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Europe as a Geopolitical Actor: Reforming the EU's Narrative in North Africa

Zine Labidine Ghebouli
Visiting Fellow, European Council on Foreign
Relations (ECFR)

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched what he qualified as a “special military operation” against Ukraine. Following months of military tensions on the Russo-Ukrainian borders, Moscow opted for a wide scale invasion with the aim of forcing Kyiv and its western backers into a set of “security guarantees” (Osborn, 2022). Twenty months into this conflict, multiple geopolitical theories about the nature of the western-led unipolar world order and established norms are at play. Moscow’s war against Kyiv is yet another attempt to challenge the post-cold war international order following its previous military and diplomatic policies in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and across the African continent. For the Russian Federation and its partners, the current global order is allegedly characterised by an “unjust” and “unbalanced” nature (Gan, 2022). In that sense, this war and its subsequent battles of influence in Africa will shape other regions, especially the European Union (EU)’s immediate neighbourhoods, including the Southern Mediterranean region. It is therefore critical to evaluate the impact of this ongoing conflict on the strategic influence of different regional and international actors including the EU. Thus, the question of geopolitical competition and tools of influence including the utilisation of narrative becomes a timely policy discussion, especially for the EU and its member states.

Aside from the prominent and immediate considerations of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in relation to Eurocentric security perspectives and fears, this war’s ramifications go far beyond Europe and its allies. Other regions such as the Mediterranean and the Sahel are clearly and increasingly becoming fields for hostile influence competition marked by the influx of non-state actors like the Russian Wagner group – a private

security firm operating as Moscow’s military and influence tool for Africa policy. Hence, the EU’s southern neighbourhood is now perceived, by almost all concerned parties, especially the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia, as an essential actor within this conflict for its engagement as part of the great power competition.

To face the Russian violations of international peace and security that attempt to reshape the world order, the EU and European capitals mobilised a package of diverse sanctions and began considering broader policy areas, including their messaging with international partners. For that purpose, the EU released the “Strategic Compass” as its counter-offensive strategy on 21 March 2022, preparing for a new EU narrative. This Strategic Vision Proposition calls for a stronger and more capable EU in defence and security, contributing positively to global rules-based international order with the United Nations (UN) at its core (Council of the European Union, 2022, pp. 5-7).

The “Strategic Compass” further stressed that the EU is resolved to protect its interests and advocate for its values through the single market, trade and investment partnerships, and development assistance. This approach makes Brussels a norms setter that decides and preaches values of peace, freedom, democracy and rule of law, and leadership in different multilateral settings. While Brussels’ narrative in its neighbourhoods including the southern one is a big component of this approach, achieving efficiency and relevance is admittedly a challenging battle (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 12). In that respect, empowering the EU as a strategic competitor in the Mediterranean basin implies an understanding of the background, potential and limitations of the European narrative. The language and pres-

entation of the EU and its member states, including their interests and policies, in their southern neighbourhood, especially across North Africa, deserves an objective assessment to safeguard and empower Europe's increasingly challenged influence in the region.

In that context, this paper will examine the gap between the promises and self-perception of the EU and its member states in North Africa, and realities of implemented policies. It is true that the founding principle of the EU, i.e., to promote peace and prosperity, has never been more pivotal in policy frameworks. However, Europe on the level of both the EU and its member states is confronting complex post-COVID dynamics such as major life changes, further weakening of vulnerable economies, and deeper sociopolitical fractures. Added to this dangerous mix of challenges, the invasion of Ukraine is not only a violation of the latter's territorial integrity and sovereignty but is also a symptom of an overall weakened security order both in Europe and abroad (De Clerck-Sachsse, 2022). At a time of multiple crises, it is imperative to reassess Europe's partnerships in North Africa to develop a new narrative that is based on realistic advantages and limitations.

The starting framework

The study of the Southern Mediterranean zone of influence is an old debate that dates to 1972 when the Global Mediterranean Policy was established ahead of the Euro-Arab Dialogue of 1973 (Bicchi, 2007, p. 7). These policy discussions designed the initial framework for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995, alternatively known as the Barcelona Process, based on a wide regional consensus. From their side, Europeans worked on their own regional policy kits that were introduced progressively starting with the European

Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 2004. Meanwhile, these European efforts also contributed to the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008 at France's initiative (Carolin, 2010, pp. 60-65). On the other side of the Mediterranean, partner countries across the North African region at first welcomed these efforts and attempted to take part in envisioning the future of the Mediterranean neighbourhood through cooperation programmes. Some actors, like Morocco, even aspired to achieve further integration into the European community with bids to join the predecessor of the EU in 1987 (Cobarrubias, 2018, p. 10).

Beyond the promise of a collaborative Mediterranean region, the ENP primarily served as an institutional response regarding the future of the EU partnership with its neighbours amid its 2004 enlargement. Given the clear lack of any integration schemes for countries in the southern neighbourhood to join the EU, the ENP came as a unique format of "non-accession integration" to countries that are considered as important partners in the Mediterranean neighbourhood (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, & Pickles, 2012, pp. 40-41). In a way, previously formulated and domestic EU policies on good governance shared security cooperation and modernised economic sectors constituted major axes for the ENP approach on policies as much as on the narrative level.

