

Dossier: Europe and the Mediterranean

# The Crisis of the European Project and Its Consequences for the Euro-Mediterranean Agenda

**Marc Pierini**

Visiting Scholar

Carnegie Europe, Brussels

Whatever the depth of the European project's 'crisis,' it is a 'dual' phenomenon, one internal, and the other external. The EU project – its size, its mechanisms, and the values on which it is based – is challenged from within in a number of different ways. It is also challenged directly from third countries, some being traditional allies of the European Union, others its rivals. The consequence is that the EU foreign policy now needs to take into account new parameters, including hostility, reduced attractiveness/leverage with neighbouring countries, hesitations from its own foreign policy ranks, and even fundamental doubts from within.

But the mid- and long-term remedy lies in more Europe, not less, and in a renewed reliance on and defence of European values. EU-style democracy may no longer be a given and therefore needs to be defended against hostile political actors from within and from abroad. This is a new existential endeavour for the EU institutions.

## The Crisis of the European Project Is First and Foremost an Internal One

Trying to rank the EU's internal problems by increasing degree of seriousness, I would list Brexit, a dysfunctional post-Lisbon Treaty foreign policy mechanism, the rise in migration movements, the rise of

populism in central Europe and other countries, and a serious challenge to basic European values. Each of these issues has an external dimension.

Brexit is certainly an element of the current crisis. Despite being the result of a hugely miscalculated gamble on the part of the British conservative leadership, Brexit will be implemented and may be resolved in the foreseen timetable. From a foreign and security policy perspective, the sooner Brexit is implemented, the better, as it will remove a crippling uncertainty. Once the United Kingdom is out of the EU, the remaining 27 member countries will undoubtedly weigh less on the world stage diplomatically, economically and militarily. The loss will be particularly perceptible in the field of military operations outside the EU, although joint force projection may still be a possibility depending on future arrangements. The capacity and geographical scope of the British Foreign Service will also be missed.

The EU foreign policy mechanisms created by the Lisbon Treaty are also in themselves part of the crisis. Despite all the good words and intentions concerning a Common Foreign and Security Policy and the hard work of two successive High Representatives and the European External Action Service staff, the reality is that the EU's foreign policy has increasingly been crafted at Heads of State and Government level<sup>1</sup> (the European Council), essentially by the larger Member States,<sup>2</sup> and often in crisis mode. In itself, the EU's foreign policy machinery does work, but its work is largely made of routine operations (statements, demarches, coordination at high-officials level, local concertation between ambassadors) while the real policy initiatives are taken

<sup>1</sup> S. LEHNE. "Are Prime Ministers Taking Over EU Foreign Policy?," *Paper*, Carnegie Europe, 2015, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/02/16/are-prime-ministers-taking-over-eu-foreign-policy-pub-59070>

<sup>2</sup> S. LEHNE. "The Big Three in EU Foreign Policy," *Paper*, Carnegie Europe, 2012. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/07/05/big-three-in-eu-foreign-policy-pub-48759>

by individual Heads of State and Government after, at best, direct consultation between a few of them. On a number of recent occasions, there was no involvement of the EU institutions concerned (European External Action Service, European Commission, European Parliament) prior to fresh policy moves. Recent French initiatives on Libya, on the Syrian Kurds, or on a Syrian peace process post-strikes are cases in point, which are part of the long-standing *Gaullian* attitude in France's diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> The notable absence of the EU from the diplomatic aspects of the Syrian crisis (except for two conferences held in Brussels in 2017 and 2018) is particularly illustrative of the current situation. It results from the unwillingness of the most influential Member States to involve EU institutions in efforts to influence the resolution of the Syrian crisis, with the exception of the more technical aspects (humanitarian assistance, trade sanctions). In the EU foreign policy field, doing "more together to build diplomatic muscle"<sup>4</sup> remains a challenge.

## EU-style democracy may no longer be a given and therefore needs to be defended against hostile political actors from within and from abroad. This is a new existential endeavour for the EU institutions

Populism and extreme right parties<sup>5</sup> are on the rise in the European Union: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany are the most striking ex-

amples. In most cases, this phenomenon has developed as a rejection of the EU integration drive and as a defence of national interests<sup>6</sup> over collective European interests. Populist parties have fully exploited the migration crisis of 2015 in two directions: rejecting the 'other' as a threat to national (and often Christian) identity, and criticizing the lack of EU efficiency in securing borders and providing security.

