association and a secular state cannot be guaranteed, then neither can the right to culture, neither in terms of its access nor its production.

However, the conclusions were developed in such a way as to contradict this initial impression.

Without doubt one of the most significant moments was the constitution of the Euro-Mediterranean Strategy on Culture as an instrument for “enhancing the cultural dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in a way which is both innovative and focused” and relating intercultural dialogue with cultural policies. Reference was also made to culture as an instrument for fostering democracy, human rights and fundamental liberties, and to combat racism, xenophobia and extremism. Ministers recognised the need to improve mobility for artists, intellectuals and teachers, as well as for cultural and artistic products, simplifying among other things, procedures for issuing entry visas.

Emphasis was given to the need for a fair consideration of cultural and linguistic minorities, although this would have to take national legislation into account.

On the subject of cultural policies, ministers agreed on the need to establish a greater balance for cultural exchanges, whose notorious imbalance is tipped heavily in favour of the European area.

Finally, the need was recognised to foster contemporary cultural creation with the aim of “perpetuating our rich cultural heritage” and the need to intensify cooperation with civil society, assuming this is done “in accordance with national legislation.”

The Baku Conference

The Council of Europe, with its 47 Member States and a structure which, thanks to its characteristics, is surely more agile, celebrated the Year of Intercultural Dialogue with a conference for Ministers of Culture, which was extended to give room to representatives of both civil society and religious communities.

The host nation, Azerbaijan, is a candidate for the headquarters for the “Artists for Dialogue” project. The initiative, if set in motion, could respond effectively to the needs of artists and contemporary creators for a programme that finances their creations and also aids their dissemination.

The premises on which the declaration is based make reference to the European Convention on Human Rights and to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. The stated principles are similar to those contained in the conclusions of the ministerial meeting in Athens,

but pay more attention to the richness of cultural diversity and, hence to the need to defend and value this. There is also more emphasis on respecting human rights through free cultural activity and the declaration makes explicit reference to the role of religions in the field of dialogue.

Although it was scarcely mentioned, it is precisely the religious dimension as a subject for dialogue that, along with matters regarding democracy and freedom of expression, constitutes one of the most critical points in question.

Mediterranean Cultural Forum

Organised by the French government and initiated the same day as the Union for the Mediterranean Ministerial Conference, this meeting aspired to be the point of convergence for three other such events that took place in Paris (September 2006), Seville (June 2007) and Alexandria (January 2008).

Subdivided into eight thematic workshops, the Forum had the pre-established aim of reviewing all that could be classified as culture, from heritage to cinema, as well as libraries, creation, religions, modernisation and education, among others.

Furthermore, since the mandate was to establish specific and attainable objectives, each workshop would also have to identify projects that, if put into practice, could respond to needs that arise from each work group. However, it is a well-known fact that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” In such a short period of time it was impossible to make any serious proposals, and for the same reason it was not a viable option to debate projects that had been suggested previously by the organisers.

What is most surprising is the fact that the French government, instead of offering cultural creators a space for discussion between themselves and the institutions, believed that it could replace civil society with a clumsy attempt at managing proceedings. If this initiative could have any consequences, they are as yet unknown.

Some Considerations

This brief summary of three of the events that characterised the Year of Intercultural Dialogue cannot be concluded, in my opinion, without raising some personal considerations in light of ten years of experi-

ence as an activist in the field of culture and the Euro-Mediterranean area.

Action taken by some governments in the Partnership could undoubtedly be classified as a formality dictated by the theme chosen for 2008, and while the principles and aims indicated in the different conclusions and declarations are certainly praiseworthy, the instruments used to reach them are ineffective. Frequent reference to national legislation reduces issues of human rights and fundamental liberties to an exercise in rhetoric. National sovereignty clashes relentlessly with laudable principles, and delicate diplomatic manoeuvres are needed to avoid attacks on firmly consolidated positions on the different shores of the Mediterranean.

It is the Euro-Mediterranean civil society itself that today must innovate its own strategy to avoid being “adopted” by the different governments and therefore running the risk of becoming the “fig leaf” of Euro-Mediterranean politics

This extended custom of raising walls, albeit virtual ones, is converting Europe into a fortress with weak foundations. Rising immigration and the onset of eco-

nomic and social crises have led governments from the North to toughen up procedures for obtaining visas, with the aim of settling concerns regarding national security; measures which instead of tackling any real problems are in fact favouring the illegal practice of human trafficking. Needless to say the much trumpeted issue of mobility as an instrument of knowledge and dialogue has once again been reduced to an exercise in verbal rhetoric.

Furthermore, dialogue between religions was scarcely touched upon and often raised as if it were a token obligation. In the debate between the diverse Euro-Mediterranean actors there are those who consider that religion should be included in its own right within the social and cultural themes, and those who would prefer to assign it a specific area. In any case, it should be noted that the increasingly rigid Vatican hierarchy does not exactly constitute the ideal setting for inter-religious dialogue, or even for dialogue with the secular civil society.

It is the Euro-Mediterranean civil society itself that today must innovate its own strategy to avoid being “adopted” by the different governments and supranational authorities, and therefore running the risk of becoming the “fig leaf” of Euro-Mediterranean politics.

In a reality that evolves with ever-increasing speed, whose symptoms we are increasingly less accustomed to perceiving, there is a risk of overlooking the role of fieldwork, which although slow and complex, is the only way to provide representation with meaning and content.