Such replication of EU domestic formulas caused signs of "ENP fatigue", which emerged throughout 2006 even as Brussels capitalised on this policy to draw new partnerships across the Mediterranean (European Parliament, 2013). Ultimately, the policy's narrative was set under review to consider the increasing focus on the wider European values such as democratic empowerment as part of the 2007 ENP unofficial reform led by German efforts

(European Commission, 2007). Still, the European Commission lacked the effective tools to concretely implement such an ambitious “democratic agenda” in the southern neighbourhood. In reality, the relative success of authoritarian actors across North Africa, which was seen as a failure for the EU as a “normative power” and its ability to match its narrative and policies since the early days of the ENP (Barbé & Johansson-Nogués, 2008, pp. 88-90).

Following recommendations of all EU member states, another review of the ENP was introduced in 2015 with the aim of adopting a transactional approach with the EU's partners (Scazzieri, 2020). But the new ENP policy was in fact a late plan to adapt to the unfolding security crises in the EU's neighbourhood, including the southern flank following the Arab Uprisings. Moreover, the “New Response” once again imported a narrative already present within the Wider Europe report of 2003, which seeks to “allow [the EU] to tackle sources of instability and conflict in the region” (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, such reforms by the European Commission came as a formal answer to the criticism of multiple actors, including that of the EU Parliament in Strasbourg and Brussels of an official EU response to the Arab Uprisings. Members of the European Parliament insisted that the “quest for stability has often overshadowed the values of democracy, social justice and human rights in the EU and its member states' relations with southern neighbours in the past years” (Schumacher, 2015, pp. 392-394).

The ENP in its early form of 2004 was therefore an attempt to manage intra-European dynamics amid the EU's enlargement and Brussels' aspiration to play a bigger geopolitical role. Furthermore, for southern European governments in particular, the question of democratisation and political

transition was always managed within a bigger security and strategic debate. Instead of fostering mutually beneficial partnerships, the “normative duty narrative” and temporary concerns dominated the language of the European Commission, which focused on the EU's geopolitical, economic and security interests that are at risk due to regional instability (Schumacher, 2015).

It is safe to say that the ENP came essentially to project a desired image of the EU as a ‘force for good’ in its immediate neighbourhood (Barbé & Johansson-Nogués, 2008). Despite European attempts to extend policies that reflect this preliminary narrative, relations with state actors in the southern neighbourhood ultimately depended on two major factors: migration and socioeconomic stability. Against early wishes of the European Commission as expressed in the theoretical framework, the ENP was practically reduced to a set of predominately socioeconomic tools that stem from security concerns to address the fallouts of the Arab Uprisings in Southern European countries. Such tendencies resulted in further limitations that hindered the already stagnated Euro-Mediterranean cooperation which was later questioned by emerging pro-democratic social movements (Cobarrubias, 2018).

Reality check

Exploring the fundamentals of the EU's narrative on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the southern neighbourhood is a process of multiple levels. Despite the existence of a basic framework, it is essential to check the relationship between narratives and policies in key dossiers such as democracy and rule of law, conflict and security, in addition to trade to explore the shortcomings in the ENP's implementation. In that context, relations between EU member states and their southern neighbours are complicated. Dynamics showcase Brussels' limi-

tations in empowering democratic actors, preventing conflict and ensuring stability, balancing commercial activities, and upholding liberal values. These issues are partially the consequence of European inconsistencies, divisions, and prioritisation of momentary interests at the expense of far-sighted goals.

Democracy and rule of law

Initially in 2003, the ENP's narrative emphasised empowering democratic rule, but Brussels' policies in practice failed to consistently uphold such a standard. Prior to the Arab Uprisings, one of the key principles of the Barcelona Process was to promote democracy, good governance, and human rights. To achieve that, both EU institutions and member states used several instruments such as capacity-building programmes and conditionality clauses. Yet, the application of democratic conditionality was not adequately implemented, especially as demonstrated by the close ties that Europe cultivated with pre-revolt authoritarian leaders such as Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's establishment in Tunisia (Scazzeri, 2020, p. 6). Today, the case is even clearer with the European engagement vis-à-vis the regime of Tunisia's Kais Saied and some war actors like Khalifa Haftar in Libya (El Gomati & Saini Fasanotti, 2023). Behind the official rhetoric, this approach of rapprochement made EU actors look "complicit" with the *anciens régimes* of autocratic rulers across North Africa.

Reasons leading to this contradiction are multiple, but one factor includes Europeans' interest in maintaining stability as the primary motive behind Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Brussels also proved reluctant to engage, as a united entity, with the political opposition beyond the EU parliament's political and diplomatic light endorsement of official opposition groups

(European Commission, 2013). The new generation in the southern neighbourhood who lived through the 2011 uprisings still recalls Europe's hesitance and historical partnerships with old rulers and would naturally feel sceptical about any pro-human rights narrative that comes from Europe. More importantly, these historical concessions given by the EU to autocrats did not grant Brussels any lasting regional influence on human rights and good governance. On the other hand, many regimes in the Southern Mediterranean region are forging strategic partnerships with Beijing, which approaches economic deals without the inconvenience of democratic conditionality (Li, 2017, pp. 3-4).

