



We need new bridges.

Linking the European-Mediterranean-Sub-Saharan Area as a functional space.¹

By BERND THUM

No one doubts that the dialogue between Europe and Africa has to be intensified. Education and culture as well as economic stabilization are part of the central tasks of Euro-African politics. Until now, however, Germany has not signed any cultural agreement with Sahel countries except Senegal, not even with Algeria, whose southern regions belong to the Sahel. Only through the epochal migration dynamics have the West African Sahel countries from Senegal to Chad become interesting for the German public and German politics. In October 2016 even the Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, travelled to the region. Migration and security policy were the predominant issue of the discussions.

In this situation it is appropriate to have a new "social", multilateral, interactive, even "civic" concept of culture. Foreign cultural policy, which gives the civil society scope for action and seeks to support it, should not be too close to the respective constellations of foreign policy. These can change in the short term. But how about, on the basis of long term economic, political and demographic facts, creating a map of the large interaction spaces where Germany, integrated into a functional relationship of regional, but also global players, has its specific place? In the spatial contours that result from such a network of relations new political orientations could arise and develop, in the framework of a multilateral cultural policy, that bring together civil society actors from different countries.

The concept of a functional space is mainly used in social geography, but also in economic policy. Functional spaces are recognizable by a special, multi-layered tightening of relationships. These

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are spaces which arise across political boundaries, spaces, which develop outwards starting from dynamic centers. The transatlantic space is just one example such as the European-Russian-Central Asian space, in which China by its Silk Route concept is laying its own geopolitical transversal, strengthening it both politically and culturally by Chinese language teaching and Confucius Institutes in the countries of the former historical Silk Route. For Germany, the European-Mediterranean-Sub-Saharan space has specific current significance. This space is a dynamic structure going back to the ancient world with the Mediterranean as an epicenter. In this space economy, cultural energies, mutual striving for power and religion are overlapping since ancient times. Today it is characterized from northern Europe to the Sahel by an epochal mass mobility, by partly common, partly diverging cultural orientations, by religiously fed conflicts, by climate change, by questions of global economic order and security problems.²

The European Union is pursuing a neighborhood policy, which is aligned to functional spaces as the basis of multilateral cultural policy action. But it is not consistent. For example, the Southern Neighbourhood Policy, constituted in form of the Union for the Mediterranean, ends with the Maghreb states. The Sahel countries, which are functionally so closely linked with the Maghreb and Europe, whose climatic, economic and demographic problems, through migration, reach deeply into Europe, are not represented in the Southern Neighbourhood policy of the Mediterranean Union. Unfortunately, the European Neighbourhood Policies remain too strongly bound to state borders. As institutions with very limited possibilities of the formation of a common political will, they can motivate actors of the civil society to a more intensive communication, but hardly to an active participation in the policy - if necessary "against the grain".

Is the state, as an actor of cultural policy, devalued here? This would indeed be a dangerous misunderstanding. The state actors should secure open spaces for multilateral civil society initiatives, both in the context of their own foreign cultural policy as well as towards other states. And they should help these initiatives by giving them a legal status to protect themselves in an institutionally unsettled, fragile functional space against aggressions as well as takeovers. Just as in exchange with the United States there is an association called 'Atlantic Bridge' (Atlantik-Brücke), one could imagine a Mediterranean-Sahara-Bridge, which brings together committed and linguistically dexterous personalities as well as civil society initiatives.

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² Bernd Thum: [From the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership towards a Geopolitics of the Wider Euro-Mediterranean Area as a 'Functional Space'](#). In: Europa bottom-up Nr. 12. Berlin, Maecenata-Stiftung 2015.