

Western Balkan Countries and the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean

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When several Western Balkan states were invited into the fledgling Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008, commentators saw it as diluting the flagship initiative of the EU Council's French Presidency. After all, President Nicolas Sarkozy and his advisors had originally envisaged a forum of the riparian EU members (Slovenia was rarely mentioned!) and a handful of countries in North Africa and the Middle East, potentially extending to Turkey. The inclusion of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania happened after the Franco-German bargain that embedded the UfM into the existing multilateral frameworks covering the region – the Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – and therefore adopted a catch-all approach to membership that brought in non-Mediterranean EU countries in Northern and Central and Eastern Europe. Yet, in the first year of the UfM's existence, its Western Balkan dimension remained at best marginal. This has to do with both the overall blockage of the institution in the aftermath of the 2008 war in Gaza and the underlying nature of Southeast Europe's relationship with the EU. In the longer run, however, the UfM may well become a more significant foreign policy outlet for the countries in question as they either join or move closer to the EU. Croatia is arguably the most significant member of the quartet. With its accession negotiations entering a closing stage, Zagreb is now poised to become part of the EU by 2011. That will give Croatia a voice in the Union's policies on a range of issues, from environment and maritime transport to political links with the "southern Mediterranean." It is important to note that Croatia has by far the longest coastline

amongst the Yugoslav successor states (1,800 km). This results in a natural interest in the functional matters at the core of the UfM, which have been sold to the wider world as a reincarnation of Jean Monnet's famous understanding of integration as a policy of small steps. On 26-27 November 2009, the historic city of Dubrovnik hosted a conference of UfM Ministers of Environment, which made Croatia more visible within the scheme. In truth, the importance of the Adriatic, and, more broadly, the Mediterranean, as an economic resource has presented both opportunities and challenges to Croatian diplomacy. Indeed, squabbles over territorial waters and access to high seas have led to serious hurdles in the country's progress to EU membership, with Slovenia blocking accession negotiations to pressure Zagreb over the territorial dispute in the Gulf of Piran in Istria. Similarly, relations with Italy and, again, Slovenia have in the past been strained over Croatia's decision to implement an "Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone" (ZERP, from the Croatian) in the Adriatic from early 2008 onwards and to control fishing by foreign vessels. Due to pressure from Brussels, the then government of Ivo Sanader had to back down and allow operators from EU member countries to continue fishing in the zone, covering some 23,870 sq. km. Still, activists inside the country have used the example of other UfM members, primarily the co-chairs France and Egypt, to call for strict enforcement of the ZERP. Economic prospects for cross-Mediterranean cooperation top Zagreb's perceptions. Recently, President Stjepan Mesić advocated cultivating friendly ties with Algeria, Libya and Egypt as the way to ensure the security of energy supplies to the national operator, INA, and prevent a potential future crisis involving disruption of flows from Russia and other producer countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States.¹

¹ Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak visited Croatia in October 2009. Energy topped the list of issues. *Al-Ahram*, No. 968, 15-21 October 2009.

For all the talk of engagement, seasoned observers such as Tonči Tadić, provincial politician and head of the NGO Euromediterranean Forum, assert that there is no long-term thinking for Croatia's presence in the "south."² "Mediterraneanism" is a popular identity marker in the political discourse of the country, certainly one preferable to associations with the "backward" and "violent" Balkans.³ Croatia also benefits from the former Yugoslavia's amicable relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries, once the driving force behind the Non-Aligned Movement.⁴ For all these reasons, it is unlikely that Croatia will become a policy entrepreneur in Euro-Mediterranean policy once it joins the EU. True, it has taken part in various Euromed summits since 2005, and President Mešić recently offered to mediate between Syria and Israel by hosting a meeting in Tito's summer residence in the Brijuni Islands.⁵ Still its external priorities are sure to continue being directed towards the fragments of the former Yugoslavia, particularly neighbours such as Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro. These are countries with multiple political, economic and human ties to Croatia. By contrast, the southern UfM members remain distant. Visiting Zagreb, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad declared that economic cooperation with Croatia is non-existent.

