

## A Shared Perspective from the Nordic Countries

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From sociology to exploration to trade to literary exchange, the Nordic countries have had throughout history extended relations with the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean. As Tuomo Melasuo highlights, these relations remain a modern-day reality through tourism and migration, as well as through the role countries such as Finland and Sweden have assumed within the European Union's foreign policies. Yet, it is the domain of civil society and popular culture that may offer the most promising and visible areas of cooperation.

The Mediterranean world is a kind of cultural cradle whose borders are almost impossible to define. Its rayonnement has no limits, its political, but also cultural spreading concerns all the continents. In this sense it has become the property of all the humanity.

The European North, that is the Scandinavian countries, Finland and the Baltic states as well as other countries surrounding the Baltic Sea are all very much maritime nations. For this reason these countries have always had a lot of cultural and commercial exchanges with faraway regions, and as well as with the Mediterranean world, which was for centuries, even for more than a couple of millenniums the main source of inspiration for the North of Europe. These long historical relations were multifaceted, qualitatively extremely important and tenacious, but, at the same time, thin and narrow. An important part of the Nordic social and cultural life is based on Mediterranean items, be it Latin letters, Arabic numbers and Middle Eastern religions.

### Exchanges throughout History

The first known contact is the expedition of Pytheas from Marseilles to the North in the 4th century BC. More than a millenary later the Vikings sailed into the Mediterranean in the 9th century and they met the Arabs also in the Russian rivers as Ibn Fadlan tells us in his journey book about hundred years later. Both, Idrisi, the Moroccan geographer, gave a description of the Northern Europe in his geography handbook in the 12th century as did Ibn Khaldun, the North African historian and the founder of sociology in his famous world history in the 14th century.

During the Middle Ages Nordic pilgrims went to Santiago de Compostella and to the Holy land. In the Middle Ages some Nordic royalties travelled to the Mediterranean and the Middle East in order to spend some time in the southern environment. From the other side, the Knights Templar and the Knights of Malta managed to establish themselves in

the islands of the Baltic. But generally the Nordics travelled to the South much more than the Mediterraneans travelled to the North. There were also myths proposing that in the 17th century Sweden was a reincarnation of the lost Atlantis and that the origins of the Finns were in the Mediterranean islands.

In the 17th century Arabic was taught and studied at least in three Scandinavian universities and the following century the King of Denmark sent a scientific expedition *Arabia Felix* to the Arabian peninsula and to Yemen. Since that time the Nordic scientific activities concerning the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world have been stable, and they have had an impact on the evolution of sciences in the North. For instance, more than one hundred years ago the Finnish sociology was born in Morocco with the works of Edward Westermarck and some of the internationally best known Scandinavian writers, such as Axel Munthe or Mika Waltari, developed most of their production concerned the Mediterranean world.

Today's understanding of the relations of the Nordic countries with the Mediterranean world should be based on this vast heritage, and not on the short-term political or commercial conjunctures.

### Political and Economic Dimensions

The Nordic understanding of the European Union (EU) and of its role generally determines the Nordic countries approach towards the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in its different forms. In their relations with the Mediterranean world the Nordics sometimes stress that they do not have colonial background like many other European nations. They also underline that they had diplomatic relations with the southern shore of the Mediterranean before the colonialism, that they were critical towards the colonial adventure, and that they actively supported the decolonisation process both directly and in the United Nations also. This is only partly true. The Nordics did, however, took actively part in economic performance of the colonial order.

Anyway, the understanding that the Nordic countries form together with the southern Mediterranean countries, a kind of periphery towards the European centre, towards the founding members of the EU, did not really take place even if there were some attempts since before World War I to develop this idea. In the 1980s and the early 1990s there were several international Maghreb and Nordic scientific conferences, and at least one in Madrid which brought together all the peripheries, Iberian, Maghreb and Nordic. After World War II the Nordic societies have slowly turned their regards more towards the Atlantic and these kind of Mediterranean sensitivities have lost at least a part of their charm.

