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Overlapping Crises Cast Shadow Over Euro-Mediterranean Relations

Panagiota Manoli*

RÉSUMÉ

Le processus qui permet de développer un dialogue euro-méditerranéen significatif qui permettra de rapprocher les sociétés des deux rives de la Méditerranée constitue une question épineuse faisant face à de sérieux obstacles autant de sécurité, politiques et économiques. Cet article soutient que, malgré le ralentissement de la coopération euro-méditerranéenne en raison des crises, toujours en évolution, dans les pays du sud de l'Europe et ceux du MENA, de nouveaux modes d'interaction régionale sont à développer, qui reposent moins sur toutes les institutions et normes actuelles et davantage sur la flexibilité et la géométrie variable. Les pays d'Europe du Sud ne doivent pas perdre cette occasion historique afin de remodeler la politique méditerranéenne de l'UE à la lumière de nouveaux besoins en matière de développement et de gouvernance des deux rives de la Méditerranée.

ABSTRACT

The process of developing a meaningful Euro-Mediterranean dialogue that will bridge societies of the two Mediterranean shores has been a thorny one facing serious security, political and economic obstacles. This article argues that despite the slow-down in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation due to the, still evolving, overlapping crises in southern European and MENA countries, new modes of (inter)regional action are to develop, based less on all encompassing institutions and norms and more on flexibility and variable geometry. Southern European countries should not lose this historic challenge to reshape EU's Mediterranean policy in light of new development and governance needs on both shores of the Mediterranean.

Introduction

The title of the opinion article 'Arab Spring + European Autumn = Mediterranean Crisis'¹ that appeared in the *Guardian* reflects the current state of affairs around Europe's southern sea. Politics and economics on both shores of the Mediterranean have been historically intertwined among others

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through sea born interaction, the rule of European empires and in the early twentieth century the colonization of North Africa and Middle East by major European powers. Interdependencies notwithstanding, the two shores followed a dissimilar path of development in the second half of the twentieth century. All northern Mediterranean countries became one after the other an integral part of the European integration process, marking significant development, enjoying political stabilization and security. South Mediterranean societies on the contrary have been in a vicious cycle of poverty and human insecurity.

Despite the invisible wall that keeps apart the developed and stable northern shore with the developing and conflict torn southern one, migration, energy and sea born environmental issues are only few of the channels of interconnection. The interdependencies of the two shores of the Mediterranean became obvious with the outburst of the Arab uprisings at the end of 2010 and the financial crisis of 2008. The current eurozone crisis has deeply impacted on all north Mediterranean countries (except Malta) and has disclosed new channels of (financial risk) contamination through trade, remittances and capital flows. European neighborhood economies after steady growth between 2005 and 2008 were drawn back into recession as a consequence of the global financial turmoil. Another home grown crisis, this time, the Arab Spring that erupted in 2010-11 swept all southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The uprisings resulted in regime changes, constitutional reforms, civil war and military interventions engaging European powers as the UK, Belgium, France, Spain and Italy.

This double crisis has brought fundamental changes in the political economy of the Mediterranean and has of course influenced the pace of Euro-Mediterranean relations. As Kausch argues ‘Unfortunately, today there is no momentum for comprehensive, institutionalized multilateralism across the Mediterranean’.² Of course, the process of developing a meaningful Euro-Mediterranean dialogue that would bridge the two Mediterranean shores has been thorny, facing serious security, political and economic obstacles. The paper argues that despite the slow-down in institutionalized Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, new modes of interregional action are to develop in time, based less on all encompassing institutions and norms and more on flexibility and variable geometry.

Mediterranean Policies under Austerity Imperative

The impact of the American mortgage crisis was felt on the eurozone with a small delay in 2010 bringing since then the northern Mediterranean in the spotlight of international financial system and generating an overall governance crisis in the European Union. Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Cyprus were brought into recession while France is also suffering from a deterioration of its competitiveness that has generated austerity measures. As there was no crisis resolution mechanism for the eurozone, the sovereign debt crisis spread into the real economy of all southern European economies. A mixture of EU forced austerity measures, political stalemate, technocratic governments, deep recession and unemployment is now widespread in northern Mediterranean.

