EDITORIAL

A new vision for the Mediterranean

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When the Euro-Mediterranean Intergovernmental Conference was held in Barcelona in 1995, it launched a process aimed at promoting mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation between the two shores through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. 1995 was seen as an opportunity to advance shared economic progress and was also perceived by many societies as a space to enhance their freedom. The Barcelona Declaration represents the symbolism of a successful and modern European project with the profile of a dynamic and open Mediterranean.

A set of ambitious proposals and agreements emerged from that conference, but it was not until 2008 that the project was reinforced with the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean. The implementation and institutionalisation of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership has been one of the EU's most ambitious foreign and neighbourhood policy initiatives. However, the context and conditions that led to its creation seem difficult to revive today.

Twenty-five years after the launch of the so-called Barcelona Process, we can state that the results have unfortunately been much less satisfactory than originally expected and many of the good intentions have been neglected or surpassed by developments. The distance between the two shores is now even greater and the challenges that prevent the Mediterranean from being a region of prosperity, peace and solidarity have multiplied. The Euro-Mediterranean agenda might be drifting away from the sense of integration and inclusiveness that had driven it.

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The Union for the Mediterranean project has involved the implementation of a set of

cooperation policies with the southern shore, the establishment of cooperation instruments and regional programmes and the mobilisation of EU economic resources with the aim of reducing disparities on either side of the Mediterranean. The need to focus existing policies not only on growth but above all on the region's socio-economic progress is certainly an accurate point to make today. Although this will exists, the concentration of political energies on other objectives has made the Mediterranean agenda a non-priority issue for European institutions. The countries with the greatest historical impact on the region have not firmly taken up coordinated action either. Such a complex reality has ended up slipping through the back door in the form of conflicts and greater uncertainties, and the refugee crisis has ended up affecting European societies and the agenda institutions, calling into question the core values of the European Union.

Persistence of old conflicts and challenges

Probably one of the characteristics that best define the uniqueness of the Mediterranean is the persistence of old conflicts and challenges that have become chronicled over time, and the fact that the region is a laboratory for the new challenges posed by the global agenda. Both circumstances make the Mediterranean, as a whole, a highly vulnerable and sensitive area.

Over the years the Euro-Mediterranean region has undergone many changes that have shaped a variable scenario in which the dynamics of the Middle East and the growing prominence of the African continent currently converge in a decisive manner. It is also one of the places in the world where the negative externalities of the process of economic globalisation of recent years are most clearly evident and where the crises experienced have accumulated, leaving the region in a very bad situation. Global challenges such as the growth of economic and gender inequalities or the effects of climate change on a habitat of great ecological fragility are having a strong impact on the entire Mediterranean region. These trends add to the weakening of the international regulatory system and a return to state and renationalization dynamics that question the United Nations system and Euro-Mediterranean multilateralism, and make it even more difficult to promote coordinated action to address current challenges.

There are many factors behind the current stagnation of the Euro-Mediterranean process. In fact, it is one of the regions where the impacts of geopolitical changes and the active intervention of new and old powers that interfere in the development of many countries are most evident. Furthermore, since 1995, we have witnessed the transitions of political regimes following the Arab Spring, but at the same time the authoritarian reaction to the failed attempts at democratisation has intensified, resulting in a clear regression and involution in the rights and freedoms in many countries on the southern shore, and the outbreak of civil conflict and violence, further destabilising the region. Thus, radicalisation and sectarian extremism, the effects of terrorism, the war in Syria and polarisation have had a deep impact on the whole Mediterranean. The rise of authoritarianism is not, however, exclusive to the region; it is a trend that also affects Europe and the world.

During the last decades we have seen how the concept of Europe as a fortress has been built, through an increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum policy characterised by a lack of consensus between the EU member states. A policy centred on the securitarian view, border control and wall policy. A strategy of border control that has resulted in the ignominious figure of almost 40,000 people killed in the last two decades while trying to cross the Mediterranean shores from south to north. The magnitude of these figures strikes at the European conscience and unmasks the cynicism that has predominated in the debate on immigration. A policy that has not defined real decision-making spaces based on co-responsibility or shared management with the countries of origin or traffic, but rather has sought to externalise the problem and has failed to promote economic and social development in source countries in order to reduce migratory flows. With these dynamics it is difficult to advance in a partnership between equals.

