



FUTURE OF EUROPE OBSERVER

Vol. 8 No. 3 November 2020

Post Pandemic Prospects in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

In this joint special issue of the ZEI-MEDAC Future of Europe Observer, Master Fellows "Class of 2020" and scholars from the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) in Malta and from the Center for European Integration Studies (ZEI) in Germany write about the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Euro-Mediterranean region, displaying the latest product of the longstanding cooperation between both institutions.

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The Covid-19 pandemic is the most adverse peacetime shock to the global economy in over a century. The economic consequences of this evolving crisis will impact negatively both developed and developing countries for years to come. In the past decade the Mediterranean has witnessed its fair share of upheaval as a result of the Arab Spring revolutions which saw different degrees of political and economic turbulence play out in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and outright conflict in Syria and Libya.

After a decade of continuous transition, the Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed even more uncertainty and instability across the MENA region. The severe economic contraction in sectors that most Mediterranean countries are dependent upon such as tourism will have a multiplier effect across all areas of the economy. The resultant loss of jobs, investment, and the downturn in future economic prospects will put more pressure on governments to deliver support to their respective citizens or suffer civil societal upheaval on a scale not witnessed to date.

The Covid-19 crisis will thus accentuate further the disparities that exist

across the Mediterranean area. Economic downturn will give rise to instability everywhere but especially in the developing states of both North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Mismanagement of the pandemic will lead to further uprisings in the decade ahead that could result in shifts to either stronger democracies, or even more likely, militant autocracies.

In Europe, northern European states and southern European states also face a solidarity challenge that is essential to address successfully if the EU is to remain a relevant player in global and regional relations. At a regional level Euro-Mediterranean relations risk being overwhelmed by the emergence of a permanent north-south geopolitical fault-line. The temptation to erect a cordon sanitaire between the EU and the southern shore of the Mediterranean must be avoided at all costs. Just as the EU needs to avoid a north-south divide from emerging between its own members it must also ensure that a north-south divide does not emerge across the Mediterranean. Only robust political and economic leadership at a Euro-Mediterranean level that seeks to implement a strategic plan of action engaging all Mediterranean

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states and countering forces of paralysis and fragmentation will be able to assist in mitigating the numerous sources of instability across the Mediterranean region.

Of course much will depend on the length and severity of the pandemic. Will the economic downturn be a profound one that has a multiplier effect for more than a generation or be equivalent to a sabbatical from regular economic cycles? If the health crisis leads to less development in the decade ahead across the MENA region, this could lead to a collapse of current systems of governance and the emergence of more failed states. Such a scenario of increased instability would give rise to a regional setting where a tidal wave of economic migrants will seek to cross the Mediterranean towards Europe in an effort to escape from the impoverished post Covid-19 reality.

While turning back the clocks is obviously not an option what strategy is required to ensure that Mediterranean states land on their feet post pandemic? It is apparent that all Mediterranean states will face common challenges in post-Covid-19 times as a result of the international economic downturn that impacts all sectors including the very important sector of tourism.

In order to arrive at a viable regional agenda for recovery it is essential that political and economic leadership maps out a sustainable development program that makes the Mediterranean a more attractive foreign direct investment location than hitherto the case. Managing the ramifications of the historic Covid-19 crisis in an effective manner demands that a Euro-Mediterranean summit be called to address challenges in a collective and coherent manner. This international initiative will be tasked with addressing issues pertaining to education, health care, and tourism and focus on launching a common Mediterranean infrastructure development plan that generates tens of thousands of jobs in all countries.

More specifically the Euro-Mediterranean Recovery Plan should address a number of strategic objectives. First, it should help southern Mediterranean governments move their citizens away from the overcrowded coastal belt. By 2035, living conditions along the coasts will become increasingly unbearable. It

will therefore become imperative for almost all of the southern Mediterranean states to develop their respective “hinterland,” the Sahara. Egypt and Algeria have already started to move in this direction. This means creating jobs, schools, hospitals, and above all housing for tens of millions of people every year, away from the present urban centres, towards more attractive living conditions. While this is a huge challenge the post Covid-19 moment of generating employment provides an opportunity when such an immense undertaking should take place.

