

Contradictions of International Cooperation in the Mediterranean Region

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256

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The year 2005, the Year of the Mediterranean, which was to allow commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, closed with the failure of the Barcelona Summit. Marked by the absence of nearly all Arab leaders and any Final Declaration whatsoever, the November 2005 Summit illustrated the difficulties and contradictions of international cooperation within the Mediterranean region remarkably well. These lukewarm results became known and heralded a renewal for 2006. Nonetheless, though certain meetings in 2006 did achieve limited progress in each of the three baskets of the Euro-Mediterranean Process (i.e. economic and financial; political and security; and social, cultural and human), the contradictions of international efforts involving this region have continued to handicap its development, causing disappointment.

2006: Small Steps Forward in Each of the Three Baskets

The 5th Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Trade Ministers in March 2006 provided the opportunity to launch negotiations on liberalisation of services and the investments necessary for establishing a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area by 2010. This was an important step forward in the economic facet of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. With regard to the financial dimension, the replacement of MEDA and TACIS by a single European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) allocating 8.9 billion euros to the Mediterranean region represented a turning

point, equipping the European Union with a significant means to implement its neighbourhood policy. Nevertheless, the very conception of this new instrument was once again defined without the sufficient political dialogue.

By the same token, the first Europe-Mediterranean-Gulf States Cultural Workshop in September allowed progress in the long-neglected social, cultural and human basket of the Barcelona Process. This intercultural dialogue event, organised in exclusive collaboration with non-government organisations and the new Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue among Cultures, can be perceived as promising with respect to the participation of civil society in the cooperation process, a key element for the region's development.

Finally, with regard to the political basket, the year 2006 was, after the shift of government in Italy, marked by a strong European will to cooperate on the Lebanese crisis. The strengthening of the UNIFIL in southern Lebanon, the major European diplomatic success of 2006, was made possible by the coinciding views of Rome, Paris and Berlin. This operation of aid to stabilise Lebanon represented a concrete advance insofar as security, reflecting the will to reduce instability in the region. Illustrating just how useful these small steps were, the Eighth Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in Tampere resulted in a joint declaration on the progress and work to be done on the Process in 2007, signed by the 35 countries attending. The undersigning of this commitment thus illustrates the progress made since the failure of the November 2005 Summit; it also brings to light the road left to travel before attaining the "global and solidary cooperation" that these same States had declared as a goal in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995.

... And a Few Steps Backward

Despite these elements of progress, the year 2006 is far from having brought the renewal needed for international cooperation with the Mediterranean region. In fact, the international community was divided on the Palestinian issue after the election

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of Hamas in January, once again missing the opportunity for joint action. The Middle East Quartet (USA, Europe, Russia and the United Nations) was paralysed by the different approaches taken by its members and the prompt criticism of the new Palestinian government prevented any attempt at political dialogue whatsoever. Immobilised by the diverging positions of its Member States, the European Union was for a good many months unable to dispatch aid to Palestinian populations. The difficulties of this early financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority contributed to the greater fragmentation of this community, today on the brink of civil war.

Along Europe's southern borders, moreover, the record influx of illegal immigrants during the summer of 2006 bore witness to the existence of a common Euro-Mediterranean area as well as the patent absence of an effective regional partnership to

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manage it. The French-Spanish discrepancies on regularisation of illegal immigrants moreover demonstrated the need for coherent migratory policies within the Schengen area. Be that as it may, the hasty cooperation initiatives implemented for border control (such as the strengthening of the Frontex Agency) cannot replace an integrated regional view and the construction of a balanced

geographic area based on sharing a single destiny. These incidents and their mixed results can be ascribed to two series of contradictions: those of the United States – Europe – Mediterranean triangle on the one hand, and those of the European Union on the other. Such incoherence continues to weigh heavily on the manner in which the international community approaches this region and demonstrates an absence of consensus on what this region of the world represents to the different actors concerned. Without a shared strategic vision, it will be difficult to develop a coherent, effective cooperation policy, the only thing capable of reducing the fractures fostering conflict.