Another impediment of the ENP policy framework is the resort to short-term solutions rather than long-term visions. While advocating for democracy in the southern neighbourhood, Brussels considered the lack of democratic empowerment as a root cause of migratory and refugee flows. Consequently, the EU's timid support of democratisation processes can be read as a pre-emptive resolution to the migratory crisis (Faustini-Torres 2020). This questions Europe's narrative as a "norms setter" since democracy becomes part of an easy "solution pack" to redress complex regional challenges instead of leading to a genuine and sincere goal of empowering democratic actors across North Africa. Also, Europe's attempts, directly and implicitly, to address the structural factors that limit democracy promotion in the southern neighbourhood were often faced with the reactions of sovereigntist regimes that eventually had the upper hand (Li, 2017). As part of its democracy promotion narrative, the EU also had limited success in exporting European liberal values such as collective and individual liberties. The Arab Spring revolts may have given an opportunity for Europe to assert itself as a normative power by siding with the democratic

aspirations of the populations. In practice, this democratic empowerment failed to adopt a long-term intention and well implemented strategy to reach the political goals of the EU and its member states on democratisation and transition. In short, the EU was a victim of its urgent desire to look after the safety of its borders, which hampered its narrative especially when Brussels took an ambiguous and, at times, implicitly supportive approach to authoritarian regimes. The clearest example is Tunisia, which was until recently the successful model for the Arab Uprisings and benefited from significant European funding amounting to millions of dollars to support local democratic actors. However, European policy-makers failed to consolidate successes on the values level. Finally, Europe resorted to a quid-pro-quo strategy that reduced European engagement to momentary antimigration funding in exchange for legitimising the authoritarian behaviour of the current leadership of Kais Saied (Megerisi, 2023). Even previous EU attempts to reach out to grassroots organisations in its southern neighbourhood to encourage democratic empowering were met with sovereignty limitations and neo-colonial scepticism (Badarin & Schumacher, 2020, p. 75).

Security and conflict

One of the major challenges for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks is the modern securitisation logic of international relations. Behind frameworks like the ENP, there was a clear motivation to protect EU citizens and retain effective control over the EU external frontiers. But Brussels' politico-economic assistance to its southern neighbours has not secured these policy goals. Migration serves as another clear example of the failure to balance between narrative and policy. Brussels relies on its southern neighbours to play the "security guard" role and prevent clandestine migra-

tion (Kulesa, 2022). This is especially the case with countries like Tunisia and Morocco, which also benefit from important financial allocations for that purpose. Morocco received approximately €234 million in financial support between 2015 and 2021 (European Commission, 2023) while Tunisia most recently inked a €100 million deal with the EU (Hayden, 2023). However, cooperation is not always as feasible and comfortable as suggested by the EU's narrative, which impacts Europe's discourse of defending its strategic sovereignty.

A notable case study is embodied by the humanitarian tragedy in Spain's Ceuta in July 2022. Moroccan authorities used lethal force against dozens of African migrants in an alleged effort to prevent mass clandestine border crossings (UN Committee on Migrant Workers, 2022). Another incident took place in Tunisia when sub-Saharan migrants were victims of a targeted racist campaign that was fuelled by President Kais Saied (Ben Hamadi, 2023). Even administrative measures to assert the EU's policies and interests could be the subject of backlash. In September 2021, the French government took a sharp turn when it cut visa quotas to North African countries to pressure them to expedite the extradition of clandestine migrants (De Ragueneil & Soldaïni, 2021). France had to face serious repercussions that reached the level of a diplomatic crisis between Algiers and Paris.

In all these cases, both the EU and its member states proved incapable of maintaining a firm hand to hold their partners accountable. Instead, serious violations of bilateral agreements and inhumane practices were implicitly permitted with the hope of reaching the "greater goal" of securing the EU's borders. Such subcontracted security control, often defended as a temporary solution, is not sustainable and undermines the humanitarian values and rhetoric of the EU. This securitisation strat-

egy also feeds into competitors' accusations of the EU as a neo-colonial and self-centric force and alienates Brussels from the population of the southern shores while empowering authoritarian behaviour of their rulers.

On regional conflicts, the EU is also far from acting as a normative power as speculated in its founding narrative. Both in Syria and Libya, Europeans did not have much influence on the conflicts' outcomes. In part, this was the result of perpetual divisions between member states and their inability to bypass diverging interests. At the same time, competing regional and international powers seem to win ground at the expense of the United States (US)'s withdrawal and the EU's reluctance (Lister, 2023). For the past years, Libya has been at risk of a violent partition between different spheres of influence (Scazzieri, 2020, p. 3) while the Sahel is already transforming into a playground for pro-Kremlin mercenaries (Stronski, 2023). This reality is another manifestation of the ENP's limitations in enforcing Europe's narratives in the neighbouring region and contrast between rhetoric and policies (Celata & Coletti, 2019).