Ironically, the movement is stronger in the Central European countries of the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) which have been the biggest recipients of both political and financial support during the post-communist transition. There is undoubtedly a recession in European democracy,<sup>7</sup> although a period of renewal may follow. More generally, there is a vast reshaping of European political forces, one in which movements more than traditional parties are increasingly important, including in countries like France<sup>8</sup> where the extreme right was defeated in the 2017 elections.

European values are contested by major political players, including several political parties sitting in government and by prime ministers sitting around the European Council table. In some cases, parties contesting EU values are not in government but they have enough political leverage to influence governments. Different concepts, different historical backgrounds may provide part of the explanation,<sup>9</sup> but overall it is a hugely disquieting moment in European history, especially considering the roots and history of the European project since 1950. The recent victory of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán<sup>10</sup> – and notably his capacity to reform the country's constitution in a legal way thanks to the super-majority won by his Fidesz Party – will probably drastically change

<sup>3</sup> Manuel LAFONT RAPNOUIL. "Alone in the desert? How France can lead Europe in the Middle East," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018. [www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR251\\_how\\_france\\_can\\_lead\\_europe\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR251_how_france_can_lead_europe_in_the_middle_east.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> S. LEHNE. "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?," *Paper*, Carnegie Europe, 2017. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/05/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy-pub-74909>

<sup>5</sup> FREEDOM HOUSE, *Freedom in the World 2018 – Democracy in Crisis*, 2018 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

<sup>6</sup> S. LEHNE. "Populism: The Risks and Impact on European States," *Paper*, Carnegie Europe, 2017. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/06/06/populism-risks-and-impact-on-european-states-pub-71170>

<sup>7</sup> R. YOUNGS and S. MANNEY. *Recession and Renewal in European Democracy*, Carnegie Europe, 2018, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/02/26/recession-and-renewal-in-european-democracy-pub-75601>

<sup>8</sup> C. CHWALISZ. *En Marche: From a Movement to a Government*, Carnegie Europe, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/04/06/en-marche-from-movement-to-government-pub-75985>

<sup>9</sup> T. VALÁŠEK. *A Disquieting View of East and West Europe*, Carnegie Europe, 2018. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/02/20/disquieting-view-of-east-and-west-europe-pub-75629>

<sup>10</sup> B. JARÁBIK. *Viktor Orbán's Survival Games*, Carnegie Europe, 2018 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/76030>

Hungary's political landscape, with much less room for a vibrant civil society, academic freedoms and media independence.

The surge in movements of refugee and migrants in 2015, under the influence of the war in Syria and activities of human trafficking networks produced such a political shock in many EU countries that it weakened the European project and triggered a massive increase in xenophobic and rejectionist attitudes in the EU. As Carnegie Europe's Stefan Lehne asks<sup>11</sup>: "Why has the 2015 influx of 1.4 million refugees had such a lasting, traumatic impact on the collective European psyche?" There were many factors that triggered mass population movements: the Syrian war, insecurity in Afghanistan, Eritrea or Sudan, as well as poverty in many parts of Africa. Moreover, the lack of controls in Turkey (at least initially) and the influence and agility of trafficking networks were determining factors in the massive migration phenomenon of 2015. On the EU side, fears of terrorism being associated with refugee flows (although largely unsubstantiated), deep divisions between Member States on asylum policies, misgivings about the Schengen Treaty, and difficult reforms in the area of border controls and the coast guard made the EU response slow and difficult to agree upon.

### The European Project Is also under Attack from Abroad

External factors can also be ranked by increasing degree of seriousness: US, Russian and Turkish attitudes toward the EU have been changing rapidly and have become increasingly hostile. More importantly, a new "authoritarian model" of government has developed inside and outside the EU, at the antipodes of the value-based EU model.

From **Washington**, the EU is faced with a new attitude from the Trump Administration: hostility on trade issues, criticism on defence policies and con-

tributions to NATO, and, even more importantly, permanent unpredictability on foreign policy. In both substance and style, President Donald Trump has in many ways destabilized his EU partners and allies, especially when contradictory messages are issued by various parts of the Administration. Trade policy,<sup>12</sup> including the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), NATO policy,<sup>13</sup> and the policy on Syria constitute cases in point.

