

THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN EUROPE IS BAD NEWS FOR SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN AND EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS

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Diverse political, economic and diplomatic priorities have been rapidly re-arranged to manage the multiple crises that have hit the European Union and its neighbourhood since 2008.

In the last ten years, Euro-Mediterranean relations have been witnessing structural and mostly irreversible changes. Diverse political, economic and diplomatic priorities have been rapidly re-arranged to manage the multiple crises that have hit the European Union (EU) and its neighbourhood since 2008.

The 2007 US subprime mortgage crisis severely impacted the very bases of the European financial and banking system. The EU was highly unprepared to face the pervasive consequences of that crisis, and such unpreparedness concurred with the weakening of the highly interrelated economies of EU member states, especially those in the South.

During these harsh years of crisis, EU member states' relations have been read and understood mainly through the lens of economic strategies and priorities, aimed at preventing the largest EU economies from being battered by the contagion from the weakest member states.

Moreover, the intergovernmental management of the EU economic downturn eventually concurred with the national interests of the biggest EU countries to prevail on those of the most fragile ones, further deepening the North-South economic and social gap.

Hence, the kind of Europe that was slowly and irremediably approaching another time of emergency was an inherently divided one. Since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, defending member states' particular interests, mainly circumscribed to the realm of economic and foreign policy issues, has become a trademark of how EU politics and goals have been pursued both inside and outside its borders. What began as an economic crisis soon became a political one.

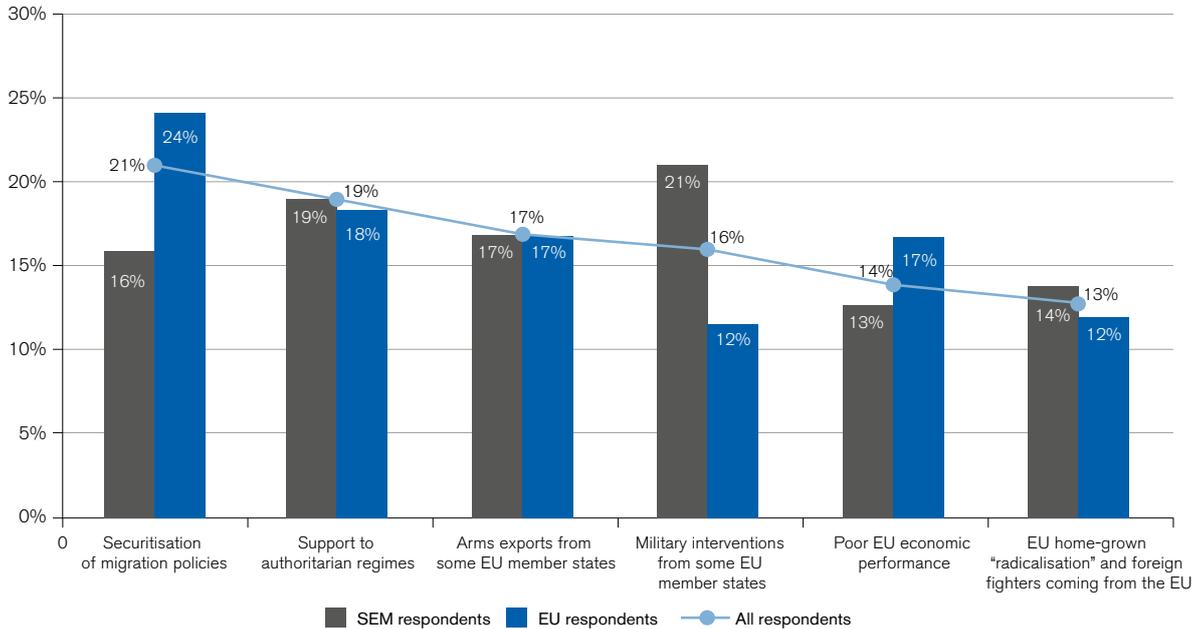
A few years later, the 2011 Arab Spring has brought foreign policy issues back to the fore. Once again, the EU supranational and national agendas began to be dominated by the need to conduct profitable diplomatic relations with third countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, in an effort to stem the consequences of North-African public upheaval at home.

The Arab Spring uprisings had profound repercussions on the EU, especially in the growing number of people fleeing from war-torn Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. In particular, since 2011, the Syrian civil war, sparked by the Assad government's bloody repression of the revolts, has forced more than 5 million Syrians to flee and internally displaced other 6.1 million people. Today, 13.1 million are in severe need of humanitarian assistance.

