

Cities and Mediterranean Integration: In Search of a “New” Political Project

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On 26 November 2020, the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, chaired an international online conference entitled Barcelona+25: Cities in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, organized by the city council and the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), in partnership with networks of local authorities (United Cities and Local Governments – UCLG, and MedCities) and research institutes (European Institute of the Mediterranean – IEMed, and Italian Institute for International Political Studies – ISPI). It focused on the role of cities in the dynamics of Euro-Mediterranean integration initiated in 1995 through the Barcelona Process and continued today, primarily via the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The point, indicated in the conference programme, was clear: the UfM, an organization set up by and for states, would grant only a marginal role to municipalities and decentralized cooperation. It would focus on major infrastructure and urban development projects. At the conference, the floor was given to a few mayors of large cities,¹ who shared their vision of their role in the Mediterranean. The tone was set from the start by Ada Colau in her introductory speech: the Barcelona Process had not produced the expected results and cities should propose their own agenda as an alternative to states and the EU. They were to lend regional cooperation a political dimension again, by promoting the recep-

tion of migrants, the regulation of mass tourism and the fight against climate change.

This appeal, however, was not new. Often organized in networks, cities have been developing their own vision of Mediterranean integration for some fifty years now. At times hand in hand with the initiatives of states and international institutions, at others in competition, they intend to make the Mediterranean a political space structured around the city and urban issues. In this article, based on a doctoral thesis,² I shall provide a (very) brief overview of this history.

Activist Origins, from Anti-Colonialism to Environmentalism

In the early 1970s, the Mediterranean had no political or international existence of its own. States and international organizations did not see it as a distinct region. It was not the object of any regional integration processes. The only notable exception was the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP), which from 1975 onwards, under the aegis of the United Nations, established a multilateral framework for combating marine pollution. Cities began to organize as of 1973. More than 250 elected officials and municipal technicians from all around the Mediterranean met in Beirut in June for the first conference of Mediterranean municipalities against sea pollution under a common slogan: “Cities of the Mediterranean: Let's Unite.” At first glance, this was a seminar for technical exchange of know-how in the fields of municipal sanitation, the fight against uncontrolled urbanization of the coastline, etc.

¹ Amman, Izmir, Tunis, Florence.

² RIPOLL, Samuel, *Le rêve d'une Méditerranée des villes. Entre développement et démocratie (années 1960 – années 2010)*, Doctoral thesis in Political Science, Institut d'études politiques de Lyon, 2022.

It was organized by the United Towns Organisation (UTO), an international association of cities then led by left-wing political activists, mainly French and Italian. They were urban planners, journalists and local councillors, and had often met in networks of anti-colonial movements since the 1950s. For them, the Mediterranean was a laboratory for the renewal of relations between the “North” and the “South.” Away from states, often accused of neo-imperialism, the cities and twinning arrangements were to pave the way for a dynamic of regional integration in order to overcome the legacy of colonization and also find solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, they intended to make the Mediterranean the laboratory for a new international socialism that, while marking a clear break with the Soviet experience, would not stop at the borders of western Europe.

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Environmental protection, integration and regional appeasement formed the different sides of the project. For the French urban planner André Chaudières, kingpin of the Beirut Conference, it was indeed a question of guaranteeing “peace through sewers.”³ The concern for the protection of a common sea and specific technical exchanges between European, Maghrebi and Levantine municipalities, but also between Israeli and Palestinian municipalities, were intended to create a framework favourable to the resolution of the Middle East conflict. The concrete achievements remained small but the networks expanded.

These Mediterranean initiatives multiplied and took shape in the 1980s under the leadership of the UTO

(then chaired by the French socialist Pierre Mauroy) and the city of Barcelona (in particular its socialist mayor Pasqual Maragall and his communist deputy Jordi Borja). For the Catalans, this Mediterranean dynamic was part of a project of democratic recovery following the death of Franco (1975): after decades of dictatorship, the local elites intended to reconcile the city with the sea, in the sense of both developing its coastline (neglected under the Franco regime) and establishing links with other municipalities in the basin after years of international isolation.

It was, moreover, in Barcelona that the MedCities network was created in 1991, an initiative of the World Bank, the UTO and several cities in the basin. It provided a first form of institutionalization of regional municipal movements. Still centred on environmental protection, technical exchanges between municipalities were organized and materialized thanks to the expertise and funding of international development institutions. But in the eyes of the cities and the UTO, this cooperation also embraced a deeper political project: the technical reinforcement of locally elected officials and technicians in the South and East should enable the municipal level to assert itself as an essential political actor in a region characterized by centralized and authoritarian states.