The EU should therefore discuss with its Mediterranean partners a long-term strategy for settling some 100 million people away from the present urban centers, as Brazil, Nigeria, and most recently China have done. Such a program should become the biggest public-private investment and employment program ever undertaken in the Mediterranean. It should provide for the most advanced technology of “desert living,” climate-adapted housing, solar energy, and road and rail connections. It could give a tremendous boost to a modern Mediterranean culture of living and technology by drawing on experiences in the south-west of the US, Dubai, and Brazil. The EU would also learn from this experience. It would have to finance part of the blueprints and the advanced technology to be applied.

The success of coordinating post pandemic Euro-Mediterranean relations will be determined by the extent to which interaction between these two adjacent regions of the Mediterranean contributes to an improvement in the standard of living of all peoples. A more integrated engagement should focus on immediately enhancing Euro-Arab R&D in the field of innovation, especially when it comes to renewable and alternative energy.

Second, the EU needs to give a boost to education. There will not be sustainable development without improved training and technology. This is the Mediterranean’s weakest point and their largest disadvantage in the international markets. The EU should therefore commit the bulk of the future ENP funding to education, training, and technology. It should:

- Help, in particular Egypt and Morocco to provide 100 per cent of children with primary

education with modern curricula;

- Massively finance teacher training;
- Encourage the MED countries to establish “Arab Erasmus and Bologna programs” of student exchanges and quality improvements of their universities;
- Encourage European public research institutions to twin with their Mediterranean counterparts and thereby help them raise their performance;
- Engage in a meaningful program of scholarships for PhD students in computer technology, science, and engineering.

Strengthening such practical policy dialogue mechanisms is essential in the ENP (2020-2030) perspective if one is serious about integrating the Mediterranean partners close into the fabric of European society.

The Euro-Mediterranean Recovery Plan must also make available a substantial scholarship scheme for university students from Euro-Mediterranean partner countries and increase mobility grants for higher education staff.

Education is a sector where much more needs to be done. The European Commission together with its member states needs to trigger both public and private stakeholders to work hand in hand with a long-term perspective to attract a larger number of Arab students to their shores. This will of course require an updating of procedures for visas, making them more user-friendly for such a category of professionals.

Future Euro-Med programs need to ensure that people-to-people interaction is at the forefront, especially young people as the Anna Lindh Foundation Young Mediterranean Programme has been championing. It is essential that a much larger number of students from the Arab world are given the opportunity to study in the EU. The Bologna process must be made functional to them. The same goes for joint EU-Arab research projects. The EU must introduce a package of programs that seeks to tap into the wealth of intelligence in the Euro-Med region via scholarships, seminars, and other initiatives.

When it comes to diplomatic training, Malta has already established itself as a regional center of excellence in the Mediterranean through its educational and training

institution, the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) where over 800 graduates from across the Mediterranean and beyond have been trained in the last 30 years. Between 1996 and 2012, MEDAC together with the European Commission and the Maltese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also responsible for coordinating the Euro-Mediterranean Information and Training Seminars. The Malta Seminars were an official confidence building mechanism of the Barcelona Process where more than 1,500 diplomats had the opportunity to interact. The time has come to re-launch such a Euro-Mediterranean diplomatic training program and to emulate this exercise in Euro-Mediterranean diplomacy in other areas such as that of justice and home affairs so that a future generation of professionals from other sectors also have the chance to share a similar experience

Third, the Euro-Mediterranean Recovery Plan should give a boost to renewable energy. The Mediterranean requires more expertise in modern technology. This is one area in which the Mediterranean can become world leaders. Few countries on earth offer so many favorable opportunities for the major three or four most promising technologies for producing renewable energy at competitive costs. Mediterranean states have ample sunshine throughout most of the year and 10,000 km of coastlines with good to excellent wind and wave conditions, especially on the Atlantic and Red Sea coasts.

Why not marry these natural advantages with the EU’s rich experience in the design and use of renewable energies and engage in a comprehensive and long-term EU-Mediterranean development effort in a post Covid-19 recovery program? Both sides would immensely benefit from such joint undertaking, which would have to involve public and private research institutions, solar companies, utilities, and developers.

