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The Vth AU-EU summit: a turning point for relations between Africa and Europe?

On 29th and 30th of November 2017 the 5th AU-EU Summit took place in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. 16 of the 28 EU Member States attended the summit, amongst them the German Chancellor Angela Merkel und French President Emmanuel Macron. For both countries Africa stands high on the political agenda, and the ad hoc initiative undertaken at the summit to address the modern slave trade in Libya highlights the joint concern but also the renewed Franco-German partner- and leadership.

According to estimates of the Libyan government, approximately 400.000 to 700.000 migrants are currently in Libya, most of them stranded in about 42 makeshift camps. Albeit not a recent phenomenon – migrants whose return IOM facilitates had already reported beginning of the year on the auction of migrants in marketplaces of Southern Libya. It was the recent CNN investigation that called politicians to react.

At the margins of the summit, France, Germany, Morocco, Niger, Chad, African Union, European Union as well as the UN Secretary General got together in order to combat the abuses of migrants in Libya along three axes: the strengthening of a joint operational task force that already aims to dismantle criminal networks operating in the Sahel; an urgent evacuation of those who got stranded in Libya (voluntary return and resettlement of those in need); as well as an investigative committee established by the African Union that would assist the governments of countries of origin to engage with their youth and to discourage them from migrating.

As Chancellor Merkel reiterated in her press statement at the summit, in order to address irregular migration also more mobility, more legal migration channels are needed. African youth must find the opportunity to study in Europe, to get professional training of quality either in Europe or in their home countries. But also humanitarian emergencies need to be addressed and resettlement has to become an option for African refugees as it does already for those stranded in Syria, Lebanon or Iraq. However, first and foremost, Africa's youth needs to get a secure and prosperous future in their home countries.

Investing in Youth

The 2017 summit put youth – particularly the African Youth, at its forefront. Investing in youth for accelerated inclusive growth and sustainable development became the leitmotiv for the summit and allowed to touch on a substantial number of associated topics such as economic growth, job creation, skills development and transfer, infrastructure investment and trade, governance, peace, security and resilience, migration and mobility, climate change and natural resources management.

In their political declaration, African and European leaders committed to focus on four strategic priorities which would be reflected in forthcoming concrete projects.

Priority 1: Mobilizing investments for African structural and sustainable transformation

African partners lauded the initiatives undertaken by the EU (e.g., External Invest-

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ment Plan (EIP), aiming to mobilize 44 billion Euro of private investments for sustainable development and job creation) and the G20 Africa Partnership. Both sides committed to promote inter-African trade, and the establishment of a Continental Free Trade Area.

Priority 2: Investing in people through education, science, technology and skills development

Both sides agreed to deepen their cooperation and exchange in education, technology development and skills transfer in order to unlock the potential of the digital economy also for the African continent. Leaders also agreed to enhance the mobility of students, staff and academics across the African continent, as well as exchange programs between Africa and Europe, such as ERASMUS+. The importance of inclusive education and vocational training was highlighted in order to enhance the employability of young people.

Priority 3: Strengthening resilience, peace, security and governance

Both sides agreed to maintain peace and security at the heart of the partnership. Africa and Europe will step up their efforts to address the root causes of violent conflict and crisis. In this regard, they will strengthen strategic, political and operational cooperation between the African Union and European Union, in close partnership with the United Nations. Support to ongoing work to fight against terrorism was reiterated, including the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram, the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel and the African Union Mission in Somalia.

Closer consultation on other threats to human security such as illicit drug trafficking, production and consumption, mercenaries, child soldiers, trafficking of human beings and weapons, illegal exploitation of natural resources, has also been envisaged.

In addition, leaders agreed to strengthen the preparedness to detect, prevent and

respond to disease outbreaks with epidemic scale.

Priority 4: Managing mobility and migration

European and African leaders reaffirmed their strong political commitment to address the root causes of irregular migration in a spirit of genuine partnership and shared responsibility, and in full respect of international laws and human rights, as well as creating legal pathways for migration.

Leaders committed to deepen cooperation on migration and mobility in a joint framework, including a continental dialogue between Africa and Europe.

Taking stock of the Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES)

Ten years after the relationship between Europe and Africa was formally institutionalized at the Lisbon summit in 2007, relations between Europe and Africa have considerably changed over the last decade and particularly since the Joint Africa-EU Strategy – the so-called JAES, came into life in 2007. The JAES was launched at the Lisbon summit at a time when Chinese engagement on the African continent was changing power relations. Europeans felt that they might lose out when new partnerships were formed and African elites turned to the East – for the better or worse for their countries.

Ten years later, and even since the last EU-AU Summit in Brussels in 2014, the institutional settings are changing. The AU has started an institutional reform process that has at its heart the aim to gain financial independence from international donors and to revise its thematic focus and structures. In 2016 59% of the AU budget was externally funded. Payments by the European Commission increased from €91 million in 2010 to €330 million in 2015, of which almost 90% went into peace and security. With the need to generate more funding from Member States the AU also intends to focus more on the role of Africa in the global context and to refer a substantial number of other topics to the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

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But also on European Union side, parameters are going to change. The Brexit will alter substantially the EU's development assistance towards Africa. The United Kingdom currently contributes 14.7% of the European Development Fund, the main instrument for development assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa. Besides, the EU will lose a strong advocate for African affairs amongst its member states at a time when talks about the future cooperation agreement with former colonies of Europe, the ACP-States, become official. Preliminary consultations on the "post-Cotonou framework" already showed divergences between, for example, France and Eastern European countries.