The Persistence of Transatlantic Difficulties

United States – Europe – Mediterranean cooperation suffers in the first place from discrepancies on the manner of perceiving this region. Whereas the immediate proximity of the Mediterranean Basin countries represents a major direct challenge for Europe in terms of population exchange, economic growth and security, the US, profoundly marked by the events of 11th September 2001, views the region through the prism of terrorism, progress of democratisation and the securing of raw materials. This strategic perspective has led the Americans to consider the Maghreb and Mashreq countries as elements of a 'greater Middle East' extending from Rabat to Islamabad.

This discrepancy of perception leads to disagreement on the policies to be conducted. While the US has chosen the path of quick imposition of democracy coupled with the implementation of free trade agreements, the EU has prioritised long-term partnership based on economic, political and socio-cultural cooperation. Within the American administration itself, the 'greater Middle East' policy has not met with consensus and the difficulties of 'nation building' in Iraq are dampening enthusiasm. And finally, political timetables are in dissonance. The US elections as well as the war on Iraq have long led the Bush Administration to neglect the ailing Middle East peace process, whereas the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 plunged the European Union into a prolonged period of crisis little conducive to strong foreign policy initiatives. At no time was the Quartet able to muster the political dynamism necessary to reactive the roadmap.

Persistent European Contradictions

Though international cooperation efforts suffer from strong transatlantic divergence, the most urgent task is to remedy the contradictions of European development policy in the Mediterranean region. Indeed, Europe does not enjoy the influence to which its financial efforts would entitle it in this crucial region, for both institutional and operational reasons. A Europe equipped with a coherent, effective neighbourhood policy would be in a position to engage in dialogue on a par with its American partner and to contribute to the reorientation of international policy regarding the region. Yet the establishment of this policy is slow.

The first difficulty is inherent to the cooperation instrument consisting of the Barcelona Process. The latter continues to be handicapped by the difficulties of the political basket of the Partnership. Whereas the required interrelation of the three baskets of the Process displays the importance attached by Europe to progress in each of them, this strategy has in fact led to a deterioration of the whole programme. The absence of progress on the Palestinian and Western Sahara issues and the rivalries among Arab countries render the regional dimension (South-South) of the programme difficult to put into practice, delaying economic cooperation initiatives. Moreover, conflicts in the region are at times reflected at annual summits, as was the case in 2005. Partnership Countries still display great reticence today in cooperating in the political sphere, fearing European interference in their internal affairs. The European Neighbourhood Policy involves resource allocation choices that have generated battles between the Commission Departments and Member States. The issue of the amount of aid to be allocated to our Eastern European Partners and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Countries, respectively, has given rise to numerous debates, as if these two regions were 'in competition.' Nevertheless, these two processes are in reality part of the same policy, whose aim it is to build a well-structured, growing neighbourhood space along the borders of the European Union. This is why we must applaud the decision to create a single European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) at the service of this policy. Contributing exclusively to the acceleration of economic development of Eastern Europe and the Balkans would entail the risk of aggravating the North-South gap in the

