

# The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Civil Society and Cultural Co-operation: an Uncertain Triangle

**Odile Chenal**

Assistant Director  
European Cultural Foundation,  
Amsterdam

Much has been said and written about the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, its fragile foundations, its limitations and its advances. The third section of the Barcelona Declaration deals with the social, cultural and human aspects of the Partnership, and in fact cultural co-operation is one of the key dimensions conditioning the quality of exchange between all other areas. So, ten years after the inaugural meeting in Barcelona, what is the state of cultural co-operation within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership? The inclusion of the cultural dimension in the Barcelona agreements was far from being a foregone conclusion, but in the end culture was given its place in the definitive text of the agreements. In terms of an action plan and financial means, it has taken some time for the Partnership in the cultural sphere to be put in place at European Commission level. There were plenty of cultural projects at the beginning, relating to areas such as music, social sciences, books and publishing, but only a few framework programmes have seen the light of day, notably in the area of heritage (Euromed Heritage in 1998), audiovisual production and exchanges of young people (Med Media and Euromed Youth Forum in 1999). The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has, then, given birth to a certain number of initiatives within these areas – initiatives that are certainly limited by comparison with what has been done in other sectors, but which are nonetheless important from the point of view of people operating in the cultural

sector and who may well have been used to a more parsimonious approach in the past.

There have been some successes, but the framework programmes set up by the Commission in the cultural field suffer from a chronic weakness: the inadequacy of the means employed in relation to the objectives to be achieved – that is, to provide real co-operation between artists and cultural ‘entrepreneurs’ in different parts of the Mediterranean and to support the emergence of an independent cultural sector in regions where it is still at best very limited, and at worst completely non-existent. Initially conceived as a dynamic, political framework, this cultural partnership remains at best a cumbersome technical tool which only a restricted number of institutional operators or specialised agencies have the financial and administrative capacity to use. Independent operators have little access to it (except perhaps in the case of those dealing with exchanges for young people), and the administrative frameworks hardly lend themselves to the setting up of real co-operation projects, jointly prepared and negotiated by the partners concerned. Ten years after Barcelona, under the effect of bureaucratic constraints and political compromise, the Partnership’s programmes are not really capable of supporting and assisting the agents of real interaction between cultures. Nevertheless, the situation is not stagnant in the Euro-Mediterranean zone. Regional and trans-European cultural networks make an effort to encourage solidarity and professional exchanges; some independent cultural initiatives have been developing fast for some years, particularly to the South of the Mediterranean, in countries like Egypt, Lebanon,

Jordan or Morocco; private foundations are looking to invest more in the region; the countries of Northern Europe, under the effect of immigration, are opening up to the Mediterranean... Although the general political context and failures of European institutions are making the exercise difficult, the spirit of Barcelona is not dead!

Certain developments which marked the years 2003 and 2004 throw these 10 years of Partnership and its future prospects in the cultural sphere into particularly sharp relief. A few highlights:

## **December 2003 : Naples Civil Forum**

Prepared and held in difficult conditions and despite the fact that a great deal had to be improvised, the Naples Forum marked a point of no return for the presence of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The Civil Forum (which brings together representatives of the NGOs active in the Mediterranean region, and operates in parallel with inter-governmental meetings) has enjoyed a somewhat precarious existence since the euphoria of the first Barcelona meeting in November 1995. From Valetta and Naples (1997) to Stuttgart (1999); from Marseille (2000) to Crete (2003), passing through Brussels (2001) and Valencia (2002), the Civil Forum has often been called into question because of circumstances or political divisions, and also because of difficulties with the guidelines and the organisation of the Forum itself. If the Naples meeting, despite the difficulties, has led to a new momentum and has consolidated the Forum’s basic structures, this is undoubtedly because, since

September 11 and the occupation of Iraq, it has been driven by a greater sense of urgency; but also to a great

extent because it has been able to rely on the support of the non-governmental Euromed Platform. Bringing together

representatives of associations, trade unions, networks and foundations, the Platform will now be the permanent

### STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The year 2005 should witness a new stage in the process of setting up the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP).