**The EU's foreign policy machinery does work, but its work is largely made of routine operations while the real policy initiatives are taken by individual Heads of State and Government after, at best, direct consultation between a few of them**

Multiple changes of high-level personnel in the US Administration in the first 15 months of the Trump Presidency and a flurry of puzzling messages from the US President himself created a negative perception in the EU: imprecision, fluctuation and inconsistency were now coming from a hitherto solid ally and supporter of the European project during the entire post-World War II period. The first few months of the Trump Presidency jolted EU leaders, in particular after the NATO and G7 summits in May 2017. As The June 2018 G7 summit in Canada only reinforced these trends. German Chancellor Angela Merkel<sup>14</sup> put it then: "The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over. (...) We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands. (...) We have to know that we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans." As Carnegie's Erik Brattberg put it: "traditional transatlanticism is in flux."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> S. LEHNE. *The EU Remains Unprepared for the Next Migration Crisis*, Carnegie Europe, 2018. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/04/03/eu-remains-unprepared-for-next-migration-crisis-pub-75965>

<sup>12</sup> J. DEMPSEY. *Judy Asks: Is Europe Ready for a Trade War with Trump?*, Carnegie Europe, 2018 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75790>

<sup>13</sup> J. DEMPSEY. *Trump, NATO, and Europe's Security*, Carnegie Europe, 2016. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/63292>

<sup>14</sup> J. HENLEY. "Angela Merkel: EU cannot completely rely on US and Britain any more," *The Guardian*, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/28/merkel-says-eu-cannot-completely-rely-on-us-and-britain-any-more-g7-talks>

<sup>15</sup> E. BRATTBERG. *Trouble Ahead for Transatlanticism*, Carnegie Europe, 2017 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/73261>

From **Russia**, the EU is confronted with a permanent and structural harassment policy.<sup>16</sup> This policy has been implemented through the funding of political parties, election interference, and hacking, but also in the security field with a permanent harassment of NATO and European forces at sea and in the air. Several instances of extra-judicial killings of political opponents have also occurred in the United Kingdom.

Russia has recently increased its political, military and economic presence in the Middle East and Turkey. Russia's dynamic diplomacy,<sup>17</sup> a worldwide endeavour with multi-pronged tools, contrasts with the lack of the EU's collective diplomacy. Russia is setting foot militarily in the Middle East with a permanent air force base in western Syria (where it controls the skies) and dominates the security situation, replacing the traditional role of the US in the region. Russia is also in talks with Turkey to provide an S400 defensive missile system and, for security reasons, will probably operate this from within Turkish air force command centres, laying down (if the sale is confirmed) a huge precedent in a NATO country.

### President Trump has in many ways destabilized his EU partners and allies, especially when contradictory messages are issued by various parts of the Administration

Russia is also using its powerful energy sector as a diplomatic tool, essentially aiming to keep maximum control of gas supplies to the EU. Linked to its obsession to bypass Ukraine, Russia is building gas pipelines in both the North Sea (Nord Stream) and the Black Sea (Turk Stream), while at the same time involving itself in offshore gas exploration in Israeli

and Egyptian waters, together with onshore projects in northern Iraq and eastern Libya.

In 2015-2017, **Turkey**, for its part, has rapidly moved from EU candidate country status to that of an EU partner with a permanently hostile narrative, while retaining strong economic ties in terms of trade, investment and technology. Interference in national politics, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, criticism of France over its military presence in Syria, inconsistency of a foreign policy driven largely by domestic electoral considerations have become the hallmarks of Turkey's relations with the EU and EU member countries.

While, until recently, it had been following a 'European trajectory' (despite all the ambiguities associated with the EU enlargement policy and with Turkey's own political evolution under President Erdoğan), Turkey is now on an 'antagonistic orbit' with the EU, largely for its own domestic political reasons. The accession of Turkey to the EU as part of a deep and lasting political alliance<sup>18</sup> is now out of the question, due to the country's drift toward a one-man-rule system. The unanimity rule used by the EU in accession matters clearly precludes any advance on that front. Even a reduced partnership has now become problematic, although domains such as trade,<sup>19</sup> investment and counterterrorism still constitute a base for joint action. To a large extent, the fact that Ankara's narrative with the EU has become structurally hostile – and is unlikely to be smoothed out anytime soon – is preventing improvements in the EU-Turkey relationship from materializing.

