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**Article**

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## THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A DRIVER OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN ITS SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Gabriela Irina ION\*

**Abstract:** *The European Union's policy towards its southern periphery in North Africa and the Middle East has sought to promote regional cooperation both between itself and the Arab partner states and, most importantly, among the Arab states. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, and later on, the Union for the Mediterranean introduced, after decades of superficial institutionalization of Euro-Mediterranean relations, an element of novelty in the form of the regionalism it promoted and the multilateral setting it was creating. However outstanding at its debut, this experiment of „building” a Mediterranean region, where security and peaceful change would be brought about by the states' willingness to cooperate through multilateral mechanisms has failed. The EU's efforts to create a Mediterranean region have been stymied not only by what can amount to an unrealistic perception regarding intra-Arab dynamics, but also by changes in the substance of the Euro-Mediterranean institutional setting. Namely, the region-building multilateralism of the EMP has been side-lined by the pragmatic bilateralism of the UfM.*

**Keywords:** bilateralism; Euro-Mediterranean Partnership; European Neighbourhood Policy; multilateralism; regionalism; region-building; Union for the Mediterranean

**JEL Classifications:** F50; F53; F54

### Introduction

The events unfolding since the wave of Arab protests have taken the European Union (EU) by surprise, also revealing how the EU has dealt with the „democracy-security dilemma”. Namely, between its support for democracy and human rights, on the one hand, and its quest for security and stability, on the other, the EU chose the latter. Admittedly, it did not contribute to triggering the societies' desire for change, remaining an external observer of the democratic transitions. Placing such current developments in connection with the EU's cooperation frameworks with the Mediterranean, which date back to the 1970s, will bring about a more nuanced understanding of the goals the EU pursued over time in the Mediterranean. This paper explores the fairly numerous institutional layers of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and tries to identify what exactly is the „Mediterranean” as a necessary preamble in the endeavour of identifying to what extent the regional dimension has been a component of the EU's policy towards the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Specifically, we want to show how the EU has been aiming at region-building in the Mediterranean area. This paper posits that the European Union was not successful in constructing a region in the Mediterranean, not only because of the heterogeneity of the Arab space, but also because of the changes that occurred in the institutional setup of the various Euro-Mediterranean policy frameworks.

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## 1. Earlier policies of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation

Ever since the time of European Political Cooperation, the Mediterranean represented a significant subject on the European agenda, if we are only to glance over the numerous policies launched in order to incentivise the Arab world to cooperate. The proximity of the Arab world can undoubtedly account for the abundance of EC/EU initiatives that expanded from an economic, trade-related focus to a security or political collaboration in the post-Cold War period.

One of the first Euro-Mediterranean mechanisms of cooperation has been the Euro-Arab Dialogue (1973-1989), launched at the Copenhagen European Summit of 14-15 December 1973, where the Arab League proposal to initiate a dialogue between Europeans and Arabs has been welcomed by the EC member states. Actually, this delegation of Arab League foreign ministers did not announce its participation at the summit. Their proposal for cooperation was „a response to a November 1973 EPC declaration which referred to the legitimate rights of the Palestinians; this was seen as an indication of a collective pro-Arab stance” (Smith, 2008, p. 86). The EC agreed to discuss economic issues (especially after the oil crisis quadrupled oil prices in 1973) with the Arab League but avoided discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which was what the Arabs were most interested in. While Europeans maintained the oil supply uninterrupted and avoided another oil embargo, the Arabs eventually obtained a common European stance on the Palestinian question through the 1980 Venice Declaration. The Euro-Arab Dialogue was put on hold by a series of events that were fragmenting the Arab system: Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League following the Camp David agreement, the assassination of President Sadat, the Iran-Iraq war, the Israeli incursion in southern Lebanon or the invasion of Kuwait. Due to little tangible results and the numerous failed attempts to revive it, an assessment of the Euro-Arab Dialogue would most likely be a negative one, though from the European perspective the framework might as well be considered a relative success. „As a means of *Realpolitik* the dialogue secured the EC several advantages: (1) it created a reasonable relationship with the Arab world in a period of crisis and helped establish the EC as a factor (albeit a minor one) in the Middle East [...]; (2) it constituted a forum for learning collective diplomacy; (3) it paved the way for the EU-Gulf dialogue” (Dosenrode *et al.*, 2002, p. 103).