The migratory flow that ran over Europe from 2012 onwards reached its peak in 2015, when more than one million people crossed its southern borders. Since then, the EU has actively embarked on designing and implementing a complex and multifaceted set of policies aimed at reducing the negative spill-overs of these arrivals on both EU countries and their citizens.

However, as the results of the Euromed Survey show, the securitisation that has accompanied this shift in the EU approach towards migration is the most likely factor to have a negative impact on the stability of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: From the following options that relate either to the situation of the EU or to its policies, which ones are likely to have the most negative effect on the stability of SEM countries?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Indeed, the incapacity and often unwillingness to adopt coherent and cohesive policy guidelines to cope with the consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings has heavily affected the capacity of the Union to perform as a credible diplomatic actor. Euro-Mediterranean relations between the EU and the MENA region have thus been markedly shaped by the way in which the EU has engaged or disengaged in those territories. The partnership agreements the EU has put in place, aimed at defining a wide array of development strategies for the countries mostly in need of infrastructural and economic recovery, have proved insufficient to pave a new path of stability and growth.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), established in 2003 and revamped in 2011 to face the consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings, governs the Union's relations with 16 of its southern and eastern neighbours. In trying to shift from more development-based approaches, the revised ENP strategy has eventually prioritised regional stabilisation, from a political, economic and security point of view. Furthermore, the ENP also relies on the implementation of ENP Bilateral Action Plans (AP) aimed at operationalising EU interventions in partner countries that are tailor-made to the specific needs and realities on the ground. However, despite the overall framework and structure of the European policy, the member states failed in creating ad hoc and targeted policies which could meet each of the 16 countries' specificities and peculiarities. Instead of differentiation, they opted for a unique approach to be used both for the southern and the eastern interlocutors. This also seems to contribute to eroding the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean. 15% of respondents to the Survey believe that the inconsistency of the EU's approach vis-à-vis different Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries and the EU's inability to renew its offer to the "Southern neighbourhood" (11%) impact on European credibility. Migratory issues have shifted EU attention from sustained efforts for African regional integration to the management of migrants' flows from its northern countries.

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Regional integration has been the core of EU-Africa relations for decades: improving regionalism as a key development strategy was one of the main goals enshrined in the 2000 Cotonou Agreements, as well as in the 2007 EU-Africa Strategic Partnership. Today, with a large part of the 2015 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa being devoted to border controls and security, the aim of addressing the root causes of migration (one of the objectives the Trust Fund is set to achieve) is further downgraded to the bottom of the EU agenda of strategic priorities.

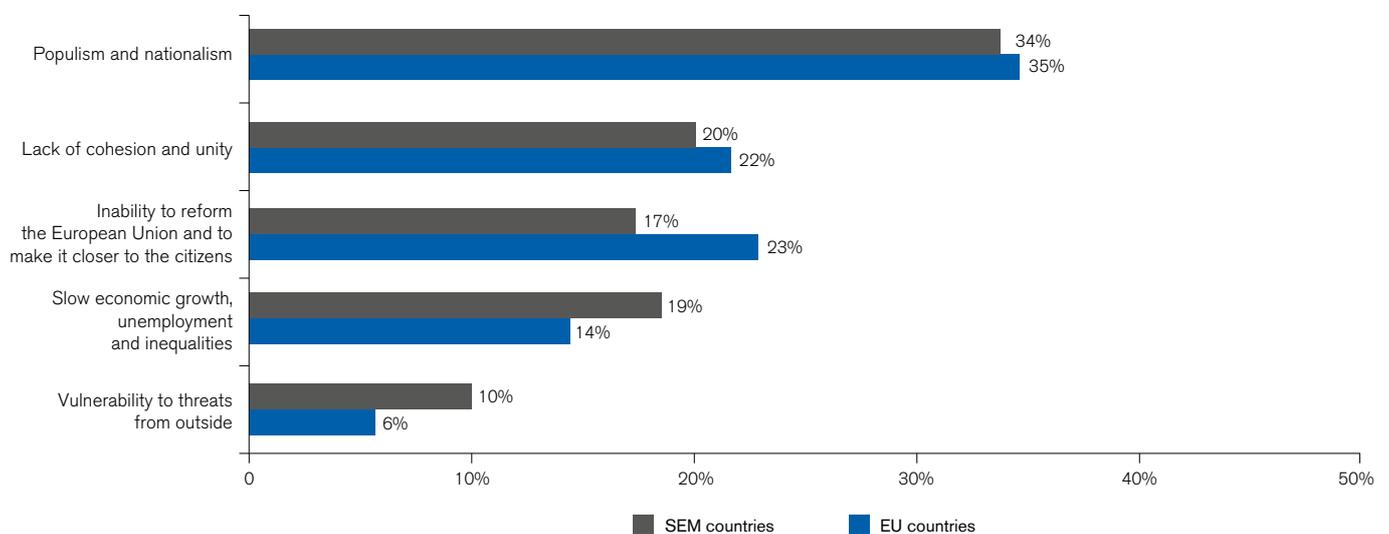
The progressive departure from an approach that focuses on the causes pushing migrants to embark on long and perilous journeys across the Mediterranean is also the direct and clear consequence of the securitised trend that the European political narrative on migration has acquired during these last three years.

