

**Euro-Mediterranean Summit
of Economic and Social Councils
and Similar Institutions**

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Speech by

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Excellencies,

Dear friends and colleagues,

First of all, let me say how very pleased I am to be here in Alexandria, Egypt, for this Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions.

On behalf of Mr Sepi, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, who could unfortunately not be present here today, I would like to thank our Egyptian hosts for welcoming us and for their excellent organisation of this important event. I would especially like to thank the Alexandrina Library, which is offering us the possibility to hold the Summit in these amazing premises, in the house of knowledge and intercultural dialogue.

I am also pleased that the Euromed Summit is held in Egypt at this particular moment, when your country is holding the co-presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean. Through this co-presidency, Egypt is playing a leading role in the new cooperation structure that the Union for the Mediterranean has initiated, working strongly for the common goals set up for the region.

This year's Summit is also important because it is the first time that we have the pleasure of welcoming the new partners of the Union for the Mediterranean to our Summit, namely Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Monaco. I really hope that this enlarged cooperation will bring us closer together and that our future work will be constructive and fruitful.

However, I have to say that I regret that one of the three Israeli delegates invited to participate in the Summit did not get a visa to come to Alexandria. Therefore the Israeli delegation has decided not to participate in the Summit. I am disappointed that this chain of events occurred on the occasion of this Summit in Egypt.

Since we met last year in Rabat (Euromed Summit 16-17 October 2008), the world has been facing important challenges resulting from the economic and financial crisis, effects of which we still need to work hard to remedy.

The economic and financial crisis has not only had an impact on the financial stability and the growth rates of the countries, but has above all had a huge effect on the every day life of the populations. The crisis has brought with it an important increase in unemployment, resulting in situations of extreme precariousness.

Even more than before, the crisis has shown that an effort has to be made to develop strong and efficient social protection policies and to give support to small and medium size enterprises, which often have been touched very badly by the crisis. We need to develop regional cooperation in order to enhance investments, not only between countries of the North and the South but also between countries of the South.

The crisis has also shown that we need to develop more sustainable and fairer models of growth. Therefore, the goals of the Lisbon strategy, to develop an economy based on knowledge and sustainable values, are more relevant today than ever, not only for the EU but for all its partners in the Mediterranean region.

Such a model of growth has to be based on developed educational systems and far reaching initiatives in the field of vocational training. In my point of view, the Euro-Mediterranean region can only become more competitive if it adapts to these new requirements.

Another important challenge facing the world today is climate change. The Mediterranean region is one of the most vulnerable in this respect, with an acute lack of water resources and an every day increasing desertification.

Different policies need to be developed both in the environmental, agricultural, energy and civil protection field in order to tackle the effects of climate change.

2009 may be remembered as the pivotal year in the fight against climate change, if a comprehensive agreement can be reached at the Copenhagen conference in December on cutting greenhouse gas emissions. It is urgent to take firm and immediate action at the global level, but specific measures are also needed at the regional level.

I therefore welcome that the Union for the Mediterranean has defined sustainable development as a key priority of its action. This decision is reflected in the initial projects that have been selected for enhancing the cooperation between the EU and the partner countries, as for example the development of solar energy, the de-pollution of the Mediterranean and the coordination of civil protection policies.

It is clear that the Union for the Mediterranean can work as a tool for tackling some of the major challenges that lay in front of us. Nevertheless, in order to do so, the Union has to be supported by local and regional authorities, enterprises, social partners and civil society organisations that are actually going to implement the decisions and different cooperation projects.

It was the wish of the initiators of the Union for the Mediterranean to make the cooperation in the Euromed region more visible and tangible for the people. Nevertheless, despite these ambitions, the Union for the Mediterranean has until today mainly been a matter of governments. No concrete proposal has been made concerning the actual involvement of civil society organisations in the Union for the Mediterranean.

As you know, the European Economic and Social Committee, that I represent here today and that is representing civil society organisations from all 27 member states in the EU, was set up in the beginning of the cooperation of the European Community in 1957. The purpose was to establish a consultative body of civil society organisations on European level, so that the decision makers would be able to listen to the organisation's point of view on specific issues before adopting legislation.

Setting up this kind of body on European level was a significant step to favour dialogue between decision makers and civil society representatives.

This inclusive and open decision making process has shown its merits at the European level, but also at the national levels in many countries of the world.

I would therefore like to encourage the leaders of the Union for the Mediterranean to foresee a concrete participation of civil society organisations in the institutional framework of the Union for the Mediterranean. If the Union for the Mediterranean shall be understood and supported by the people on the ground, we need to make them feel responsible and listened to in order to reach common goals.

The Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions in the Mediterranean region have been cooperating since 1995 in order to strengthen the voice of civil society not only nationally, but also at the regional level. We are ready to do so also in the future.

During this Summit, the European Economic and Social Committee will therefore propose to establish a Euromed Assembly of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions, on the basis of our already established network, in order to give our cooperation a new name and a consultative status in the Union for the Mediterranean.

I am convinced that the voice of civil society organisations, gathered in this new Assembly, will positively contribute to the process of selection and follow-up of the projects of the Union for the Mediterranean.

Finally, it is my clear wish that this proposal will get strong support from all concerned parties in the Union for the Mediterranean, bearing in mind that the success of the Union will be based on how it is understood and perceived by the people.

Thank you very much for your attention.
