

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



THE EU AND POLITICAL IDEAS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

This MEDRESET Policy Brief summarizes the findings of MEDRESET's WP4 on political ideas in the Mediterranean and identifies policy implications.

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INTRODUCTION

While much of the literature on Euro-Mediterranean relations has assessed the EU alongside its own standards, MEDRESET Work Package 4 (WP4) was aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of EU policies on democracy promotion and human rights in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region from the perspective of bottom-up actors' interests, needs, perceptions and expectations, both at the local and the EU level, with the purpose of identifying inclusive, responsive and flexible policy actions to reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean relations.

By adopting a non-Eurocentric approach that gives voices to local and bottom-up perspectives, WP4 found that civil society stakeholders on the Southern and Northern shores of the Mediterranean think that the EU should not impose a political and economic model on the Southern Mediterranean, but that does not mean that the EU should abandon support for locally driven democratic transitions and human rights protection. Quite to the contrary: *WP4 points to the urgent imperative for the EU to press the reset button in Euro-Mediterranean relations by putting human rights and social justice upfront, rather than security and stability.*

In this policy brief we point out how stakeholders, firstly, perceive the Mediterranean space and EU practices in it, and, secondly, which alternative policies they recommend.

The representation of the Mediterranean space

The representation of the Mediterranean varied by the types of actors interviewed. Confirming the findings of MEDRESET Work Package 1, European institutional stakeholders constructed the Mediterranean as a space crucial for EU interests, a dangerous space and a diverse geopolitical space. In contrast to this, European civil society and grassroots actors are constructing the Mediterranean as a space in which all types of universal rights (civil, political and socio-economic rights; the rights of migrants and refugees; the rights of civilians under war and occupation; and the rights of women) are being violated; as a space that is economically, but not geopolitically or ideationally, dominated by the EU; and as one where civic space is shrinking and xenophobia, authoritarianism and “wall politics” are prevailing. These different approaches of European institutional and civil society stakeholders justify diverse policies. If it is not the Mediterranean as such which is dangerous but the practices of various actors in it which violate universal rights, then the policy response would need to place human rights and social justice upfront, rather than security and stability.

A different representation of the Mediterranean space is given by stakeholders in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. *Division, disparity and separation* are the three key concepts that emerge as central in the *description of the Mediterranean space*, evidenced in the spheres of politics, economics/development, migration and gender. Specifically, as highlighted in the table below, it is the EU’s *depoliticizing, securitizing and technocratic practices* in these sectors that are performing such a division, disparity and separation of the Mediterranean space (some interviewees even referred to EU practices with the concept of neo-colonialism).

Examples of perceived depoliticizing, securitizing and technocratic practices

Sphere Practice	Politics	Economics/Development	Migration	Gender
Depoliticizing	<i>EU continues to support oppressive regimes rather than demands for locally rooted democracy</i>	<i>EU does not foster (or even prevents) a development model which responds to social justice claims</i>	<i>EU seeks to keep migrants in recipient countries, but is not responsive to their needs</i>	<i>EU development model ignores socio-economic needs of women</i>
Securitizing	<i>EU prioritizes security, preventing migration, and counter-terrorism</i>	<i>Resilience as a strategy for stability (not development)</i>	<i>EU makes South its policeman</i>	<i>EU puts its own interest first</i>
Technocratic	<i>EU biased to work with pro-Western elites and professionalized civil society</i>	<i>Rather than following local needs, programmes respond to international trends and the need to foster trade liberalization</i>	<i>Everything is viewed through the migration lens</i>	<i>Check-box ticking approach</i>

EU ineffectiveness

The EU today is no longer seen as a model in the Mediterranean. Other models are emerging (Tunisia, Turkey, Russia) but do not yet represent an alternative. EU policies are seen as ineffective, mainly due to problems in

- Invisibility: EU policies are frequently unknown or overshadowed by the policies of the member states.

- Lack of coherence: There are perceived contradictions between the position of the EU (specifically its agenda of democracy, human rights and social equality) and those of individual member states.
- Substantial gap between expectations in the South and actual EU policy output: This applies specifically to the area of human rights. While EU aid is seen more positively than the aid of other actors, assistance to civil society is not enough when not backed up by political pressure, specifically to change laws which breach human rights, the rights of refugees and women, and the freedom of expression. A civilizing rhetoric on the part of the EU which represents universal rights as European is, however, rejected, as it denies local actors their agency in fighting for their rights.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the effectiveness of EU policies in the Mediterranean, the interviewed stakeholders proposed the following improvements in terms of substance, actors and instruments.

Substance

As evidence above, there has been a clear gap between the EU's stated democracy and human rights motives and its actual practices in the Mediterranean. But instead of the current trend in Brussels of adjusting its rhetoric to its practices, the interviewed stakeholders urge the EU to do the contrary, namely *to expand its human rights agenda and actually implement it*, by devising a genuine and shared human-rights-based foreign policy and by dropping the need to look, at all costs, for areas of consensus with unwilling state partners. Concretely, the EU should expand its scope in terms of substance to include more general topics related to democracy, democratic transition and human rights, such as education, culture and social-economic rights / social justice. Moreover, a human-rights-based approach should also inform Mediterranean economic relations, including the respect of labour rights as a major priority and devoting more attention to the gender and social impact of trade agreements. Gender-related issues to be taken into due account by EU policies should also concern sexual harassment and violence, including within Europe itself. Investment in these areas is seen as more effective, in the long term, in the fight against authoritarianism and terrorism. Indeed, the EU should also be wary to not too easily give in to the fight-against-terrorism and border-management narrative by which, for example, the Egyptian regime portrays itself as a necessary shield in the region. However, while expanding and implementing a human rights agenda, *the EU should not impose a political or economic model* on states such as Tunisia, but rather acknowledge the agency of local actors in devising this by themselves.