While the Euro-Arab Dialogue has been the first explicit policy that dealt with the EC's relation with the Mediterranean, The Global Mediterranean Policy (GMP), launched in 1972, was the first *European* initiative to address the Arab countries. The GMP was based on the trade agreements signed by the EC with Mediterranean countries in the 1960s and 1970s that granted free access to European markets for Mediterranean manufactured goods, with the view of creating a free trade area.

From the mid-1980s onwards, there was a certain demand for a renewed commitment to the Mediterranean, especially from the new southern EC members that feared an eastern shift of the European foreign policy once the eastern revolutions debuted. The Renovated Mediterranean Policy (RMP) that began in 1991 achieved little in terms of efficient political dialogue or regional cooperation. For the purpose of this paper, we must note that „despite the Community's attempts to „globalise” its Mediterranean policy and further the Euro-Arab dialogue, Euro-Mediterranean relations remained bilateral throughout the 1970s and 1980s” and „although these initiatives managed to foster some economic and political cooperation, they all failed to establish an efficient regional regime to accommodate, and even transcend, post-1989 international change” (Chryssochoou *et al.*, 2001, pp. 63-64).

One tentative effort that has not been initiated by external actors and that was meant to bolster regional cooperation and combat political isolation was made by the states of the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia) in the form of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA/*Union du Maghreb arabe*), created in February 1989. The UMA's objectives were the creation of an EC-like entity that would embody the mythical intra-Maghreb unity and the intensification of intra-regional trade in order to reduce dependence on European markets. The lofty objectives were infeasible though, due to the long-lasting tensions between Morocco and Algeria, not least because of the dispute regarding Western Sahara. There have also been attempts of regional cooperation in the form of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean (CSCM), the 5+5 Formula (Western Mediterranean Group), the Forum of the Mediterranean (FOROMED) or even the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue.

Amid this flurry of initiatives came the realisation that a „New Partnership” is needed, though such a partnership was at first limited to the Maghreb countries. A European Commission Communication entitled „The Future of Relations Between the European Community and the Maghreb”, issued on 30 April 1992, called for a Euro-Maghreb Partnership, while the Commission Communication „Future Relations and Cooperation Between the Community and the Middle East”, issued on 8 September 1993, symbolically preceded the signing of the Oslo Accords and marked a reinforced commitment to boost Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Notably, „it is significant that the 'Middle East' [...] is now being considered separately from the Maghreb” (Niblock, 1996, p. 125), though the idea of a Euro-Maghreb Partnership would soon be replaced by a Euro-Mediterranean one. In this regard, in a Communication dated 19 October 1994, the Commission presented the need to establish a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership that „would start with a process of progressive establishment of free trade, supported by substantial financial aid”, also advancing the possibility of

a Euro-Mediterranean Conference in 1995. The Conference did take place, in Barcelona, on 27-28<sup>th</sup> of November 1995, and it launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, that included the 15 EU member states at the time and 12 Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey).

The creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership can be attributed to a convergence of factors: the need to balance the East-oriented foreign policy of the EC after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the necessity for the EC to review its agreements with the Mediterranean states in the context of the regionalisation of world economy; the EC's desire to have stability at its southern border (Derisbourg, 2013, p. 9). Moreover, the 1979 EC accession of Greece and the 1985 EC accession of the two Iberian states – Spain and Portugal – brought the Communities closer to the volatile Mediterranean region, with failing economies and high rates of population growth. The positive conjuncture of the Middle East Peace Process and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 have also played a part in acknowledging the need to forge a more comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework.

The Barcelona Declaration enlists three baskets regarding the cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean: the political and security basket, the economic and financial basket and the social, cultural and human affairs basket. By structuring dialogue around such „baskets”, the participants began a comprehensive cooperation process that has eventually resulted in the institutionalisation of the multilateral cooperation forums: general and sectorial ministerial meetings, the Euro-Mediterranean Committee, the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue of Cultures and the EuroMed Civil Forum.

## **2. What „Mediterranean”?**

The European Union has been long trying to design and implement a viable cooperation platform with the Mediterranean region. Nonetheless, a prerequisite for a comprehensive assessment of the EU's performance in interacting with its southern neighbourhood is establishing what in fact is the „Mediterranean” that is invoked in official EU documents. There is a certain degree of ambiguity regarding the area targeted by the EU's various cooperation frameworks, not only in terms of its geographical limits but also in terms of how the EU classifies these neighbouring countries.

