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“The Dilemma of the EU Neighbourhood Policy: Mediterranean vs. Eastern Partnership”

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The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is the instrument through which the European Union (EU) aims to create bonds between its Member States and the countries at the boundaries of the EU and thus secure the stability of the European borders. The EU stipulates Association Agreements offering financial support and other advantages in exchange for a commitment to implement reforms. There are two action plans within the ENP: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

The UfM was created by 43 Heads of State and Government in Paris, in 2008, to connect the countries of the Mediterranean Basin. During the meeting in Marseille, on 4 November 2008, the headquarters of the Secretariat of the UfM was settled in Barcelona. The Union was meant to substitute the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), or Barcelona Process, started in 1995, which originally failed to fulfil its aims¹. According to Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Director of the Center for International and European Studies at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, the asymmetry between north and south and the lack of confidence among the parties involved were the main reasons for its limited success. Today, the UfM comprises the 28 EU Member States, the European Commission and 15 Mediterranean countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Libya as an observer.

The EaP was designed for six post-Soviet countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The proposal for the project was presented by Radosław Sikorski and Carl Bildt, ministers of foreign affairs of Poland and Sweden respectively, and it was inaugurated on 7 May 2009, in Prague. The purpose of the initiative is to offer a permanent forum for a stronger cooperation with the EU's eastern neighbours, on important issues such as visa-free movement, trade and civil society.

¹ Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, “The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Linking the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea”, *Mediterranean Yearbook Med.2010*, Institut Europeen de la Mediterrània. Barcelona 2010, pp. 132-135.

EU foreign policy is on the edge of a new era, and the debuts of the UfM and the EaP, between 2008 and 2009, are clearly a sign of this. Yet, this policy does not seem to be very well coordinated at the EU level and is too much engaged by the national will and, sometimes too cautious to be as efficient as the evolving geopolitical circumstances demand. According to Triantaphyllou, “these policies reveal the different foreign policy priorities and interests of some of the EU Member States, while raising questions, relating to their successful implementation”². In some cases the ENP has been used as a political tool to foment rivalries among the EU Member States. All these differences could allow the implementation of more comprehensive policies, taking into account the contribution of each member, but, actually, seem to dilute the effectiveness of them, diverting attention from the primary objectives. How to decide which countries need to be addressed as a priority seems to be the biggest challenge, especially now that both the southern and the eastern borders are currently unstable, and require attention.

UfM: perception of the Central Eastern European states

The proposal to establish a “Mediterranean Union” was one the goals prefixed by Nicolas Sarkozy during the French presidential election campaign in 2007. The UfM was born as a multilateral partnership aimed at increasing cohesion among Euro-Mediterranean countries and it was inspired by the desire to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, democracy, cooperation and prosperity. The six priority areas of the Union are the de-pollution of the Mediterranean, maritime and land highways, civil protection, alternative energies, higher education and research, and the Mediterranean Business Initiative.

Southern EU members such as Greece, Italy and Spain strongly supported the partnership. But, what about the Eastern Countries? Agnieszka K. Cianciara, Senior Academic Assistant at the College of Europe, Natolin campus (Warsaw), highlighted the evolution of the perception of Mediterranean issues in Eastern European Countries. “Initially, – pointed out Cianciara – the perception of UfM as a threat in terms of a financial trade-off to the detriment of the east as well as scepticism as to the added value of the whole project to the Mediterranean itself prevailed. Relatively quickly however, this initial perception was replaced by an understanding that the project provides a perfect opportunity for reinforcing the eastern dimension of the ENP”³. In other words, the first reaction of eastern EU partners was: the UfM was perceived as a threat to their own foreign agendas. Yet, later it became leverage, a negotiation tool to use to pursue their own foreign policy agenda. But, eastern members have never shown a concrete interest in Mediterranean issues⁴. The biggest concerns were raised by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. “In their view, – wrote Cianciara – the Mediterranean region had been favoured in terms of financial resources earmarked by the EU, in comparison with the amount promised to the eastern neighbours”⁵.

² Ibid.

³ Agnieszka K. Cianciara, “*The Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership: Perspectives from Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary*”, Report of the Institute of Public Affairs, 2009.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The Hungarian case well explains the common thought among eastern EU partners. Cianciara explained “Hungary has participated in the Barcelona Process as a full member since 2004, but interest and awareness have always been very limited, both amongst the political elites and the general public and confined mostly to administration circles responsible for the relevant tasks and activities”.

As regards the Polish case, before the UfM proposal was presented, Poland had never shown any interest in the countries of the Mediterranean. Warsaw had a few weak economic ties with this region and it was more concerned with developing relations with its nearest eastern neighbours. Poland was always moderate in its statements on Mediterranean policies, declaring its willingness to participate in the solutions undertaken by the EU⁶. However, Polish diplomats never forget to remind of the need to balance EU involvement in the south and in the east, especially on financial issues.

The Czech Republic had even bigger concerns about UfM than Poland, mainly focused on the idea that the UfM was just a temporary solution to grant Turkey an alternative to membership. Prague was very careful to ensure that the distribution of the EU budget on neighbourhood projects would not compromise the ENP’s eastern dimension.