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Further south, Montenegro is striding forward in the hopes of becoming, sometime in the next decade, a member state of the EU. It submitted its candidacy in December 2008 and the European Commission is currently working on an *avis* on the application. A small

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country even by Balkan standards (only 620,000 citizens), Montenegro cannot be expected to assume an activist role within the UfM. This does not mean that the "Mediterranean" is not of interest to the post-Yugoslav republic, which has sought to cultivate an international image as a tourist and recreational paradise akin to that of Monaco. Engagement with various Mediterranean fora is also pursued for symbolic reasons, as the Mediterranean connection is one of the features that potentially set Montenegro's historical identity apart from Serbia's.⁶ The distinction between the country's coastal and northern regions continues to be salient, with the latter being the heartland of those who insist that Montenegrins are an offshoot of the larger Serbian nation. One thing Montenegro brings to pan-Mediterranean politics is its experience in fostering peaceful relations amongst diverse ethnic and religious communities. These include Slav Muslims/Bosniaks and Albanians, about 9% of the overall population, who voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence during the referendum of 2006 and generally identify with the Montenegrin state. This could prove a valuable asset as the UfM's long-term goal is also to transcend cultural boundaries.

Though it has also submitted a membership application, Albania is even further back in the EU membership queue; however, it is closely integrated in terms of trade and human mobility with southern Europe. For Albania, Italy and Greece are incomparably more

² Quoted in "Hrvatska bez strategiji o Uniji za Mediteran" [Croatia without a strategy for the Union for the Mediterranean], *Poslovni List*, 17 November 2009.

³ RAZSA, Maple and LINDSTROM, Nicole. "Balkan is Beautiful: Balkanism in the Political Discourse of Tudjman's Croatia," *East European Politics & Societies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 628-650, 2004.

⁴ See BECHEV, Dimitar. "Distant Neighbours: The Mediterranean Policies of the Countries in South East Europe" in SCHÄFER, Isabel and HENRY, Jean-Robert. *Mediterranean Policies from Above and Below*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009.

⁵ *Haaretz*, 30 October 2009.

⁶ On the contested notion of Montenegrinness, see ROBERTS, Elisabeth. *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

significant in terms of trade and investment than the Western Balkan region, including Kosovo and the Albanian community in Macedonia. Albanian economic diasporas are already well-established in the aforementioned two countries. The outward orientation of today's Albania, in sharp contrast to its isolationism under communist rule, implies the Mediterraneanisation of the country from the bottom up, rather than through involvement in multilateral diplomacy. This trend echoes Albania's history. Bureaucrats and soldiers of Albanian Muslim origin played a prominent role in spreading and maintaining Ottoman rule across Anatolia, the Middle East and North Africa. Mohammed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt, is but one amongst many examples of the Albanians' Mediterranean past. This is not to underplay the significance of the country's inclusion in the EMP in 2007 and now the UfM.⁷ For Albania, as for everyone else in Southeast Europe, this meant becoming a net contributor to regional stability rather than a source of turmoil on the southern fringes of Europe as it had been in the 1990s.

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Bosnia-Herzegovina is in many respects the outlier in the Balkan cluster within the UfM. As the very issue of statehood is still deeply contested internally, it is difficult to speak of the country's foreign policy, let alone its policy towards more remote regions. Bosnia's EU accession is currently blocked owing to a persistent deadlock over constitutional reforms needed to strengthen the central state institutions and take power away from the two constituent entities, notably Republika Srpska. The recent collapse of talks in Butmir are indicative of a crisis that many have identified as the most serious challenge since the end of the war back in 1995. Being left out from the group of countries granted visa-free travel to the Schengen zone has exacerbated Bosnia's sense of isolation within the Western Balkans and Europe. The Mediterranean is not an alternative field of political engagement. Bosnia's coast consists of a minuscule enclave surrounded by Croatian territory. In other words, functional interest in cooperation on sea-related issues is much less pronounced than in any of the other three countries. Bosnia's absence from Mediterranean initiatives is unfortunate given the symbolic capital of cities such as Sarajevo as sites of multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence of the sorts praised by the EMP and its successor, the UfM. Furthermore, the Western intervention in Bosnia, as well as in Kosovo, was aimed at helping Muslim victims of ethnic cleansing. Bosnia is a reminder to the countries and societies in the Middle East and North Africa that Europe's motives are benign.

⁷ For detailed analysis, see ΜΟΝΤΟΒΒΙΟ, Manuel. "Coming Home: Albania in the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean" in *Med.2009 Mediterranean Yearbook*. Barcelona: IEMed/CIDOB, p. 154-160.