The intricate and volatile Mediterranean area remains a source of instability through ongoing conflicts, terrorism, the potential spreading of weapons of mass destruction and alarmingly high illegal migration. Also, the Mediterranean epitomises the perennial North-South divide and „if the

existing perceptual and prosperity gap between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean are allowed to increase, tension and hostilities will also become more widespread” (Calleya, 2005, p. 137). Admittedly, this „clash of civilizations” narrative has become rife than ever following the 2001 terrorist attacks. The Islam-Christianity co-existence remains, nonetheless, an important attribute of the Mediterranean: „The fundamental characteristic of the Mediterranean [...] was the relative proximity of opposing shores, but also the clear separation between shores, enabling different cultures to interact with one another across what may at times seem almost impermeable cultural barriers, such as the Christian-Muslim divide” (Abulafia, 2003, p. 26). Today, this highly strategic area also proves to be an increasingly de-secularising one, where the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Sunni-Shi'a tensions cease to be the most pressing priorities. The post-revolutionary transitions have, in some cases, given way to failing states, the threat of radical Islam is ceaselessly expanding, while the power vacuums have been speculated by groups like ISIS.

The European Union is clearly not impervious to the threats coming from this area, if we are only to give the examples of Western-born jihadists returning home or the migrants attempting to reach European shores in overcrowded boats. The EU has constantly affirmed the importance it attaches to the stability of its surroundings, namely what the European Neighbourhood Policy naively termed „ring of friends”. In this regard, the European Union has constantly striven to address the Mediterranean in various cooperation frameworks. Nonetheless, this „Mediterranean” that the EU is attempting to engage with has proved, over time, to have shifting geographical dimensions, as the various Euro-Mediterranean policy frameworks do not involve the same groups of third states.

If we are to consider the five most consistent Euro-Mediterranean policy frameworks, namely the Global Mediterranean Policy, the Renewed Mediterranean Policy, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean, we can carve out a „core group” of eight states that are targeted by all policies: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. Interestingly enough, though Libya, a Mediterranean riparian state, has not been included in the GMP and the RMP, it has received an observer status in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and it has been included in the ENP, though technically it is not a full participant, as it has no Association Agreement or Action Plan in place. Though Syria is in the same situation, it has been obstinately included in all Euro-Mediterranean policies. Turkey is included in the EMP and UfM, though it is technically involved in the EU accession negotiations since 2005. Similarly, Albania and Montenegro are currently candidate countries, while Bosnia-Herzegovina is a potential candidate and they all have been included in the UfM. Including such states in policy frameworks that are prioritarily destined for the ones with no EU membership perspectives

accomplishes little more than an „overcrowding” of the Euro-Mediterranean institutional layers. In this sense, one can observe an increase in the number of states included in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks: from the nine Mediterranean non-member countries (MNCs) targeted by the GMP, 12 in the RMP, 12 in the EMP and 15 in the UfM. Indeed, „the concept of ‘the Mediterranean’ in EU foreign policy terms has become ever more complex as the third states covered by the various policies have shifted” (Cardwell, 2011, p. 220), while „the increase in the number of participants further contributes to the dilution of regionalism” (Bicchi, 2011, p. 9). That the EU itself „does not seem to have a clear idea of what the Mediterranean represents” (Pace, 2002, p. 195) is also reflected in the fact that the states of this area have been, over time, referred to as „Mediterranean partners”/„states”, „Euro-Mediterranean partners”, without any explicit significance attached to one or the other denominations. This random manner of defining the EU's interlocutors may even prompt the conclusion that the Mediterranean „groups together a group of countries chosen on the basis of criteria sufficiently diverse and incoherent to be qualified as political” (Pace, 2002, p. 200-201).

### **3. Region-building in the Mediterranean**

In this third section we address the European Union's attempt of „building” a Mediterranean region through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. There is a vastly shared perspective that „in a world of apparently increasing regionalism, the EU is superbly well placed to shape and encourage the trend and exercise leadership” (Smith, 2008, p. 81). In this context, the EU's appetite to promote multilateral regional cooperation in order to stabilize its periphery is linked to its own experience that demonstrated how shared economic development can bring about peace. Rightfully,

the EU in many ways constitutes a new model of international relations based on institutionalised multilateral, multifunctional cooperation amongst its member states. In terms of foreign policy, the EU is often viewed as attempting to translate or transfer its internal model into the wider international system, and the EU's neighbourhood is one of the main arenas in which this objective is pursued (Cottey, 2012, p. 376).