The Baltic countries likewise have shown the same cautious attitude towards the Mediterranean region for a long time. Their foreign policies have always been directed to the east, for obvious geopolitical reasons. Yet, the study of the Finnish NGDO Platform to the EU dated 2010 and based on a survey pursued in the Baltic and in the Mediterranean states, clearly highlighted the common ground on which future cooperation could be built. The report states, “there is a lack of mutual understanding between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean regions. Prejudices and racism are widespread. The media cover is limited and cultural exchange relatively small. Despite this, the regions have much in common. They understand the concern of cooperating with neighbouring countries that are not part of the EU”⁷. These two maritime regions face similar environmental and also commercial challenges, being at the periphery of the EU. The EU should, and can be the bridge to enhance respective knowledge and cooperation.

Controversial aspects of the EaP

The EaP was created to balance the UfM, adding a northern dimension to the EU neighbourhood policy. Yet, according to many authors, it is a mistake to give equal consideration to the south and the east, because of their deep geopolitical differences. Secondly, many stated that the EaP could even compromise the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, reducing its effectiveness. Marcin Łapczyński, an international security expert in the Casimir Pulaski Foundation in Warsaw stressed that the EaP competes with other instruments of stronger cooperation with non-EU countries⁸, such as those towards EFTA/EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and towards the Balkans,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anna Lindh Foundation, “*Attitudes and Prejudices between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Regions, the Finnish NGDO Platform to the EU*”, September 2010.

⁸ Ibid.

Turkey, or even Russia⁹. Other criticism came from issues such as the allocation of funds¹⁰: in light of the recent crisis it is debatable how funding can be efficiently distributed among the several programs and the interested countries, especially considering that some of them are involved in more than one project.

Moreover, experts stated that the proposal could easily fit in the scenario of political tensions existing between Sarkozy and the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, at the time of the proposal¹¹. In this perspective, the EaP may have been an attempt to hamper the plans of the former French president to move more funds towards the EU's southern borders.

Ukraine, as well, has raised doubts about the EaP, claiming, “any form of neighbourhood policy without a membership perspective cannot satisfy”¹².

Another controversial aspect refers to Belarus. Some European countries are against establishing any closer contacts with Belarus; others are available to provide assistance, but only in exchange for tangible democratic changes. “More concretely, – reports Łapczyński – the EaP has been criticised for giving Belarus the chance to participate in it when there are no signs of real political reforms in the country¹³. But now, more than ever, Belarus matters. The role of Minsk is fundamental in the current Ukrainian crisis. Not to mention that, if abandoned, Belarus would become vulnerable to the Russian expansionistic desires, and then it would become a rival, rather than an ally.

The example of Belarus can be useful to better understand how Russia can affect the future of the ENP. Indeed, the problematic role of Russia in the ENP has dominated the European agenda in the last decade. Russia has always clearly expressed its opposition to the EaP project, being concerned that it would lose its grip on its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet countries. The Russian involvement in the Ukrainian crisis is, from this perspective, an attempt by Moscow to prevent Kiev from tightening ties with the EU. The Europeanist desires of the Maidan uprising was not appreciated by the Kremlin, which took the field to maintain chaos in Ukraine and impede any further European drift.

Many European countries have strong bonds with Russia, and have no intention of ruining their relationship with Moscow, even if it means taking steps backwards in the neighbourhood policy. For instance, Italy made no attempt to find a solution to the Ukrainian crisis during its EU Council Presidency, from July to December 2014. The Association Agreement with Ukraine was signed during the Italian Presidency, however, the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), was suspended until the end of 2015, due to “Russia's concerns”¹⁴.

⁹ M. Łapczyński, “The European Union's Eastern Partnership: Chances and Perspectives”, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, Spring 2009, Cria 2009, Online access: http://www.cria-online.org/7_3.html.

¹⁰ Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, “The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Linking the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea”, op. cit.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² N. Mikhelidze, “Eastern Partnership and Conflicts in the South Caucasus: Old Wine in New Skins?” IAI Working Papers No. 23/2009, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome 2009. Online access: <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iai0923.pdf>, p.10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A. Dimitrova, “Postponing the implementation of the trade part of the EU-Ukraine Association agreement: Pragmatism or Surrender”, Eurosearch.wordpress.com, September 30, 2014. Online access:

On the other side, Poland, in particular, has not hidden its fear about the military aggressiveness of Russia, as did the Baltic countries. These are the countries that more than others want to pursue the Eastern Partnership. Their position has been made stronger thanks to the support of Germany, which has been a strong economic partner for Russia, but always keeping an eye on Russia's aggressiveness.

Since January 1, 2010, Moscow has promoted the Eurasian Customs Union, aimed at creating an economic alliance of former Soviet states, in order to compete with the ENP. The post-Soviet space is becoming a battleground between the EU and Russia, and the risk of a Second Cold War seems to be no longer just a hypothesis.

