

Transport and Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, a Slow Journey

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The 1995 Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference awakened hopes for the establishment of an efficient transport network and facilitation of transport conditions between Euro-Mediterranean countries. To this end, two objectives were set: the improvement of infrastructures in the region, with the definition and promotion of a multimodal network; and the facilitation of transport conditions through a series of improvements based on the convergence of the transport regulation between the countries of the two shores of the Mediterranean. However, the need to create a funding mechanism for Euro-Mediterranean transport infrastructures in the southern countries has thus far slowed down the multiple attempts by the EU and, later, the UfM, to push forward real and effective Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

When in November 1995 the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference adopted the declaration that began the current Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the actors involved (countries, and regional, sub-regional, sectoral and professional organisations) warmly welcomed the inclusion of the infrastructure and transport sector.¹ This inclusion was logical. How to create a large area of economic cooperation without an adequate and efficient transport system and without facilitation of the transport conditions for trade?

Therefore, the concise phrases in the declaration and in the annexed work programme raised great hopes. Let us recall some:

- “The participants stress the importance of developing and improving infrastructures, including through the establishment of an efficient transport system.”
- “Efficient interoperable transport links between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, and among the partners themselves, as well as free access to the market for services in international maritime transport, are essential to the development of trade patterns and the smooth operation of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.”
- “Cooperation will focus on development of an efficient Trans-Mediterranean multimodal combined sea and air transport

1. This article exclusively reflects the opinion of the author and not that of any of the organisations or countries cited.

system, through the improvement and modernization of ports and airports, the suppression of unwarranted restrictions, the simplification of procedures, the improvement of maritime and air safety, the harmonization of environmental standards at a high level including more efficient monitoring of maritime pollution, and the development of harmonized traffic management systems; development of east-west land links on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and connection of Mediterranean transport networks to the Trans-European Network in order to ensure their interoperability.”

To complete the optimistic scene, transport was the focus of one of the seminars in the Euromed Civil Forum, held simultaneously with the political conference.

The start of cooperation at a multilateral level was, therefore, hopeful. The European Union quickly created a Euromed Transport Forum for cooperation between the sectors involved and noted two major objectives: improvement of infrastructures in the region, with the definition and promotion of a multimodal network; and the facilitation transport conditions through a series of improvements based on the convergence of transport regulation between the countries of the two shores of the Mediterranean.

This first impulse, the result of good coordination between the different actors involved, raised great expectations, but some clouds soon appeared on the horizon. The same European Commission services that had driven the forum forward started to bring it to a standstill with different excuses: regulation, yes, infrastructures, no. Infrastructures require funds that are not available, so better to focus on the more useful aspects in trade (let us remember here that this trade is mostly north to south, apart from energy products).

Thus, and for a few years, the hopes raised were frustrated. Only after a change of personnel in the EC, then absolutely responsible for (and controller of) Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and the Euromed Transport Forum (to the detriment of a larger role for the European states), did there seem, once again, to be new hopes following continuous meetings in which the southern countries made their growing dependency clear and where there was on-going demand for specific activities.

Some general multilateral cooperation projects were introduced (Main Transport Project, Infrastructure Project, MedaMos, SafeMed...) focused on bringing administrations in line, convergence of the regulation, training in maritime safety, promotion of maritime highways, but greatly limiting cooperation in the field of planning and promotion of infrastructures.

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Although the southern Mediterranean countries repeatedly expressed the need to work in this latter field, the EC limited the activities to the “Infrastructure Project”, entrusted to a consultancy group, which identified, in broad terms, a network and infrastructural projects whose priority was assessed regardless of the countries involved.

The result was a process that, overall, enabled a certain exchange of knowledge in the search for greater regulatory convergence (strengthened with strong pressure in the bilateral association agreements and the programmes that developed them) and limited the multilateral cooperation to a series of meetings and training seminars with few results for the actual physical transformation of the region and with practically no effect on the economic development of the region as a whole. A new



Port of Barcelona (Lluís Castellà).

change of Community officers was needed to stimulate and introduce a change in this fairly unambitious scenario.

After continuous insistence from the countries and sub-regional representatives, such as the Group of the Transport Ministers of the Western Mediterranean (GTMO 5+5), set up as the main invigorator of cooperation, the EC agreed on the preparation of a Regional Transport Action Plan (RTAP) 2007-2013. This plan came when some of the services of the Commission were finally aware of the few advances in multilateral transport cooperation and the need to impose order and have a more specific framework cooperation to revert the negative perceptions that this cooperation provokes among the agents involved.