The criticised 2016 EU-Turkey deal and the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding represent the utmost example of the EU tendency to divert the management (in terms of first and second assistance) of migrants to extra-EU countries that could benefit from consistent financial transfers, in return for their operational and logistical support.

These ambiguous forms of collaboration are gaining increasing support as part of new nationalist and populist agendas in the majority of EU countries. Galvanised by and, at the same time, fomenting the anger of public opinion, exacerbated by years of difficult economic crisis, populist and nationalist parties have taken the lead of the current EU debate on migration and, more broadly, of EU foreign and security strategies. The launch, by former Trump advisor Steve Bannon, of the so-called “The Movement”, a sort of 21st Century Populist International, is just one of the latest examples of how Mediterranean and transatlantic relations are being re-written and risk being re-shaped by a marked right-wing and populist footprint. Internally, the Crimea question is not only showing how fragile the territorial integrity of Europe is – particularly after Brexit – but also emphasising our ever-lasting inherent incapacity to decisively face the Russian power in the normative war in which we are engaging. This situation resonates in the Euromed Survey results, where 34% of respondents considered populist and nationalist movements/trends as the main threat to European integration process (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: What is the main threat to the European integration process?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

In the background, new and unexplored environmental challenges are going to have, in the near future, unexpected repercussions on Euro-Mediterranean relations. The progressive desertifica-

tion of the Sahel region, the dramatic shrinking of Lake Chad, and the continuous water shortages in most central and eastern African regions are becoming crucial push factors of migration, helping to fuel human smuggling phenomena due to the renewed urgency to leave.

A consistent part of EU action in North Africa should thus focus on tackling the root causes of this growing vicious cycle, which is likely to endanger, by means of famine and drought, the life of millions of people in that regions. Cohesively engaging with key African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as the European Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and with international bodies, like the African Union (AU), will contribute to developing more coherent and long-lasting strategies for these countries. Still, it will be necessary to overcome the outdated development-based approach, by integrating it with a more solid security perspective that could evidently show the growing link existing between environmental stresses and the occurrence of conflicts. Re-launching regional cooperation and integration would also be crucial to ensuring a more uniform implementation of joint EU-Africa initiatives in those areas. To achieve this, the EU should start engaging with key regional and international actors as a single and unified entity in order to assert a more credible diplomatic role in the world scene.