In the early 1990s the perspectives to join the EU changed the approaches towards the Mediterranean in an important way in countries like Finland and Sweden. Once EU members these two countries wanted to assume their new membership entirely, taking part in all the domains, issues and questions they judged essential for the EU's performance and for its future. They also understood that if they wanted the central and southern European member countries to support their own goals and ambitions in the North, in particular the 'Nordic Dimension' and more recently the EU Baltic Sea Strategy, they needed to show interest, engagement and responsibility to the Mediterranean issues and goals of these countries. Secondly, for the Nordic countries the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is an essential part of EU's relations in the neighbouring areas and as such a concern of all the members countries.

Both Finland and Sweden started their official Mediterranean policies already before their accession into the EU in 1995, when they also signed the Barcelona Declaration. They both actively took part in the Barcelona Process. To provide an example Finland organized the first ministerial conference for the environment and Sweden presented together with Spain the first initiative for the dialogue between cultures much before the tragic event in New York 2001 and the Valencia action plan in 2002. Finland created its own Euro-Mediterranean network for the main internal actors which gathers about 40 persons being civil servants

and the representatives of research institutions and non-governmental organisations.

The Finnish EU Presidency in 2006, has been estimated by several specialists as maybe the best one until today for the Barcelona Process. The Swedish 2009 EU Presidency managed to put forward the EU Baltic Sea Strategy which, in the long run, might play an important role in strengthening the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership by producing different options and tools highlighting the importance of the sea areas in general and those in proximity of the EU in particular. It is obvious that in the domain of energy, environment, urgency relief and maritime transport they could even develop common institutions in order to face challenges which they share. Whether this can be done in reality depends on the political will.

The approaches and attitudes of the Nordic countries towards the Union for the Mediterranean, created in 2008, has been pragmatic. When the first preliminary propositions were presented in 2007 and when the intention was to exclude the non coastal countries, the deception felt by Nordic countries which had struggled during the previous two decades for making their countries active in Euro-Mediterranean policies felt very discouraged. The Nordics were satisfied that the new Union would reinforce the Barcelona Process and they supported it. But they were also very much of the opinion that this new Union should concern all the EU member countries. As a consequence, they were very much backing Germany when Chancellor Angela Merkel required publicly that the Mediterranean partnership cooperation should belong to all Europeans.

Today there is, in the Nordic countries, a certain degree of disappointment due to the modest results of the Union for the Mediterranean. At the same time they feel that the achievements of the Barcelona Process should be further developed and better incorporated in the performance of the new Union for the Mediterranean. More generally the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is felt strongly as a EU issue, it is too important for not being dealt with all the member

### Finland - Baltic and Mediterranean Conference

Building on a previous 2002 forum on 'Baltic-Mediterranean' cooperation, the 2008 conference was prepared by Tapri, the Baltic Institute of Finland and Tamk in the context of incoming regional cooperation frameworks including the EU Baltic Sea Strategy and the Union for the Mediterranean. The main aim of the event was to increase mutual understanding and recognition of the Baltic-Mediterranean axis, with discussions on scientific and educational cooperation, social, political and cultural issues, and economic cooperation at both the macro-economic level as well as at the micro level. In total there were around seventy experts and civil society activists from twenty different countries around the Baltic and the Mediterranean Sea areas. One of the major conclusions of the conference underlined the need for increased coherence and shared coordination between networks, partnerships and programmes in order to strengthen the overall cooperation work and dialogue initiatives between the Baltic and the Mediterranean.

[www.annalindhreport.org/goodpractice/balticmedconference](http://www.annalindhreport.org/goodpractice/balticmedconference)

countries. The Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll indicates that, for instance in Sweden, the respect of cultural diversity will be strengthened with the Union for the Mediterranean.