Since the eruption of the crisis, sovereign debt brought Greece twice on the verge of default. Once in spring 2010 when the so called Troika i.e. European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB), and IMF bailed it out with a \$163 billion loan in exchange for strict spending cuts and tax reforms. In October 2011, Greece was given a second bailout package worth approximately \$178 billion which included a 'voluntary' write-down by private holders of Greek debt. Greece is required to cut its debt-to-GDP ratio to 124 percent by 2020 while committing to bring its debt levels 'substantially below' 110 percent by 2022. Portugal's debt crisis also worsened and in May 2011 the EU and IMF agreed on a \$116 billion bailout package, for which Portugal agreed to implement austerity measures totaling 3.4 percent of GDP. At the end of 2011, the center of the debt crisis moved to Italy -the eurozone's third largest economy. For Italy, which has a public debt worth \$2.6 trillion -more than 115 percent of GDP- a bailout was not an option. Following the formation of a temporary technocratic government by Mario Monti in November 2011 urgent budget reforms, tax increases, spending cuts and reforms in the pension system and the labor market were being implemented. However, austerity measures brought the Italian political system once again in 2013 in a political stalemate. The other large Mediterranean economy, Spain, had a rapid increase in its budget deficit in the wake of the crisis and went through a major housing-market bust during the global financial crisis that left its banking sector highly exposed. By the summer of 2012, Spain was forced to request a bailout of \$123 billion in aid by the newly established EU funds –

the temporary European Financial Stability Fund and the permanent European Stability Mechanism- to recapitalize its banks. The economy of Cyprus which was highly exposed to the Greece was also brought into a near default by spring 2013 which led to a \$13 billion bailout agreement with the European Commission, ECB, and the IMF, to the closing of country's largest bank, Popular Bank (Laiki) and to heavy losses on bank depositors.³

The effects of the eurozone crisis vary as they depend on several transmission mechanisms (trade, banking, currencies, bond spreads) that are affected by different forces both in the EU and in third countries indicating differences with regard to their economic structures, integration in global financial markets, vulnerability to the eurozone and recovery potential. Actually, the eurozone crisis occurred at a time when all neighboring economies were marking steady positive growth recording an average growth of 4-5% between the years 2000-2007. For most of 2008 the southern Mediterranean countries remained relatively immune to the US born financial crisis, primarily due to the low exposure of their financial systems. As however the crisis spread into Europe, by 2009 the first effects on the real economy of the southern Mediterranean countries became obvious. Still, however, they managed to maintain positive growth of 3.3% in 2009. Soon after, their macroeconomic performance weighed down under the weight of political and social upheavals, by declining export receipts (due to decline in tourism), lower remittances and lower capital flows. According to IMF figures, only Morocco achieved a growth rate of about 4.6% in 2011-12, while all other southern neighborhood economies grew between one to three percentage points below their 2000-7 expansionary period.

The impact of the economic crisis on the Euro-Mediterranean process goes through two channels; instruments and resources at the EU level and at the individual member states level the latter especially with regard to bilateral development cooperation. Despite the austerity measures in Europe, the new multiannual budget of the EU (2014-2020) allocates 18.2 billion for the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), 40% more than the amount available under the current period (2007-13), reflecting the ENP's increased priority. This increase might be also explained as an alternative to the decreasing development aid by individual member states.⁴ Though ENI funds seem not to be affected by the crisis, at the individual country level, recession

brought cuts on development cooperation and public diplomacy. Development aid (ODA) declined in France by -1.6%, in Greece by -17.0%, in Italy by -34.7% (due to lower levels of aid to refugees arriving from North Africa and reduced relief grants compared to 2011), in Spain by -49.7% and in Portugal by -13.1%. While, Turkey registered an increase of 98.7% in development aid reflecting help to a large number of refugees arriving from Syria and increased support to North African countries following the Arab Spring.

