

Euro-Maghreb Relations & the Euro-Med Partnership:

A Parliamentary Perspective

Speech delivered

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I have been asked to talk about Euro-Maghreb within the context of the Euro-Med Partnership. As a Member of the European Parliament, I will, of course, only give you a perspective of a parliamentarian. I will do this because first and foremost I am a member of the European Parliament and secondly because I feel that the European Parliament is today playing an increasingly important role in the shaping of Euro Mad policy and this role is only likely to grow in the future, even if, as you know, the rejection of the EU Constitution in France and the Netherlands were significant setbacks, not least for the European Parliament.

I think that it is tempting to underrate the role of the European Parliament in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and in shaping the policies of the region. After all, it is the European Council, which lays the broad EU policy goals for the region, it is the Commission which drafts the proposals to put them into effect and which then implements them once they are approved. The Southern shore countries are consulted through the Committee for the Barcelona Process and periodic Foreign Ministers' meetings (EU-25 plus Mediterranean Countries). Historically, the parliamentary dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) has been weak and much more limited in scope.

So what meaningful role could the European Parliament be playing in shaping the EU's Mediterranean policies?

Over the years the involvement of the European Parliament in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has expanded steadily hand in hand with the expansion of its legislative powers. This involvement in EMP policy-making has occurred mainly as a result of the way in which the powers of the Parliament have expanded in the EU's external relations and foreign policy - but from my personal experience I can now also add - as a result of the Parliament's budgetary authority in deciding how much money goes where.

Let me elaborate. As you know, in the European Political Cooperation (EPC) process that was established in 1970 and which lasted up to the Treaty of Maastricht the European Parliament's role in the external affairs of the EU was largely a consultative one. Throughout this period the single most important improvement that was made was the assent procedure, introduced by the Single European Act (SEA), which gave the

European Parliament the **final say in the approval of Association Agreements and Accession Treaties**. However, the European Parliament's power to influence the negotiation of such agreements remained marginal.

Soon after, in 1993 with the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Parliament's powers were increased further when the Council became obliged to consult it on matters of external affairs specified by the treaties. This Treaty also extended the assent to a wider category of treaties with third countries which had financial implications for the Union.

Other than this the Parliament has a right to consultation and information. And let there be no mistake, external policy-making remains almost exclusively a Council domain.

Nevertheless, as I have said, the role of the European Parliament in EU foreign policy-making has been steadily growing over the past years particularly on the back of the Parliament's effective use of its bargaining strength on budgetary issues. As a member of the European Parliament's Budgets Committee, I can see how through its powers to amend non-compulsory expenditure in the Community budget, the Parliament can also change the financing of aid projects with non-member states and thereby influence foreign policy initiatives.

For it stands to reason that if our consent, as Parliamentarians, is required for the EU to spend money in the Euro-Med region, then we shall do and shall continue to do our utmost to influence the way in which that money is being spent.

The other development that has encouraged the strengthening of the European Parliament's participation in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has resulted from the gradual increase in public interest in foreign affairs in general, which has been reflected in the EU's external relations with third countries becoming a regular feature in the Parliament's debates. Indeed, topical foreign affairs issues are on our agenda during every plenary session.

In response to this increased interest the European Parliament has also created special committees, known as "parliamentary delegations" to deal with the EU's relations with different non-EU countries, not least in the Euro-Med region.

Present Structures

Let me now focus more directly on the European Parliament's relations with the Euro-Med regions and start by illustrating the main bodies within the European Parliament that deal with relations with southern Mediterranean shore countries.

First of all, there are two main EP committees covering what may be called horizontal foreign policy issues and in which Mediterranean issues or subjects of concern to the individual Mediterranean states may be discussed. They are:

1. The **Committee on Foreign Affairs** of the European Parliament which is often perceived as the most prestigious committee and which focuses on the EU's relations with third countries, including the Mediterranean; and the

2. **INTA Committee**, which is the **Committee on International Trade**

In addition to these, however, there is the **Budgets Committee**, in which I am a member, which has a determining say in the overall as well as yearly budget allocation for the region and even in allocations for specific projects. The **Budgets Committee** also appoints a member as a rapporteur with a specific responsibility over all EU spending in the Mediterranean non-EU countries the **MEDA funding**. The rapporteur on **MEDA funding** – a responsibility which I have the honour of occupying at the moment -has a determining role in recommending an approval or a rejection of EU spending on the entire **MEDA budget**. Clearly, the recommendation for approval will only be forthcoming if the rapporteur and the European Parliament are satisfied with the progress of policy implementation. In this regard, we closely scrutinise the work of the Commission particularly from a budgetary, but increasingly also from a political, point of view.

