

The French Presidency of the EU and the Union for the Mediterranean: Forced Europeanisation?

Eduard Soler i Lecha

Mediterranean and Middle East Programme Coordinator
CIDOB Foundation, Barcelona

France assumed the Presidency of the EU in the second semester of 2008, promising to galvanise Euro-Mediterranean relations. Within the framework of a presidency that made energy, the environment, immigration, agriculture, security and defence its top concerns, three priorities were set in the sphere of the Mediterranean: the launching of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the advanced status of Morocco and the strengthening of relations with Israel, taking into account the evolution of the conflict in the Middle East.

Of all of these points, the one to generate most attention was the launching of the UfM. The previous year, in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy had proposed the creation of a Mediterranean Union, which stirred both interest and unease in different capitals on both shores of the Mediterranean. One of the main criticisms levied against Sarkozy's initial proposal was that it strayed from the idea of a common European approach, encouraging the renationalisation of Mediterranean policy instead. This was particularly worrisome coming from a country that would soon assume the rotating Presidency of the EU Council. Would Mediterranean policy be a harbinger of a weakened commitment by France to the need for the EU to act with a single voice on the international stage? Euro-Mediterranean relations were not the only sphere where France, in its role as President, faced the challenge of staking out a common position for the EU-27. For instance, its presidency began with one crisis in the neighbourhood of the EU (the Russian-Georgian war) and ended with another (the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip). In the search for consensus, alliances with the EU's largest countries play an especially important role.

This article will examine France's return to the forefront of Mediterranean policy and will argue that the 'forced Europeanisation' of the French initiative must be understood in the context of Franco-German tensions. It will then highlight the outcome of the two major Mediterranean events that took place during the French Presidency: the Paris summit in July and the Marseilles ministerial meeting in November. Finally, and by way of conclusion, it will seek to define the legacy of the French Presidency and identify which aspects will continue to shape the course of Euro-Mediterranean relations in years to come.

Rediscovering the Mediterranean

France is unquestionably a major power in the Mediterranean. Geographical proximity, history—in some cases, such as Algeria, painful—, population flows and all manner of economic interests make France a key actor in the region and, in particular, in the Western Basin. This notwithstanding, as Hayète Cherigui has noted in his work on France's Mediterranean policy, the formulation of a Mediterranean policy worthy of the name, one that goes beyond traditional Arab policy and stresses the creation of initiatives for regional cooperation, is relatively recent and can be traced back to the nineties.

Since then, France has been a member of the 'Mediterranean lobby' within the EU, calling for more attention to the region, with special emphasis on the need to strengthen political dialogue, preserve the Partnership logic and engage in ambitious cooperation in the spheres of justice and home affairs. Of course, it has had to share its leadership with other Mediterranean countries (in particular, Spain), with non-Mediterranean countries that are increasingly interested in what is going on in the region (above all, Germany, but also Nordic countries, such as Sweden

and Finland) and with the European Commission (which has played a dominant role in driving and developing the Barcelona Process). Its inability to impose its hegemony, as well as the disappointment stemming from the poor results of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Marseilles in 2000, have, until recently, prevented France from becoming more involved in the Mediterranean agenda. In full campaign mode, the then-candidate Nicolas Sarkozy gave his famous Toulon speech in February 2007. Three months later he repeated his pledge to implement what was then called the Mediterranean Union in his speech celebrating the results of the elections. This renewed interest in Mediterranean issues was not a mere pet project of Sarkozy's. Among his closest advisors (such as Henri Guaino), but also in several French academic and economic circles, there was a consensus, on the one hand, that neither France nor Europe could afford to ignore their neighbours to the south and, on the other, that France should be leading the effort.

The French rediscovery of the Mediterranean awoke interest and expectations, as well as a certain apprehension, among its European and Mediterranean partners. For actors such as Spain or the Commission, this was due to the extent to which the initiative was seen as an attack on the Barcelona Process and as undermining their leadership in the field. For many central and northern European countries, it was because the initial proposal excluded them from the new design. For Turkey, it was because the proposal was presented as an alternative to accession. Finally, for some Arab countries, it was because they viewed France's return to the Mediterranean as an attempt to re-establish its hegemony.