Democratizing the Mediterranean through Its Cities

The 1990s and 2000s were marked by a proliferation of new networks of cities and, more broadly, of local Mediterranean authorities. Although their origins and compositions were sometimes quite different, they nevertheless shared a common ambition: the desire to take part in the Euro-Mediterranean relations project launched by the European Union. The projects carried out were becoming more numerous and in-depth. They enjoyed more substantial funding and expertise. The structuring of municipal exchange also became more institutional and was moving away from the activist movements of the 1970s and 80s. It was now organized around the European Union, multilateral development institutions and European municipal governments.

³ CHAUDIÈRES, André, “La paix par les égouts.” *Cités Unies*, Supplement to No. 76, 1973.

The 1990s marked an important turning point. The collapse of the USSR was accompanied in the West by the hope of the universalization of liberal democracy. It was time for the “end of history.” In Europe, however, the Mediterranean remained a cause for concern, fuelled by large development gaps and chronic political instability. With the Renovated Mediterranean Policy (RMP) in 1992 and then, above all, the Barcelona Process as of 1995, the region was gradually becoming a Euro-Mediterranean political area of integration, development and stability. For the European Union, the democratization of the southern and eastern shores was seen as a priority. The absence of democracy, the “bad governance” of the Arab states, were designated as the mother of all vices. They hindered development, threatened stability and prevented regional integration.

Within the framework of the RMP, the European Commission attempted to mobilize cities, launching the Med-Urbs programmes in 1992. Based largely on existing city networks in the Mediterranean, they aimed to support decentralized cooperation initiatives on both sides of the basin. In particular, the aim was to disseminate “democratic” urban management practices at the local level in Arab cities. These programmes created a real dynamic: between 1992 and 1994, Med-Urbs injected 22 M ECU and thus financed the action of 170 local authorities from 17 countries. However, this programme was abolished in 1996 when, paradoxically, the EU had just strengthened its Mediterranean policy with the launch of the Barcelona Process (or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, EMP). The reasons given by the European Commission did not concern the substance of the cooperation but were of a managerial nature (problems in the execution of contracts, in compliance with financial terms, etc.).

This was the beginning of a long mobilization of cities, in particular their political authorities. They were mainly French, Italian and Spanish (Barcelona, Marseille, Bordeaux, Rome, Turin, Genoa, etc.). They were lobbying the EU authorities to find their place in the EMP, which did not identify city and urban issues as a subject in its own right. They therefore organized the creation of new networks such as the Euromed Commission of Eurocities (1999), the Standing Committee for the Euro-Mediterranean

an Partnership of Local and Regional Authorities (COPPEM, 2000), the Latin Arc (2002), the Europe-MENA urban network (2004) and the Mediterranean Commission of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG, 2005). These multiple networks revolved around a common plea: cities have a role to play in Euro-Mediterranean relations, in particular in the democratization of Arab countries, primarily by disseminating “democratic local governance” techniques.

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The Mediterranean was now clearly divided between Europe and its “neighbourhood,” whose cities were often relegated to the rank of “target” for projects. On the other hand, European locally elected officials generally included their Mediterranean commitment in broader strategies for access to EU bodies, in order to develop networks of influence and obtain funding to invest in their own cities. The Euro-Mediterranean project seemed like just another platform for achieving this, sometimes to the detriment of a real Mediterranean vision and an in-depth reflection on the role of cities in regional integration. The lobbying by European cities nevertheless succeeded in prompting the EU to create pilot decentralized cooperation programmes such as Med'Act (2003-2006) and Med'Pact (2006-2009), which nevertheless remained ad hoc experiments. The commitment of locally elected representatives, fragmented between multiple initiatives, was running out of steam as Europe lost interest in the EMP.

It should be noted that another form of Mediterranean integration was also taking shape in parallel with these European dynamics. Technical exchanges were continuing around the basin, this time main-

ly led by municipal technicians (particularly Catalan and Italian) and international development experts (UN, World Bank, Cities Alliance, etc.). Local technical projects – such as strategic urban planning⁴ – also had a political scope: they were intended to strengthen the capacity for action of municipalities in the Arab worlds, which, in the eyes of the West, constituted an “authoritarian exception”⁵ on a global scale. Centralism and authoritarianism were perceived as two sides of the same coin, which, in the aftermath of September 11, was seen as increasingly problematic. Institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations, by working on urban governance, thus attempted to promote a profound, “bottom-up” transformation of the Arab states, which were deemed impossible to reform head-on.

