The EU's New Agenda for its Southern Neighbourhood: The Case for a Green and Inclusive Review

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ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) has come out with a new agenda for the southern neighbourhood, reflecting a changing environment in which the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for a shared economic and social recovery are put to the forefront. Does this new agenda respond to the demands and practices of the Arab uprisings or does it revert to the stability paradigm? We argue that the EU could regain relevance in a multipolar region by putting itself more firmly behind citizens and their demands in the region. Rather than seeing citizens as "norm-takers" of the EU, it needs to begin to see them as "norm-makers", including for the EU. Covid-19 has so far seemed to delay the EU's entry into a new era, but it could yet act as a catalyst for the bloc to rethink its policies in the longer term. In this respect, the Green Deal may offer most potential for the EU to move forward towards a more sustainable and equitable approach that puts participatory democracy, the whole range of human rights and social–ecological justice upfront.

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INTRODUCTION

In February 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative released a Joint Communication aimed at providing a new agenda for the southern neighbourhood (European Union 2021). Not for the first time. The document reflects a changing environment in which the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for a shared economic and social recovery are put to the forefront. It represents a commendable effort to adapt the cooperation agenda to this new (post-) Covid-19 context and a systematic attempt to identify the tools to make it operational. Some months earlier, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) also commemorated the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process and discussed the need to incorporate new issues, such as health, into this regional cooperation mechanism. And yet the past record shows us that those efforts may not be enough. The proposals made in the Communication or agreed in the UfM will do no harm, quite the opposite. But these efforts may be in vain if the root causes of social unrest in the neighbourhood are not addressed, which range from mounting inequalities to the absence of political change.

Amid the collective shock of the pandemic, it seems relatively easy to forget what was going on before the spread of Covid-19 and what has happened since but gone unnoticed. These are times in which it has become difficult to think about anything other than contagion, lockdowns, fatalities and vaccines. Yet, the signs of frustration and sustained political and social contestation in the southern neighbourhood are very visible, for example in the massive and persistent protests in Algeria and Lebanon that started in 2019. Citizenship activism has, however, found space for dissent being shrunk across the region (including the arrest of journalists in countries that used to be presented as reformist champions like Morocco), deteriorating living conditions for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Middle East and Europe, and the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory. As Charles Tripp (2021) has recently pointed-ed out, people in the MENA went from being passive subjects of authoritarian regimes to active citizens during the Arab uprisings. And while strengthened authoritarianism seeks to make them passive subjects again, citizens are continuing their practices of dissent and solidarity, or their "peoplehood" as Larbi Sadiki (2016) has termed it. How does the EU's own agenda sit in this larger picture? Does it sustain such practices of citizenship or does it instead contribute to turning citizens in the Arab world into subjects vis-à-vis their own states, and maybe also vis-à-vis the EU?

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

It is worth remembering that back in 2010, a few months before the Arab uprisings, the EU had also launched a review of its neighbourhood policy. It was more the result of institutional inertia (the review was scheduled) than an appreciation that the neighbourhood needed new types of engagement (Soler i Lecha & Viilup 2011). Simultaneously, Spain tried twice to convene a second summit of the Union for the Mediterranean and a few weeks before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the EU also agreed to open negotiations to grant Ben Ali's Tunisia "advanced status", meaning strengthened ties with the EU. An undoubted disconnect existed between institutional agendas and realities on the ground.

The events of 2011 were a turning point for the region. The EU was forced to suddenly reconsider its priorities (from reform to democracy) and instruments (conditionality and dialogue with civil society, among others), as the communications released in March and May 2011 made clear. More importantly, it accepted publicly that it had failed to listen to the signals from the region and expressed an arguably sincere *mea culpa*. One example was then Commissioner Štefan Füle arguing that the EU "has often focused too much on stability at the expense of other objectives and, more problematic, at the expense of our values. Now is the time to bring our interests in line with our values" (Füle 2011).

