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EU AND CONFLICT PREVENTION Ten Years of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: What Next?

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The 28-29 November 2005 anniversary conference in Barcelona has closed a full year the EU devoted to celebrating the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and reinvigorating it for the years to come. True, the outcome of the conference proved unsatisfactory and to some extent even disappointing. A conference, though, is but a diplomatic event. The balance sheet must be that of the ten years elapsed so far and not that of the conference in itself. With this caveat in mind, the relevant question is what is the outlook of the Barcelona process after ten years working?

In the last few years, after the crisis of 2000 - when the Partners proved unable to sign the Charter supposed to establish the political principles for their cooperation – thanks to EU's impulses, achievements did not fail to emerge. While, broadly speaking, EMP's common ground has remained weak, thanks to such achievements the EMP "acquis" has been definitely strengthened and enlarged. It would not be easy to find out in the world a framework for cooperation as rich and articulated as the EMP.

EMP achievements are carefully listed in the Conclusions released by the Presidency at the occasion of the 30-31 May 2005 seventh EMP Ministerial Conference in Luxembourg¹ - and reaffirmed by the Presidency Conclusions of the Barcelona conference². Among them, those certainly worth mentioning are the completion of the Association agreements bilateral network between the EU and the Southern Partners; the establishment in 2003 of the Euro-Mediterranean Investment Facility (FEMIP); the creation in 2004 of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly; the setting up in 2005 of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures; the signature of the Agadir trade agreement between Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan in 2004.

To these specific achievements, one has to add that EU aid (channelled through the MEDA fund), despite persisting shortcomings, has strongly improved its performance, so that funds are now reaching out to beneficiaries more easily and quickly. Most of all, the principle of joint ownership has been clearly and explicitly embedded in the decision-making mechanisms of the EMP. This means that EMP decisions have now to reflect a genuine consensus among partners to be implemented. In this sense, the EMP is getting closer to a true partnership than it was the case in the past. Maybe, EMP decisions will be fewer and more difficult than it happens today, yet they will be actually shared and then more effective. Unless ownership will be used by Southern partners just to skip EU's exhortations for change and reform, joint ownership could well emerge as a real turning point in the EMP.

¹ *Conclusions of the VIIth Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Luxembourg 30-31 May 2005)*, published in the "EuroMed Report" series, edition No. 90, 1 June 2005.

² *10th Anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Barcelona Summit Conclusions 27-28 November 2005*, published in the "EuroMed Report" series, edition No. 92, 30 November 2005.

In the Barcelona conference, the Ministers did not add new significant building-blocks to those pointed out above. Still, they have reaffirmed their political will to pursue and strengthen cooperation with a view to keeping on evolving and enlarging the Euro-Mediterranean “acquis”.

One can wonder, however, about the prospect of this “acquis”. What next with the Barcelona process? One can speculate by taking into consideration the platform from which Northern and Southern Partners are apparently about to sail for navigating throughout next ten years in the Barcelona process. The EU has, no doubt, made an effort of imagination in past few years and, in fact, it has set out a platform which – in this author’s view – includes two most prominent and significant orientations: European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and emphasis on political reform.

The ENP is not to replace the EMP and dilute it in the wider context of the East-South arc of EU neighbouring countries and regions. It is juxtaposed to the EMP with the aim of modifying its methods and procedures, while leaving its backbone intact. It increases the stakes of regional integration by adding the liberalisation of institutional regulations to that of commercial trade. Neighbours are expected to be integrated in what the EU calls “internal market”. This integration, however, will be pursued less regionally than bilaterally. Just because of ownership, Partners will opt for even very different agendas so that the speed of integration will result very different from country to country. In sum, the challenge is for a more integrated area, with less regional cohesion, however. What this will entail politically is difficult to say. There are dangers in this perspective as well as opportunities. In any case, Partners will enjoy more freedom in cooperating with the EU but will have to take more responsibility in picking up or putting aside opportunities. At the end of the day, the overall picture could contemplate a more developed and politically mature region or a persistently underdeveloped region with a few countries having been able and willing to progress.