The Mediterranean and the Franco-German Axis

The concerns that surfaced on both sides of the Mediterranean soon became varying degrees of pressure to modify the French proposal to make it acceptable. In 2007, Spain and Italy ensured that what would henceforth be known as the Union for the Mediterranean would not contradict but rather would complement the Barcelona Process, that it would not be tied to Turkey's accession process and that the Commission would be involved. However, it was German pressure that ultimately brought about a more acute restructuring of the proposal in 2008.

As Dorothé Schmid has correctly noted, the hackles raised by Sarkozy's initial proposal show that France may remain a major player in the Mediterranean, but it can no longer act alone. Indeed, it was precisely this desire to act alone that gave rise to Germany's misgivings. This apprehension was further compounded by the fact that this lukewarm attitude toward Europe was hardly new and was moreover being projected just prior to France's assumption of the EU Presidency. Would France choose to use its presidency to benefit its own national interest? How would such an attitude affect the health of the Franco-German axis?

Despite occasionally divergent interests and regardless of the political stripes of their leaders, Berlin and Paris have, for decades, tended to promote major decisions at the European level jointly in what is known as the 'Franco-German axis'. Sarkozy's proposal for a Mediterranean Union entailed a break with this tradition: not only was there no coordination with Germany, but that country was moreover excluded from an initiative that seemed to embrace a logic based on spheres of influence. Were the sponsors aware of the effects of this decision? According to Sylvie Goulard, it is troubling whether it was simply a poor calculation or an intentional break.

Whatever the case, the German government, led by Chancellor Merkel, repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction. After months of increasingly frosty relations between Merkel and Sarkozy, on 3 March 2008, they reached a compromise whereby Germany would support the launching of the Union for the Mediterranean (with the innovations it entailed), but within the framework of the Barcelona Process. The so-called 'Hannover compromise' paved the way for the recovery of the Franco-German motor and the re-Europeanisation of a controversial initiative.

The Results of the Paris Summit and Marseilles Ministerial Conference

Seven Euro-Mediterranean meetings were held during the French Presidency. Two of them deserve special attention due to their importance in defining the future of the UfM: the Paris summit and the Foreign Affairs ministerial meeting in Marseilles. In addition to these meetings, ministerial meetings were also held on trade, industry, employment, health and water. In other words, although attention was centred on

defining the structure of the UfM, activities continued to be conducted under the Barcelona Process. Just a few days after assuming the Presidency of the Council, France hosted the Summit for the Mediterranean. On 13 July, the leaders of the countries of the EU and of the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, as well as observers from several multilateral organisations, met in Paris. The summit served as the starting gun for the UfM and was viewed by analysts and commentators as a major diplomatic success, the result of the intense and ongoing involvement of the French president at the meeting.

This involvement not only translated into a very high level of attendance and representation, but also a series of bilateral encounters facilitated by the summit, such as those held between the Presidents of Lebanon and Syria or between Ehud Olmert and Mahmud Abbas or the talks between Syrians and Israelis mediated by Turkey. Sarkozy himself, in a speech to the European Parliament summarising the French Presidency of the EU, underscored the political dimension, noting that the UfM was 'the organisation of an ongoing dialogue between Europe and the Mediterranean and, therefore, with the Arab countries', in which the EU would not settle for 'the role of provider of funds'.

In addition to promoting political dialogue, the Paris summit aimed to shape this new phase in Euro-Mediterranean relations. Although the Foreign Affairs Ministers were tasked with working out the details at their meeting in November, the Heads of State and Government sketched out the main lines. Among the main changes, at the institutional level special attention should be called to the holding of regular summits and the creation of a secretariat, a co-presidency and a joint permanent committee of senior officials. As for content, the Barcelona Declaration was kept as a reference point, but a new type of project was rolled out, based on the idea of variable geometry, with infrastructure, solar energy, maritime depollution, higher education, civil protection and business development as priority areas.

The Paris summit ultimately offered a sense of continuity with regard to the Barcelona Process, but also afforded a larger role to the inter-governmental dimension at the expense of the common Community approach. This notwithstanding, the Paris Declaration contained several ambiguities and it was necessary to wait until the Marseilles meeting to see how the UfM would be defined. One of these ambiguities,

the role of the Arab League, prevented further progress in the months between Paris and Marseilles.

