

A Euro-Mediterranean Partnership - Eight years on

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It has been eight years since a group of countries from around the Mediterranean sent their high-level envoys to the beautiful Spanish city of Barcelona to initiate a new process of dialogue and partnership in the Mediterranean. Launched in 1995, the Barcelona Process was an indication that countries to the north and south of the Mediterranean, which have engaged in dialogue and cross-cultural fertilisation throughout the course of history, were not satisfied with the level of cooperation attained thus far. The new initiative was aimed at enhancing cooperation throughout the basin of the great Mediterranean Sea in many fields, including political, economic, social and cultural.

The dreams of partnership were great among the peoples in the north and the south; and so were the expectations of the politicians, including myself, who were present at the birth of this process. However, so far, at least from the perspective of the Southern Mediterranean, the results have been modest – to put it mildly.

The three fields of cooperation – political, economic and social and cultural – are still bare of the fruits they were supposed to yield. This unsatisfactory result is the outcome of several conditions. One obvious reason is that the mind and heart of Europe have moved elsewhere.

The European Union is now preoccupied with its enlargement, toward

which its focus and attention are now directed. This is an understandable situation. However, it should not be at the expense of the cooperation with the other partners of the European Union, and in fact the enlargement should serve as an added benefit to the Barcelona Process.

The declining attention of the European Union toward its southern neighbours is not an issue of smaller budgets for economic cooperation. It is about a real fear of losing an important momentum that started on such a positive note. It is about the possibility that we may not be able to achieve genuine peace and security around the Mediterranean basin. It is about a waning interest in the cultural basket, at a time when cross-cultural dialogue, especially among countries of impressive historical exchange, is most needed.

Today, many misleading voices are arguing the inevitability of the clash between the Arab/Muslim and the Western civilisations. Indeed, it is the countries around the shores of the Mediterranean, which subscribe to both civilisations, that could have proven this theory wrong, by constructing on their base of a long history of dialogue and cross-cultural production.

This said, it is not possible to ignore the fact that the slow pace of the Barcelona Process is, in so many ways, the outcome of the deteriorating Arab-Israeli peace process. The destructive and frustrating policies undertaken by Israel adversely affected peace and stability in our part of the world, and made cooperation on many fronts around the Mediterranean very difficult.

But the picture is not entirely bleak, or at least we should not lose hope. Earlier this year, in May 2003, the mid-term Euro-Mediterranean Conference that convened in the spectacular city of Crete revived hopes that this process can be given a new lease of life. At the conference there were voices who spoke of the need to resume, and even intensify, the dialogue between the north and south of the Mediterranean on the many issues of common concern and interest, including trade and migration matters.

At this point, I must salute the Greek presidency of the European Union for its remarkable efforts in pursuing a more effective cooperation throughout the basin of the Mediterranean.

The results of the Euro-Mediterranean conference, which took place in another beautiful Mediterranean city, Napoli, in December 2003 will hopefully offer another opportunity to achieve the worthwhile purpose of closer Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

The countries of the Mediterranean have so much to gain from a more effective process of cooperation and a real partnership. Free trade around the Mediterranean, for example, could open new vistas of opportunities. We need to march with a more rapid pace toward the implementation of the Mediterranean Free Trade Agreement, which should be achieved by the year 2010.

The Barcelona Process is worthy of a rescue operation. Our nations are neighbours for life, and it is certainly in our collective interests to make sure that we achieve our common objectives through a true partnership.