The EU would benefit in the following domains:

- It would open a new big market for large-scale application of its technologies in its immediate neighborhood under ideal conditions.
- It would be able to diversify its energy supply from fossil to renewable by importing “clean” electricity from Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, all of which dispose of ample fields for

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installing large solar fields (both PV and solar-thermal) to be connected to the European-Mediterranean grid under construction.

The Mediterranean would benefit in four ways:

- By making its energy supply sustainable beyond the times when fossil sources will reach depletion.
- By cooperating more closely with European research institutes in the development of more sophisticated research facilities.
- By getting involved in the manufacturing and installation of solar/wind/wave facilities, jointly with European partners.
- If Israel were to be involved, by creating peaceful research and commercial links with Israel.

What needs to be done to make this dream become a reality? First, the European renewable energy industry has to realize the long-term opportunities of teaming up with Mediterranean partners. Second the European Commission has to back such a cooperative approach by offering adequate political and financial support. It should play the catalyst role in bringing the two sides together. This is a long-term venture, but the post Covid-19 job creation moment offers a context within which such an endeavour should be launched.

The longer-term objective of an enhanced political dialogue between the EU and the Mediterranean world should be to foster a more conducive political and economic environment within which a cooperative security dialogue takes shape. The Covid-19 crisis has forced everyone to reflect seriously on what type of sustainable well-being modality of development is necessary in a world of eight billion people. The Euro-Mediterranean area must devise its own regional post Covid-19 security strategy if it is to emerge stronger in the new world reorder of the twenty first century.

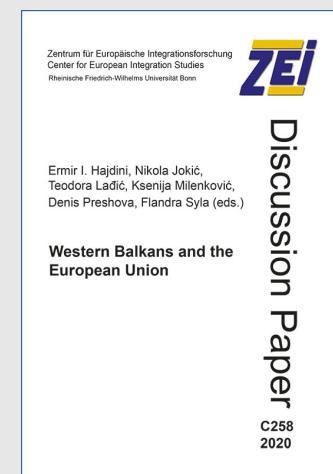
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ZEI Discussion Paper C 258/2020

In this paper, ZEI Alumni from the region, representing a wide range of emerging leaders, express their frustration, but even more their expectation: The new EU leadership must complete the unfinished agenda of EU enlargement in the next few years should the EU not be blamed for loosing the youth of the Western Balkans.



What is to be Done to Reactivate the Economy on Both Sides of the Med?

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic continues to threaten the economies, health, and societies of countries worldwide. For the Mediterranean region, the fight against the pandemic has proved to be an especially challenging one. This is true for both the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, where the battle has been fought with a limited amount of economic support as well as limited access to healthcare. In March and April, the Northern region of the Mediterranean experienced the second largest outbreak of the disease, before any aid measures were established by the European Union. This article will first provide an overview of the economic impact of the Coronavirus in the Northern, Eastern and Southern regions of the Mediterranean. To conclude, this piece will discuss the possible prescriptions that could remedy the damage incurred on the economies of the Mediterranean.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on all parts of the Mediterranean. In Italy and Spain, the Coronavirus exposed a glaring weakness of the existing European economic system when it comes to dealing with emergencies. The system in question is the Just-In-Time (JIT) inventory system (Caroline Banton 2020), which sees a producer, in this case a state, order an amount of raw material that matches production schedules. This meant that when states began imposing various restrictions in the hope of mitigating the virus, the chemical and medical equipment manufacturers were unable to match the hike in demand (Constantin Tsakas 2020).

Northern Mediterranean countries have also experienced economic troubles because of the unpreparedness of their healthcare system and their large debts. In the case of Northern Italy, where the healthcare system received 8.84 per cent of GDP in 2017, the exponential rate of infections and thus the rising demand for intensive-care beds led to a system collapse (Sara Ronco 2020). Furthermore, Covid-19 hit Italy at a time when the Debt/GDP ratio stood high, specifically at 134.8 per cent in 2018 (Eurostat 2020). Prometeia predicts that this rate will grow to 150 per cent by the end of 2020. Even though a steady trend of economic improvement could be observed in Italy in the lead-up years to the

outbreak of the pandemic, the damage induced by Covid-19 can be observed more tangibly in Italy's agricultural economic sector. Coldiretti, Italy's largest agricultural association, has said that 27 per cent of the labor required to harvest Italy's seasonal crops was covered by a seasonal foreign workforce and thus the imposed mobility restrictions endanger the state's production rate. This may cause a dangerous domino effect, as Italy is a key player in the Global Value Chain.