In addition, the global geopolitical landscape has experienced tremendous disruptions. Populism is on the rise, multilateralism is put into question, terrorism and Islamist radicalism but also the impact of climate change have become subjects of concern for both continents. Demographic developments, jobless growth, and declining growth rates for African states provide a catalytic effect for migration from Africa to Europe.

It is particularly the latter, the issue of irregular migration over the Mediterranean that dominates debates in Europe when it comes to relations with the African continent.

But it is also on this issue that the narratives between Europe and Africa differ most. From an EU perspective migration management is about return and re-admission, it is about border control and the fight against human smuggling.

For African governments migration management means more opportunities for legal migration, it means opportunities and resources. In many cases yearly remittances by the diaspora have already outnumbered the official development assistance African governments receive.

Taking into account these diverging perceptions on migration, it does not come as a surprise that migration and particularly return and re-admission remained a hot topic at the summit.

The discussion around migration has also shifted the attention of many European Member States towards the Sahel region and to the countries of origin and transit of irregular migrants. This created on the African side, and particularly amongst civil society, the concern that the EU and particularly its Member States might no longer follow a Pan-African approach but could prioritize certain countries even at the expense of the European set of democratic values.

Asymmetric relations or a partnership of equals?

Both sides continuously re-iterate the equality in the partnership. Both sides aim for the last three summits to overcome the asymmetries enshrined and perpetuated by development assistance. However, just the question of financing the summit and its various pre-events made it very clear that the balance does not strike even.

The EU and its Member States are the biggest donors on the African continent, 50% of ODA funds going to Africa come from Europe. In 2016, 21 billion EUR of development assistance were disbursed. One third of foreign direct investment in Africa comes from European enterprises.

And when the chairperson of the AU highlights in an interview just before the summit the expectations African governments have, "Je souhaite que nous puissions parler de manière franche avec nos partenaires européens de nos attentes, qui sont nombreuses, sur le sujet", it becomes quite clear that perceptions on root causes and responsibilities for the large migration flows out of Sub-Saharan Africa are diverging.

The European Union and the European Parliament have elaborated profoundly their views on the future of relations between Europe and Africa. In May the EU launched a joint communication for a renewed impetus of the Africa-EU partnership [JOIN (2017) 17 final]; and also the European Parliament adopted in November a resolution that advocates for a new EU-Africa Strategy: a boost for development [2017/2083 INI].

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So far, the “new impetus” has only been partially endorsed by the African Union Commission. During the summit negotiations and the work on the final document it became very clear that on the African side not all Member States were brought along in the process. In fact, the derogation of democratic principles and practices of some AU Member States manifested itself drastically at the summit.

The Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) explicitly mentioned and underlined the importance of civil society and aimed for a people centered and people driven partnership. In the first seven years of its implementation civil society in fact enjoyed a certain consultative and monitoring status in some of the initially eight partnerships. But already in the follow-up of the 2014 summit that had proposed a Joint Annual Forum bringing together all stakeholders of the JAES, it became evident that for both institutions, the inclusion of civil society in the processes did not have a priority. No Joint Forum was organized.

In the run-up to the Abidjan Summit, African and European civil society organizations convened an intercontinental forum (Tunis, 11-13 of July 2017) in order to take stock of the relations between African and Europe and to formulate recommendations for the Heads of State summit later on in the year. Already at that occasion when participants presented their recommendations to representatives of the EU and AU, the AU representative showed his irritation why civil society is not bringing forward those subjects which Heads of State want to hear but have chosen to address controversial points in the relationship instead.

This attitude towards civil society that already manifests itself in a shrinking space for civil society actors on the African continent becomes symptomatic for the stalling and regression of democracy in a substantial number of African countries.

At the Abidjan summit, the Ivorian government not only dissolved a parallel gathering of civil society actors, Forum du Citoyen, at its last day by police intervention. The tradi-

tion of AU-EU summits allowing civil society to address Heads of State with a short 3 minute message has also been disregarded due to the veto of selected AU Member States. The strong protest by the EU and EU Member States remained without effect. In the end, only the High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini and the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven could underline in their summit statements the importance of civil society actors not only for the strengthening of the AU-EU partnership but also for the sustainable development of African countries.

At a moment when relations between Africa and Europa are at a crossroad, it seems that the potential of such a summit has not been used to its full. A declaration hastily put together and acclaimed, insufficient time for discussions and Member State contributions, diverging views on core values of the European Union such as democratic governance and the importance of civil society engagement in a democracy are symptomatic. Any partnership of equals would necessitate not only shared objectives but also shared values. It seems that relations between Europe and Africa drift towards an interest driven partnership where strategic interests are becoming the driving force. It is not only that the strategic framework for cooperation since 2007, the Joint Africa EU Strategy, does not get mentioned anymore, it also seems that its core spirit advocating for a people-centered approach where ordinary citizens and the role of civil society play a role in the relationship between the two continents has been fully buried in Abidjan.