What has happened since then? The EU has failed to deploy some of the incentives it said it was ready to put on the table. Mobility, one of the famous 3 Ms, together with money and markets, is the clearest example. The EU was also so absorbed in dealing with its own crises – mainly the sovereign debt in Europe's southern flank – that its leaders had little time and energy to devote to the challenges its southern neighbours were facing.

When the situation rapidly deteriorated in the form of counter-revolutionary operations, multi-layered conflicts, the rise of ISIS, an increase in areas of limited statehood, repression and societal fatigue, as well as the further erosion of the legitimacy of governments and institutions, EU leaders rediscovered the importance of the neighbourhood. Once again, however, they did not turn towards it from a citizenship or peoplehood perspective, but from a stability one. When the so-called "migration crises" of 2015/16 made it clear that instability in North Africa and the Middle East could impact European societies and their respective domestic political debates many in the EU dug out the pre-2011 paradigm. The causes of instability were not addressed – at best some of its effects were contained or externalised (Colombo & Soler i Lecha 2021). Furthermore, and with its migration policy in particular, the EU has de facto built a wall in the Mediterranean, separating the southern and northern shores from each other. As MEDRESET has shWown, the "Mediterranean is perceived by Southern stakeholders as a space of division, disparity and separation, performed into being through European depoliticizing, securitizing and technocratic practices in the spheres of politics, economics/development and migration" (Huber et al. 2018).

Not only has the EU increasingly separated from the south, the south also increasingly looks towards other regional powers. This means the relative weight of the EU has diminished – a potentially enormous loss of political opportunity for European actors. The EU seems to have realised that it is not the only game in town and that other regional and global actors have been able to pour in economic resources and military supplies and offer political backing. This sharply reduced the effectiveness of what the EU was able to put on the table. However, the EU could regain weight in relation to such other powers by putting itself more firmly behind citizens and their demands in the region.

EU-LISTCO has confirmed some of the findings that previous projects such as ArabTransitions, MEDRESET and MENARA have already pointed out: (1) it is a mistake to see lack of change as stability – in fact, the absence of change, or even of the possibility of change, is one of the main drivers of tensions that risk spiralling into governance breakdown and full-fledged societal conflicts (Teti and Abbott 2017); (2) there is a need to listen more carefully to the demands and concerns of southern Mediterranean societies, including on issues such as equity, social injustice, deficient public services provision, corruption and impunity, which are often not among the list of EU priorities (Huber and Paciello 2019); (3) the EU may have lost relative weight in the countries in its vicinity but it is far from being an irrelevant actor (Colombo et al. 2019). Whatever the EU says or does has an impact on countries that are not only geographically close but also connected through history, trade and inter-personal relations.

The EU has long had a vision for its relationship with the neighbourhood. First it took the form of a shared Mediterranean security community, as reflected in the ambitious and still-valid goals of the 1995 Barcelona Declaration. In 2004 it also crafted the idea of a "ring" of stable, prosperous, friendly and well-governed neighbours. These visions coincided with major transformational processes in the EU and were, to a large extent, projections of such processes. As explained below, the EU is now also engaged in a major transformational process, some of whose key ingredients, such as the digital agenda, the green transition, the quest for strategic autonomy and the Conference on the Future of Europe, were accelerated or amplified by the pandemic (Bargués 2021). It is high time to rethink relations with its neighbourhood, not only in line with the challenges brought by the pandemic (as reflected in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean released in February 2021) but through listening to citizens' concerns and learning from past mistakes.