The economic impact on the Southern and Eastern regions of the Mediterranean was even more significant due to other pre-existing factors, namely the socio-political conflicts and the lack of strong economies. On the surface, if one looks at the cases of Lebanon, Algeria, or Jordan, it can be observed that these states have gradually restarted their economic activity from May onwards. In the case of Jordan, all restrictions have been lifted. The reason for this has not been the eradication of the virus though. It is because in middle-income countries that also have very high youth unemployment rates, such as Algeria, whose under-30 age group comprises 70 per cent of the total population, 25 per cent of whom are unemployed (Bouandel 2020), cannot afford to keep their economies shut for an extended period of time. Despite the reopening of economies, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has estimated that Arab countries could stand to lose 1.7 million jobs this year as well as a 42 billion dollar loss in the region's GDP.

It is now evident that the economic impact has been significant across all parts of the Mediterranean. It is thus important to analyze primarily the possible remedies that could reactivate the economies of the region and the responses that governments have made in the form of aid packages to help economies recover.

Rebooting Mediterranean economies must account for climate change. This is a crucial point as the Mediterranean basin is witness to a 20 per cent higher rate of warming than the global average. The link between second economic policy and climate change can now serve as an opportunity for economies to be restructured in such a way that mitigates environmental pollution and thus avoid potential future crises (Nasser Kamel 2020).

The path to recovery is two-fold: the short-

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term and the long-term measures. The short-term consists of solidarity funds that governments should use to aid companies that have been impacted by Covid-19. At the end of the pandemic, it would also be wise for governments to establish a financial aid plan for small businesses (Constantin Tsakas 2020) given the fact that a large portion of the Mediterranean receives its income from this SME sector. In the long-term, states must unveil reconstruction plans with realistic funding estimates that account for all the aforementioned factors that have plagued the Mediterranean.

The responsibility for this lies in large part with central banks, which must play their crisis-mitigating role. This is already being done to a large extent, for example in Tunisia, whose central bank has already injected 9.9 billion dinars to aid its banks' quantifiable liquidity. However, it is not only central banks that have to play their social role – private banks must prioritize their social responsibility through means such as loan postponements/furlough and relaxing their requirements for private businesses to take out loans. Such measures would allow for a win-win situation, where the private bank helps its society at no expense to its own business. Lastly, repayment schemes and debt relief plans must be considered for the poorer states in the region, of which there is a considerable amount. Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) will have to be consulted and adhered to, to ensure recovery a plan being successful.

Ultimately, the path to recovery will be complex and needs to rely on cooperation as the simple but key principle across the Mediterranean. Regional projects must continue to develop and furthermore bring together actors from the EU to realize a full recovery. Cooperation strategies regarding healthcare, tourism, governance, renewable energies, trade, fiscal measures, and technological development must be enacted for economic growth to come about. What better time could there be for acting on a long held intent than during a pandemic when all parties need it the most?

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The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Water Sector in the Mediterranean

Water supply in the Mediterranean has remained a point of high concern and contention throughout recent decades. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic however has exacerbated the situation, renewing the urgency for a more collective approach to be adopted by the concerned states and the creation of effective policies which go beyond policy papers.

Analyzing why exactly water is such an important resource for the Mediterranean may at first seem unnecessary, considering the basic fact that it is the essence of life all over the planet. However, further research shows how truly particular to the region some aspects are. The Mediterranean region is currently experiencing an average warming rate which is 20 per cent greater than the rest of the world (“Mediterranean Countries Share Water Emergency and Recovery Plans to Tackle the Aftermath of COVID-19 - Union for The Mediterranean – UfM”, 2020) meaning also that the region is facing the mounting repercussions of global warming more than any other area in the world. Amongst these are effects directly threatening the already limited and unevenly-distributed water resources of the region, such as “reductions in average annual precipitation, increased variability in the frequency and intensity of precipitation events, increased average temperatures that result in higher evaporation from dams and reservoirs, and increased urban and irrigation water demands.” (Ferragina 2009). As highlighted at the 2011 Bonn Conference, water security is one of three main pillars, along with food and energy security, which are all deeply interrelated (Hoff 2011). Thus, with a threatened water supply, the Mediterranean region is risking problems in other linked essential sectors and at a disadvantage in the process of building a green economy (Hoff 2011). Notwithstanding the natural setbacks, various Mediterranean states have been and still are building stronger and more diversified economies. As the number and dimension of industries increased, so did the demand for water. Amongst the most popular sectors are in fact productive industries such as agriculture and manufacturing, tourism also depends on an ample and reliable water supply.