Moreover, the European Parliament has also established specialised **parliamentary delegations** to deal with non-member Mediterranean countries either in group or individually. These include:

1. The European Parliament's Delegation for the **Maghreb Countries** and the Arab Maghreb Union, which includes Libya. In this delegation, I occupy the role of Vice-Chairman;

2. The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the **Mashrek countries**;

3. The European Parliament's three separate delegations for relations with **Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Turkey**, and most importantly;

4. The European Parliament's Delegation to the **Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly** of the EuroMediterranean Partnership.

As you know, the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) was launched in Greece on 22 March 2004 succeeding the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Forum, which came before it. The total size of the Assembly is 240 members of which 120 come from the EU and its Member States; 45 members come from the European Parliament and 75 (that three from each) come from the member states.

Malta is represented in the EMPA by myself and by MEP Louis Grech from the Party of European Socialists as well as by three national parliamentarians, George

Vella, Mario Galea and Michael Ascjak. So with five representatives out of 240 coming from 35 different countries I would say that Malta is extremely well represented in the EMPA and has ample opportunity to make its voice heard.

Essentially, the European Parliament's committees as well as the European Parliamentary delegations and the Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly introduce the 'Parliamentary dimension' in the Union's external relations. I think it is important to reflect a little bit about this for a moment. Whereas the Council deals on a governmental level with counterparts from the Euro-Med. And whereas the Commission deals also engages with the Euro-Med largely on a governmental level, but going down also to lower ranks within the governmental structures of the Mediterranean partners concerned, the European Parliament focuses largely on the parliamentary dimension and gives a great deal of attention to exploiting its role of (a) getting parliamentarians to meet and share their experience and (b) reaching out to the people, particularly to civil society in the Mediterranean partner country. This is a dimension that can often be perceived a controversial but that is crucial in achieving the European Union's foreign policy objectives, not least the objective of strengthening human rights and the democratic process, but also crucial in establishing a longlasting rapport among the representatives of the respective countries.

I think that the parliamentary dimension is all too often summarily dismissed as a talking shop with little effectiveness. Having this the parliamentary dimension at work and having also had some governmental experience myself during my years as a member of Malta's EU negotiating team, I think we must not be short sighted about the real impact of the parliamentary dimension. The parliamentary dimension may not have any executive power and may therefore be short on concrete action and immediate deliverables. But it is a crucial long-term investment in people who are today and tomorrow's political leaders. And more than that, it is a vital link between power and the people.

So the 'Parliamentary dimension' in the Union's external relations helps the Southern Mediterranean countries to strengthen their parliamentary practice by bringing parliamentarians from these countries in direct contact with their European counterparts whether from national Parliaments or from the European Parliament. And it also extends its reach to the people and to civil society.

On the other hand, in our meetings as members of parliamentary delegations, such as the Maghreb delegation in which I am a member, we discuss issues of mutual interest that cover both the functioning of the bilateral association agreements as well as other points such as human rights and political reform which are of major interest to the EU. In the Maghreb delegation, we often hold exchanges with ambassadors from the respective countries and press home the points of concern for the European Parliament.

The meetings of the delegations usually take place in Brussels or in Strasbourg. However, visits to the countries concerned are also envisaged. In the case of the Maghreb delegation, last April we made our first visit of the current legislature when we visited Tripoli to discuss the three most topical issues concerning Libya, namely Libya's prospective participation in the Barcelona process, the problem of immigration as well as the issue of the Benghazi hospital and the foreign medical workers.

Since, as Parliamentarians, we are also members of political groups, we are also keen to establish networks with sister parties in the Mediterranean partner countries. For instance, my group, the European People's Party - the EPP - is working hard on setting into motion the launching of a network of EPP parties in the whole of the Mediterranean region.