### Civil Societies, Migrations and Mixed Cultures

The attitudes and the approaches of the Nordic civil societies and public opinions towards the Mediterranean have been, during recent decades, influenced mainly by the evolutions in three different domains: tourism, migrations and cultures. The Nordic mass tourism towards the Mediterranean already started in the 1950s. Today, more than a half a century later, the number of Nordics spending annually a couple of weeks under the Mediterranean sun are around at least about two million. The significance of this phenomena for such a number of people having a direct but still restrained experience about the South is not really known. But it is obvious that it has an importance. And one can presume that it makes the Mediterranean world more familiar and thus plays a positive role by approaching these two vicinities. It certainly has an impact on how the Mediterranean migration is felt by the Nordics, and promotes the Mediterranean cuisine: two important elements of cultural dialogue. In order to really appreciate the significance of the Nordic tourism into the Mediterranean we need more studies and investigations. The Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll provides some evidence demonstrating that Swedes travel to the southern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean more than other Europeans including those from coastal countries.

Migration from the Mediterranean, especially from its southern and eastern shores is a very important element forging the image of the Mediterranean and the Euro-Mediterranean relations in the Nordic countries. Here again the Poll data shows that the Swedes have more contacts with the Southerners than the other Europeans. Still, in the 1960s only a few thousands of people coming from the Mediterranean countries lived in the North of Europe, today we can speak of hundreds of thousands. This is extremely important in several ways because these people form a kind of human bridge towards the southern and eastern Mediterranean. A part of them have come also because they got married with

the Nordics. And the number of these cross-Mediterranean couples is constantly increasing in an important manner. So, today, with the second generation, the number of young Nordics having half of their grandparents in the other side of the Mediterranean is tens of times superior to the figures of the 1970s. We can not underestimate the importance of this kind of family relations. They bring the Mediterranean world much closer to the Nordics than any kind of official or semi-official exchange and cultural dialogue programmes can ever do. According to the European Social Survey 2006, Finland and Sweden are the countries whose population has the most positive attitude towards the foreign migrants.

The only southern European Mediterranean country being on the positive side of the European average is Spain. Nordic tourism and Mediterranean migration have both an impact on cultural dimensions in the Nordic world. Before going into it, let us note that the first ever Nordic cultural institutes were created especially in the Mediterranean area. And it is not a coincidence that the newest ones can be found in the southern and eastern shores of the Mare Nostrum such as the Danish Institute in Cairo and Finnish Institute in Damascus. The number of this kind of Nordic institutes in the Mediterranean is considerable, and their role for cultural dialogue even more. Concerning civil society and popular cultures the role of cuisine is very visible and maybe the most promising. In Finland the 'National pizza' (ham and pineapple) was developed already in the 1980s, when also the Kebab houses completely overcame the traditional sausage kiosks which have almost disappeared. The new phenomena are the 'reindeer couscous', local falafel, and the latest, that is 'sapas', the original Finnish tapas. All this is to say that the mixture of cultures is a very complex and very rich phenomena, but that it is also very creative and extremely innovative, producing this 'art de vivre' where there are no borders.

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## Latvia - Intercultural Week

Taking place in nine different Latvian cities, an 'Intercultural Week' was organized in November 2009 with the support of the Anna Lindh Foundation and by its National Civil Society Network in Latvia. In the context that data about the Euro-Mediterranean region is not easily accessible for the general public, the main aim of the project was to increase people's understanding about the existing diversity of countries of the southern and east Mediterranean area. The programme of the week included 24 different activities, such as language classes, poetry readings, meetings with religious leaders as well as discussions with representatives from across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Around one thousand five hundred people took part in the initiative with the 'intercultural evening' bringing together 400 people to a stylish café in Riga with dancing rooms, exhibition areas, film-screenings and a room for informal talks and discussions. In addition to impacting on public awareness, the event was also an opportunity to consolidate and promote the work of the Anna Lindh Network in Latvia.

[www.euromedalex.org/networks/latvia](http://www.euromedalex.org/networks/latvia)