

“Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean” Readjusting the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

Coming together in Brussels for the European Council spring meeting, the heads of state and government agreed on 13 March on the French-German proposal of establishing a Mediterranean union, giving it the slightly cumbersome name “Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean” (UMed). It was then passed to the Commission, which is now responsible for working out a concrete institutional framework for the initiative.

Following the Council decision, FES Brussels convened experts from the institutions and the southern partner countries as well as independent consultants, political advisors and academics for a one-day workshop on the topic “Union for the Mediterranean as ‘Barcelona+’? Tasks and perspectives of the UMed partnership” in April. This paper builds upon the debates from the workshop. The French-German paper shall be referred to briefly at the outset, followed by an evaluation of the Barcelona Process. Special attention is then paid to southern perspectives on the partnership, before two models of regional cooperation with regard to the UMed are discussed.

1. French-German paper and Council decision

The Council agreement of 13 March was based on a two-page working paper that was jointly presented by the French and the Germans. This proposal put an end to week-long huffs, and even open dissent. The compromise solution was to acknowledge the French desire to form a Union for the Mediterranean, while at the same time ensuring that the non-Mediterranean EU members will also fully participate in the initiative. Concerns especially among the northern and eastern EU countries that such a Union could entail a split within the EU were thus dispelled. However, no clear definition of the project was given.

The French-German paper makes explicit reference to the Barcelona Process launched in 1995. The initially high ambitions of the French to start from scratch with the creation of a Mediterranean Union were watered down to an initiative which gives the Barcelona Process a new impetus.

The UMed shall be copresided by an EU member and a partner country from the south, which

would be responsible for preparing the biennial summits. A 20-staff secretariat, headed jointly by a director from a non-EU member state and one appointed by the Council of the EU, will assist the presidency in its tasks. According to the paper, the exact role of the secretariat “remains to be defined.” Further on however, it is stated that the directors should participate in the meetings of the Euro-Med Partnership and should serve as ‘source of inspiration’ in the definition of new projects. Financing of the projects, the probably most delicate question, shall be ensured through the existing Barcelona funds as well as through private third-party funding. A launching event, convening EU-27 and the non-EU Mediterranean partner countries, is scheduled to take place in Paris on 13 July.

2. Barcelona – A failed experiment?

The wish to replace an established project by a new one usually hints at an erroneous design of the original initiative. Indeed, French President Sarkozy was quick in burying the Barcelona Proc-

ess, calling in his Tanger speech in October 2007 for a 'rupture' and the need to create something new. However, the European Council's position underlined its belief in the adequacy and suitability of the basic idea and design, voting assent to the new initiative only in the framework of the 'old process' (Barcelona Process).

Before energetically drawing the reform map, it makes sense to pause and look back at 13 years of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. After carefully assessing the rights and wrongs of the process, the picture of how and what to reform should become clearer. As results vary, it is useful to look at the three baskets separately.

The achievements in the political and security dialogue are minor. The process was created in 1995, at a time when, following the Madrid and Oslo conferences, the Middle East peace process was at a peak and peace seemed to be within reach. The partnership was thus believed not only to flourish in a then conflict-free and prosperous region, but also to contribute to the 'Arab spring', replacing authoritarian regimes with governments committed to democracy and pluralism. To compare the hopes of 1995 with today's realities is thus a rather sobering experience. The Middle East peace process lies in ruins, political and civil freedoms have been curbed even further in several countries, a significant security dialogue is not in place and the fear of Islamist election victories paralyses all EU efforts to promote regional opposition movements and to press for free elections. However, it is often claimed, and rightly so, that one should not underestimate the so-called 'socialisation effect'. Though difficult to measure, the impact of regularly bringing together representatives from all partner countries in various committees, forums, workshops etc. cannot be neglected. Providing a framework for permanent dialogue, the process is thus a confidence-building mechanism in itself.

In terms of measurable results, the second basket, economic and financial partnership, is easier to assess. Nevertheless, outcomes are mixed. While trade has increased, with the EU being by far the southern Mediterranean countries' most important trading partner, the latter could not significantly increase their share in total European imports, which remains at approximately six per cent. Despite the fact that southern partners have reduced their overall tariff level, they were in reverse not granted access to the European agricultural market and therefore still face high burdens to enter the European market with agricultural products. Excluding the agricultural sector, where the south arguably has a comparative advantage, from any free trade arrangement has contributed to widening the welfare gap between north and south. The continuously very low level of foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from the EU to the southern

region has further contributed to this evolution. The envisaged Free Trade Zone, foreseen by the Barcelona 'road map' in 2010, is still a long way ahead, with trade relying largely on bilateral structures. Much hope is now pinned on the Agadir Agreement, which was signed in 2004 and establishes a free trade zone between Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Whether this can effectively kick off more intense south-south cooperation remains to be seen.

