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A Look Behind The News, by Ferdinando Riccardi:

Union for Mediterranean: A birth marked by Ambiguity and misunderstanding

Rhetoric and reality. The Paris ceremony this Sunday, marking the birth of the Union for the Mediterranean will undoubtedly be a media success. There will be a sumptuous flow of important figures and the echo in the media will be quite noticeable but the follow-up and results will have to be gauged later. Despite the radical adjustments to the project since its launch, there are still concerns. There is moderate enthusiasm in Mediterranean third countries (this adjective is a euphemism). Misgivings and a certain distrust about the conference are more to the fore in fact than the expectations and confidence about it. Official speeches will be warm and sometimes heated, as is their due. The decisions, however, will be modest and will only be focusing on what instruments to implement, as well as on the institutional machinery and bureaucracy to set up.

In this connection, no-one will be disappointed. Four measures will be announced; a) meetings at the summit (heads of state and government) every two years; b) creation of co-presidency, with a president from the EU and a president from Mediterranean third countries; c) creation of a mixed secretariat with an operational role; d) setting up of a joint permanent committee in Brussels, in charge of preparing political meetings (ministerial meetings and summits). The Paris ceremony will not broach any controversial points on the appointment of the two co-presidents, the rules on their future rotation or where the secretariat will be based. These are politically sensitive points. For example, how is Israel going to be part of the co-presidency rotation? To prevent any ill-feeling at the solemn ceremony, these aspects will be tackled by the first ministerial meeting, programmed for November in Marseilles. Hence, the new Union will be able to function and new bodies can be added to already existing instruments covered by bilateral agreements and the Barcelona process. It doesn't look like any bureaucrats or diplomats will find themselves out of work.

Vague projects. The other decision at the Paris ceremony will focus on future activity. Some projects will be announced on: decontamination of the Mediterranean; transport (maritime and land) and infrastructure; civil protection (for tackling forest fires, for example). Some readers may get the impression that they've already heard about this. It's true they've been in the making for a long time - the hope now is that the new union will give a boost to them actually being carried out, but this will remain problematic as long as conflicts on the southern side of the Mediterranean remain unresolved. Other projects could be envisaged between a limited number of countries: there is talk of an Italian-Spanish initiative for SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) and new cultural bodies.

We have to ask ourselves whether this new union is necessary to this end, even more so given that that budgetary and national funding remains vague. The Paris conclusions will outline a number of possibilities: budgetary allocations, national funding, the role of the EIB and the creation of a new bank, an appeal for capital from Arab countries or from elsewhere etc. But no specific budgetary allocation has been planned as yet.

Concerns and a certain distrust persist in several countries. The very sharp initial differences in the EU have been smoothed out. Supporters of the new Union are hoping that there will be a revival of political interest in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and broader and more efficient implementation of the Barcelona process objectives in an updated framework.

Concerns and hesitation in Mediterranean third countries persist, prompted for several reasons: a) the diversity of objectives in relations with the EU (Turkish accession, a special exclusive link with Morocco, a free-trade zone - to a large part already in place with Tunisia, an energy partnership

with Algeria, participation in common EU policies for Israel etc); b) non-existence of free-trade between them, which makes differentiated bilateral relations between each of these countries with the EU indispensable (Turkey is already in the Customs Union, Tunisia and other countries are moving towards bilateral free trade, Algeria doesn't want it etc.); c) there is a desire to preserve individual EU budgetary support and other bilateral arrangements that no-one would like to make common (cooperation matters and immigration, for example). Libya is rejecting the very principle of the Union for the Mediterranean and believes that it could break both the solidarity between Arab countries (a large number of which will not be participating in the new Union) and African solidarity, to which it is very attached.

Political pressure, a few concessions and respect for diplomatic form has certainly led to almost all heads of state and government announcing that they will attend the Paris ceremony. Turkey's position is one of wait-and-see; Libya is the only country to reject the invitation and its attendance would have been difficult to understand given that the Union for the Mediterranean is part of the Barcelona process, of which Libya is not a part.

