



The EU and the Mediterranean Region

Commission further waters down Med Union proposal

Article from Euractiv.com

Not much is left of high-flying French plans for a 'Union for the Mediterranean' as the Commission yesterday presented its proposals on the initiative, allaying fears that it would be a closed club directed against Turkey.

The new forum, entitled 'The Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean', would be managed by a rotating co-presidency involving one EU and one Mediterranean partner country, dealing a blow to Sarkozy's hopes that France could remain in the co-chair beyond its own EU Presidency, which starts in July.

Unlike the former French proposal, all 27 EU countries will be eligible for co-presidency under the Commission's plans.

"We are a European Union of 27 countries. It is clear that there are others with interests," External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said, adding: "This can be a great project if everyone takes part and if everyone feels implicated."

The EU executive downgraded the central focus of the plan, insisting that it will merely be an upgrade of the Barcelona process.

"We are thinking in terms of a merger. This is the only way that this Union for the Mediterranean will be successful," said Ferrero-Waldner.

Sarkozy had originally envisaged the 'Mediterranean Union' as an exclusive club, involving only the EU's Mediterranean countries and their neighbours but not the EU as a whole.

This proposal attracted strong criticism from Germany, which feared the plan could split the EU down the middle, with the new union becoming a rival to the EU itself. In the end, Sarkozy was forced to back down and agreed to allow all 27 EU member states to participate.

The French proposal had also sparked opposition from Turkey as Sarkozy indicated that joining such a club may be a better course for Turkey to follow than joining the EU.

The Commission has now made clear that this project is "not directed against Turkey", nor is it aimed at diverting the focus away from Turkey's EU accession talks.

Turkey had made its participation in the EU-Mediterranean inauguration summit in July in Paris conditional on receiving this assurance. Ferrero-Waldner said she was now "confident" that Ankara would attend.

The new forum is meant to be project-oriented, with the main areas being energy security, environment, civil protection and transport, the commissioner said.

Potential projects will be the opening of new sea traffic routes, a clean-up of Mediterranean waters, improvements to maritime security and exploitation of solar power in North Africa to help meet the energy needs of the region, Ferrero-Waldner pointed out.

Despite the stark contrast between the Commission's proposals and the vision from Paris, the Elysée welcomed the work done by the EU's executive body. EU leaders are set to further discuss the plans and adopt a final version at their summit in Brussels on 19-20 June.