Another aspect that undermines European humanitarian actions and initiatives of conflict prevention within the Mediterranean is the lack of consensus amongst EU member states on how to face emerging challenges. Governments often refer to the EU as "a peace provider", but rarely coordinate their efforts to showcase European unity in line with Brussels' narrative. One of the most prominent instances was the EU's hesitance to enforce a no-fly zone in Libya in 2011 at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) level due to deep disagreements between European leaders (Traynor, 2011). These leaders are often pressured by the local political context and other strategic considerations that limit their

capacity to make concessions and reach consensus on foreign policy dossiers. Such contradictions between the EU's narrative and policies are also a direct consequence of the remarkable divergence within European institutions on concrete steps to defend the EU's "peace provider" posture. Aside from European issues, southern partners are also sceptical about the EU's resources to address domestic affairs of other countries. For instance, Brussels' humanitarian interventions navigate a complex set of systemic boundaries in line with public and elite opinion across countries like Algeria and Egypt for alleged neo-colonial motives (Schumacher, 2015, p. 391). For instance, Algerian authorities closed the humanitarian Caritas association on dubious charges (Zouaoui, 2022).

In addition to this inefficiency on migration and conflict, it is also noteworthy to highlight the division on other sensitive issues. Energy discussions are a key example of the depth and severity of lack of European unity and sense of solidarity. When Algiers chose "diplomatic silence" as a counter-strategy to force Madrid into revoking its policy shift on Western Sahara and its support for Rabat's autonomy plan, Spanish policy-makers sought the support of European institutions, especially after Algeria's suspension of a two-decade friendship treaty. While the European Commission responded with a balanced statement reiterating Brussels' unity and Algeria's strategic importance (European Commission 2022), Madrid rallied no further support and even lost its privileged energy partner status with Algeria to Italy (Leali 2022). Algeria's strategy boosted the country's reputation and local popularity of its leadership but also almost caused a fracture between Rome and Madrid as both capitals needed EU-mediated talks to avoid confusion, signalling a lack of coordination and solidarity (Orihuela, 2022).

All these events and developments were not particularly game-changing on their own, but their pattern reflects poorly on the EU's narrative as a cohesive, united and assertive force. On democratic empowerment, migration and energy security, Euro-Mediterranean dynamics are plagued with strategic disagreements, pursuit of momentary interests, and prevalence of national interests at the expense of the "greater European good". The overly optimistic language of European policy frameworks is not aligned with the realities of the fractured political vision and did not mobilise enough support from all EU member states. In part, this is due to the nature of the EU, which began as an economic community and is still exploring the limits of its institutions and geopolitical power in light of the different sociopolitical context in each country. EU member states are behaving as individual actors of the great power competition rather than a common European front as demonstrated by the lack of a united foreign policy.

Trade

A major feature of Euro-Mediterranean relations since the inception of the Barcelona Process was the development of trade activities between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Figures have been growing steadily after the signature of the Association Agreements to reach over half a trillion euros in 2022 (European Commission, 2023). Two contrast cases are present across North Africa, with two diverging models of cooperation. First, EU member states cultivated a growing economic partnership with Morocco. In that sense, Rabat benefited from privileged access into the European market, and Moroccan cities became a popular nearshoring destination for major European companies. This notable geoeconomic rapprochement was a concrete embodiment of Europe's narrative towards its southern neighbourhood, es-

pecially as bilateral trade reached an approximate €53 billion in 2022 (European Commission, 2023), covering primarily industrial sectors and capitalising on the 2000 Association Agreement.

On the other hand, the EU was unable to replicate this model across other countries in the region. In Algeria, Brussels is often accused of its unbalanced trade, which restricts Algerian products from competing on the European level. Beyond the hydrocarbon sector, which was rehabilitated in the wake of the Ukraine war and Europeans' interest, it is true that industrial joint ventures with Algeria are rather limited despite the €56 billion sum of trade between the two partners (European Commission, 2023). This imbalance feeds into the counter-narrative of exploiting the African continent's resources and Algerian authorities' cynicism towards European officials' rhetoric as a "neutral" power in the southern neighbourhood.

In addition to inequalities between North African countries in terms of partnerships with the EU, Europe also suffers from a communication deficit. Throughout the past few years, regional competitors like China have fostered solid economic ties across the southern neighbourhood. These ties serve Beijing's strategic ambitions to strengthen its Belt and Road Initiative and underline its increasing disagreement with the international system. European capitals, despite their prevalent trade with North African countries, are still unable to lead effective media campaigns to introduce the figures and impact of their commercial relations with southern partners, which would counter the narrative of competitors such as China and highlight Europe's engagement. Moreover, various business platforms organised by EU member states do not receive sufficient coverage from official communication teams at the European institutional level.