Academia confirms and explains divergences

A conference organised in Brussels by the Institute of European Democrats (IED) confirmed and partly explained in open and non-diplomatic language, the differences of approach and misgivings.

The key factor was the participation of representatives from academia and certain Mediterranean countries: Fouad Ammor from the Groupement d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Méditerranée (GERM) in Rabat; Ahmed Driss, the director of the Centre for Mediterranean Studies in Tunis; Virginie Collombier, seconded to Alexandria by the Institut d'études et de Recherche sur le monde arabe et méditerranéen in Aix-en-Provence; Ozgul Erdemli from Inside Consulting in Istanbul. I was struck by their independence and their frankness (they did not hesitate to criticise the authorities of their countries) and the calmness and balance with which they expressed their opinions, without the excess and fanaticism sometimes observed in European universities. But these opinions were far from being all the same.

Mr Ammor bitterly regretted and sharply criticised the abandonment by the Union for the Mediterranean of the ethical and political component, which is the basis of the Barcelona process. In his opinion, "neighbourhood policy" already represents a step backwards. So far, the new Union is leaving out democratisation, human rights, freedom of expression and governance. It is busy with electricity and infrastructure etc, but stability and sustainable prosperity require something else. Accession to fundamental values was forgotten and no longer exists. Dialogue is useful, as is doing things together, but this will not change anything if most of the major objectives are left out.

Ms Collombier described reactions in Egypt and took an opposition line. In this country, the initial perception of the project had been mainly negative because it appeared excessively theoretical and doctrinaire. What the political community found pleasing, and even more so the economists, was the pragmatism, growth targets, investment, infrastructure, energy, equality between partners. The principle of "variable geometry" in projects, between limited groups of countries that share a specific interest, as well as the direct participation of the private sector, was also appreciated. According to Ms Collombier, we cannot yet talk about support from the public, which knows nothing about it, but the authorities and business community attending, support the project. They are not expecting much from Europe from a point of view of liberties, which are of an essentially domestic nature, but they are hoping for concrete results.

Mr Driss said that the new Union has one advantage - it had placed the Mediterranean at the centre of political affairs. With regard to the contents, there is nothing new. The project, as it stands, has been transformed over recent months and is no longer the Sarkozy project with political objectives. There is now only the objective of relaunching a number of projects. In his opinion, the turning point came with the withdrawal of "conditionality": we no longer mention democratisation and reform. The bilateral nature of the relations (EU on one side and each Mediterranean country individually evaluated, on the other) persists: the joint co-president representing Mediterranean third countries will not in fact represent anything; its role will be theoretical, given the huge divisions, indeed conflicts, that exist. Bilateral relations between each of these countries and the EU, is the only thing that works, even if in most cases the people and cultural world are playing almost no part at all in them.

Ms Erdemli affirmed that Turkey did not see the new Union's objective as being clear or containing a clear message. Despite official reassurances about the absence of interference regarding the country's accession objective, Turkey is wary and has observed that Mr Sarkozy has reaffirmed his opposition to accession and Ms Merkel is still talking about a "privileged partnership". Ankara believes that accession is incomparably more important than this Union and it already considers that "neighbourhood policy" is a step backwards. The private sector and business community do not know where the added value is in relation to what already exists, and it believes that links with other neighbouring countries are far more important than those with countries in the southern Mediterranean. Some concrete projects could prove interesting but they do not require a Union. A reductive approach in relations with the EU will not be accepted by Turkey.

Sandro Gozi MEP (former close collaborator of Romano Prodi when he presided over the European Commission) said that the Mediterranean was not as yet a "sea of cooperation" but rather "a sea of division". How can a Union of 43 members be built if no unity exists between the third countries involved or if the EU does not have a credible external policy? We should begin with common projects that are modest but symbolic, such as the free movement of students and business leaders and corporate cooperation. Projects that are too ambitious are not realistic. (F.R./transl.rh)

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