The dramatic situation in demographic trends and immigration for economic reasons therefore conditions present and future scenarios in the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean basin. This is why it is essential to create new alliances for a new vision in the Mediterranean and to speed up the prioritisation of social, solidarity and educational agendas so that the spaces for dialogue and exchange can become effective and have a positive impact on all societies.

An increasingly negative narrative on immigration has emerged in many European Union member states. The emergence of new hate speeches with a high xenophobic content, which promote Islamophobia, is jeopardising the coexistence and social cohesion of today's diverse societies. A discourse of identitarian withdrawal promoted by national-populism that feeds on contemporary fears, challenges democratic systems and principles and finds in cultural differences, minorities or immigration the scapegoat for social unrest.

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One of the variables for understanding the key to the region's future is the dynamism of the societies on the southern shore and the activity of younger citizens, who, with their constant mobilisation, have pointed out the need for transformation and responses to underlying structural challenges. The reality of an increasingly Mediterranean Europe also reminds us of this. A new framework for renewed relations should incorporate some of the lessons learnt from these twenty-five years in order to maximise the potential with which we are facing the future.

The future development of the Mediterranean becomes a fundamental issue for Catalonia

and its citizens, and obviously for the whole region. We can conceptualise the Barcelona Process as a non-fulfilled hope, but we will surely contribute very little if we focus our efforts only on frustrated expectations. Over these twenty-five years, Barcelona and Catalonia have been home to an ecosystem of institutions and initiatives aimed at promoting regional Mediterranean cooperation. This, added to the geographical location of our country, makes the commitment to regional integration a key issue for Catalonia.

IDEES special issue: reflecting on the current challenges

This concern gave rise to the IDEES dossier “A new vision for the Mediterranean”, which has been shaped within the framework of collaboration between the Centre for Contemporary Affairs, the Directorate General for European and Mediterranean Affairs and the European Institute of the Mediterranean. A joint initiative that aims to reflect on the current challenges in the Mediterranean, 25 years after the start of the Barcelona Process. The dossier has been coordinated by Tamirace Fakhoury, who has been in charge of the social and governance dimension of current imbalances and asymmetries of power; Roger Albinyana, who has conceptualised the institutional sphere of regional and economic cooperation with a special emphasis on sustainable development in the region; and Mireia Estrada, who contributes to represent a part of the plural and diverse cultural imaginary of the Mediterranean region, from its tensions, conflicts and dissidences and with a feminist perspective. A set of reflections based on the contributions of more than 30 different voices that do not seek to revive the context of twenty-five years ago, but rather to reflect on the present challenges based on the accumulated experience and the changes and transformations that have taken place.

A debate that we believe to be essential in order to analyse and interpret the relevant factors that now condition the validity of the Mediterranean as a social, economic and cultural space. The publication is driven by the will to understand what the key factors are in order to anticipate their future development and to assess whether it is possible to deepen political and institutional cooperation. This is why it is crucial to reflect on whether it is still possible to define a regional strategy for the Mediterranean area that will make it possible to anticipate and condition future scenarios.

Rebuilding the spirit of the Barcelona Declaration would now involve contributing to the leadership of a new integration drive for today’s Mediterranean. The ambition is to give fresh push to a new European project for the Mediterranean that places the region as a priority in European policies and consolidates the region’s international role. Bringing back to life the spirit of Barcelona would represent the will to reanimate the debate on the vision for the Mediterranean community. Nevertheless, unlike it was done 25 years ago, today it would be done in order to renew it on the basis of experience and, above all, on the basis of the ability to adapt to a context that requires a global view. The European and Mediterranean spirit of Catalonia can contribute to supporting the mobilisation of actors and achieving a central role for the Mediterranean.

In this process, Catalonia and its government want to lead a shared strategy to have a

greater impact on the region and reconfigure Euro-Mediterranean relations. Catalonia's Mediterranean strategy MedCat 2030, a four-year action plan, aims to be a catalyst for a Mediterranean community under construction, which will strengthen alliances between the northern and southern shores and work towards human development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals set in the 2030 Agenda.

Furthermore, Catalonia is and wishes to continue to be a country of refuge that promotes intercultural dialogue and diversity. In this regard, it is essential to open up to the Mediterranean as a space for mobility and cultural exchange. We are committed to a Mediterranean citizenship and community that supports transformative social processes and makes it possible to build an inclusive community that places well-being, quality of life, democracy and human rights at the centre of its priorities. We hope that this monographic dossier and the articles that we will be publishing in the coming months will contribute to the debate to achieve all these objectives.



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