Interestingly, these challenges hindering Euro-Mediterranean cooperation did not impact joint ventures in non-sensitive sectors. In that sense, the 2004 joint initiative “Private Participation in Mediterranean Infrastructure” (PPMI) launched by the European Commission and the World Bank serves as a key example. This strategy helped in shaping the competition and regulation for shifts in the energy sector across the southern neighbourhood (Herranz-Surrallés, 2017, p. 130). In figures, a quarter of the overall assistance for the neighbourhood, which increased by 25%, from €17 billion (2014-2020) to €22 billion (2021-2027), will be focused on the climate agenda. Another important observation is Brussels’ energy funding in the Southern Mediterranean during the 2014-2020, which helped kick off multiple projects in energy transition.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the EU’s financial assistance to its southern neighbourhood is regarded positively by local populations. According to a poll conducted in 2019, 59% of people in North Africa and 67% across Middle Eastern countries agree that financial assistance is an asset to address local development issues (EU Neighbors South, 2019). Yet, this financial assistance is not synonymous with practical strategic gains. Part of the reasons could be, again, that EU entities do not advocate this financial assistance in an accessible way to the public and average populations. The same issue applies to other forms of assistance like the several Action Plans signed by countries like Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia with the EU to achieve political and socioeconomic goals like democratic empowerment and rural development especially in the wake of the Arab Uprisings.

More broadly, and despite the countless opportunities, Euro-Mediterranean coop-

eration remained largely limited to financial aid, educational exchange and vague democracy-promotion rhetoric in exchange for safeguarding primary European migration and stability interests. As for the concrete implementation of norms, the re-emergence of authoritarian rules across the region is proof that the EU did not transfer sustainable values nor made strategic use of its commercial ties with North Africa. Right after the Arab Uprisings, local actors across the EU’s southern neighbourhood may have shared the same democratic and prosperity aspirations with Brussels, but Europe’s anxious concern with returning to the stability of the status quo was not helpful (Dandashly & Kourtelis, 2020, p. 1525). Furthermore, the EU’s financial assistance and capacity-building processes were not developed adequately to respond to the southern neighbourhood’s context, leaving Europe weaker and more vulnerable in the face of strategic competition at a time of intense geopolitical manoeuvring.

Great power competition

Liberal order

Despite its re-emergence in the wake of the Ukraine war, the great power competition is not a novel topic. Ever since the end of World War II, the pursuit of international leadership has been a stepping stone for foreign and domestic policies across the US, Russia, China and most recently the EU. While the world embraced homogeneous and unipolar trends after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Russia’s war in Ukraine comes as a catalyser of new global dynamics in a world that is far more complicated. This means regions like the Southern Mediterranean is again at a strategic crossroads, shaped by numerous factors starting from political and security upheavals to the COVID-19 pandemic and digital shifts.

However, this regional and international disorder cannot be read as the end of history or the end of liberalism. Instead, it is a manifestation of an age of disruption that scholars fear would last for much longer than expected (De Clerck-Sachsse, 2022). Amid this reconfiguration of the international order, the southern neighbourhood is likely to host intense battles for influence. Already prior to the war, studies have shown that the EU's strategic sovereignty across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is under attack (Barnes-Dacey & Dworkin, 2020, p. 2). This phenomenon of emerging geopolitical competition requires an understanding of Brussels' posture and narrative from a historical and practical point of view that sheds realistic lights on the future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. This is crucial for the implementation of the Strategic Compass as the EU and its member states aim to increase their influence.

In recent years, Europe found itself in a defensive position in the Southern Mediterranean region, both for its lack of action and other actors' disinformation campaigns. In line with its founding narrative and as previously discussed, Brussels aspired to promote lasting stability by deploying multiple strategies according to different operational contexts (Barnes-Dacey & Dworkin, 2020). Yet, the reality of the region kept primary attention on the urgency of preventing disorder across North Africa from reaching Europe, as was the case with refugees and migrants, or security threats. Amid these momentary discussions, a bigger battle includes the competing rivalry between influential capitals and the issue of a contested liberal international order. Europe's current narrative, as speculated in the Strategic Compass, complicates Brussels' mission to uphold the "bulwark of the wider liberal international order" reputation both domestically and abroad. However, the EU

may not have the capacity on its own to succeed in such endeavours.

Europe only woke up to this changing reality when it struggled with counter-revolutionary trends post-2011, multi-layered conflicts in Libya and Syria, and the rise of violent extremism and organised crime groups. In the face of these monumental shifts, the EU narrative remained unchanged and overly anxious about the neighbourhood's stability at the expense of a citizenship or peoplehood perspective (Soler i Lecha & Huber, 2021, p. 2). Years later, and due to malign activities of actors such as Russia, China and Turkey in the southern neighbourhood, the EU returned to the normative power narrative originally underscored within the ENP language. Yet, Brussels had already assumed the cost of political stability and lack of international action across the MENA region. This inconsistency in strategies and policy goals highlights another fundamental issue with the EU's narrative in the southern neighbourhood.

More significantly, competing actors, especially Russia and China, often accuse the EU's foreign policy of adopting Eurocentric or "inward looking perspective". Scholars have previously called upon the EU to take this external contestation of liberal values into consideration and choose the pathway of suitable policies that would advocate for Brussels' vision but does not necessarily impose specific political models on entire populations (Keukeleire & Lecocq, 2018). Europe must address this shift at a time of global democratic backsliding that is accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rupucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Actors such as Russia are already advancing an alternative version of the world order amongst countries of the Global South and particularly some of those in the Southern Mediterranean. Moreover, Moscow's nar-

rative on conflicts in the southern neighbourhood mirrors the latter's postures and causes.

