

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



THE EU'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

This document summarizes the findings of MEDRESET's WP1 on the EU construction of the Mediterranean and identifies policy implications.

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INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How does the EU regard the space beyond its southern borders? How has it been framing the Mediterranean space throughout the last almost fifty years, i.e., ever since it embarked on the creation of a foreign and security policy? And how have these framing practices informed, shaped and possibly determined EU foreign policy practices vis-à-vis the Mediterranean other? These questions were at the heart of research conducted by MEDRESET's Work Package 1, which gathered scholars from Cairo University (CU), CIDOB and the ENP Chair, based at the Natolin campus of the College of Europe.

The findings of this research are quite straightforward: The EU constructs the Mediterranean space mainly through three discursive practices, notably “the Mediterranean as a diverse geopolitical space”, “the Mediterranean as a dangerous space” and “the Mediterranean as a space crucial for EU interests”. While constructing the Mediterranean on these lines, the EU also reproduces its own ideal self as stable, secure and peaceful and legitimizes its policies which are mainly technocratic and depoliticizing, as well as—ever more so since the early 1990s—securitizing. Based on these insights, this policy brief calls upon the EU to change the othering (and also security) discourses employed to define the societies and states in the Mediterranean. Moreover, it recommends abandoning (at least

to a significant extent) the EU's technocratic and depoliticizing approach towards target societies by facilitating opportunities for increased political agency of locals, especially opposition groups, non-co-opted civil society actors and women as agents of change and modernization.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Analyses were performed within WP1 through the production of three working papers on the EU's constructions of the Mediterranean in three time periods (1970–1989, 1990–2002 and 2003–2017). With regard to the EU's constructions of the Mediterranean in 1970–1989, the analysis demonstrates that **early attempts towards European construction of the Mediterranean were mainly triggered by the EC's economic interests and necessitated by its recurring enlargement processes**. The EC did not perceive the Mediterranean as a coherent region, and a clear distinction was made between its various geographical components. The analysis also demonstrates that most of the Community's initiatives for political cooperation with many Mediterranean countries did not succeed. It further reveals that most Europeans perceived Middle East politics—and not “Mediterranean politics”—as a domain of US active diplomacy, even though the EC perceived itself as an increasingly powerful actor capable of constructing the Mediterranean as a zone of economic prosperity.

The analysis of the EU's constructions of the Mediterranean in 1990–2002 demonstrates that the Mediterranean space was presented as a source of threats, but also as a space in need of EU engagement, mainly due to its proximity to and interdependence with the EU and individual Member States. CIDOB argued that the Mediterranean was also seen as an opportunity for the EU as well as a (self-imposed) responsibility. This was reflected in the EU's growing ambition in international affairs and the initiation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) as a region-building project with a strong bilateral dimension. This occurred against the backdrop of preceding debates that revolved around drawing the boundaries of the Mediterranean, a much discussed dichotomy between patronization versus co-ownership, and the utility of pursuing merely a technocratic as opposed to a comprehensive approach. CIDOB's report further underlined the significance for the EMP of the collapse of the Middle East Peace Process and the 9/11 attacks. In their view, these developments were a litmus test not only for the EMP but for the EU as a whole. Consequently, their conclusion regarding the period 1990–2002 is that what was initially incepted as a political project of region-building in the Mediterranean was nevertheless implemented in a rather depoliticized and technocratic way. Securitization processes had been present since the beginning, and the EU/Europe was presented as a solution to threats emanating from the South. Ever since 9/11, these securitization processes have become more apparent, particularly in the framework of the EU's handling of migration and the refugee crisis that emerged in 2015 and Europe's relations with Islam.

In the period 2003–2017, **the EU’s approach to the Southern Mediterranean has been mainly about marking the EU’s borders, thus creating a peaceful inside and a dangerous outside** (as apparent in the emphasis on border control and managed migration found in the recent ENP documents). In the CoE-N report it is argued **that the securitized approach of the EU towards the Mediterranean was also an identity-construction exercise, particularly on the lines of immigration and radical religiously inspired terrorism** (as manifested in the ESS and the Global Strategy, as well as in the ENP texts). It is also revealed how the EU’s approach has been depoliticizing in this regard. Looking into the norms and interests dichotomy in the EU’s relations with its Southern Mediterranean partners, the CoE-N also demonstrates that the EU has been feeling the need to reinstate its normative difference from others so that it can pursue its interests more effectively. It is further argued that the EU has a depoliticizing and technocratic approach which feeds into the construction of the ideal European self vis-à-vis its imperfect others.

In conclusion, research in WP1 has shown that **the EU constructs the Mediterranean mainly through three discursive practices: “the Mediterranean as a diverse geopolitical space”, “the Mediterranean as a dangerous space” and “the Mediterranean as a space crucial for EU interests”**. **These discursive practices mainly serve the construction of an ideal European identity vis-à-vis its Mediterranean others which are depicted as societies that suffer from bad governance and authoritarianism, that cannot cooperate among themselves and that are prone to conflicts**—in other words, as societies that are weak, imperfect, backwards, etc. Depicting the Mediterranean as a diverse space brings about an inevitable comparison with the EU which is regarded as successful in achieving “unity in diversity”. The “danger discourse” is used to define the threats (such as conflicts, terrorism, illegal migration, weapons of mass destruction, extremism) seeming to emanate from the Southern Mediterranean and its neighbourhoods. On the other hand not only is this discourse constitutive of the securitized policies of the EU towards the region, the predication of Southern Mediterranean societies as conflictual also inherently involves a comparison with the EU/European self which—in contrast—is deemed as peaceful.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the confines of the theoretical and conceptual analysis undertaken, WP1 has found that the EU’s construction of the Mediterranean as a diverse geopolitical and dangerous space that is crucial for EU’s economic and security interests affects its policies towards the space. Such a construction not only refers to production and reproduction of European and Mediterranean identities vis-à-vis each other, it also has policy implications. Securitization inevitably leads to depoliticization because

the decisions are taken at the level of the political elites and leave little room for public political discussion. On the other hand, the mostly depoliticizing technocratic approach of the EU towards the region (particularly, the rhetoric of standards and benchmarks, as well as the technocratic reporting system) is usually justified through references to the EU's interest in the stability of the Mediterranean, as well as to its economic/trade interests.