As an example of dispersion, the EC created a high level group to reflect on the extension of the trans-European transport networks in the neighbouring countries, which was working in parallel with the Euromed Transport Forum, and whose proposals had to be later revised in the framework of the RTAP. The RTAP sought to bring order to the multiple and diverse EC initiatives and generate the bases of a new stage in which the hopes of southern countries could be addressed. This first plan was structured in different actions that sought to approach the issues not addressed or poorly addressed in the previous 10 years and, finally, adopted the idea of planning a multimodal Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network (TMN-T) and tackle its funding. But these hopeful proposals expressed

in RTAP required new and intense efforts from the southern countries and the sub-regional groups to try to move from words to action.

Thus in 2009, the Centre for Transportation Studies for the Western Mediterranean (CETMO), in its capacity as Secretariat of the GTMO 5+5, and on the request of its member countries, accepted the challenge of defining the TMN-T network, together with the southern countries, and of developing the technical tools necessary to evaluate it. The 5+5 countries believed that the political cooperation must reflect the real technical cooperation and that this had to be checked in two ways: putting the southern countries at the same level as European countries in terms of technical training, and developing a framework of infrastructural planning equivalent to that of the Trans-European transport network in Europe.

In this respect, it began to work to endow Euro-Mediterranean cooperation with the TMN-T network of reference, comparable in its conception and definition to the European network. But the planning was not complete if it did not also tackle the issue of funding of the network defined. Aware of the lack of resources, a mechanism was proposed to at least contribute to the evaluation of the network and to the preparation of priority projects.

The process of defining the network was enthusiastically received by the countries of the region and, in October 2010, the TMN-T network was practically fully defined. Some links corresponding to Israel and Palestine remained suspended, but that did not affect the network as a whole or its global conception. However, there was a new hindrance. The EC services insisted on the need to complete the network in its totality before adopting it and rejected working at a sub-regional level. With the excuse of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, the culmination of the process of defining the TMN-T and of further developing the possible funding mechanism was frustrated. The

Maghreb countries once again saw their hopes dashed when in the Western Mediterranean sub-region the degree of consensus on the aspects dealt with was total.

For some actors involved, the situation was disappointing and once again the role of the EC was questioned, not only for its “understandable” difficulty in solving the problems between Israel and Palestine but also for a lack of capacity and alternative approaches for the other countries to be able to advance and have partial or sub-regional TMN-T development proposals.

The array of frustrating situations in the transport sector (and in other sectors) affected the creation, in 2008, of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which seeks, among other objectives, to return the active role in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to the countries and focus on specific initiatives. Therefore, its appearance within the scenario of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in a technical field like that of transport was received by the actors involved with renewed hope.

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Let us recall that the Paris Declaration indicates that: “The Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean gives a new impulse to the Barcelona Process [...]: by upgrading the political level of the EU’s relationship with its Mediterranean partners; by providing for further co-ownership to our multilateral relations; and by making these relations more concrete and visible through additional regional and sub-regional projects, relevant for the citizens of the region.”

Moreover, “the partners will set up a favourable environment for the implementation of projects taking into account the regional, sub-regional and trans-national character

proposed [...]. The potential to promote balanced and sustainable development, regional and sub-regional integration, cohesion and interconnections will be considered and their financial feasibility including the maximization of private sector financing and participation will be sought.”

Moreover, “Heads of State and Government underscore the potential offered by the reinforced cooperation through the principle of variable geometry projects in line with the scope and main aims of the initiative. Such an approach will enable member countries with affinities, shared objectives and complementarities to give momentum to the process and reach the goals of the Barcelona Declaration.”

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Finally, it is worth noting that “easy and safe access and flow of goods and people, on land and sea, is essential for maintaining relations and enhancing regional trade. The development of motorways of the sea, including the connection of ports, throughout the entire Mediterranean basin as well as the creation of coastal motorways and the modernisation of the trans-Maghreb train, will increase the flow and freedom of the movement of people and goods. Particular attention should be devoted to cooperation in the field of maritime security and safety, in a perspective of global integration in the Mediterranean region.”

There is a clear presence, behind this declaration, of 5+5 cooperation and of the need to make progress in those sub-regional infrastructural projects that the existing cooperation, until that moment, had been unable to advance.