Much criticism has been received for the at best humble progress made with regard to the social, cultural and human partnership. The lacking will of the EU to firmly denounce political repression and human rights abuses in Mediterranean partner countries runs counter to all intentions of "support for democratic institutions and for the strengthening of the rule of law and civil society," explicitly noted in the Barcelona Declaration. Moreover, the process has so far often been perceived as a dialogue exclusively at the elite level. Even if this maladjustment was somewhat acknowledged by introducing in 2003 the 'Euromed Non-governmental Platform' within the 'Euro-med Civil Forum', these mechanisms have yet to be made more transparent.

3. The southern dimension

Looking at the Mediterranean region of the 90s, one might be struck by the resemblance to today's 'tasks and challenges' attributed to the region: the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the Morocco-Algeria standstill, terrorism, authoritarianism, the demographic factor (putting pressure on labour markets and causing instability), migration, poor educational performances etc. This list could easily be further extended without changing the general diagnosis: the challenges are everything but new. Instead, they have become permanent and thus structural problems of the region. (This conclusion is hence making the case for not completely rupturing with the Barcelona Process but to smoothly readjust it.)

Beyond endlessly listing the challenges, it can be helpful to contemplate how the Euro-Med Partnership is perceived in the southern neighbour countries. It is quite a common phenomenon that discourses in Brussels tend to develop a life of their own, often becoming, to say the least, somewhat detached from the peoples and their opinions. So trying to shift the focus and to draw on external perceptions might be an enriching exercise.

Talking to a southern Mediterranean, one is likely to be swiftly informed that the EU's enlargement to the east happened at the expense of the non-EU Mediterranean countries. Furthermore, the simultaneous stagnation of the accession process with Turkey is perceived as being due to the country's

Muslim identity. These perceptions are probably not novel, but they do hint at a more general emotional state.

When carefully examining the terminology used to describe the relations between Europe and its southern neighbours, one observation is striking: while there is a rather loose talk of 'dialogue' and 'partnership' in the north, discussions in the south orbit around the 'rapprochement of cultures.' This makes clear that there is a deeper north-south rift than commonly recognised in Europe. In other words, before a real dialogue can be established, an intense debate is to be set up on how to overcome the profound cleavage between the cultures. This expresses a widespread feeling among Arabs and Muslims that they are stigmatised and disliked in the West, all the more so after 9/11 and the war on terror.

Beside security concerns, it is not believed in the south that Europe has an interest that goes beyond the economic sphere. Europe is denied any honourable intentions of intercultural dialogue and honest partnership; those being perceived as a cover for economic expansion. Furthermore, pushing southern partner countries to adjust business and trade rules and regulations to global (i.e. WTO) standards is interpreted as an attempt to spread Western culture to other regions. Overall, the image of Europe in the region is thus one of hegemonic superiority.

In the context of the Euro-Med Partnership, it is tantamount to take those perceptions into account. Readjusting the partnership then implies not just to make it more effective on a technical policy level, but to add instruments and programmes that address the concerns of all sides involved.

4. Looking at other models of regional cooperation

In the aim of redirecting the Barcelona Process, making it work more effectively and rationalizing it, it can be useful to look at other models of regional cooperation at the borders of the European Union.

Council of the Baltic Sea States

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) is a much hailed example often referred to as a successful model of regional cooperation. Founded in 1992 and comprising the eleven states of the Baltic Sea region as well as the European Commission, the CBSS performs as the roof political forum for regional intergovernmental cooperation. Under its mandate, various working groups and sectoral ministers' meetings were set up, such as the Working Group on Nuclear and Radiation Safety (WGNRS), the Baltic Sea Region Energy Cooperation (BASREC), the Baltic 21 Network or the Business Advisory Council. Although it does not dis-

pose of own funds, the CBSS innovates, stimulates, coordinates and monitors projects. Once a project is approved, the partners involved therein start to allocate money from local, regional and national funds, from EU funds and from the international financial institutions. The Council is not directly involved in the implementation of projects, as this is the task of the particular parties and stakeholders having a direct interest in the project.

Closely linked to the CBSS' founding history was the development of the European internal market in the 80s and early 90s. Fear that the economic gravitation centre would shift further away from the Baltic Sea region gave the impetus for intraregional cooperation. It is, of course, necessary to mention that the northern economies were already highly developed and thus competitive enough on a technological level to confront the EU market economies. Another interesting feature to note is the mushrooming of regional 'international departments' in the rather centralized countries of the region. The financial support, partly through the EU structural fund mechanism, enabled regions to interact on an interregional level. This paved the way for today's innumerable ties and links in the Baltic Sea region.

Returning to the Euro-Med Partnership, can the CBSS serve as model for the UMed? Without daring to compare the two regions historically or culturally, two points seem worth being stressed: firstly, the practice of funding the projects mainly through the parties and stakeholders involved, since financial ownership ensures commitment in carrying out projects; and secondly, the regional focus to promote and intensify interaction on a sub-national level.

Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe

Another interesting model of regional cooperation is the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. Founded in 1999 by more than 40 partner countries of the international community, the pact claimed to follow a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention, which covered the democratic, economic as well as security dimension in a long-term, preventive strategy. Acting as a neutral forum based on parity principle, the pact oversees cooperation and provides political support in a number of thematic processes, such as parliamentary cooperation, energy infrastructure, education, anti-corruption measures or disaster prevention. In all thematic fields, it is sought to develop shared strategies based on international standards and best practices. As a result, more than 25 regionally owned initiatives have so far emerged. Apart from concrete achievements – such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) or the Energy Community Treaty, working jointly on concrete

policy issues also means a political rapprochement of countries whose encounters over the past decade took place mainly on the battlefield. The current relocation of the Stability Pact from Brussels to Sarajevo and its transformation into the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) stands as a successful example of converting an internationally-led effort into a regionally owned cooperation body. Funding for the RCC will also be allocated in the region.

While it proves difficult to compare the specific situation the Balkan countries found themselves by the end of the 90s, with a large number of young states and protectorates allowing the international community a high degree of interference, more can be gained by considering the incentives given to engage in regional cooperation. Here, the 'European perspective' can clearly be singled out as the top driving force for participation: even if there was never a specific link between progress in the pact and advancement to EU membership, the dim prospect of EU accession has been the main motivation for regional cooperation and reform in the countries.

5. Keeping Barcelona – moving ahead

The Barcelona Process is not dead. "[T]he general objective of turning the Mediterranean basin into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity requires a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion of greater understanding between cultures" (Barcelona Declaration, Nov. 1995). This is as much a political vision as it continues to provide a programmatic basis for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The French initiative resulting in the European Council's decision to establish a Union for the Mediterranean within the existing Barcelona framework has given the partnership a new impetus. This impetus should be used to readjust the partnership, making it both more effective on a working level and more integrative as regards the expectations of the countries and peoples involved. The readjustment needs to include two interconnected dimensions: establishing a fundament for existing structures and rationalize processes at the operative level.

Fundament for structures: integrating southern perspectives and strengthening intercultural exchange

The north-south rift is perceived in the south as a profound cultural divide. Furthermore, the Euro-Med Partnership is seen as an economic programme benefiting first and foremost the countries of the European Union. The human dimension has

to be moved to the forefront, addressing the people and promoting programmes with an explicit regional focus. Having concentrated so far mainly on bilateral cooperation, towards which about four-fifth of the financial resources are directed, much more attention has to be paid to regional and multilateral cooperation. Projects such as the 'EuroMeSCo' network of foreign policy institutes, the 'Femise' network of economic research institutes, and the 'Euromed Youth programme' are first steps in the right direction, but have to be extended considerably. Projects could comprise knowledge transfer through networks of scientific cooperation between universities (north-south as well as south-south), translation of books to raise cultural awareness, the spreading of modern technologies, such as Internet, as a tool of intercultural communication etc.

An often neglected, but extremely important feature in strengthening intercultural exchange is the parliamentary dimension. The visibility of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) has to be increased. Making a case for democratic legitimization, decisions taken by the EMPA have to be accounted for and incorporated into projects at the policy level. The EMPA itself should consider instruments to intensify contacts between parliamentarians from the north and from the south, e.g. through participation of southern parliamentarians in the annual meetings of the EP groups.

Making structures work: focussing on projects and setting incentives

The decision to establish a secretariat for the UMed was already taken. What remains to be defined is the role this secretariat should take over within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Instead of merely adding new structures to existing ones and thus causing even more confusion, the opportunity should be seized to rationalize working procedures and to make the partnership more transparent at the operative level. The new secretariat could – like the CBSS – serve as a roof political platform where projects are coordinated and monitored. Furthermore, the secretariat could assist in the preparation of working group and sectoral ministers' meetings. Regarding the initiation of projects, a very pragmatic approach has to be taken: not every country has to participate in every project. Instead, the concept of variable geometry should guide the negotiations and final realization of projects. A pragmatic approach should also apply to the allocation of funds. Partners and stakeholders in particular initiatives need to be committed through financial contribution, which would also increase financial ownership.

However, an indispensable precondition for effective regional cooperation is the existence of inter- and intra-regional links. These need not necessarily

already be in place, as the example of the Stability Pact shows. Nonetheless, it is imperative to promote the development of intra-regional networks through directly targeting regions and assisting in the set-up of institutional structures. These could then serve as precursors for more decentralized forms of cooperation, as the regional 'international departments' in the Baltic Sea region show. Altogether, this would contribute to bringing projects closer to the needs of the people.

Last but not least, focussing pragmatically on single projects is crucial for going ahead with the Barcelona Process. Nevertheless, this short- and medium-term working programme has to be supplemented

by a long-term perspective. Drawing on the experience made in South Eastern Europe, yet only the vague prospect of accession to the EU could have a decisive effect on the readiness for mutual cooperation. This would mean to go even beyond the close partnership offered through the European Neighbourhood Policy instrument. Anything lying between the ENP and a concrete membership perspective could serve as an incentive to accelerate policy integration within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

Alexander Geiger, Junior Policy Officer, EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Brussels

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Ernst Stetter, Director of the EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Brussels

Interesting links:

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/ Barcelona Process:
http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/

Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/empa/default.htm>

European Council 13/14 March 2008 – Presidency Conclusions:
http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/99410.pdf

Council of the Baltic Sea States:
<http://www.cbss.st/>

Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe:
<http://www.stabilitypact.org/>

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