Another impact is on policy priorities. Under the austerity pressure, European governments are putting a stronger emphasis on 'economic diplomacy', as in the case of Spanish bilateral relations with Morocco and Algeria, where Spanish firms try to compensate for the losses in domestic economy. Spain's restrictive position on agricultural imports and fisheries has also hardened as a result of the recession, but this hardly represents a novelty in Spain's strategy as J. Vaquer argues.⁵ Energy cooperation has acquired a new dimension with a renewed interest in eastern Mediterranean, the energy cooperation between Cyprus and Israel and the economic impact of the natural gas findings in the offshore of Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus. Traditional Mediterranean powers such as France, Spain and Italy are less active in public diplomacy preferring bilateral initiatives such as the Morocco-Spain initiative on the 'Promotion of Mediation in the region of Mediterranean' (to develop the practice of mediation as a tool of settling conflicts engaging civil society) or the Spain-Algeria initiative (that seeks to approve a water strategy for the Western Mediterranean).

The Mediterranean policy of the EU and its member states is not only shaped under austerity imperatives but under the uncertainty of new post-revolutionary societies emerging in the Arab world.

Euro-Mediterranean Relations Faced with an Unexpected Uprising

The EU countries had followed a policy of engagement with the Mediterranean partners despite the democratic deficit in the North African and Middle Eastern regimes. Especially following the 'new era' in West's relations with Kaddafi's Libya since 2003 the EU established one way or another institutional links with all its southern partners, but Syria. Energy,

migration and security concerns in European capitals underlined the deepening of Euro-Mediterranean dialogue. Till now, in engaging with its southern neighbors, the European Union has deployed a number of specific foreign policy instruments carried out largely by EU institutions – in particular the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). These instruments include the enlargement policy (which covers Turkey), the European Neighborhood Policy which develops at a bilateral level (with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria and Tunisia and eastern partners), and the (inter)regional approach of the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). In varying degrees the above instruments have not been particularly successful in the Mediterranean. The EU membership path of Turkey since it was launched in 2005 has been thorny and lengthy, raising concerns over the real possibility of Turkey entering the EU family any time soon. The eurozone crisis and the earlier constitutional crisis in the EU have brought EU's further enlargement into a halt and revived the discussion on 'special relations' with important neighbors such as Turkey.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), conceived ten years ago to address post enlargement challenges of EU's new neighborhood, seemed overdue to respond to the challenges of the Arab awakening, as it was neither designed as a crisis management tool, nor as a short term democracy promotion instrument. As a response to the Arab uprisings, the ENP was revised in March 2011 to prioritize democracy building and mobility. Joint communications of the High Representative and the Commission were prepared on 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' (8 March 2011), 'A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood' (25 May 2011) and 'Supporting closer cooperation and regional integration in the Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia' (17 December 2012). According to these documents EU's response to the Arab calls would develop around three 'Ms', i.e. money, mobility and markets⁶. Accordingly, in 2012, preparations for deep and comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTA) negotiations started with Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan. An agreement on a Mobility Partnership with Morocco was reached, negotiations with Tunisia continue and a dialogue was also opened with Jordan in December 2012.

To contribute to the establishment of 'deep democracy' in the partner countries, the EU set up the US-style European Endowment for Democracy (EED), proposed by Poland in early 2011, to increase and improve the democracy promotion structures already operating in ENP countries, from the EU, from its Member States, or from political parties' foundations. A Civil Society Facility was also created, an instrument that has already been implemented in the Balkans with an initial budget of 26 million for 2011-2013. The centre piece of the EU package to support the transition processes was the SPRING (Support to Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) programme initiated in September 2011 with a budget of 350 million of assistance (for 2011-2013) in accordance with the 'more-for-more' principle.

The UfM which attempted to address the shortcomings of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and was described as 'the project of projects' was not meant to be a political forum, rather it aimed at facilitating expert cooperation and specific projects such as cleaning up the Mediterranean.⁷ The eurocrisis, the Middle East conflict, the Arab Spring and intra-EU differences on the institutional design and the funding of the UfM all added to its delayed debut (in early 2012, it launched its first project, a Desalination Facility in the Gaza Strip). The delayed establishment of the joint Secretariat of the UfM in Barcelona in October 2010 preceded the Arab revolts just by a couple of months and was immediately faced with lack of or change of spokespersons in the southern Mediterranean partners. Key players throughout the neighborhood have a lukewarm attitude towards real integration either as they question its welfare benefits or as they see alternatives especially in forging bilateral links or alliances with extra regional powers. Despite some progress marked at the institutional level, the evolving crisis has exaggerated the agency deficit issue in Euro-Mediterranean dialogue as the usual front runners of EU's Mediterranean policies (France, Italy and Spain) are preoccupied by the handling of the European economic and financial governance issue. They once more have opted for bilateral or more confined frames of action. Thus, a boost of the 5+5 dialogue was noticed which included its thematic expansion from security to economic and social concerns and high level meetings and summits in 2012 and 2013.