Although the differentiated approach pursued by the EU—particularly after the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Review and the adoption of the Global Strategy in 2016—seems to be less Euro-centric and more tailored to the needs of the Southern Mediterranean societies, the EU increasingly uses an othering and securitizing discourse regarding the region. This discourse limits its capability to fully grasp the deeper dynamics of the Mediterranean and in many cases makes it prone to criticism for paternalism and self-declared superiority. Thus, the EU's policy problems (such as ineffectiveness, lack of visibility, and distrust of the Union on the part of the partners) are not about policy instruments at its disposal—on the contrary, it has a wide range of instruments. Instead, the preconceived and securitized understanding of the EU regarding the Mediterranean space (even with regard to the Mediterranean members of the EU, sometimes) coupled with its technocratic and in many cases depoliticizing approach, because it hinders a deeper geopolitical analysis of the dynamics of target societies, decreases the effectiveness of EU instruments. In light of this assessment, the key policy recommendation WP1 puts forward is to change the othering (and also security) discourses used to define the societies and states in the Mediterranean. This should be coupled with abandoning (at least to a significant extent) the EU's technocratic and depoliticizing approach towards target societies by supporting the creation of conditions which would increase the political agency of the locals, especially opposition groups, non-co-opted civil society actors and women. In other words, if the EU aims to make a difference in the Mediterranean, it should first start with desecuritizing its approach. Certainly, this does not imply downplaying, or even ignoring, existing security dynamics in the Mediterranean, but rather the adoption of, and adherence to, a more holistic, diversified and thus realistic understanding of the multifaceted developments in a geopolitical space that is ever evolving.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The MEDRESET project aims to deconstruct the EU's conception of the Mediterranean, which is rather Euro-centric, and to unsettle it through offering an integrated, inclusive and flexible approach to the Mediterranean which puts the emphasis on grassroots civil society actors (such as non-co-opted and less professionalized civil society organizations) and their corresponding needs and demands.

The theoretical framework applied in this regard is critical constructivism with a slight bend towards its poststructuralist variant. This is simply because such a framework offers a better understanding as to how the EU's specific construction of the Mediterranean leads to the drawing of boundaries (mental maps), produces and reproduces the European self vis-à-vis (and mostly against) its Mediterranean others and silences or excludes others' discourses whilst simultaneously legitimizing its own policies in the region. The research methodology adopted is critical discourse analysis based mainly on the works of J. Milliken, L. Hansen and R. Wodak. The intention of WP1 was not only to look into the common meanings created by the EU regarding the Mediterranean but also to demonstrate how the EU discourse is productive/reproductive of subjects, objects and policies—especially identities and difference—and how its dominant/hegemonic discourse legitimates its own policies. Extensive literature reviews, semi-structured interviews and elite surveys are only some of the techniques that were employed to achieve these research aims.

A thorough analysis was made of all the official documents of the EU on the EMP, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the ENP and the Arab uprisings (e.g., declarations, communications, common strategies, Action Plans and Strategy Papers); all the speeches by the President of the European Council, the High Representative, the President of the Commission and the Commissioners responsible for the ENP/UfM and the sectors the project specifies; the European Council Presidency Conclusions; the resolutions, reports and debates of the European Parliament and the speeches of its President; as well as speeches of governmental leaders of “key” Member States. Furthermore WP1 also employed an extensive literature review of relevant scholarly books and articles in journals on the Mediterranean, Euro-Mediterranean relations, the ENP, the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the EU, and of the documents produced by key European think tanks. The selection method for the sources was left to the Work Package partners due to the temporal difference in the corresponding research conducted by each partner. CIDOB and the College of Europe-Natolin (CoE-N) conducted semi-structured interviews with MEPs, Commissioners, EEAS staff, personnel of Member States' representations, or other relevant stakeholders.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME MEDRESET

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FURTHER READING	<p>Cebeci, Münevver (2017), <i>The EU's Constructions of the Mediterranean</i>, MEDRESET Final Report.</p> <p>Cebeci, Münevver and Tobias Schumacher (2017), “The EU’s Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003–2017)”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i>, No. 3, http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13294.</p> <p>Cebeci, Münevver and Tobias Schumacher (2016), “Deconstructing the EU’s Discourse on the Mediterranean”, in <i>MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers</i>, No. 2, http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13238.</p> <p>Huber, Daniela and Maria Cristina Paciello (2016), “MEDRESET: A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach”, in <i>MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers</i>, No. 1, http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169.</p> <p>Isaac, Sally Khalifa and Haidi Esmat Kares (2017), “The European Community Framing of the Mediterranean (1970–1990)”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i>, No. 1, http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13287.</p> <p>Morillas, Pol and Eduard Soler i Lecha (2017), “The EU’s Framing of the Mediterranean (1990–2002): Building a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership?”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i>, No. 2, http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13290.</p>