ARAB UPRISINGS: AN UNFINISHED PROCESS

Labour and anti-war protests had been bubbling under before 2011, but the Arab uprisings of that year saw broad societal participation, building on various social movements. They remain an ongoing phenomenon, as evidenced by the protests which erupted in 2019 in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan and Algeria, and they will continue if the political economy of repression persists. Beginning in the 1970s, but accelerating in the 1990s and 2000s, key areas of governance provision have been privatised. At the same time, the political system has been restructured not towards more liberalisation but rather towards new patronage networks which include the private sector (Guazzone & Pioppi 2012). Due to the restructuring, the legitimacy of the state sharply declined and governing elites had to increasingly rely on coercive force. As EU-LISTCO has shown, since the uprisings states have become even fiercer, "i.e. readier to deploy violence to counter challenges to existing regimes or against specific sectors of the populations" (Bicchi & Legucka 2020). Similarly, Steven Heydemann has recently pointed out that the "Arab regimes have responded to the threats posed by the 2011 uprisings not by embracing appeals for inclusive social contracts, but through the imposition of repressive-exclusionary social pacts in which previously universal economic and social rights of citizens are being redefined as selective benefits" (Heydemann 2020). This further erodes legitimacy and social trust, fostering insecurity rather than authoritarian stability (Teti and Abbott 2017).

Discontent will continue to manifest itself in one way or another, particularly if there is no prospect of change. But it may be met by harsher repression by actors that want to preserve the status quo and the privileges they currently enjoy. This should concern the EU, not least because authoritarian regimes have taken their counter-revolutionary response beyond the state into the larger region and increasingly associate themselves with European states to support such positions. This entangles the EU and/or its member states with a politics of repression that turns people into subjects, rather than supporting their peoplehood. The arms trade which flows from European member states into the region is one example.

In this larger picture, in spite of the colossal changes the southern neighbourhood has undergone, the revised ENP remains framed by the model devised in the 2000s. If the EU focuses on investment, it needs to ask itself what it is investing in – does it want to invest in resilient societies (resilience as defined by EU-LISTCO as transformation) or does it want to continue investing in (authoritarian) stability (Eickhoff and Stollenwerk 2018)?

This question becomes especially pressing as the region approaches a new crossroads. As Rami Khouri (2020) has recently pointed out,

> As the Arab system of states now enters its second century of state-building, anxious and determined citizens who battled for a better life in the 2010-20 decade will keep trying to make sure that they finally exercise their right to, and participate in, their national self-determination.

At this crossroads, the EU can either stand by and watch as geopolitics of repression unfold or distinguish itself from other powers and become part of a "geopolitics of hope" (Dabashi 2012). Rather than seeing citizens as "norm-takers" of the EU, it could begin to see them as "norm-makers", including for the EU. Covid-19 has so far seemed to delay the EU's entry into a new era, but it could yet act as a catalyst for the bloc to rethink its policies in the longer term.

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19

Nobody has been spared the effects of the pandemic and the severe measures implemented to try to contain it. The shock has been felt almost simultaneously around the world, and Europe and its southern neighbourhood are no exception, with very strict measures being enforced since March 2020. Yet, the impact of the shock has varied between countries and within societies. Those working in the informal sector and those with no other safety net than family support have been particularly hard-hit. Countries and regions that depend on international tourism or falling fossil fuel prices have also paid a larger cost.

As such, Covid-19 has indirectly given additional centrality to two of the concepts EU-LISTCO focusses on: areas of limited statehood and resilience (Börzel and Risse 2018). The pandemic has put the state in the spotlight. This is not peculiar to the southern neighbourhood – it is a global phenomenon brought about by an increased social demand for the state to deliver services. At the same time borders have been sealed, and the cohesion of societies and the legitimacy of institutions have become key factors in assessing the uneven success rates of controlling the pandemic. Trust matters.

Public health and social service provisions have gained prominence and may become the benchmark against which the strength or weakness of states and public institutions are measured. This has clear implications when it comes to the EU policies and programmes in the southern neighbourhood and is already reflected both in the discussions within the Union for the Mediterranean and in the ENP policy review. And yet there has been a failure to identify a major danger for the months to come: the material and emotional cost of the pandemic. This risks eroding the resilience of societies and countries, particularly in the event of a process of economic recovery that could amplify inequalities.

The vaccination process, with citizens scrutinising whether certain groups are privileged over the rest of the society for reasons other than the medical, could reinforce pre-existing social and political grievances at local or national level. This could also acquire regional dimensions. In the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT), for example, Israel has so far refused to fulfil its obligations as the occupying power when it comes to providing vaccines to the Palestinian population (Asi 2021). In the Mediterranean, the different speed of vaccination processes in the two rims could further widen the gap between Europe and its neighbours. This allows a fertile field for competing global and regional powers to assist governments and societies, thus eroding the EU's reputation and leverage in its immediate vicinity.