We have chosen to utilise the hypothesis advanced by Adler and Crawford that states that the European Union is using its normative power in order to stabilize its near-abroad by building a Mediterranean region and, potentially, a security community. Noteworthy, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is the instrument through which the EU is exercising its normative power (Adler, Crawford, 2006, p. 11). The classical definition of a security community advanced by Karl Deutsch postulates that the members (sovereign states) cannot imagine a war among each other (Deutsch *et*

*al.*, 1957, pp. 5-9), while their degree of integration leads them to develop „dependable expectations of peaceful change” and a sense of community (the „we-feeling”). Adler and Crawford insert security communities in their analysis to emphasize their role in fostering region-building practices and pacification processes. They attach an alternative significance to „community”, namely a structure that is socially constructed and that pools the identities of its members into a larger „we” (Adler, Crawford, 2006, p. 21). Further on, the authors elaborate on the EU's community-building experiment, meant to counter extremism and to socially construct a Mediterranean partnership identity:

The Barcelona process is a laboratory where one of the most outstanding experiments in international relations may have started to take place. We are referring to the invention of a region that does not yet exist and to the social engineering of a social identity that rests, neither on blood, nor on religion, but on civil society voluntary networks and civic beliefs. The long-term aim of this experiment is to construct in the Mediterranean region a pluralistic security community whose practices are synonyms of peace (Adler and Crawford, 2006, pp. 28-29).

The authors themselves are guarded regarding the feasibility of this experiment, all the more so since the force generating the entire process is the EU's normative power. The export of the „EU model” (the fallacy of assuming the neighbours' desire to become „more like us”) has been out of touch in the Arab region, not to mention that the „Mediterranean partners” have denounced the EMP as paternalistic, a situation that has not fundamentally changed once the „co-ownership” was introduced. Aside from the fact that the „Mediterranean” targeted by the EU has rarely if ever constituted a homogenous entity, the EU's failure to „construct” a region in the Mediterranean is fundamentally linked to the institutional architecture of its Euro-Mediterranean policy frameworks, for the multilateralism embodied by the EMP has been replaced by the bilateralism of the UfM and of the ENP. There has been a constant dilution of the region-building strategy of the EMP to the point that it is inconceivable that such a significant political objective will ever find its way back to the European agenda. The region-building strategy that has underpinned the EMP has been replaced by the depoliticized sub-regional projects of the UfM, while the ENP functions exclusively on a bilateral basis (the agreements between the EU and each partner state would be the Action Plans, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements or the Association Agreements).

What is more, from a legal perspective, the Euro-Mediterranean system of governance has been expanded through additional policy instruments that have not necessarily facilitated a better cooperation between the two parts. In this regard, the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements



introduced by the EMP and concluded in the 1998-2005 period, very important for achieving the far-fetched objective of a free trade area across the Mediterranean, have been supplemented by the Action Plans introduced by the ENP. These Plans have a different format, as they set out the political and economic reforms to be undertaken by the partner country, prompting some of these to consider that this bilateral dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean system of governance „strongly resembles a ‘hub-spoke’ pattern, where the EU is a central actor surrounded by a periphery of unequals” (Cardwell, 2011, p. 233). Finally, the fact that the Union for the Mediterranean fundamentally eliminates the region-building strategy of the EU is astutely captured by Federica Bicchì: „The substance of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is thus no longer bloc to bloc (EU+Med) as in the EMP, or bloc to single country (EU+single Med countries) as in the ENP, but single country to single country” (Bicchì, 2011, p.10).

### **Conclusions**

As it has been shown, the European Union has long expressed its interest in engaging with its southern neighbours, although not all cooperation frameworks proved to be efficient. Surely, this efficiency refers not only to the successful promotion in the southern societies of the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights or the principles of market economy, but also to the successful promotion of regional cooperation both between the EU and the Mediterranean and within the Mediterranean. After having shown that this much-invoked „Mediterranean” is a concept imbued with significance by the EU, while its various cooperation models have given it the status of a region, the paper investigates whether the EU has managed to pursue its aim of region-building in the Mediterranean. This paper posits that the European Union, through its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, did not succeed in its experiment of region-building that would have brought about peaceful change through the states' willingness to cooperate through multilateral mechanisms. The EU's failure can be attributed, among others, to the changes occurred in the institutional design of Euro-Mediterranean relations, namely the regionalism and multilateral setting of the EMP have been replaced by the pragmatic bilateralism of the UfM, while the ENP also marks a departure from the regionalism embedded in the EMP, through the bilateral relations it establishes.

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