

Culture, Community and the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation

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Among a variety of activities given a boost by the Valencia Conference of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 2002, the most high profile initiative was undoubtedly the decision to establish a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation as a central focus of cultural dialogue. The decision seemed to signify a clear determination on the part of the Euro-Mediterranean partners to finally invest balance into the Barcelona Process by giving content to its long neglected third «basket», the designated home for the promotion of cultural cooperation. Yet the painfully slow process of establishing the new Foundation suggests that it is facing many of the same problems that have befallen other EMP proposals in the past. To mention just a few that are apparent to the external observer, we can refer here to three features.

Firstly, there was an immediate squabble over the funding arrangements. This was misreported in the press to suggest that EU countries had doubts about whether they should each be contributing one million Euros to the venture, although the real roots of this problem lay in a total lack of clarity as to the shape and form of the Foundation. How could there be a sensible decision on the size of the budget and hence on individual financial contributions when all that had been approved at Valencia was a slogan, and still to be given substance?

Secondly, there were the typical ma-

noeuvers that we see when the EU sets up its own new institutions, except that on this occasion the question of where the Foundation would be based was mixed up with the more crucial question of the organisational model to be adopted. Should the Foundation be based on a federal pattern, with a strong central institution at the heart of a network of cultural centres, or should it be a much looser, almost confederal entity? This particular debate saw divergence early on between France, Spain and Italy, all of them countries with strong claims to a leading Euro-Mediterranean role, and with Italian influence being boosted potentially by this country's EU presidency during the second half of 2003. Thirdly, the planning of the Foundation immediately became a highly politicised business. This should perhaps have come as no surprise, given that the whole idea of undertaking this new initiative in cross-cultural dialogue was very much part of the Euro-Mediterranean response to the attacks of 11th September. While cultural dialogue and cooperation now attracted greater interest as means of pursuing a «convergence of civilisations» and thereby frustrating any Huntingtonian «clash of civilizations» scenarios, any hope of a consensual EMP approach to the Foundation was quickly dashed. From the outset, the substantive question that divided the Europeans and their partners was how broad the dialogue should be. Should the EMP continue to leave Islamist movements out of the Euro-Med dialogue, or was it not essential to a real dialogue to include those particular Islamist sectors that had demonstrated a readiness to coexist with other sectors of society on a pluralist basis?

The fears held by some about the «dangers» of giving a voice to moderate Islamists is presumably the reason why certain governments insisted at the end of the day on placing a strict political control over the new Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures. Distrustful of civil society, some of the partners ensured that governments would retain a firm grip on the new cultural enterprise. Thus, one of the decisions taken at the mid-term Euro-Mediterranean Conference held in Crete in May 2003 was that during an initial stage, the board of governors of the Foundation would be the Euro-Med Committee composed of senior officials from the EU and the Mediterranean partner countries.

Thus the Foundation promises to at least commence its activities on a very cautious basis, evading and avoiding some of the contentious issues that breed confrontation, mistrust and conflict in the Mediterranean. A politically restricted dialogue between communities appears to be in the offing, disappointing the hopes of many who have seen the «third basket» as the key to a «reinvigoration» of the Barcelona Process.

Actually, the third basket, associated in the Barcelona Declaration with the task of building a Partnership in Social, Cultural and Human Affairs, is not simply being «filled» at the present time: it is also being changed. As Annette Jünnemann has observed, the more attention the third basket receives at a political level, the more it will be transformed into something else.

Along with the new cultural content, the Valencia Conference was significant to the introduction into the EMP of a justice and home affairs dimen-

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Founded in 331 BC by Alexander the Great, Alexandria was the world's first conscious manifestation of internationalism, and during the three hundred years of Ptolemaic rule was the capital of antiquity and its centre of learning and research. The Library of Alexandria was the first public library to be owned by the state and the only truly universal library in the ancient world, with holdings of about 700,000 scrolls.

In the spirit of the ancient library, the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, inaugurated in October 2002, has become a cultural centre that hosts conferences and exhibitions, encourages research and promotes exchange. It is established with four main missions, to act as:

- The world's window on Egypt;
- Egypt's window on the world;
- A library for the new digital age;
- A centre of learning and dialogue;

An offshoot of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the «Alexandria and Mediterranean Research

Centre» (Alex-Med) was established in April 2003 with the purpose of being Egypt's link with the Mediterranean, and to be a centre for conducting comprehensive research related to the past, present and future of Alexandria.

By placing itself in the Mediterranean, Alex-Med seeks to encourage cultural dialogue and multilateral understanding. Relations between the northern and southern Mediterranean, and with the European community, are fostered on the human and economic level in order to reinforce the Mediterranean's role today as the meeting point of civilisations.