An additional risk is that of fostering conflict. The pandemic has dashed many hopes and truncated countless individual projects. One of the hypotheses put forward is that Covid-19 may prolong conflict in the Middle East, among other reasons by empowering non-state actors that fill "governance voids to provide services to local communities" (Alaaldin 2020). Contrary to the early proposal by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, that the pandemic should be used as an opportunity to enforce a global ceasefire and boost conflict-resolution processes, the post-pandemic situation could contribute to thawing frozen conflicts – this may be happening, for instance, in the Western Sahara.

The effects of the pandemic in the EU are also shaping the ambition and orientation of EU policies towards the neighbourhood. This goes well beyond the new agenda and the identification of the instruments listed in February 2021's Joint Communication. It has to do with the EU's own resilience. The pandemic has accelerated previous debates on the need to transform and to transition towards new economic, social and political models. The green recovery, the digital agenda and strategic autonomy have gained traction and have become even more relevant. Those transformational projects are now backed by additional resources and provide a narrative on the EU's intended destination. This multi-layered transition will have global repercussions and neighbours are naturally among those that could be most exposed.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

As these new narratives emerge in the EU's foreign policy discourse, the Green Deal may offer most potential for the EU to move forward. The focus so far has been on the EU itself and the proposals remain on the more conservative side of green thought. Nonetheless, it holds enormous potential to make the EU a (green) power that is relevant to the needs of people in its neighbourhood, ensuring that the region is resilient, inclusive and secure. The idea of a "deal" also evokes the need to remake social contracts. This is a valid premise everywhere, but even more so in the southern neighbourhood.

A "Green ENP" would need to involve a profound rethink to conceive of a more sustainable and equitable model that puts participatory democracy, the whole range of human rights and social–ecological justice upfront. It would thereby work to boost resilience and resist the political economy of repression outlined above. Central parameters of such policies should be investment in production for local communities, creation of *good quality* jobs, ensuring human rights including land rights and access to water, local participatory democracy and citizenship practices, and investment in local research on environmental technology, among others. To ensure such parameters find their place in the actual programming, policy should not only be devised by Brussels – it should emerge from consultations with the communities at which EU policies are directed or affect. Furthermore, the ENP cannot be seen separately from other EU policies that impact the neighbourhood profoundly, such as those on security, trade and migration. All these policies should be screened from a green perspective (paying particular attention to social rights/environmental effects). The Green Deal also holds the potential to provide the EU with a new identity and a new narrative around which the member states could unite to ensure a more cohesive foreign policy. This is of the essence for a European foreign policy which has suffered from profound divisions in the past years as the "Normative Power Europe" narrative has lost steam (Cadier and Lequesne 2020).

Overall, the Joint Communication for a new agenda for the southern neighbourhood has the merit of indicating some areas where there is space to scale up Euro-Mediterranean cooperation such as health and sustainability. Yet, the EU still needs to review and find new solutions for the larger questions. It needs to address not only the lack of unity it has displayed when dealing with regional conflicts, but also the need to profoundly revise its policies to support locally driven and inclusive transformations.

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ABOUT EU-LISTCO RESEARCH

EU-LISTCO investigates the challenges posed to European foreign policy by identifying risks connected to areas of limited statehood and contested orders. Through the analysis of the EU Global Strategy and Europe's foreign policy instruments, the project assesses how the preparedness of the EU and its member states can be strengthened to better anticipate, prevent and respond to threats of governance breakdown and to foster resilience in Europe's neighbourhoods. Continuous knowledge exchange between researchers and foreign policy practitioners is at the cornerstone of EU-LISTCO. Since the project's inception, a consortium of fourteen leading universities and think tanks have been working together to develop policy recommendations for the EU's external action toolbox, in close coordination with European decision-makers. The EU-LISTCO Policy Papers are peer-reviewed research papers based on findings from the project.