The Euro-Mediterranean co-operation opened up by the Barcelona Conference gave rise to great hopes. In effect, for the first time the member states of the Union and their neighbours on the shores of the Mediterranean displayed a will to set in motion a process of co-operation on a wide variety of fronts. For the first time, issues as fundamental as economic co-operation; fair trade; sustainable development and environmental protection; human, social, cultural or political rights; the rule of law and democracy; peace and security in the region, etc., were clearly addressed in a document backed by all signatories. But above all it was the first time states in the region had solemnly undertaken to strengthen the role of civil society, thereby recognising not only the right of men and women to organise themselves entirely independently of the State, but also acknowledging their eminently crucial role in the construction of this Partnership.

In this way, very many of us believed that, despite criticisms that may have been vented with regard to the need for such a Partnership, the Declaration nevertheless "opened up new possibilities and created conditions and opportunities which civil society can seize with both hands..."

Unfortunately, to date, the practical application of the process has been very limited. The overall approach has remained virtual and the essential issues of peace, democratic and social rights, the environment and sustainable development have remained confined to fine words at the end of speeches.

The role of civil society, although mentioned many times, remains marginal. The absence of effective means – including an effective financial mechanism – for civil society to exist in countries where the State tolerates rather than accepts the presence of independent organisations has prevented civil society from taking its proper place in the Partnership. We must, however, recognise that this marginalisation has not only been due to the bad intentions of this or that government. It is also the result of the difficulty that representatives of civil society had in organising themselves and creating synergies in order to create a real citizens' dia-

logue beyond their particular specialised or geographical interests – a dialogue which is indispensable for implementing a real Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

#### **The Establishment of a New Platform to Help Re-launch the EMP**

Aware of the urgent need to re-launch dialogue and co-operation between representatives of civil society from both shores of the Mediterranean on a new lasting and constructive basis, the former organisers of the Euromed Civil Forum, including representatives of trade unions and of other NGOs, decided at the beginning of 2003 to intervene collectively to establish a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which would have as its priorities the concerns and proposals of civil society in the countries of the Euromed area.

Launched in a corporate spirit of co-operation between different spheres of activity, the need for such a platform was clearly demonstrated in the following months.

It is still, however, in the process of being set up, a phase which will reach its culmination with the holding of its General Assembly in April 2005. In an attempt to formalise affiliation and representation procedures within the organisation, the Platform has begun a process of opening itself up to a wide range of representatives from civil society by means of a series of national consultations, launched at the end of September 2003 and continued in 2004 and 2005, extending the number of countries and representatives involved at each stage.

Today, more than 700 associations, NGOs and trade union organisations are involved.

With the Naples Civil Forum in December 2003, where it was involved as co-decision maker and co-organiser, the Non-Governmental Platform clearly showed that a reinforced and reorganised civil forum is an important venue for agreement between the various representatives of civil society working for peace, equality, freedom and prosperity for all the population of the Euromed region. Its recommendations for the meeting of Foreign Ministers were greeted with interest and highlighted by observers. To follow up these recommendations, a permanent monitoring system to operate between forums is therefore essential.

Reinforced by the experience acquired by its founder members in following up issues in the course of their involvement in the EMP, and their desire to pool together their knowledge and skills, the Platform has been recognised by the public authorities as having an essential role in organising future civil forums (as shown in the conclusions of the EU Presidency at the Dublin summit, and confirmed by the conclusions of the EU Presidency at the summit in The Hague).

With the opportunity it has when the next Civil Forum is held under the Luxembourg presidency, the process must continue and advance in accordance with the determined but gradualist, prudent approach adopted by the Platform.

The Euromed Civil Forum is, by definition, the place where the representatives of civil society give an account of the progress in their reflections and actions, to encourage the strengthening of the role and position of civil society both inside and outside the context of the Partnership.

It is, above all, the time when agreement and debate with public authorities must take place, with the latter taking into account the concerns and proposals of civil society.

To achieve this, it is essential that mechanisms for agreement between the public authorities and representatives of civil society (both at regional and local level) are drawn up and put in place.