The Marseilles Declaration was a veritable balancing act and exercise in ambiguity that substantially affected the issue of the Secretariat

The agenda for the ministerial meeting in Marseilles, held on 3 and 4 November, was packed. A solution had to be sought to the issue of the Arab League's participation, the headquarters and structure of the new permanent Secretariat had to be chosen and additional details had to be provided on how the UfM would operate. Following complicated talks, a compromise was reached: the Arab League would participate in the meetings and bodies of the UfM, a reference to the Arab Peace Initiative would be included and an Israeli would hold one of the vice-presidencies of the new Secretariat. Once these issues had been settled, Barcelona was chosen as the site of the Secretariat, although the appointment of its executive officers was postponed to a later date, as was the definition of its legal status. The Marseille ministerial meeting likewise failed to sufficiently clarify how the six selected projects would be carried out, with what funds and how they would fit with the rest of the activities conducted under the traditional Barcelona Process.

In short, in order to ensure that the ministerial meeting ended with agreements and to satisfy as many countries as possible, the Marseilles Declaration was a veritable balancing act and exercise in ambiguity that substantially affected the issue of the Secretariat. It was assumed that a series of meetings would be held beginning in December to clarify the more technical details. What no one foresaw was that the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, at the end of the French Presidency, would block any chances of further progress.

Conclusions: The Legacy of the French Presidency

Euro-Mediterranean relations were substantially transformed under the French Presidency of the EU. Five

issues deserve special attention as the most important parts of its legacy.

First, the French Presidency left such a complex institutional architecture, one in need of such balancing acts and able to cause such blockage, that its implementation is quite likely to monopolise the concerns of those in charge on both sides of the Mediterranean. In other words, as a result of these innovations, greater emphasis will be placed on the *how*, *where* and *who* than on the *what* and *why*.

Second, the presidency left six chosen projects, which must be infused with content and tied into similar initiatives that are already underway and for which appropriate sources of funding must be found. As these issues have not been settled, the coming presidencies (both those of the EU and those of the UfM) will be required to make as great an effort, if not greater, to promote what was approved in 2008 as to propose new areas of action.

Moving on to lessons learned, the third component of this presidency's legacy is the realisation that EU states cannot act manifestly unilaterally. The metamorphosis of Nicolas Sarkozy's initial proposal makes it clear that not even a country as powerful as France can impose its point of view, even in an area like the Mediterranean, where it wields undeniable influence. The implementation of the Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership initiative, within the framework of the EU, shows that other European countries have learned that the best way to advance their national priorities is through EU channels.

Fourth, despite having embraced the logic of variable geometry, the new institutional structure makes it even more urgent for there to be advances in the Middle East Peace Process for Euro-Mediterranean relations to yield results. The Gaza crisis, the outcome of the Israeli elections in 2009 and the paral-

ysis experienced by the UfM serve as reminders to those who would forget that the construction of the Euro-Mediterranean area is hostage to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Fifth and finally, this presidency left very high expectations: grandiloquent speeches, the attention lavished by the media on the UfM and the attention given to the creation of the Secretariat in Barcelona have sparked growing interest in Euro-Mediterranean relations. However, such high expectations entail a certain risk, namely, they can lead to deep frustration.

Bibliography

- BALFOUR, Rosa. "The Transformation of the Union for the Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics*, 14 (1): 99-105, 2009.
- CHÉRIGUI, Hayète. *La Politique Méditerranéenne de la France : entre diplomatie collective et leadership*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997
- GOULARD, Sylvie. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin européen*. Paris: Seuil, 2008.
- INSTITUT DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE. *Rapport du Group d'experts réunit par l'Institut de la Méditerranée sur le projet d'Union Méditerranéenne*. Marseilles: Institut de la Méditerranée, 2007.
- KHADER, Bichara. *L'Europe pour la Méditerranée : De Barcelone à Barcelone (1995-2008)*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009.
- SCHMID, Dorothee. "Méditerranée: le retour des français", *Confluences Méditerranée*, 63, 13-23, 2007.
- SOLER I LECHA, Eduard. "Proceso de Barcelona: Unión por el Mediterráneo. Génesis y evolución del proyecto de Unión por el Mediterráneo". *OPEX Working Paper*, 28, 2008.