

Blog

Renewed EU-Southern neighbourhood agenda: is economical aid a right tool to achieve EU's targets?

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April
2021

In February, the EU launched a new agenda for the southern Mediterranean partnership. The new proposal of a strategic partnership between the EU and 10 countries in the MENA region put emphasis mainly on economic ties between these regions and aim to spur long-term socio-economic cooperation.

Is economic aid the most efficient way to achieve security and stability in the region? Is the new agenda reflecting what the EU has learned in the last 25 years after signing the Barcelona declaration?

The southern neighbourhood is covering relations between the EU and 10 countries of the MENA region: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. The partnership was established in 2004 on the basis of the Barcelona Declaration signed in 1995. Its main aim is to strengthen prosperity, including upholding democratic values and support for human rights, security, peace and stability. Unsurprisingly, at the beginning of the new cooperation, expectations were lofty. Now, after more than 16 years, it can be reasonably surmised that the results are contrary to these expectations; the region is arguably more insecure and more destabilized.

The southern neighbourhood is formed by very diversified countries and cultures. The population consists of different religions, languages and ethnic groups. Historically, the MENA region influenced European politics and society. The last decade, dominated by Arab uprisings, which in some countries resulted in wars, thus in the migration crisis in 2014, corroborates how important support for security and stability within the region is for the EU.

Comparing the Global peace index from 2010¹ and last year², we can see that in 8 countries from 10 is the situation now worse than 10 years ago. Looking at another comparison, in this case, the World press freedom index from 2013³ and last year⁴, we are observing the same descending trend; the condition of freedom press worsens in 4 countries. Despite the fact that peace and press freedom were, back in 1995, one of the priority areas on which the EU wanted to focus, we can state that in this specific regard, the Southern Neighbourhood policy has over the past 16 years proven a failure.

Problems encircling the Southern Neighbourhood region, such as human trafficking, migration, border disputes or autocratic governments, are undoubtedly difficult to solve. In the agenda for the South, the EU is customarily relying on normative and soft power through economic means; up to €7 billion are allocated to this area for the time frame 2021–2027, which would be followed by up to €30 billion in private and public investment in the aforementioned years. It is indisputably clear that economic aid is necessary for reaching the EU's goals; it plays an essential role in strengthening regional economies and abets to mend the overall socio-economic situation. However, considering the character of the region and its social dynamics, the financial budget cannot, irrespective of size, alone bring the wanted peace, prosperity and stability.

Without safeguards and consistent monitoring of transition and implementation of EU values, there is a tangible risk that budgetary concerns and economic tools will take precedence over sustained commitment to fundamental values that are more intangible yet no less important. A corollary to this concern also lies in the EU's lack of activity as an active mediator in bilateral Southern relations; supporting countries in strengthening their bilateral relations and continuing in resolving border disputes between them is crucial to stabilize the region. The Middle East and North Africa are critically pondering their economic potential and crucial geopolitical position vis-a-vis their importance in relation to migratory flows and foreign direct investment from other geopolitical actors that often come with little to no strings attached. In this respect, the EU is at a critical junction where its fundamental values and its geopolitical and geostrategic goals risk being at odds with each other.

The EU made no significant difference in its approach to the Mediterranean region comparing its foregoing strategy and the new one. The EU perceive the importance of partnership, but as the approach is based on an investment plan and strong budget, there is a risk of repeating past mistakes where only lip service is paid to



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fundamental values in order to ensure funding. At the same time, adding more strings to financing may entice the region to pursue funding from the EU's geopolitical adversaries. However, this is already the case, albeit to a smaller extent, and the EU needs higher ambitions if it is to realize its geopolitical ambitions and live up to the mantle of geopolitical leadership that the 'new' Commission heralded. Perhaps it is time for stronger conditionalities.

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¹ Global Peace Index 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/jan/17/global-peace-index>

² Global Peace Index 2020, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>

³ World Press Freedom Index, 2013, <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2013>

⁴ World Press Freedom Index, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>



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Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union