In the EU perception, the bolder economic challenge the ENP brings to bear is coupled by the need to promote political and social reform in Southern domestic arenas. The ENP economic agenda is linked to reforms: the Action Plans the EU is presently already stipulating with its neighbours - in the event its Southern Partners - contemplate a combination of development policies and economic as well as political reform. When it comes to political reform, today’s mainstream thinking in the EU is that democratisation in the Southern Mediterranean countries cannot be imposed from outside, although it can be supported and stimulated from outside. Democracy has to come from within and, to that purpose, it has to be fostered by domestic forces and internal values. In this perspective, these forces are expected to be able to integrate the masses and reflect their consensus and support. The few western-minded liberals in the Arab world cannot attract such consensus nor can they represent the masses of a modern democracy. Such masses can only be integrated by moderate Islamic parties having accepted the rules of the democratic game. In general, in the EU there is a growing feeling that these moderate parties are there and that next endeavour in the EMP (and elsewhere in the wider Middle Eastern and North African

region) is to open a political dialogue with them. The Commission seems to believe the same.³

As the EMP remains fundamentally an intergovernmental framework, EU openings towards the Islamic parties will face strong opposition by the Partners' governments. How to reach out to civil societies, associations, NGOs, parties and groups in the Southern Mediterranean remains an unsolved problem as of today. The EMP's significant transactions among Northern and Southern civil societies (besides the intergovernmental relations it is already assuring) are perhaps the most important condition for making the new EU platform work. The Anna Lindh Foundation is a first good step - although the fact that its decisions are definitely in the hands of the 35 EMP governments is not auguring well.

Thus, the key point regards EU's ability to open a dialogue not only with governments but with civil societies as well. Will this platform work? The first Barcelona's years - particularly in the 1990s - have seen the EU - as well as the United States - mostly concerned by the upsurge of violent opposition from radical Islamic parties. This made the Europeans to privilege the stability of the authoritarian regimes prevailing in the South with respect to democracy. The motto was "One man, one vote, one time", inspired by the comment of an American official on the outcome of the 1991 Algerian elections and the FIS victory. Ever since things and perceptions have changed. Today, the EU could well be able to privilege democratic change over stability. It will not be easy, though. It is likely that next ten years will be needed to set out nothing more than the sheer conditions for more flexible and trustful relations to be set among EMP Partners.

These difficulties may be multiplied by the general political conditions in which the new ten-years cooperation wished for by the EMP Partners is unfolding. Presently, Euro-Mediterranean relations are included in a difficult political framework, essentially because of the uninterrupted crisis in Iraq and the strong tensions it triggers in the United States-Arab World-Europe triangle. The course of the Palestinian crisis after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza is giving raise to hopes, yet what its evolution will actually be looks very uncertain and there are little motives for optimism. Most important, the US policy of democracy promotion - of which the military intervention in Iraq is part - has stirred up strong opposition in the Arab and Muslim world, both in undemocratic and democratic quarters. Finally, the EU is weakened politically by its ability to master its enlargement to East Europe and, at the same time, its institutional and political deepening. These conditions should not be underestimated, as much as should not had been so the worsening of Palestinian-Israeli relations when in 1995 the EMP was established.

The EMP, however, is working. This is definitely an asset. As marginal as it may be with respect to the grand trends we have just mentioned, it may help the Euro-Mediterranean countries to overcome ongoing hardships and get to a robust framework of regional cooperation.

³ See Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *Tenth Anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership: A Work Programme to Meet the Challenges of the Next Five Years*, published in the "EuroMed Report" series, edition No. 89, 14 April 2005. In this text the Commission says that it is important "to strive towards common perceptions of the challenges of democratisation, including the role of democratic Islamic political movements in national polities".