

The Barcelona Process a dialogue between cultures as an intercultural dialogue

Presentation by Maria-Antoinetta SIMONS,
Euromed Coordinator – Belgium

For a long time, the Mediterranean has been an economic and cultural crossroad which created a common heritage of which we should take full advantage. Intense interactions often bring forth conflictual situations. Frictions show that at least we have contacts with one another and, wanted or not, we influence one another. The Mediterranean being the cradle of western culture and civilization played a significant role in determining Europe's destiny.

With the end of the Cold War, the Mediterranean developed its own dynamics. The EU realized that we needed to consider both coasts of the Mediterranean equally. We should regard this sea more as a lake than as an ocean. Our common journey started in 1995 with the Barcelona Process. The political intention of the Barcelona Process was and still is to create a "Euro-Mediterranean" partnership. The objectives are **first**: establishing an area of peace and stability based on principles of international law and respect of human rights; **secondly** on the economic front - creating a free trade zone by the year 2010 is the objective; **thirdly** social, cultural and human partnership, with the aim of developing human resources and promoting understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies. This third objective was long time considered as an ugly duckling. The September 11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent acts of violence and terror have created a climate of fear and distrust. More and more people believe in the inevitability of the clash of civilizations and that the "others" [rivaling party/opposite camp] have to change their [its] values. This attitude is a menace to the international environment. Some powers reverted to traditional "hard power" as coercion and force younger players on the international scene to seek the path of cooperation rather than confrontation. In an EU effort to stop the widening of the gap through dialogue, in 2002 in Valencia, a new impetus was given to the social, cultural and human partnership with the start of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the dialogue between cultures,

the Anna Lindh Foundation. It is, in fact, the only common institution we have.

This Foundation is created with much political will from all the partners involved. This top down creation **should become** a foundation that functions bottom-up. The Foundation was meant to function as a network of networks but the presumption that such networks already existed in all the countries proved to be false. In many countries the appointed head of network had to create a network, which entailed a lot of work **and a financial burden**, which wasn't foreseen. The financing of the heads of networks was never taken in consideration, which has become a major problem. The actual Board of Governors of the Foundation is the Euromed Committee and, to be honest, it did not excel in giving directions where to go to with the Foundation. The **Executive Director** brilliantly handled such inadequacies filling the intellectual void behind the concept. After 2 years and a half of foundation's operation it is time to begin preparing a review of its functioning and to **amend** the statutes where needed. The composition of the Board of Governors should reflect the original idea of the Anna Lindh Foundation: “ a network of networks functioning bottom-up”. The Board of Governors of the Anna Lindh Foundation should be therefore composed by the heads of the national networks. The heads of these national networks know firsthand what is needed to enhance the cultural dialogue within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

As has been already pointed out, the foundation is covering such a vast area of subjects that focusing was not easy and the **Executive Director** tried to cover as many topics as possible. The cartoon crisis with its onset in 2005 and reaching its peak in 2006 clearly demonstrated the problems and indicated which issues are to be tackled as a matter of priority.

It became clear that, as stated by the **Ministers of Foreign Affairs** in Valencia 2002, there should be more respect for pluralism, diversity and cultural peculiarities, equality and mutual respect, avoidance of prejudices and stereotypes. Dialogue should aim to reach not only at a better understanding of the “other” per se, but ultimately should lead to peaceful and fruitful coexistence and mutual enrichment.

The dialogue between cultures too often stresses collective identities rather than identities of individuals or social groups. It reveals that our thinking is based on antagonisms between ideological monoliths. It is "this OR that", rather than "this AND that". Special attention should be given to deconstructing ideological hierarchies in our way of relating to one another. A dialogue that only focuses on what cultures have in

common will largely fail. We need to have a dialogue on differences and diversity, based on the common value of non-discrimination. We should be aware that the issue of discrimination and the rejection of the “other” is not **only** a **European** problem but **also** (perhaps less visibly) a **problem** of the South **when it** exercises religious intolerance against people of other faiths **or** against non-believers. **Respect for human rights is a prerequisite for dialogue.**

We should not be tempted to adopt “cultural relativism” following the view that one or another religion is incompatible with democracy and rationality. Discriminatory theories, based on islamophobia, anti-semitism and anti-christian **sentiments** , are all manifestations of group-identity based **feelings** and should be fought with ideological and political debate against intolerance and discrimination and the defense of **human rights including** fundamental values as the right to **differ, freedom and diversity should be part of the debate.**

Europe is proud of its diversity in languages, mentalities, religions and customs. It took innumerable wars before Europe understood that diversity and the wealth it brings can only flourish in a society where freedom is guaranteed. Freedom is the prerequisite for our diversity. A long process of revolutions and secularization lead to a constitutional separation between State and Religion and of a separation of powers. Such separation makes social, cultural and political pluralism possible and is necessary as a safeguard for freedom. Freedom is not possible without a clear understanding of non-discrimination and responsibility for ones own actions as well as for the others. Taking responsibility is undeniably linked to tolerance.

As the example of Europe shows, tolerance, non-discrimination, freedom are essential to live in peace but **it** also shows that we do not need a dialogue between rivaling cultures but an intercultural dialogue, in which the hierarchy of values loses its relevance. This, I think, is the strongest asset of the EU - we lead a daily, continuous intercultural dialogue. We do not speak in terms of tolerance of one another but in terms of respect of one another. How healthy is a personal relationship, in which one of the parties is merely tolerated and not respected?

However, respect also is the result of an interactive learning process. Getting to know one another is the first step to being able to accept and respect the other. Such an acceptance should be the basis for social integration of the newcomers into the hosting society. They should do their utmost to **adapt themselves** to the code of social behaviour and

cultural values prevailing in their hosting countries. On the part of the host it is essential to understand and cater (to the extent possible) to the needs of the newcomers.

Respect for one another or the lack thereof should be sorted out within every society internally conforming to the laws of the country. Every minority should have the right and the possibility to make its voice heard without fear of retaliation, which, I believe, is the case in European democracies. Seeking pressure from the country of origin **might be considered as a** lack of confidence in the hosting society and **or** the unwillingness to accept its norms, perhaps in its turn suggesting that this minority does not belong there in the first place.

Moreover, people should never feel compelled to leave their country looking for a better future elsewhere. Poverty, lack of freedoms, democracy and good governance, demographic explosion, gender inequality, growing political and religious extremism prevailing in the region present a great challenge for **all the participants in the Barcelona Process. We need to take up the challenge. Europe can offer its experience in intercultural dialogue. People who want to migrate should be aware that they embark on a difficult journey and that not just one or two components in their live are changing but they will be confronted with an entire new world where not everything will be conform to their expectations..**

Asserting Human Rights is ultimately more effective than a fixation on security. A determined approach can make a political change possible. Soft power relies on the transmission of ideas, values and norms. We have to avoid a situation in which soft power is only used by **fundamentalists** that deny political and religious pluralism and equal rights for men and women. We appeal for respect, humanism and intercultural dialogue.