The City at the End of the Euro-Mediterranean Project

In the 2000s, the regional integration ambitions formulated in Barcelona seemed to fade. The stalemate in the Middle East conflict, the post-September 11 security shift of international relations and the enlargement of the EU to the East contributed to diverting political attention from the Mediterranean. In this context, French President Nicolas Sarkozy created the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008, which in fact replaced the EMP. This organization bore witness to the irruption of states (in particular the French State) at the heart of regional integration dynamics. It eliminated the political objectives of stability, peace and democracy. Integration had to be achieved through specific major projects relating to infrastructure, energy and water management, etc.

Urban development thus entered the UfM’s agenda in 2012 following a ministerial meeting in Strasbourg. The aim here was to promote very large-scale development operations in Arab countries – mega-

projects that were sometimes criticized for their liberal and vertical approach to urban planning.⁶ The central states played the leading role. This marked a break with the pre-existing initiatives of cities and their networks – which were not very involved in the UfM – and their desire to reform urban governance from below, in particular by strengthening municipalities and associations.

However, the UfM contributed to creating a dynamic that would make urban issues a recognized theme of Mediterranean integration. In Marseille, two new organizations were created to strengthen cooperation: the Centre for Mediterranean Integration in 2009 (primarily on the initiative of the World Bank and the French government) and the Agency for Mediterranean Cities and Territories in 2012 (on the initiative of the French government and local authorities).

Nevertheless, for many observers of the region, the turning point of the 2010s marked the end of the Euro-Mediterranean project: both states and the European Union gave up their ambitions for regional political integration. The Arab Springs of 2011, initially a source of enthusiasm, gradually gave way to authoritarian regressions and even civil wars. International actors turned away from the regional space to focus on the Tunisian State (especially its decentralization), which appeared – until the start of the 2020s – as the ultimate democratic hope.

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The Mediterranean project of local political authorities, embedded in that of the EU, also began to

⁴ These approaches have in common the fact that they bring together the actors of a city (municipality, trade unions, companies, associations, professionals, etc.) to produce a diagnosis and a long-term vision of the city’s development, with the hope of identifying strategic projects on which a consensus can be reached (renovation of such and such a precarious neighbourhood, expansion of the airport, development of a technology park for such and such a strategic sector, recovery of the waterfront, etc.). In 2011, there were already about 15 of them in the Mediterranean, led by actors such as MedCities and the city of Barcelona, the World Bank, the United Nations and Cities Alliance.

⁵ CAMAU, Michel, “Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe,” *Critique internationale*, vol. 1, no. 30, 59-81, 2006.

⁶ See, for instance, BARTHEL, Pierre-Arnaud (ed.), “Arab megaprojects.” *Built Environment*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010.

crumble. Moreover, at the turn of the 2010s, some of the leading city councils involved in the municipal movements – particularly Marseille, Barcelona and Rome – experienced changes in political majorities marked by a surge in right-wing and far-right politics. These changes were accompanied by a relegation of the Mediterranean issue in favour of policies of competitiveness and economic attractiveness, the geographical horizons of which were reorientated towards other territories considered to be in “strong growth,” for example in Asia. Most of the Mediterranean political networks, such as the Euromed Commission of Eurocities or the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG, have been dissolved.

Conclusion

From a region of integration and democratic modernization through cities, the Mediterranean seems to have once again become a geographical area divided by civil wars, migratory crises and authoritarian regressions. It is now pervaded first and foremost by states and international institutions according to conventional bilateral “North-South” development logics, in which the city and urban issues often occupy only a marginal place.

The project of “building the Mediterranean”, in particular through its cities, is thus being abandoned by the political authorities. This should not mask the persistence of so-called “technical” institutions and networks which, particularly from Barcelona and Marseille, continue to work to lend it substance and a future. We must give credit to these “technicians” and their political role. Far from confining themselves

to the neutral functions of executors, they convey visions of society and democracy. They maintain active transnational networks of urban planners, intellectuals, engineers and activists, concerned with transforming Mediterranean cities and rethinking their role on a regional scale.

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What is probably missing today is overall coherence. In other words, a political vision. In this respect, the commitment of local elected officials is indispensable. Twenty-five years after the EMP was launched, the Mayor of Barcelona’s call to rebuild a Mediterranean project on a city scale may seem as salutary as it is solitary. In order to breathe new life into a true Mediterranean of cities, it is essential that mayors of other cities, such as Marseille, Rome and many others, collectively engage in developing a new Mediterranean project. But this must not remain a Western project: it is necessary that mayors from the southern and eastern shores – too long limited to the role of project “partner” or “target” – get involved and be able to participate fully, as equals, in this enterprise of transforming the Mediterranean through its cities.