As a result, 3 out of 4 jobs in the Mediterranean region are water-dependent (“Mediterranean countries share water emergency and recovery plans to tackle the aftermath of COVID-19” - Union for the Mediterranean - UfM 2020).

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a great equalizer. Engulfing the whole world in a matter of few weeks, it has brought countries of all kind – big or small, coastal or landlocked – on a common platform. Paradoxically however, whilst highlighting vulnerability and thus the need for a more collective and collaborative plan of action on all common issues- the pandemic has also made already-present socio-demographic divisions become even more pronounced. In the midst of the pandemic, perhaps very few of the people living on the Northern and Western shores of the Mediterranean worried about water supply. National and social concerns in these areas were instead much more focused on the availability of specialized treatments and equipment to combat this novel virus. On the other hand, due to a naturally-occurring imbalance of natural water sources in Mediterranean Southern and Eastern states, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria were already experiencing water scarcity at differing levels, before the pandemic, and are thus more prone to water shortages during the health emergency as demand for water grew. Indeed, over 24 million people in the Mediterranean Arab countries do not have access to soap and water to wash their hands as recommended by the general guidelines (ESCWA, “Moving towards Water Security in the Arab Region”, 2019). Other countries have also experienced such shortages, such as Turkey, whilst various countries have had to reroute substantial amounts of water to combat this emergency (“World Environment Day 2020, A Time to Think the Way Forward”, UfM 2020). In this way, the Mediterranean can be regarded as a microcosm of the world, where different sociodemographic standings contributed to different levels of efficacy in tackling this global health emergency. Such shortages are also especially threatening as water is an essential resource for development, and thus its absence contributes to wider “social and territorial imbalances in the Mediterranean” (Scoullos and Ferragina 2010). Apart from water scarcity, the safety of water has also been put into question after traces of the Co-

vid-19 virus were discovered in wastewater treatment plants. This uncertainty is especially damaging for various crucial Mediterranean industries which rely on considerable amounts of treated water to sustain their activities, such as agriculture (“World Environment Day 2020, A Time to Think the Way Forward”, UfM 2020).

As the saying goes, “one does not know the value of the water till the well runs dry”, and indeed the direct effects of the pandemic on the Mediterranean water supply have also helped push this long-standing issue further up political agendas. Although there has long been knowledge of the limited availability and uneven distribution of water resources in the Mediterranean, this new and unexpected shared obstacle is currently serving as a source of renewed vigor for collective initiatives to better manage the water sector in the Mediterranean region. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in particular has been on the forefront of leading such initiatives, building on its “Water Agenda” - a proof of its recognition of water management as a crucial issue, globally, but also especially for the Mediterranean. Right at the beginning of June, a meeting with more than 100 participants from 21 different countries representing more than 30 regional expert organizations met, which reaffirmed the need for collaboration and reminded the participants to “maintain a focus on meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and not jeopardise the progress made over the last decades” in their efforts to rebound from the impacts of this pandemic (“Ufm Water Agenda: Looking For Responses To The COVID-19 Crisis And Challenges”, UfM 2020). Malta will soon be hosting the 4th Mediterranean Water Forum, which is to serve as preparation for the 9th World Water Forum in Dakar in 2021.