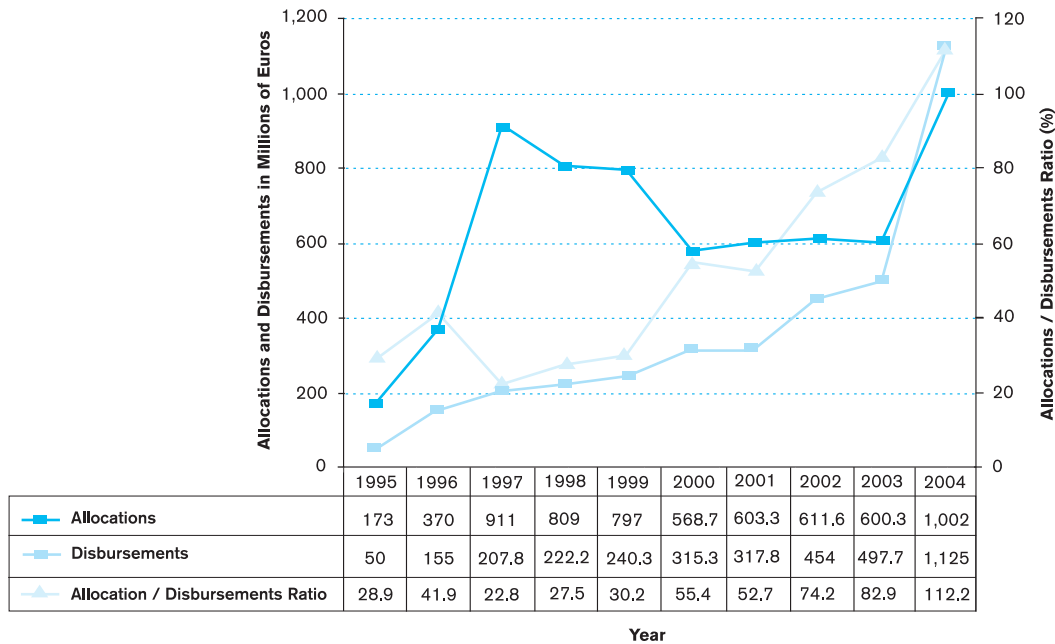
Mediterranean Basin. The Euro-Mediterranean region continues to register one of the greatest development divides in the world, greater than that prevailing between the United States and Latin America. Whether in terms of migration or trade, the Euro-Mediterranean region cannot afford to watch as the inequalities between the Northern and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean areas continue to grow. These struggles to influence the development aid budget have a great deal to do with the institutional fragmentation of our cooperation system and the redundancy of its decision processes. Matters of development fall under the jurisdiction of the Council, the Commission and the EU Commissioner for External Relations in Brussels. The complexity of this institutional panorama is heightened by the arbitration effected within the different Commission Departments and among Directorate Generals, as

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well as negotiations among Member States and even among different Member State Ministries. The EU will be hard put to establish a coherent cooperation policy if it does not manage to gradually simplify the decision-making procedures of its institutional system. In practice, the 'European consensus' on development matters reached in 2005 will not lead to important changes.

... That Weigh upon the Efficiency and Visibility of European Aid

This institutional state of affairs has weighty consequences on the operational level. The notorious difficulties of disbursement of aid from the MEDA Programme (a technical and financial assistance instrument) proved this in practice: in 1999, at the close of MEDA I, only 30% of the funds allocated had been disbursed. Though MEDA II (2000-2006) allowed an acceleration of disbursements, this was primarily achieved by increasing quick-disbursement budget programmes, while the quality of certain



Partnership administrative measures continues to raise doubts.

These operational limits particularly affect the visibility of European aid and the regional influence this visibility would bring about. It is striking to see how the leading lessor to the Palestinian Authority and the second provider of financial support to the State of Israel exercises but marginal political influence on the Middle-East peace process.

Progress on the Horizon

Nevertheless, not all is lost. The pending construction of the Neighbourhood instrument can, if there is a political will, allow the institution of genuine European cooperation between the Commission instruments on the one hand, and the aid organisms and development banks of the different Member States on the other. The latter are present throughout the Mediterranean, and the European Union would gain greatly by fostering synergy between the two. Such a road will most likely be followed. In fact, it is not only advisable but also probable that priority will be given to

investments with an integrating effect on the Mediterranean region. This would allow structural impacts that could only improve the perception of this policy by both northern and southern parties. In this regard, interaction with civil society organisations could be usefully increased as well. In sum, the logic of economic and territorial impact could substitute the mindset of concern for the amount of expenditure. This would mean specifically cooperating to build a region rather than financially compensating its disparities. These orientations are characteristic of development aid in general, especially that given to ACP countries (African, Caribbean and Pacific States), where coordination is increasingly becoming a catchword. Even though the contexts are very different, the operational progress of EuropeAid tends towards optimisation of the various processes of upgrading. It would not be far-fetched to envisage improved coordination of the different EU structural policies: why not consider improving competitiveness in all of these aspects on a Mediterranean-wide scale? This is probably the only way of preventing the polarisation of all public policy in the area due to conflicts in the Middle East