At a time when projects and initiatives backing reform and democratisation are multiplying in the region, the re-launching of the EMP is becoming a vital necessity so that the regional plan sketched out ten years ago is not swallowed up in foreign plans to dominate the planet at the expense of the real concerns of the population of the region.

This process requires a collective realisation of the urgent need to give the independent, democratic forces of civil society the importance they deserve, and to follow this realisation up with concrete actions.

Mourad Allal  
Co-ordinator of the Euromed Non-Governmental Platform  
[www.euromedforum.org](http://www.euromedforum.org)

liaison body for agents in the independent sector between meetings of the Civil Forum.

It has therefore taken ten years for an emerging and fragmented, if not divided, society to be given a voice in a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership put in place by the European Union, and resting largely in the hands of governments. Although its establishment has been slow and is still far from complete, the Platform has been built on an interdisciplinary foundation which provides its strength. In bringing together various Euro-Mediterranean co-operation networks, from environmentalists to supporters of human rights, from militant women to cultural operators, it has set itself up as a voice that is independent and critical of the institutional partnership, whilst remaining open to dialogue with the public authorities. Indirectly, then, the Platform has been a success for the Partnership which led to its creation. The European Commission has understood this and has, from now on, agreed (limited) financial support for the Platform, whose role has also been officially mentioned in the declarations of the Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Affairs ministers' meeting in December 2003 under the Dutch presidency. As with other areas, the non-governmental Platform will give its opinion on the Partnership's cultural performance.

### **Spring 2004 : Publication of the Report Known as 'the Wise Men's report'**

Culture, which had so narrowly missed not being included at all in the Declaration of Barcelona, was finally subjected in 2003, at the request of President Prodi, to the scrutiny of a group known as the 'High Level Advisory Group.' Officially entitled 'Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area,' their report, published at the beginning of 2004, offers a suggestive analysis of the urgent need and importance of communication and exchange in the current Euro-Mediterranean and world political context, while empty formulas, incomprehension, dashed hopes and irrational fears bounce across the Mediterranean.

- It might have been better if the title of the publication had insisted on the prin-

ciple of co-operation, as opposed to the worthy sentiments evoked by the essentially meaningless expression "cultural dialogue," which, as the High Level Advisory Group themselves recognised, in fact contributes to create an immediate feeling of estrangement. In fact, the use of the expression "cultural dialogue" only tends to reinforce the very concept of "conflict of civilisations" which it seeks to condemn.

- It would have been preferable if recommendations for action had been presented not as a list but as an articulated set of action plans and priorities addressed to specific representatives;
- It might have been expected that this group of respectable figures, rather than working in a vacuum, found a way of listening to the younger generation, the fate of whom they are so concerned about:

The High Level Advisory Group's report at least has the merit of existing and offering, ten years after Barcelona, a renewed political reflection on the basis of the Mediterranean Partnership. Widely circulated, the report has unfortunately not really been used as an instrument for debate outside a few zealously prepared conventional meetings in Brussels. This is deeply regrettable. One of the reasons for the silence surrounding this report is perhaps due to the demands it makes, since politicians do not have the will or means to take account of them at the moment. The discussion going on about the future Euro-Mediterranean Foundation is perhaps another reason for this. President Prodi, in fact, did not await the Wise Men's recommendations to start the negotiations to establish the Foundation.

### **November 2004: Creation of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures and Civilisations**

After long negotiations, in November 2004, the Euromed Inter-ministerial Committee, meeting under the Dutch presidency, approved the statutes of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures and Civilisations. It will be established on the basis of an "Egyptian-Swedish" tandem in Alexan-

dria, in the premises of the "great" library, but with an annexe at the Swedish Institute. The ministers agreed to facilitate and promote the Foundation's activities by supporting participation by civil society in their countries and by translating their political involvement into substantial financial contributions, as specified in the conclusion of the meeting of Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers in The Hague on 29th and 30th November 2004.