The viability of pre-Arab revolution designed Euro-Mediterranean agenda and its institutionalized approach is still to prove given political instability in

the Mediterranean parties and the rise of political Islam. In this respect, EU driven multilateral partnerships by civil society groups leading processes of nonhierarchical political 'socialization' might bring little impact. It is also questionable whether mobility and access promises will succeed. Visa liberalization remains a sensitive issue within the EU which is only exaggerated by the current crisis, the proposed DCFTAs seem slow to materialize (a view strengthened by the failure of the EMP envisaged free trade area for 2010) alike southern Mediterranean countries' access to the EU's common market.⁸ The EU increased its assistance for free and fair elections and deployed elections observation missions to Algeria, Egypt and Jordan and set up task forces for Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt to improve the coordination of financial assistance provided by the EU, EU member states and international financial institutions. This agenda however, is perceived on the southern side of the Mediterranean as incommensurate with the scale of the challenges that the post-revolutionary Arab countries face.⁹

Currently, the most serious unfolding crisis is the civil war in Syria. As a response to the Assad's stronghold the EU suspended all bilateral cooperation with the government but remains engaged at the civil society level. Through diplomatic actions it attempts to facilitate a peaceful solution to the conflict, supporting the UN- League of Arab States Special Envoy, actively participating in Friends of Syria meetings and providing aid to the refugees and neighboring countries affected by the crisis. The EU supported the creation in Doha of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and most European states have recognized it as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.¹⁰

Though the intensity and pace of political transition in many Arab countries differs greatly, the emergence of -moderate- Islamist groups as central political and social forces puts a challenge in the Mediterranean agenda of all EU countries. While the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya brought down their autocratic regimes, they are still in a transition process and there have not yet marked major shifts in these countries' foreign policies. Partial top-down reforms in Morocco and Jordan and changes at a slower pace in other countries (Algeria, Mauritania) or not at all (Gulf countries) indicate an erratic pace of reforms. It remains to be seen how the new political elites will position themselves regionally once the socio-economic transition from autocracy will

proceed. European diplomacy is now faced with the challenge of establishing links with the new elites, with Islamist politicians and also with Islamist civil society organisations with which they had avoided contact in the past. Despite the strong ties to Europe, it might be that some southern partners may not display an interest in institutionalized cooperation with the EU as the one launched in the Barcelona Process in 1995 but seek more diversified, flexible ways of cooperation.

Which way ahead for EU-Mediterranean Relations?

Social change in the Mediterranean neighborhood matched with the global power shift from West to East and the emergence of a multipolar neighborhood constitutes a strong argument for the redefinition of regional policies, their institutional expression, agenda and purpose. The discussion on a multipolar, post-Cold War order which first opened in the eastern neighborhood to point to emerging poles of power (structural and normative) such as Russia and Turkey has engaged the southern neighborhood as well with new entrants from Asia and the Middle East. Especially the Mediterranean societies have strong economic links with Middle East economies as a result of labor migration.

For some analysts the EU does not anymore constitute the only model for democracy in its southern neighborhood as there is revival of Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic trends.¹¹ The Arab countries go through a 'second decolonization', emancipating themselves from Western client states.¹² According to other analysts increased cultural interactions among democratic Arab states and cross-border interactions will enhance EU's structural power as the new (democratic) regimes will attempt to expand the, previously restrained to economic and technical issues, intraregional cooperation across the board.¹³ Accordingly, respondents to a Euromed Survey (2011) make a positive assessment of the impact of the Arab uprisings in the Euro-Mediterranean relations, as they consider that this will accelerate the implementation of the political and socio-economic reforms foreseen in the EMP/ENP frameworks.¹⁴ Despite the limitations of the EU policy, as the Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013 published by the European Council on Foreign Relations indicates, in several Mediterranean countries, specifically in Egypt and Tunisia there was genuine

demand for Europe to take a more influential role instead of allowing the US to be in the strategic driving seat, but the EU did not take that opportunity¹⁵. The task forces (within the EEAS framework) that have met in Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan are the most visible aspect of EU external policy. But EU's willingness to accept the slowdown of political reform, particularly in the case of Egypt and Jordan, set a problematic precedent for a longer-term strategy to support democratization in the region.

