

Relations EU/Mediterranean countries: reinvigorating the Barcelona process

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PURPOSE: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament to prepare the fourth meeting of Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers "Reinvigorating the Barcelona Process".

CONTENT: This Communication seeks to prepare the EU's position in the run-up to the Euro-Mediterranean meeting of Foreign Ministers of November 2000. The Barcelona process, established in 1995, is a regional framework which brings partners together at both political and technical level to promote their common interests. It builds on the various Mediterranean policies developed by the EU since the 1960s but marked a new departure in that, for the first time, it created a framework for strategic relations going beyond the traditional areas of trade and assistance cooperation. This multilateral process is underpinned by a network of bilateral relations between each partner country and the EU, embodied in Association Agreements. The three main goals of the EU Mediterranean policy are set out in the Barcelona Declaration and in the common strategy adopted by the European Council in Feira in June 2000. They are as follows: - the creation of an area of peace and stability based on fundamental principles, including respect for human rights and democracy; - the creation of an area of shared prosperity through the progressive establishment of free trade between the EU and its partners and among the partners themselves in view of the creation of the wider Euro-Mediterranean free trade area by 2010. This process is accompanied by substantial financial support from the EU for economic transition and to help partners deal with social and economic challenges which come from transition. - the improvement of mutual understanding among the peoples of the region and the development of an active civil society. While there have been many successes, several difficulties have also been encountered. For example, difficulties in the Middle East have slowed process and limited the extent to which full regional co-operation could develop. The process of negotiation and ratification of the Association Agreements has also been slower than expected and the spirit of partnership has not led to a sufficiently frank and serious dialogue on issues such as human rights, prevention of terrorism or migration. In addition, trade between Mediterranean partners (South-South trade) has not increased and implementation of the MEDA programme has been hampered by complicated procedures both in the EC and in partner countries. Against this background, the Commission seeks to reinvigorate the process in several important respects: - as regards the Association Agreements, there is a need to accelerate negotiation, signature and ratification; - as regards trade, for each country for which an Association Agreement is in force, the Commission will carry out a detailed examination of the further steps needed in order to reach, by the end of the transition period, a GATT compatible Free Trade Agreement, covering all sectors including greater liberalisation of reciprocal trade in agriculture; - enhanced regional and sub-regional trade and economic cooperation. As regards the MEDA programme which provides financial assistance to support the objectives of the Association Agreements, future programming will be more focussed and concentrated on a smaller number of priorities, directly linked to the Agreements. The Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability should be agreed in November 2000 and finally, a new programme designed to raise awareness both in EU Member States and in partner countries will be launched.