The alliance of convenience between Ankara and Moscow, largely based on Turkey's diplomatic isolation after the July 2016 coup attempt and on Russia's exploitation of its partner's weakness, is now holding ground for reasons linked to traditional economic and energy considerations, to foreign policy issues (Syria), and to domestic political considerations. This policy is not without its deep contradictions, as illustrated by Ankara's approval of Western strikes on Syria's chemical arsenal on 14 April. Turk-

<sup>16</sup> R. WRIGHT. "Putin, a Little Man Still Trying to Prove His Bigness," *The New Yorker*, 20 March 2018 [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/putin-a-little-man-still-trying-to-prove-his-bigness](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/putin-a-little-man-still-trying-to-prove-his-bigness)

<sup>17</sup> AA.VV. *The Return of Global Russia, Research Project*, Carnegie Russia <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/global-russia>

<sup>18</sup> M. PIERINI. *The 2018 Turkey Regress Report*, Carnegie Europe, 2018 <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/03/14/2018-turkey-regress-report-pub-75794>

<sup>19</sup> S. ÜLGEN. "Trade As Turkey's EU Anchor," *Paper*, Carnegie Europe, 2017 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/13/trade-as-turkey-s-eu-anchor-pub-75002>

ish politics remain a key driver: the only way for the AKP to remain solidly in power is to reinforce its alliance with the nationalist MHP party. This calls for drumming up a fiercely nationalist, anti-Kurdish, anti-Greek, anti-EU and anti-US narrative. This new situation will have lasting military consequences for NATO, the US and the EU.

### An EU Foreign Policy Challenged by the EU's Internal and External Crisis

The European Union is currently confronted with a **massive change of paradigm**: some of its own members, as well as countries which were 'natural allies' have become, at least for the foreseeable future, 'structurally hostile' members or partners, or at the very least unpredictable ones. As described above, this is the case – inside the EU – of Hungary, Poland and potentially a few others, and – outside the EU – of the US under the Trump Administration and Turkey under President Erdoğan.

**The fact that Ankara's narrative with the EU has become structurally hostile – and is unlikely to be smoothed out anytime soon – is preventing improvements in the EU-Turkey relationship from materializing**

This is a new landscape. In the foreign policy field, the EU's cohesiveness and influence are now at risk, and joint action with allies and partners will become difficult and even impossible in some cases. Several current situations illustrate this new paradigm.

How can, for example, the European Union keep defending the pursuit of a diplomatic solution with Iran<sup>20</sup> (e.g. the nuclear deal) when, fundamentally, the US and the EU diverge on what future course of action to take, and when the US Administration

shifts toward a military confrontation policy with Iran?

Similarly, in the case of **Syria**, the basis for joint action was the anti-ISIL coalition, with the involvement of air forces from the US and several EU countries (among others) and special troops on the ground from the US, France and the UK. How can this coalition hold if contradictory messages<sup>21</sup> come (as they currently do, with the exception of chemical weapons) from Washington on the continuation of US actions and if there is no predictability on the future course of action in the UN context about a political settlement in Syria? Additionally, how can the EU make its weight felt in the negotiations on a political settlement in Syria if some of its member governments insist on acting on their own?

In this respect, the current (partial) alignment of Ankara with Moscow's policy in Syria creates another issue for the EU because Turkey, which was never deeply involved in destroying ISIL, has recently shown open hostility toward those EU countries (as well as the US) most active in the coalition (e.g. expelling the German air force from Incirlik air force base in 2017, or verbally threatening France for holding talks with Syrian Kurdish entities in 2018).

**Projecting EU values abroad** has traditionally been at the core of EU foreign policy in Africa (Lomé and Cotonou agreements), the Mediterranean (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Union for the Mediterranean), and on the European continent (enlargement to central Europe between 2004 and 2013, enlargement process with the Western Balkans and Turkey). Today, the development of an illiberal democratic model within the EU's boundaries through democratic elections will largely hamper the EU's capacity to project its values toward third countries. An example of a more general nature is the collective defence by Western countries of rule of law and human rights in the Mediterranean area: how can it continue defending rights and values in Mediterranean countries (e.g. Egypt) if the US is not interested anymore?

