

# Foreword

## Senén Florensa

President of the Executive Committee  
European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed),  
Barcelona

Year after year, the Mediterranean and its vicinity is the focus of international attention. How events unfold in Mediterranean countries and their neighbours directly affects international relations on a global level. And international geopolitical tensions can always find their reflection somewhere in the Mediterranean. In recent months, the Mediterranean area has undergone a period of uncertainty; unrest and conflicts in the region have drawn attention from around the world thanks to their high impact and visibility. However, there are also less evident movements and transformations taking place that are of greater complexity, yet which, little by little, will determine the region's future.

Elements like the weakening of European democracy, climate change, unpromising economic prospects or the social transformations that accompany the digital era generate dynamics that will shape the future of the EuroMediterranean area in the coming years. Based on each edition's particular focus, the IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook analyses these areas that are so decisive in the region's evolution, both through its articles and the data and information contained in the annexes.

During the course of the next year, the Barcelona Process will commemorate its 25th anniversary. Beyond an assessment in terms of its success or failure (which we will look at in the Yearbook's next edition), at the time of its launch in 1995, I don't think that anyone could have imagined that 25 years later, the European Union, the main driver of the Process that used European leadership to transform EuroMedi-

terranean relations, would be facing one of its worst crises, both externally and internally, and dwindling leadership capacity.

The complex crisis of the EU comprises one of the Keys of the Yearbook, since a strong and united EU is absolutely critical to progress in the development of the EuroMediterranean area. This has been a multi-sided European crisis, fuelled by a multitude of factors. Some of these originate outside of the EU, such as the economic crisis, the security crises – in terms of the challenges posed by Russia or the rise of Islamic terrorism –, or the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the election of President Trump has transformed Europe's long-standing American ally into an unpredictable, unilateral and often aggressive force with regard to EU interests. However, internal factors have also played a key role in this multiple crisis. Firstly, the economic and refugee crises have had an impact on Europe's principal of solidarity; and secondly, the priority of economic integration in Europe's evolution has failed to pave the way to advances in social integration. Meanwhile, the EU's common foreign policy is still relegated to the margins of the Union's most powerful countries' agendas. This multiplicity of factors has led to extreme situations like Brexit or dire threats to the EU's future, with a weakening of democracy due, most notably, to the reorganization of the far right across Europe.

This rise in exclusionary nationalism and populisms is not a phenomenon unique to Europe, but rather a global trend. Notwithstanding their different nuances, they display an exacerbated unilateralism and wave of authoritarianism, exemplified in what has come to be known as the return of the "strongmen." With examples at all levels – global (Trump, Putin), European (Orban, Salvini), and Mediterranean (Erdogan, Al-Sisi or Netanyahu) – this phenomenon comprises another of the keys of this edition of the Yearbook,

because of its role both on the global stage and in Mediterranean geopolitics.

Another of the Yearbook's *Keys* is the topic of migration in the Mediterranean. Recent times have brought more attention than ever to the Mediterranean Sea's nature as a border. European countries have proved themselves incapable of developing a common European migration policy, in turn fuelling the European crisis, and only succeed in reaching agreements on security issues. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean Sea continues to claim thousands of lives every year, as people try to cross the last frontier before arriving in Europe. Instability in sub-Saharan Africa, the Libyan crisis, European nationalisms, mounting xenophobia and the difficulties for NGOs all converge to create a highly volatile situation. Through the articles in the Yearbook, we analyse this situation, addressing both Europe's perspective and its weight in public opinion across the region, and the role which corresponds to the countries in the southern Mediterranean.

Lastly, *Keys* also addresses a couple of central elements in Mediterranean geopolitics. On the one hand, there is Turkey's role in the Mediterranean and its influence in EuroMediterranean politics; and on the other is the situation in Syria, which unfortunately still merits the Yearbook's analysis. Eight years of war are evidence of the international community's failure to find a solution to the conflict. Syria is not only the stage for civil war, but has also become the chessboard on which various interlinked geopolitical tensions are settled. Participants in this deadly game are world powers – the US and Russia –, and regional powers – Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey –, as well as the different players, movements and factions of the internal conflict. All these elements come together rendering a negotiated solution all but impossible.

In this edition of the Yearbook, the *Dossier* focuses on digital transformation in Mediterranean societies, especially in the southern countries. The transformations of the digital world, beyond their technical relevance, represent a ground-breaking change in that they reflect a new way of operating and understanding politics, social movements, the economy and information. As is always the case, the *Dossier* addresses the theme from different perspectives and with different sectors in mind. Firstly, there is an analysis of the impact of digitalization on geopolitics,

cybersecurity and political or governmental propaganda. Moreover, it deals with the digital economy's potential as a mechanism of convergence between countries, not forgetting the challenges it poses and the needs it implies, which include stepping up co-operation.

The second part of the *Dossier* is structured around the analysis of the social transformations in the digital era. Specifically, it analyses the changing use of digital tools in Arab social movements, their effect on civil society actions, the transnational dynamics favoured by these transformations or the way in which the media and social media have changed how information is obtained and disseminated. Finally, two articles focus on how digital transformations have had an impact on social movements driven by women and young people.

The short articles found in the *Panorama* section deal with a wide range of the most relevant issues in the Mediterranean area. It is impossible to cite them all here, but the most notable themes addressed include the resolution of the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia (a dispute ending in an agreement between countries, at last); the protests in Algeria, which have led to the fall of Bouteflika and have opened a period of uncertainty and hope; trade relations with India; the gradual economic empowerment of women in Arab countries; the role of NATO in the Mediterranean; Russia's energy politics and their geopolitical implications; the export of religious models and the expansion of Magrheb countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Lastly, we cannot end without mentioning the Yearbook's Annexes. Placing information above all else, the maps, chronologies and statistics contained within these annexes help readers to draw comparisons and better understand and interpret the articles they have read. In the same way that data form the framework for analysing events in the Mediterranean area, these annexes are the basis for the Yearbook's development.

As in all editions of the Yearbook, our aim is to satisfy the knowledge demands of a readership interested in the Mediterranean. Combining information and analysis, description and reflection, the Yearbook is an essential tool. It offers stakeholders and experts, as well as students and the general public, a broad, comprehensive and inescapable vision of the reality of the Mediterranean region.