To work against the securitizing trend of all powers in the Mediterranean, including the EU (see the policy briefs of Work Packages 1 and 2), bottom-up actors also suggested a *policy of reconciliation*. This could be supported within countries (for example in Egypt), but also within the larger Euro-Mediterranean space. As first steps towards a reconciliation policy, the EU could support research that makes colonialist archives better accessible for formerly colonized nations to know about policies and practices of colonialist powers, on the one hand, and that encourages examining colonialism and its impact on the current migration and socio-economic and political conflicts across the region, on the other. This could be done through a project funded by the EU's Research and Development programme. Such a project could also serve to devise a regional reconciliation policy for the EU.

Actors

The EU should focus more on working with grassroots actors and civil society organizations and less with governments. Alongside supporting civil society actors with particular attention to those who are marginalized by incumbent regimes, the EU should adopt a more critical political stance toward human rights violations by oppressive regimes. The EU cannot drop this burden singularly

on civil society organizations. As the interviewed stakeholders from both shores largely stressed, by ignoring regression in human rights the EU will continue to reinforce authoritarianism. It could use the weight of its global power and influence to put pressure on governments regarding policies and laws in order to support civil society.

In the case of Egypt, the new NGO law has made it increasingly difficult for local civil society to acquire foreign funding and implement many of their programmes, particularly for political and human rights projects. That is why it is crucial that the EU support the actions of not co-opted and corrupt civil society organizations in the field of culture, education and socio-economic rights.

Furthermore, it is more effective to work with local authorities than with the central government. The EU can help by not siding with corrupt and authoritarian governments, by pointing out corruption when it is happening, by acknowledging election fraud if it has occurred, and by applying economic pressure in case of gross human rights violations.

Finally, the EU should also signal a protection of the Tunisian transition to actors which are pushing for polarization in the country, such as the United Arab Emirates.

Instruments

The EU should create an equal dialogue with southern grassroots actors, instead of a top-down dialogue. Interlocutors stated that funds coming from the EU should be based on grassroots actors' decisions to create particular projects and programmes, and not based on focus areas decided upon in the EU, by the EU. Civil society actors need to be included in the whole decision-making process in the EU or alongside its local delegations, so that EU aid is actually used in an effective way. Instead of inviting in and working with external experts, consultants and CSOs, the EU should mainly work with local actors in this respect. Furthermore, the EU should make access to information easier, so that southern stakeholders are able to know more about EU policies and opportunities. It should also make institutional mechanisms less complicated and access to funds more diverse in order to meet local demands.

To deal effectively with the violation of women's human rights in the Mediterranean region, beyond focusing on the gender-related priorities highlighted above, the EU needs to accompany sectorial measures and projects targeted to women with broader initiatives placing human rights and social justice at the centre. Indeed, as several interviewed stakeholders, including women, pointed out, the causes behind the many violations of women's rights are the same as those behind the violation of other human rights, namely the persistence of authoritarian regimes and the implementation of an economic model that exacerbates inequalities.

Beyond this and on the multilateral level, what is expected from the EU is: firstly, to provide the Mediterranean space with a multidimensional project that puts human rights and social justice upfront, rather than security and stability; secondly, to engage in a broader dialogue with all actors in the region to remove the confusion and misunderstanding on European policy, objectives and mechanisms; and finally, to reconsider the meaning of common interest and to diversify the fields of cooperation in ways that respond to the needs of both sides. This would help to start rethinking Euro-Mediterranean relations from the perspective of redressing the profound inequalities between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

MEDRESET's overall methodology is based on a non-Eurocentric approach, aimed at moving against the marginalization of local perspectives. This report is based on recursive multi-stakeholder consultations. In a first round, based on a concept paper and a relatively open questionnaire, we interviewed 83 stakeholders in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia (not in Egypt due

to the restrictive political situation). These stakeholders included representatives of youth organizations; organizations working on economic, political and social rights; women's, minority, identity (Amazigh) and migrant rights; rural development organizations; new social movements; student movements; Islamic organizations (non-political); unemployment organizations; trade unions and syndicates; and in some cases also institutions (Tunisia). Following this, we formulated hypotheses and a more rigid questionnaire for the second round of stakeholder consultations which was conducted with 23 selected interviewees from the first round in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, and 2 interviewees in Egypt. In this second round, the questionnaire was also administered to 21 stakeholders in Europe. This procedure enabled us to reverse the ordinary approach whereby perceptions and priorities of Southern shore partners are included in the picture only marginally and/or a posteriori. Inviting EU-level stakeholders to react and position themselves with reference to structured inputs coming from Mediterranean partners represents an innovative approach that reverses the usual Eurocentric approach. The interviewed stakeholders in Europe included representatives of European institutions (the European External Action Service and the European Commission), of EU-financed organizations working in the neighbourhood in general or in the Mediterranean specifically, and of independent European, transnational or international organizations which work on various issues (conflict resolution, human rights, socio-economic development, labour rights) in the Mediterranean as well as in other world regions. They represent a European/transnational "expert community" on the issues dealt with in this report (in the sense that they are not representative of European public opinions and in the sense that they deal with Mediterranean issues in their daily work).

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	MEDRESET: A comprehensive, integrated and bottom-up approach to reset our understanding of the Mediterranean space, remap the region and reconstruct inclusive, responsive and flexible EU policies in it
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BUDGET

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WEBSITE

<http://www.medreset.eu>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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FURTHER READING

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