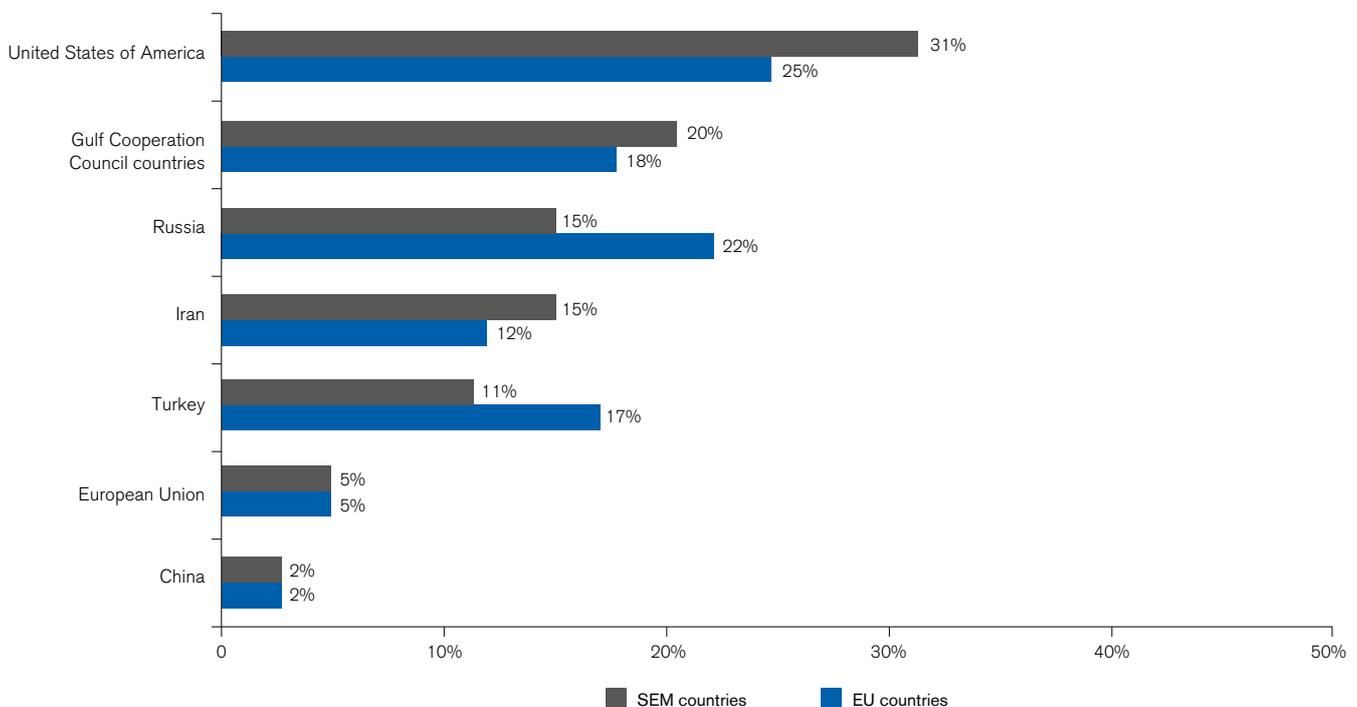
In addition to this, from the other side of the Atlantic, Trump is completely de-structuring the international order as we have known it. As a matter of fact, respondents to the Euromed Survey identify the United States (US) as the actor “more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region” (as illustrated in Graph 3 below). From trade affairs to diplomatic relations and security strategies with key global actors, everything is being reshaped and re-dimensioned to fit the world’s new size: the national one. By withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal and undertaking ambiguous relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump is overtly telling the EU that it cannot benefit from a privileged interlocutor position anymore, thus disrupting decades of delicate diplomatic networking dating back to the beginning of the Cold War.

EU action in North Africa should focus on tackling the root causes of human movements.

The European Union should learn to act as a single body, in a more supranational, rather than intergovernmental, fashion.

Graph 3: Which of the following actors are more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

In light of the profound geo-political changes Euro-Mediterranean relations are currently undergoing, it is key to adopt a new, more effective and coherent approach for structuring EU politics.

His destabilising stance on global and multilateral issues is also progressively eroding the trust the international order had acquired through the establishment of entities like the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Threatening to withdraw from multilateral agreements, as he did in the context of COP 21, and also denouncing countries that are vital parts of such accords, such as Germany and the tinier Montenegro, of internally sabotaging the functioning of such mechanisms, Trump is progressively spreading a hostile sentiment of mistrust in international relations today, jeopardising the global community management of current international emergencies.

2019 will be a decisive year for the future of the EU. The composition of the European Parliament will be completely mashed-up and new equilibriums will have to be found. This balance will inevitably shift towards a more securitised, nationalist and populist vision of the European order. We, as Europeans, are called to decide how to engage with this new political scenario by remembering which priorities we want to give voice to. It will be essential not to abandon a human rights perspective in a moment in which both regional and national rules are being re-written.

In the context of migration, it is necessary to reverse the trend that has seen illegitimate governments as proper interlocutors for the implementation of policy directives on the ground. Libya, for instance, does not have a recognised government at the helm of the country. This tendency fuels the proliferation of illegal and criminal settings, at the expense of migrants who are caught in the vicious cycle of violence and discrimination. In this framework, European and international legal norms are the linchpin around which our policies and strategies must turn. Migration is a structural and global phenomenon, and we must establish more legal channels to access Europe, with the aim of dismantling human smuggling networks and organisations.

More broadly, the EU should learn to act as a one single body, in a more supranational, rather than intergovernmental, fashion. A “light federation” should be progressively defined, paving the way to the United States of Europe. The diplomatic stalemate we are incurring when dealing with other powers on the world scene is primarily triggered by the opposite political stances the EU gives voice to. There is no uniform, shared and cohesive diplomatic position to tackle global issues. Hence, especially in light of the profound geo-political changes Euro-Mediterranean relations are currently undergoing, it is key to adopt a new, more effective and coherent approach for structuring EU politics.

Emma Bonino is Senator of the Italian Republic. She served as Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2014). From 2008 to 2013 she also served as Vice-Chair of the Italian Senate. She has been Minister for International Trade and European Affairs, from 2006 to 2008. First elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 1976 with Radical Party, she has served either in the Italian or in the European Parliament, except when she was European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid, Fisheries, Consumer Policy, Health Protection and Food Safety, between 1994 and 1999.