

**XXVI Information and Training Seminar for Euro Med Diplomats
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**Statement by H. E. Mr. Alexander Slabý
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Colleagues and friends,

I am really glad to be here with you today, having the opportunity to share with you our thoughts about the Czech Presidency of the EU and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The President Emeritus Guido de Marco said this morning that our interests, our sub-consciousness is territorially pre-determined ... I came here today to tell you, among others, that the Czech Republic, although not being a coastal state is interested in the Med things. What unites us here together today is the past and the future of our common project. But of course, some countries are more Mediterranean ... Malta, with its exceptional inter-cultural heritage, represents with no doubt one of the most convenient venues for our discussions. So allow me to thank the organizers, and personally Prof. Stephen Calleya, for the preparation of this important seminar.

I said, I was glad to be hear ... but you might be rather listening to my Swedish colleague ... since the Czech EU Presidency is coming to the end ... Or to representatives of France and Egypt because the leadership of the EU-Med Partnership - as it was still called when similar group gathered here at the same period of last year - has changed substantially... The Summit for the Mediterranean in Paris last July turned the EuroMed partnership to the Union for the Mediterranean. A lot has changed since, e.g., the institute of the Co-Presidency was launched ... one country from southern partners, one from the EU ... and others ... in attempt to answer the question reminded us this morning by professor Calleya - the Barcelona Process ... was it or was it not the real partnership? Here they are, the principles put into the cradle of the newborn baby:

- giving new impetus to Euro-Mediterranean relations,
- introducing greater balance between partners on both sides of the Mediterranean,
- offering a sense of co-ownership of the process and
- providing particular focus on regional projects.

The Czech Republic followed the original intention of President Sarkozy with particular attention. And welcomed it ... after blunting edges of the original idea supposed to create a Mediterranean Union of coastal States only. Despite some teething problems the newborn baby still suffers from we believe particularly in its project-oriented nature – selecting and bringing projects capable to bring direct benefit to peoples of the Med countries ... and achieving concrete results sooner or later ... rather sooner than later ... is the only possible outcome of this turbulent period. We considered it to be also very important that it has been based on the existing Euro-Mediterranean framework, which ensures the continuity with ongoing program documents of the Partnership and other cooperation. But, unfortunately, through all this initial period after the Paris Summit till now, the process of discussing the institutional modalities first, followed by political disputes took place rather than proper substantial progress.

The Czech Republic was ready to contribute to the success of the new Union by executing its first full-fledged co-presidency in the first term of 2009. We were committed to ensure the continuity with the remarkable work done before and to insure the smoothest and the fastest possible launching of substantial activities of the Process and new creative elements.

The main priorities of the Czech Presidency were in full accordance with the common challenges the Euro-Mediterranean region faces:

- economic and social development,
- energy and climate change package,
- liberalisation of trade,
- ENP,
- intercultural dialogue
- civil protection,

and also the first basket matters, which have been little bit marginalized:

- human rights,
- good governance,
- countering terrorism and extremism, ...

to name just a few. In that connection let me recall the overall motto of the Czech EU Presidency ... Europe without barriers – *L'Europe sans frontières*. Special attention was to be given to the cooperation with civil society and local actors. We intended to promote the dialogue between all Euro-Mediterranean partners benefiting from the experiences of the Anna Lindh Foundation.

This priorities and commitments of the Czech Republic were in no way changed by the agreement between the Czech Prime Minister Topolánek and the French President Sarkozy of 31 October 2008 ... I call it Halloween Agreement. As a result of it the UfM is co-presided by three countries during the first semester this year. Egypt is representing the so-called “southern countries”, France the “northern countries” and the Czech Republic the Presidency of the EU.

The promising early evolvement of the Union with its ambitious working program for 2009 was hampered by the outbreak of hostilities in Gaza at the end of last year.

These critical events could certainly not go unnoticed within the framework of the UfM. We are not working in a political vacuum. At the same time, we are aware of the fact that the problem of Gaza (let alone the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) cannot be solved in the context of our co-operation. But we know that our co-operation in many areas of joint interests could be more effective if this conflict would be solved. These last months, when the calendar of our meetings was suspended, made this evident once more.

The strong commitment of Europeans to peace in the Middle East is well known. The EU has clearly stated on several occasions that it expects both sides to remain committed to a two-state solution and previous engagements, in particular obligations under the Roadmap, namely the cession of violence as well as refraining from any action undermining trust.

Unfortunately, despite the halt of military action, we are still in a stalemate: there is no permanent ceasefire. On the one hand, more than 150 rockets were launched at Israel since the end of hostilities, on the other hand, restrictions for the delivery of humanitarian goods into the Gaza Strip persists, not to speak of commercial goods and cash, which are desperately needed for reconstruction. The EU continues to urge both sides to fully implement UN SC resolution 1860 and has offered a helping hand by reactivating its border mission EUBAM on stand-by.

But things are not only gloomy. On the positive side I would like to point out three aspects. First: the conference in Sharm-al-Sheik. Second: the Arab Peace Initiative being still alive. Third: the new US Administration's engagement in the Middle East together with the EU working hardly to set the peace talks back on track.

The Gaza crisis affected the Union for the Mediterranean in many aspects, but the freeze did not, however, condemn us to passivity. Rather the contrary. The Czech EU Presidency had initially accepted the decision of the Arab partners to temporarily suspend our cooperation, but has then started to work eagerly on the resumption of the meetings together with the French and Egyptian co-presidencies.

As the EU presidency we initiated and chaired the internal EU drafting group for the Statutes of the future Secretariat of the Union. The EU version of the draft, which is being finalized literally in these hours, should be presented as a common EU proposal at the reunion of the UfM drafting group in Barcelona, which we believe will take place on Monday 25th of May...

The EU presidency was also eager to prepare the ministerial meetings scheduled for the first term of this year. After several postponements there are still three ministerials at stake during our presidency:

- on civil protection,
- on transport and
- on energy.

The Ministerial on sustainable development, which was supposed to meet in Monaco early next month has been cancelled but the possibility of an alternative meeting of more technical nature is being discussed now.

In the meantime, after a series of negotiations, our Arab partners agreed to come to the Senior Officials meeting, held in Brussels on 23 April, provided that it would be entirely devoted to the political dialog. The EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana delivered the opening speech. The Czech Presidency did it as well and with a number of other EUMS speakers called for the earliest possible resumption of the UfM activities. But the idea of an immediate re-launching was opposed and four aspects to be met by the Israelis were raised... So, the situation remains unclear despite of many attempts to de-freeze the UfM ... We all now hope that the mentioned drafting group meeting in Barcelona will take place and will slowly launch the process of de-freezing.

We face many challenges and time is working against us. We need to progress this year and I dare even say this semester. The ambitious projects that we have already started to identify are waiting to be implemented.

Before concluding, allow me to underline that such an event like this is probably now more important than ever, where the Union for the Mediterranean is in its critical phase. At the very end I have the good news and the bad news for you ... The bad news is that the freeze still lasts ... The good news is that the Union for the Mediterranean has a strong potential enough to overcome this crucial period.

Thank you for your attention.