I must add that Members of the EP Delegations also strive to build good contacts with influential representatives of civil society of the country within their remit. This allows us to attain sounder information but ultimately it also serve to encourage and strengthen the role of civil society in these countries. The European Parliament is concerned that the role of civil society within the Euro-Med region remains generally weak and is pressing for this aspect of the Barcelona Process to be revamped.

The delegations thus maintain a wide brief on all aspects of the countries for which they are responsible. In this manner the views of the Southern Mediterranean parliamentarians and their Governments are assessed and the findings transmitted to the rest of the European Parliament by means of reports, minutes and other documents. These in turn not only help the Parliament to clarify and formulate its own positions on various relevant issues but the information is also fed into the other EU institutions responsible for EU policy particularly the Council and the Commission. The findings and analyses of the delegations also help the Parliament formulate its positions in its consultations with the Council on external affairs as required by the Treaties. When the Parliament debates and approves resolutions on salient foreign policy issues these are then sent to the rest of the EU institutions.

On the basis of the information gathered and analysed by the EP delegations, the Parliament's ability to scrutinise the implementation of EU policies is enhanced as well as its ability to make timely and worthwhile proposals for their improvement.

For example under the auspices of its new Neighbourhood Policy, the EU Commission has already concluded a number of 'Action Plans' with a number of EU partners including some of its Mediterranean Partners. A key component of these Action Plans involves the adoption of key human right reforms. And there is no doubt that the European Parliament will be watching closely the implementation of these plans and playing with zeal its role of the watchdog of the executive.

So although the European Parliament may not be directly involved in the drafting of policies towards the Southern shore Mediterranean countries, it does have ways and

means of scrutinising the process and in turn of influencing the policy process and of supplying an alternative approach to that of the Council and the Commission.

Furthermore, as I have already said, the European Parliament's budgetary powers in this area are significant. The European Parliament, therefore, frequently, uses its budgetary powers to influence policy-making in areas, such as external relations where it is not a primary actor. This is how it should be, since if the European Parliament is to ensure that our EU taxpayers' money is being well spent in the EU's external relations, then it is clear that the European Parliament must express itself on policy-making and on how policies are being executed by Council and the Commission, It should come as no surprise therefore that the Commission and the Council send high-level representatives to the meetings of the Budgets Committee and other parliamentary committees to listen attentively to what we have to say and to respond to our questions.

Participating In Crucial Policy Issues

One of the roles assumed by the European Parliament is to scrutinise the democratic process in the EU's partners, particularly in the monitoring of elections. An EP delegation was sent to observe the elections of the Palestinian President earlier this year and now for the elections in Lebanon. I still recall the heated debate that there was in the Budgets Committee where we complained that the EU was poorly represented in the first two rounds of the Presidential election in Ukraine, which turned out to be tainted by electoral fraud. And we pressed for a more meaningful representation in the third round, which produced a different result. Members of the European Parliament, not least colleagues of mine from the group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats (EPP-ED group), were also very prominent in the main square of Kiev during the recent turbulent days in Ukraine.

For the Palestinian Presidential elections we had a very strong 28 Member delegation from the European Parliament on the ground watching the electoral process. In a Resolution, the European Parliament welcomed the "effectiveness of the EU *observation* mission" and called on both the Council and the Commission to 'prepare *another mission* for the [upcoming] general elections with the aim of supporting pluralism and *balanced access* to the media for all the *candidates*." *Indeed*, if this proposal is taken up and more parliamentary missions are allowed to operate in more Southern Mediterranean countries, Parliament will be participating directly in the reform and democratisation process in the Southern Mediterranean states.

The Leader of the European Parliament delegation, European Parliament Vice-President Edward McMillan Scott, made the following statement:

"After an initial appraisal, my colleagues confirm that, despite the Israeli occupation and lack of opportunity for East Jerusalem and other residents to vote, the Palestinians - especially women – have conducted an election of which they can be proud. It prepares the ground for the parliamentary elections, which could serve as a model for others in the region."

To conclude therefore, the European Parliament's role in the successful implementation of the Barcelona Process is a key plank of the European Union's foreign policy is therefore undeniable. More so this year when we are marking the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process and when the European Parliament wants to use its Presidency of the Euro-Med Parliamentary Assembly to give a positive contribution to the relaunching of this process.

Although the European Parliament's institutional role in foreign policy making and in particular the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership appears to be weak at first glance, I would say that, in reality, there is much more than meets the eye.