Alex-Med is:

- A research and documentation centre.
- A forum for cultural preservation, interaction and exchange.
- Conferences, exhibitions and exchange programmes.
- An actor in the promotion of economic development and sustainability.

Alex-Med is already engaged in several projects related to the Mediterranean:

- *Mediterranean Voices: Oral History and Cultural Practices*, which is funded by the EuroMed Heritage II and involves twelve other Mediterranean cities.
- *Mediterranean City: Dialogue among cultures*. In collaboration with nine other Mediterranean cities.
- «REMSH», or the Euro-Mediterranean Network of Human Sciences Research Centres on the Mediterranean area. A excellent network proposed by the Mediterranean house of human sciences (MMSH), Aix-En-Provence, France.
- A protocol of agreement with the Laboratorio Mediterraneo aimed at a series of collaborations and activities.

Ramez Farag
Alex-Med

sion («a regional programme in the field of justice, in combating drugs, organised crime and terrorism, as well as cooperation in the treatment of issues relating to the social integration of migrants, migration and movement of people»), also accommodated within the third basket. While this is an essential area for the Partnership to tackle, the coexistence of potentially conflictive issues such as migration with potentially more constructive activity in the cultural sphere could also hamper the new cultural initiative.

However, there is a further reason why the cultural sphere is becoming politicised, and it underlies the reluctance of some governments to concede real autonomy to the new Foundation, and through that to civil society. The reason why there is to be a «cultural» management role for the unqualified Euro-Med Committee is that so many EMP countries have unsettled, contested identities – a degree of cultural heterogeneity that few governments are prepared to acknowledge, value or work with.

In other words, the task of developing the area of cultural cooperation is very different to that of building economic relations. While in the latter sphere, in-

dividual countries and their respective governments are adequate, relevant and even legitimate interlocutors for the purposes of building free trade areas and promoting economic reform, in the cultural sphere national governments tend to act in a more partisan fashion, denying or limiting cultural expression to certain groups in society.

To promote a real, inclusive cultural dialogue may thus imply a need for those who believe in it to use their powers of persuasion or pressure to influence those who want to maintain the present narrow parameters of this dialogue. Security concerns suggest that the broadening of dialogue is necessary anyway in the interests of stability. How meaningful a dialogue can take place with Morocco, for instance, if the moderate Islamists associated with the Justice and Development Party, which emerged as the leading party in urban areas in the local elections of September 2003, continue to be excluded from the realms of Euro-Mediterranean dialogue and cooperative projects?

Of course, the idea of promoting a broader dialogue is eminently political itself, promising as it does, in the event of success, to reinforce democracy

promotion activity within the EMP. This is a further reason why authoritarian regimes may be trying to block progress. In order to overcome their resistance, or side-step it by following a sub-regional approach, it may not be adequate to rely on the more democratic countries, given the way in which the Euro-Med Committee proceeds on the basis of unanimity.

Initiatives must therefore also come from civil society, to work both within the EMP framework and in parallel with it, and to help generate more broadly based projects around the theme of culture and community in the Euro-Mediterranean area. One small initiative in this direction, involving the author of this article, was the round-table on precisely this subject, held at the Swedish Institute in Alexandria in October 2003. The task of establishing suitably broad networks for activity in the cultural domain will not be easy, however. The sense of a common Mediterranean «region» that the European Union is trying to promote is questioned by many of the people who live there, not simply by ruling elites but also by individual communities as well [Del Sarto, 2003].

Thus the expansion of Euro-Med dia-

logue around cultural and community issues can be expected to give rise, at least initially, to an increase in disagreement rather than to immediate convergence. The politically suppressed cultural mosaic of the Mediterranean may need to assert itself in all its diversity before commonalities come to the fore and provide a foundation for an increase in cross-cultural cooperation. This all presupposes fresh difficulties and even threats for the Barcelona Process. It is difficult to sustain the funding of an enterprise when there are few tangible signs of progress in the short term. Moreover, even for civil society initiatives, there is the complicated task of placing some limit (even if broader) on participation. Groups that seek to advance their identity claims on the backs of armed struggle or terrorism, and which are characteristically intolerant of the rights and welfare of

other communities, are clearly problematic in this regard. Yet, while there would probably be a substantial consensus on the principle of their exclusion, the application of the principle is likely to generate specific differences of criteria and judgement.

Recognition of such difficulties is important for acquiring a realistic appreciation of the prospects of cultural dialogue and cooperation post-Valencia. It does not mean that the enterprise is unworthy of effort and commitment. The reverberations of 11th September surely show that the initiative, symbolised by the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, is both necessary and timely. We should not, however, expect an easy road ahead. We have not found the golden key that will reinvigorate the Barcelona Process, though at least now one of its deficiencies is being addressed.

Sources

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