Thus, the UfM is, within this chronology of Euro-Mediterranean transport cooperation, a

new hope for the southern countries and for the sub-regional groups to drive forward the most necessary issues and change the physical reality of the region. Consequently, it is not surprising that the first projects adopted and labelled by the UfM are projects that did not have the support of the EC services, quite the contrary. They are the project “Logismed TA” (Training Activities), promoted by the European Investment Bank, with the support of CETMO, and the project “Completion of the Central Section of the Trans-Maghreb Motorway”, promoted by the GTMO 5+5.

Although the final real added value that the UfM could contribute to these projects was still a pending issue, its mere existence obliged the EC to move a little. The EC is still the most important actor in its capacity as the main funder of the UfM Secretariat operation, with what this means for its ability to act. Meanwhile, the so-called “Arab Spring” obliged the countries involved to revise and rethink their priority projects, which hindered some decisions at both national and multilateral level.

Another new development came in 2013-2014 with the EU’s revision of its policy on trans-European transport networks, in which the possibility of funding connections with neighbouring areas and countries was formally introduced. This innovative aspect was well received, but it remains to be seen if Euro-Mediterranean infrastructural cooperation is focused only on north-south projects with more European than Euro-Mediterranean interest.

Finally, the period of applicability of the RTAP came to an end with mixed results and a Euro-Mediterranean Conference was called in November 2013, in Brussels, organised by the EC and the UfM Secretariat, allowing for a new, albeit feared, step forward. The conclusions of the conference recognise the TMN-T and above all its concept as a framework (although there is no adoption of a general map specifically indicating the network under discussion) and

there are only tentative advances on funding. On the one hand, it became part of the priority projects in the future work of the Southern Neighbourhood Advisory Programme in Transport (SNAP-T) and, on the other, it is proposed to hold a specific conference on the funding of the TMN-T. Moreover, the conference plans the development of a new RTAP for the period 2014-2020 (but at the start of 2015 this plan is neither known nor approved).

The frustrating reality in terms of development of infrastructures of the southern countries and the EC's "fluctuating" behaviour negatively affect the assessment of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the infrastructures and transport sector

The SNAP-T was entrusted by the EC to the European Investment Bank (EIB) to identify and support, through feasibility studies, some priority transport projects. The involvement of the EIB technical services must allow progress in the conception and evaluation of the priority projects submitted by the countries. As was predictable for anyone involved in the process of transport cooperation, the EIB's first conclusions at a general level coincide on the need to advance in the definition of a mechanism similar to the GTMO 5+5's proposal, and to have a source of funding to prepare the feasibility studies of the TMN-T projects, establishing clear conditions of access to available funding.

For its part, the conference on funding, held in December 2014 in Civitavecchia (Italy), despite the EC's limited ambition in its conception, enabled the UfM Secretariat to act as coordinator of financial backers and ratify the need to explore new funding mechanisms for the development of TMN-T projects.

In conclusion, after 20 years of Euromed Transport cooperation, the assessment is certainly no cause for enthusiasm. On the one

hand, there has been progress in the aspects of regulatory convergence by bringing administrations in line and the definition of a multi-lateral technical framework of reference but, on the other, the frustrating reality in terms of development of infrastructures of the southern countries (so necessary for south-south cooperation and, therefore, for an authentic balanced development of the Mediterranean region) and the EC's "fluctuating" behaviour negatively affect the assessment of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the infrastructures and transport sector.

This cooperation requires a definitive response to the development of the Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network and to the funding of its priorities, as well as acceptance of the variable geometry to strengthen, as a future guarantee, the viable sub-regional cooperation. The stronger the different parts of the whole, the more future this whole will have. We must make progress where we can and persevere where we presently cannot.

A Euro-Mediterranean transport infrastructures funding mechanism, by the EU, based on the European model (TEN-T), and its application to the southern countries would generate a virtuous circle in which the planning and funding processes would be clear and transparent, in the form of open calls, obliging technical improvement of the definition of the projects proposed by the countries and generating in them an improvement in their technical training which would reduce the arbitrariness of their priorities. Politically, it would turn the "peer to peer" nature of the Paris Declaration into a reality at a technical level, responding definitively to the southern countries' main expectation in the field of transport since the creation of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Twenty years have now passed. Either there is a response and this issue is definitively tackled, or the political discourse of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is changed.