The France-Germany tug of war

The driving forces between the two different neighbourhood policy approaches of the EU are Germany and France. France led the “pro-South” EU countries, aiming at strengthening networks with the two banks of the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, Germany has always been the landmark of the “pro-East” interest group, “advocating for the prioritization of transformations in the post-Soviet space¹⁵”, as reported by David Rinnert, policy analyst at the UK Department for International Development.

Disagreements among EU members have hampered improvements and effectiveness of the neighbourhood policy in recent years. “The lack of French-German cooperation – states Rinnert – on the ENP has been especially damaging for the EU in the cases of Libya, Syria and Ukraine, but also beyond”.

When Sarkozy launched the Union for the Mediterranean, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was particularly critical, stating in a public declaration that “there must not be a Europe of private functions”¹⁶. The Chancellor also feared the possibility of splitting the EU into two blocks, making the UfM an exclusive prerogative of the Mediterranean States, France in particular. “In December 2007, – reported Cianciara – Merkel rejected the idea that the initiative for the Mediterranean should be restricted to the EU southern states [...]. Germany and other EU Member States (notably Poland and Sweden) perceived the project as a threat not only to the Barcelona Process and the ENP, but also to the integrity of the EU itself”¹⁷.

After informal diplomatic consultations between Germany and France, the two leaders found a satisfactory compromise: Merkel guaranteed her support for the initiative, while receiving in exchange Sarkozy's commitment to make sure that the project would encompass all the Member States. Since

<https://eurosearch.wordpress.com/2014/09/30/postponing-the-implementation-of-the-trade-part-of-the-eu-ukraine-association-agreement-pragmatism-or-surrender/>.

¹⁵ D. Rinnert, “Towards Improved French-German Cooperation in the EU Neighborhood”, *New Eastern Europe* bimonthly, 23 April 2013. Online access: <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/interviews/689-towards-improved-french-german-cooperation-in-the-eu-neighbourhood>.

¹⁶ “Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union plans irk Merkel,” *EurActiv*, 13 December 2007. Online access: <http://www.euractiv.com/future-eu/sarkozy-mediterranean-union-plans-irk-merkel/article-169080>.

¹⁷ Agnieszka K. Cianciara, “The Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership: Perspectives from Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary”, op. cit.

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2012, Germany has become more involved in the partnership and, in 2013 it made clear its desire to revitalize the Union for the Mediterranean¹⁸.

According to Rinnert, Paris and Berlin may find common ground, and start to work together, trying to overcome their previous contrasts. Moldova could be this common ground. This small country has proved to be promising in term of Europeanization, yet the frozen conflict in Transnistria requires attention. “Moldova is a neighbouring country of France’s closest ally in the region – Romania¹⁹” highlighted Rinnert. At the same time it is part of the so-called post-Soviet space, of great interest for Germany.

Conclusions

To some extent, the ENP seems to be a diluted version of the enlargement policy. Many instruments and templates of the enlargement program have been emulated and re-adapted. But it is quite clear that the two policies address very different countries, and they should not be treated equally²⁰. If the enlargement policy implies the commitment of the countries to join the Union and, consequently to accept values and goals, the same cannot be said for the countries in the ENP. These countries should be considered as “partners”, not scholars. The top-down model is not the only way. Interactions, cooperation and respective knowledge should be the pattern. The values should be spread in the civil society, respecting the time needed for these to be embraced.

On the other hand, the absence of membership incentives, combined with undemocratic leadership in some countries, makes the European incisiveness weaker²¹. This makes EU-ENP relations very unstable.

According to many authors, the ENP still has room for improvement, and a good chance of becoming an effective instrument of foreign policy. Pragmatism, coordination between the two regional projects and flexibility to adapt with an open mind to the changing world are the key words to succeed²².

In a way, the UfM and the EaP, were, and still are, the platform where the European countries can confront each other and learn about each other. Western and Eastern countries have different backgrounds and different political priorities, especially in foreign policies. Nevertheless, the globalized world demands a broader commitment: distances have been dissolved and events that seem to be far away can no longer be neglected. The Ukrainian crisis, the deteriorated relations with Russia and the energy problem draw the attention of the West to the East. At the same time transnational issues, such as immigration, need to be taken into greater consideration by Eastern countries, even if they do not seem to be directly affected.

¹⁸ “Schulz resuscitates Sarkozy’s ‘Union for the Mediterranean’”, EurActiv. 4 April 2013. Online access: <http://www.euractiv.com/east-mediterranean/schulz-resuscitates-sarkozy-unio-news-518894>.

¹⁹ D. Rinnert, “Towards Improved French-German Cooperation in the EU Neighborhood”, op. cit.

²⁰ D. Linotte, “Challenges and Dilemmas of the ENP in the South Caucasus”, Diplomatic traffic. 19 September 2007. Online access: http://www.diplomatictraffic.com/debate_archives.asp?ID=634.

²¹ J. Kelley, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: Promoting Political Reforms through the New European Neighbourhood Policy”, JCMS 2006 Volume 44. No.1, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, UK and USA 2006, pp. 29–55.

²² D. Triantaphyllou, “The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Linking the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea”, op. cit.