The debate on Europe's ability to defend this liberal order and live up to the standards of its founding narrative is based on two factors. First, European politicians, diplomats and civil servants unilaterally formulated political and socioeconomic agendas in the southern neighbourhood for decades. This is clear through their dominant discourse on "values to follow" that were propagated across North Africa especially in the early days of the ENP (Keukeleire, Lecocq, & Volpi, 2020). On the other hand, competing actors seem more willing to listen to the Global South on the dysfunctionalities of the world order. Second, there is an internal confusion amongst European actors on the role that Brussels should play in global politics. Europe is often between the option of assuming a principled stance on human rights and rule of law even if that leads to security threats and diplomatic disputes or adopting the alternative strategy of a full shift towards a transactional approach like Russia and China (Leigh, 2019).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars argued that the EU must change its approach vis-à-vis its southern neighbours and assume a more strategic role in the region (Soler i Lecha & Huber, 2021, p. 3). This conviction stems from the fact that Brussels' current strategy has not been successful in achieving the security, stability and prosperity goals that are set in the EU's founding narrative (Scazzieri, 2020). Given the formal and self-claimed duty of the EU to promote democracy, peace and human rights, Brussels still admittedly lacks the practical policy tools to achieve this role (Badarin & Schumacher, 2020).

Essentially, and despite its human links with and historical roots in the southern neigh-

bourhood, the EU's capacity to act as a "normative power" faces serious challenges by outside actors. These are not limited to traditional competitors like Russia and China but extend to include those who previously served as loyal allies of the West, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Miller, 2022). In fact, Arab monarchies that were historically friendly to western interests like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are developing a nationalist approach that now encourages their leaders to join competing economic groups like Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC group) (Du Plessis, 2023). Such dynamics place Brussels within a context of great power competition and raise the need to develop European strategic sovereignty.

The war in Ukraine

In addition to these historical and progressive developments, the Ukraine war sets another pivotal example of the limitations of Europe's narrative in the southern neighbourhood. Europeans' mobilisation of allies and partners against Moscow's invasion of Ukraine began soon after the Russian forces' intrusion into Ukrainian territory. The first scene of these efforts was the UN general assembly, where two votes demonstrated the gap between the western bloc and the Global South including Europe's southern neighbourhood. In some cases, like Algeria and Syria, states even objected to withdrawing Russia from the Human Rights Council, citing "double standards" as the main argument (Henache, 2022). When it comes to the EU's narratives, these instances stress a consumed argument of alleged misapplication of human rights treaties in different conflicts. Most recently, the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza in the wake of Hamas' attacks and Israeli response provoked a bigger gap between Europe and its southern neighbourhood.

But regardless of how valid these states' argument is, it does suggest that countries in the southern neighbourhood are frustrated with the "human rights" rhetoric of the EU. Feeding into the counter-narrative of geopolitical competitors, the southern neighbourhood, especially North African countries, increasingly feel that the international system is based on unjust foundations that must be challenged and reassessed (Schaer, 2022). Consequently, the EU's "normative power" tone is seen as interests, rather than values-driven. Brussels struggles to convince the severely destabilised and fractured North African region of the humanitarian necessity to stand up to Russia's actions and expansionist aspirations. The Global South in general and southern neighbourhood in particular does not seem concerned with the Ukraine war except when national interests are affected. This dynamic was confirmed throughout the African trip of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in July 2022 to Egypt and Algeria to address these countries' fears (Kane, 2022). The origins of the southern neighbourhood's mindset are derived from the classical lenses of the Cold War and non-aligned movement, established in 1961, and follow the same pattern of avoiding endorsement of a certain global power at the expense of the other. However, countries in the EU's neighbourhood will also be keeping note of Europe's engagement on the situation in Gaza since failure to uphold the same humanitarian standards will undermine Brussels and European capitals for decades.

Another consideration of the southern neighbourhood that was unmasked by the Ukraine war is the European colonial past. For North African countries, who endured painful and prolonged periods of colonial rule, Brussels' narrative about protecting nations' sovereignty does not rime well with the continent's history. From Europe's side, this history is viewed as a *fait-accompli* that

cannot be revisited, especially with the arrival of a new generation and prominence of new challenges. Nonetheless, the sociopolitical structure of North African countries is still attached to the anti-colonial legacy especially in countries like Algeria. Therefore, it is difficult for North African states to understand Brussels' foreign policy priorities and reconcile with a traumatising shared history at the same time.

Strengths, vulnerabilities and recommendations

One of the characteristics of Euro-Mediterranean relations is the shared history that links the two sides of this region. Despite the difficult conversation on the colonial past which often shadows this common story, there are remarkable and solid social, political, and cultural bonds between these nations. Countries like France and Spain nurtured strong ties with their former colonies even if they are often characterised by historical scepticism and mistrust. While the presence of historical tensions remains undisputed, there is a long-lasting dynamic between these countries that cannot be disregarded.