Announced in Valencia, the Foundation saw the light two years later. Ten years after Barcelona, the "third strand" of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership produced an "institution" that could give it a new dynamism. But it must be recognised that the Foundation's birth was not only accompanied by positive signs:

- Its independence is not on the agenda, and the Foundation will remain – one dares to hope that this will only be for a limited time – under the control of the Euromed inter-ministerial Committee and therefore of Governments.
- Its capacity for action is limited: 11 millions euros to date, for three years, coming from the European Union and governments in various forms.
- Aiming at regional and trans-Mediterranean co-operation, the Foundation functions in terms of national representation, which risks giving an advantage to institutional agents to the detriment of independent operators in the cultural world.

The recommendations of the High Level Advisory Group's report have, then, not been followed by the Euromed Committee and the Commission. However, the Foundation now exists and, despite its teething troubles, it is going to attract a lot of attention. It defines itself as a network of networks. If the national networks it is going to be associated with are really networks of operators; if they are going to be capable of mobilising the agents around Euro-Mediterranean co-operation; if they take up more than a decorative place in the Foundation, then they will really be able to bring this Foundation alive and make it the engine bringing together action and reflection, which is so necessary in a still very fragmented Euro-Mediterranean cultural space.

Without the active collaboration of these independent cultural agents, the Foundation will remain mere shadow-play.

### **Future Prospects: Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or Neighbourhood Policy?**

What was the enlargement of the European Union going to mean for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership? Openness to the East, and closure to the South? The Southern Mediterranean countries have, in fact, expressed their fears at seeing the inclusion in the Union of countries in the North and East of Europe with little sensitivity to Mediterranean politics and the weakening of the Barcelona commitments and of European Union investment in the Mediterranean. But the debate on these issues has, however, not been very animated in the Southern Mediterranean, undoubtedly translating the disillusionment in the South towards Europe.

However, on the European Union side, the drawing up of a new policy began well before the enlargement was actually carried out. In fact it was in March 2003 that the Commission presented its communication entitled "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for our Eastern and Southern Neighbours." This was the birth of the famous

ENP: European Neighbourhood Policy. A transition period is planned from 2004 to 2006, during which the existing programmes – MEDA for the Mediterranean – will be readjusted and pursued within the framework of this new policy. From 2007 onwards – the year when a new budgetary period for the Union is opened – the Neighbourhood Policy will take effect. It should depend on strengthened budgets compared to current programmes for the regions concerned, that is, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the Southern Caucasus and the European Union's neighbours around the Mediterranean except for Turkey, which is now an official candidate country.

What can be expected from this Neighbourhood Policy in terms of co-operation, and particularly cultural co-operation in the Mediterranean? The agents for this co-operation express a certain degree of concern at seeing "the spirit of Barcelona" – that is, the spirit of partnership – being diluted in a Neighbourhood Policy where the objectives of security and development predominate. These concerns are not without foundation, although the official texts confirm that Neighbourhood Policy in the Mediterranean is based on the Barcelona axis. However, a Neighbourhood Policy conceived with enough flexibility could offer interesting prospects for cultural co-operation in the Mediterranean: break-

ing the confrontation between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean Countries, including the Mediterranean partnerships in a larger unit, with diversified cultures, religions and languages, to create new synergies and new regional solidarities. It remains to be seen whether the Neighbourhood Policy will be able to stand up to compartmentalisation and the establishment of new instruments to encourage inter-regional programmes; whether the new members of the European Union have the will and capacity to invest in the Mediterranean too; or whether Turkey, now a candidate, will also be able to play its 'Mediterranean card.' However, it is perhaps already regrettable that the non-candidate Balkan countries – the countries of the former Yugoslavia plus Albania – are excluded from this Neighbourhood Policy. It might, perhaps, be equally worrying that, once again, the place for cultural exchange and co-operation in the Neighbourhood Policy is still uncertain, under a general heading concerning "people-to-people" exchanges. The agents in the Partnership will therefore have to monitor this policy very closely as it is put into effect. Ten years after Barcelona, will the Mediterranean countries, already neighbours, become partners? The answer is clear: they have to be both things at the same time.