To put it another way, can the EU 'offset' the diminishing support for democracy from the US,<sup>22</sup> be-

<sup>20</sup> S. SADJADPOUR. *Failure Foretold*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2017 <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/73552>

<sup>21</sup> M. LANDLER, C. GALL and E. SCHMITT. "Mixed Messages From U.S. as Turkey Attacks Syrian Kurds", *The New York Times*, 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/world/middleeast/us-nato-turkey-aftrin-manbij.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/world/middleeast/us-nato-turkey-aftrin-manbij.html)

<sup>22</sup> R. YOUNGS. *In the Era of Trump, Can Europe Step Up on Global Democracy?*, Carnegie Europe, 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75075>

yond just making statements?<sup>23</sup> As Carnegie Europe's Richard Youngs puts it, "A reinforced European commitment to global democracy could act as an antidote to the EU's loss of international influence and prestige in recent years."

### **The EU Model Is Facing Competition from the 'Authoritarian Model'**

A new 'authoritarian model' based on the Russian example has emerged and is taking root. It comes in various shades within and outside the EU.

**Within the EU**, in several cases, it is the result of democratic election and a rejectionist attitude toward EU integration policies, as can be seen in Hungary,<sup>24</sup> Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In other EU countries, rejectionist tendencies are confined to some political parties which have not acceded to power (or not yet), but remain opposed to further EU integration and/or have a strongly negative stance on migration from Mediterranean countries (e.g. FPÖ in Austria, the National Front in France, AfD in Germany, the League in Italy, and PVV in the Netherlands). In some countries, even outside government, several of these parties are able to exert influence on the coalition in power.

**Outside the EU**, the authoritarian model has developed through undemocratic means – like in Turkey (constitutional referendum of April 2017), Egypt (recent elections), or indeed Syria – and there is little chance that this trend will be reversed. This model is openly confronting the European external agenda. In turn, accession to the EU or a partnership with the EU has a reduced attractiveness or has simply vanished in those countries following this emerging authoritarian model: basically, following EU political standards has become an impediment for authoritarian regimes intent on reinforcing their powers. Their argument in discussions with EU leaders is clear-cut: we are fighting terrorism (on your behalf as well) and you should understand our constraints.

This narrative essentially illustrates a return to a 'post-September 11' agenda.

Conversely, the leverage that the EU could in principle exert in some Mediterranean countries is largely altered by the other interests the EU has in these countries: military and counterterrorism considerations, including arms sales, (Egypt, Turkey), trade and investment interests (all countries), energy interests (Egypt, Libya), and considerations linked to the control of migration flows (Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco).

The EU is intending to maintain its support of the defence of human rights and rule of law, as well as free media and a free civil society. However, beyond a statement of principle, it remains to be seen how the EU will be able to implement these policies in countries where EU support for democracy will be perceived as a hostile move against those in power.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the way in which the EU can counter its own illiberal trends, the choice facing EU political leaders is between 'More Europe' or 'Less Europe and more cynicism,' unless EU Member States split between a core group fully upholding EU values and another group (or several groups) parting ways with the core group and 'freeing' themselves from their initial commitment to liberal democracy.

Civil society in Europe<sup>25</sup> is reacting against populism and autocratic tendencies. This is a sound process, but it is resting on the assumption that civil society will still enjoy a free space to work in, which is not guaranteed if we take the forthcoming constitutional transformations in Hungary as an example of what is in store.

However, civil society engagement will not be enough: a consistent reaction is needed from the core EU institutions such as the European Council, the Parliament and the Commission, including through a policing mechanism – or perhaps different political options – for those governments choosing a different path.

<sup>23</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EU. *Declaration by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on behalf of the EU on Human Rights Day*, Press release, 10 December 2017. [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/12/08/declaration-by-the-high-representative-federica-mogherini-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-human-rights-day-10-december-2017/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/12/08/declaration-by-the-high-representative-federica-mogherini-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-human-rights-day-10-december-2017/)

<sup>24</sup> B. JARÁBIK, Op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> J. DEMPSEY. *Judy Asks: Can Civil Society Defeat Illiberalism?*, Carnegie Europe, 2018 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/76063?lang=en>