History remains a strong appeal to build an extensive cooperation between the EU and North Africa despite occasional diplomatic tensions. However, Brussels' lack of unity and cohesiveness on foreign policy undermines its ability to navigate the heated discussion on the colonial history. In fact, the EU, as a modern political entity, has no history of engaging in colonial activities. It is often the past policies of individual EU member states that are used to tarnish Brussels' reputation and narrative in the Mediterranean's southern shores.

Nonetheless, history is not necessarily a barrier that would prevent Brussels from developing a deeper cooperation with re-

gional partners. The EU's history of humanitarian engagement showcases its institutions as reliable assets for Brussels' potential and efforts. The efforts invested across several sectors from education like Erasmus programmes to economic partnerships still do not receive enough focus as key elements of the EU's official narrative in North Africa. Brussels is not commercialising or raising enough popular awareness about its positive engagement and impact. For the local populations in North Africa, the EU is almost exclusively observed through regional conflicts and competitors' vision and rhetoric.

Besides developing proactive EU campaigns, it will be useful for Brussels to consider the role of the Maghrebi diaspora in Europe. As per a study conducted by the French Institute for Demographic Studies, the EU hosts approximately six million people who form a permanent immigrant community from North Africa (Poletti, 2018). These people are often dual citizens who are shaping and contributing to the EU's economic, political and social circles (Collyer, 2012). Their impact is becoming more remarkable within European politics, especially as many appropriated the EU model of governance, circulation and values. This immigrants' community is even engaged in formal and partisan European politics especially in countries like France, Spain, Germany and Belgium while retaining its historical links with native countries. Naturally, the diaspora is still attached to its homeland, and many immigrants are powerful actors in their home countries. Europe could benefit from these voices by including the diaspora and its success stories in its dissemination strategy for local communities in the southern neighbourhood.

In addition to historical ties that link the two shores of the Mediterranean, Europe's most powerful comparative advantages in-

clude its own democratic and liberal model. Since 1993, the EU has undergone impactful reforms to solidify its cross-border multi-sectoral cooperation. Even if the latter reflects a product of the European context, its developments send a strong message about the EU's capacity and serve Brussels' overall narrative. Admittedly, the exact replication of this model in the southern neighbourhood of the EU would be met with a strong official and popular backlash due to the sensitive attachment of these countries to their sovereignty on national political decisions and mechanisms. This has been clear through Algerian and Tunisian authorities' rejection of any interference in their domestic affairs. But the pro-democratic uprisings across North Africa in 2011 and 2019 shared similar liberal ideological motto, which opens doors for an indirect North-South inspiration that would serve the EU in the long term.

Despite the limited generated influence, the EU's pro-democracy narrative has indeed succeeded in cultivating a relatively minor liberal and willing opposition class across North Africa (Soler i Lecha & Huber, 2021). Europe often incentivised protesters in the southern neighbourhood in their pursuit of democracy and political freedoms. This may not mean that protesters would necessarily copy European understanding on questions such as human rights. Yet, it establishes a solid ground for rapprochement between European actors and partners in the southern neighbourhood. Furthermore, European and western norms are already influencing factors for the new generation across North Africa on individual and collective liberties, rule of law and accountability.

Aside from contentious issues like democratic empowerment, European leadership is more visible in technical fields. Within the context of great power competition, the EU holds the advantage of a deeper co-

operation scheme with North African countries on dossiers like renewable energy and joint industrial ventures. Other international and regional actors including China may constitute a serious competitor, but they lack the historical, socioeconomic and ideological extensions to their purely commercial relations with the EU's southern neighbourhood. Instead of assuming a defensive position, the EU can showcase its transparent mechanisms and democratic practices in its policy narrative to distance itself from other actors' disruptive policies in the southern neighbourhood. Moreover, consolidating extensive economic cooperation frameworks between Brussels and its southern neighbours, especially on green energy, will send a strong message to North African partners and empower Europe's rhetoric beyond history, social divergences or political disagreements.

Furthermore, Brussels can assist with investment campaigns of individual member states to build a more cohesive European front that truly adheres to the EU's founding narrative. In this context, different frameworks of these campaigns, such as special EU-North African business forums, should be publicly covered and reported to present the EU as a helpful and equal partner. Initiatives such as the Green Deal and Global Gateway are critical pieces for the Brussels investment messaging and overall narrative in the southern neighbourhood instead of the usual action plans and grants that focus almost exclusively on democracy promotion. In the end, the empowerment of democratic actors across North Africa is a local mission that cannot be delegated to EU entities, and only the European Parliament may have the capacity to assist in limited ways such as resolutions. However, Brussels will be more useful by understanding its structural political limitations and avoiding setting up a narrative it cannot concretely and effectively defend in the short term.

In the long term, the incorporation of youth segments and digital communication could ultimately help Brussels in its democracy advocacy without falling into the trap of previous failed policies. The digital revolution provides countless opportunities to engage with the youth of North Africa and spread the values and norms of the EU on governance and rule of law. In that respect, the region, which is living in a post-uprising setting characterised by a thirst for freedom, is a fertile ground for targeted communication campaigns that could capitalise on the region's history and empower local voices. This strategy will both protect Europe from the trap of implicit interference in countries' sovereignty and stand up to the former's pro-democracy values. The public comments of the EU and its member states on North African countries' domestic affairs are counter-productive since there are other tools to ensure Europe's democratic interests in the long term. Youth of the region should be at the centre of the EU's future vision and discourse for the southern neighbourhood. The new generation across North Africa is able to lead economic and social projects that could prove beneficial to the EU's narrative and reputation. The focus of official rhetoric should be the youth of the region who dream and work for stability, but also the democratic norms of the EU.