In terms of economic leverage, still the EU as a bloc remains the most important trade partner of all its southern neighbors. The opening of Mediterranean economies to the global markets however could reduce the attractiveness of EU-centred free trade agreements which constitute one of the main pillars of Euro-Mediterranean relations and increase partners' reluctance to accelerate trade reforms.¹⁶ A first fact is that EU trade with south Mediterranean partners has decreased significantly as a result of the crisis indicating that trade integration could further slow down. Intra-regional trade which still today accounts for less than 4% of North Africa's trade is another key aspect of Euro-Mediterranean economic integration as it is considered essential for allowing SM countries to benefit from trade liberation. However, intra-regional trade is still very modest, even though the current crisis is said to provide an opportunity for southern partners to deepen it.¹⁷

The Arab Spring powered ambitions in the Arab public to have a greater voice in their affairs. The League of Arab States (Arab League) raised its profile by recommending the U.N. Security Council to impose a no-fly zone on Libya, paving the way to NATO's air campaign against Gaddafi's troops. Currently it supports a joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy on the Syrian Crisis and its role has been crucial in recognizing the Syrian opposition in the summit of Doha this year. The Arab League has formed commissions to investigate on human rights in member states, to boost the role of civil society and to promote cooperation in culture and education. Responding to the Arab Awakening, the EU intensified its contacts with the Arab League (LAS), the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) and the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) on an ad hoc basis that could in the future lead to more (inter)regionalism. However, despite the renewed interest in Pan-Arabic cooperation, deep national divisions, disputes and barriers to movement and trade pose serious obstacles.

The basis of EU's neighborhood policy that creating institutional structures

and a technocratic network will in time generate the necessary political drive of reform in the partner countries has not proved successful where there is no membership perspective. As Kausch (2012) puts it 'like the building of the EU as a peace-making project, any holistic Euro-Mediterranean integration policy needs to start from shared political ambitions'. The approach of institutions for political reform is a misinterpretation of the successful genesis of the European project in which institutions in fact served to implement a larger political narrative, not to create it. To shape such shared political ambitions will however need time until the new social dynamics shape up. However, in the short term Mediterranean partners can work closer on partnerships addressing common challenges which today concern the restart of the Mediterranean economies to generate sustainable growth and new jobs, energy interdependences, labor mobility and good governance.

Conclusion

There is an overall governance crisis on both shores of the Mediterranean which is of different origins. In the northern Mediterranean the economic crisis has led to political turmoil, social demands for a new development model, European governance structures, principles and rules. In the southern Mediterranean, the 'home grown' transformation process that began with the Arab uprisings in 2011 has changed the political and social matrix in the partner countries. This transformation period is to last long. The common challenges resulting from the double crisis are high unemployment levels especially among youth (with an average of 47% in Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal and 25% in the MENA region) and the restart of the economy. In the political sphere the eurozone crisis has led to governmental changes and an upturn on xenophobic and populist forces. In the south, regardless of the democratic prospects in each of the MPCs, political Islam (in its 'moderate' approach) is gaining power and is expected to play a key role in the coming years.

The recovery period for the Mediterranean countries will be long and until transition is complete regional institutions will not deliver. However, the economic crisis combined with the Arab revolts call for a repositioning of regional actors. The EU might not be allowed to play a more active role in this historical period for the Mediterranean but the southern European

countries can work closer with their littoral partners in areas such as energy, migration and maritime issues along the lines of Mediterranean partnerships where the littoral countries will be the key drivers. Southern European countries could share their experiences on two important issues of the Arab transformation: institution-building within Arab political and civil societies, and dialogue between and within the religious-secular camps leading to an inclusive constitution-making process.¹⁸

EU led multilateral instruments such as the Union for the Mediterranean have their part to play, but will need to be redesigned to reflect post-revolutionary realities. The southern European countries should not miss the opportunity to build a new vision of where the EU would like its Mediterranean relations to be in 10 or 20 years.

NOTES

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