As the EU works to counter its competitors across North Africa, its narrative may however be undermined by partners' social choices. To be sure, social and political actors across North Africa already established their own set of ethical and moral values. Thus, societies from Morocco to Tunisia remain firmly attached to their conservative traditions even if the new generation might be showing more willingness to embrace some European lifestyle choices. Europe's advocacy of a liberal narrative on social issues is unlikely to yield support in North Africa and may even provoke counter-pro-

ductive results on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Another vulnerability of the EU's messaging across North Africa is manifested by its weakness against malign propaganda campaigns of geopolitical competitors. According to a recent study by the Middle East Institute, Arab-speaking audiences were targeted by Russian operatives following the Ukraine war (Janadze, 2022). This operation received little attention and did not face much resistance from European policy-makers, especially on social media. Empowering the EU's narrative and messaging across North Africa requires the development of defence and communication capabilities of European public and private stakeholders. The absence of an affirmative, solid and targeted EU narrative will make it open to attacks and disinformation campaigns by competitors like Moscow and Beijing.

The EU narrative in its southern neighbourhood also suffers from the inconsistency of changing ENP policies. This narrative's history identifies three major components for European policy-makers: stability, development and democratisation. Yet, it is counter-productive for Brussels to focus on one aspect depending on regional circumstances and would instead benefit more from a holistic strategy that links these three components. Such efforts would also require a refined public relations campaign that sheds lights on Europe's existing achievements rather than Europe's wishes and envisioned plans. This would raise awareness about the EU's work in the southern neighbourhood amongst the different communities and can prepare these societies to be more receptive of Brussels' policies, interests and capacities.

For Brussels and key European capitals, the questions of identity and perception of the Mediterranean region must not be dis-

regarded in favour of their future vision. In that context, North Africa's feelings of injustice and rapprochement with the EU's competitors like China and Russia are symptoms of a desire to play a bigger geopolitical role and decide on the future of their strategic and foreign policy directions. Europe's patronising practices and language, including attempts to guide the political transition after the 2011 and 2019 uprisings, raise suspicions and rejections across North Africa. Moreover, societies across the southern neighbourhood are not fond of the EU's language that portrays the latter as a moralistic regional power defining other countries' social norms. Europe should address the southern neighbourhood's countries as "equal partners" to bypass cultural differences. This implies understanding this region's sociopolitical realities from a local perspective that builds on history and anthropological identity.

While Europe has a right not to undermine universal human rights, it cannot enforce its values on others. Understanding the limitations of Europe's moral views leads to endorsing the "right to choose" as a powerful strategy aimed at commercialising, rather than imposing, the EU's model for future generations in the southern neighbourhood. Furthermore, this approach would address the accusations of a "superiority complex" that Europe is often associated with and elevate southern countries into being truly "equal partners" for the EU. Such a new rhetoric could then be policy-applicable by facilitating new balanced forms of commercial and technical cooperation especially on innovative dossiers such as digitalisation and emerging technologies.

Conclusion

Finally, new developments such as the post-COVID focus on the digital transition and war in Ukraine ushered a change in

global dynamics. The EU is at the heart of these geostrategic calculations and will assume a great responsibility, especially in its immediate neighbourhood. Therefore, European capitals must review and adapt their regional strategies to the changes and realities of today's world. The Southern Mediterranean is particularly critical for Europe's future and should constitute a major facet of Brussels' vision. In that sense, developing Euro-Mediterranean cooperation beyond today's limitations will not only require new policies but also a new narrative.

Throughout the past decade, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has been hostage to the status quo of Europe's short-term interests and the southern neighbourhood's volatile instability. A new European narrative must bypass the classical frameworks of security and democracy promotion to build solid bridges with the emerging post-revolt generation across North Africa at a time of technological advancements. European capitals should take advantage of existing historical and sociopolitical links with their southern partners without indulging in orientalist and paternalistic behav-

ours. At the same time, the future of Euro-Mediterranean ties is in sectorial joint ventures and economic partnerships. Brussels' rhetoric should consider the development's needs of North Africa and construct a new media campaign to feature Europe's role and achievements.

In the end, Europe is at the forefront of the new geopolitical battle for strategic influence. The great power competition is not restricted to the ongoing war in Eastern Europe but has already expanded to other spheres like Asia and Africa. For European capitals to assert their regional autonomy, the southern neighbourhood is a vital piece of the EU's overall policies. Countering the influence of regional and global geopolitical competitors means that Europe should develop a cohesive, united and long-term approach to foster new alliances with its southern partners. This endeavour will, however, be futile without the incorporation of this region's youth segment. Ultimately, Europe may have numerous possibilities to strengthen its posture, but it must embrace a proactive narrative that reflects its policies and interests.

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