The ongoing pandemic should be viewed as an ideal opportunity to re-examine, from their foundations upwards, the way our economies and societies work. In this process, water security should take prominence. Through both national and trans-border dialogue and negotiation, as exemplified in the mentioned initiatives, new ideas on how a better paradigm is to be built can be conceived and shared. The essential goal is to ensure the provision of water as a basic commodity for everyone around the Mediterranean shores and not only as a luxury to be enjoyed by those well-positioned. This

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would enable social progress through “poverty eradication, peacekeeping, progress in human development, gender equity, and the safeguarding of public health” (Ferragina 2010). Of course this change also necessitates the support of private and government funds (Nikol 2020) to benefit from and spur new scientific and technological solutions (Ferragina 2010). Moreover, a principal change that needs to take place is indeed within the minds of us all- in recognizing that we all have the power to contribute, with even the smallest of our everyday actions, in lessening water wastage and encouraging its better use and a more even distribution around the Mediterranean and beyond.

Paradoxically, whilst demanding isolation, the Covid-19 pandemic has also in many ways served as a wake-up call to remind us that we do not live in isolation. Each choice we as individuals or our governments as our representatives make, is intimately linked to our planet and humanity's welfare.

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The Perception of China in the Mediterranean during Covid-19: The cases of Italy and Greece

Covid-19 brought the world to a standstill. It also affected the world order, as the rising power China got an opportunity to improve its image by helping vulnerable countries in need of medical assistance to cope with the pandemic. While the US President Donald Trump was busy accusing China of being responsible for the spread of the pandemic and calling Covid-19 the “Chinese Virus”, China was busy building its image and strengthening its relations with countries hit hard by the virus. China, on the one hand, adopted a more assertive mode in its neighborhood while, on the other hand, it showed friendliness to countries in different parts of the world including EU member states through its health diplomacy. This article analyzes China’s perception in the Mediterranean during the Covid-19 pandemic and focuses on the cases of Italy and Greece.

Two Sides of China during the Pandemic: Mask Diplomacy and Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

During the Covid-19 pandemic, China experts could observe two sides of China’s diplomacy. Mask diplomacy was the term given to China’s diplomatic efforts to improve its image as a responsible global leader. In March, the epicenter of the pandemic shifted from China to the rest of the world, particularly to the US and Europe. In order to show a friendly side, China started its mask diplomacy by providing medical supplies along with sending its medical teams to countries, including Italy, fighting the Covid-19. Contrary to this, China has also been very aggressive during this pandemic. The assertiveness has been dubbed as ‘Wolf Warrior Diplomacy’ where Chinese officials directly hit back using social media platforms at any criticism against the ruling Communist party of China or the state itself. There have been many targets ranging from media to political targets of China’s Wolf Warrior Diplomacy. Beijing’s ambassador to Stockholm assertively said, “We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns.” (The Economist, Fe-

ZEI Europe Dialogue with then EU Commissioner Christos Stylianides



First-hand insights on current EU politics: ZEI had the great pleasure of welcoming then EU Commissioner Christos Stylianides from Cyprus on 11 October 2019. Our Master Fellows, resident and visiting researchers as well as alumni used this unique opportunity to discuss pressing global issues such as the EU's role in mitigating the humanitarian consequences of the Syrian Civil War and the Union's disease control initiatives. After delivering a passionate speech on the need for multilateralism, the Commissioner furthermore provided ZEI with valuable background knowledge on how the European Commission's external policies actually work. To learn more about the field of humanitarian aid and crisis management, have a look at Commissioner Stylianides's ZEI Discussion Paper, which is available online: <https://tinyurl.com/yywzr3xn>

February 20, 2020) This sums up a shift in China's diplomacy towards assertiveness. Simultaneously, China has not left any stone unturned to improve its image as a responsible global leader and mask diplomacy is part of such efforts.

Changing Perception of EU-China Relations

This was supposed to be the year of Europe-China diplomacy with a series of high-level summits concluding with President Xi Jinping's visit to Germany. Europeans are cautious of a damaging rift with China. There has been mounting anger over the behavior of China during the Covid-19 pandemic as observed during the diplomatic talks. As a result, just when China had an opportunity to demonstrate global leadership, as it tried through its mask diplomacy, its pandemic crisis management eroded trust. Reinhard Bütikofer, a German Green Party lawmaker, who chairs the European Parliament's delegation for relations with China, said that China has lost Europe over recent months. He alluded to concerns over China's management of the truth in the early stages of the pandemic and to the hard line propaganda highlighting the Chinese Communist party's rule over democracy. He also cited concerns over extremely

aggressive stances by China's ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said, "It is the pervasiveness of an attitude that does not purvey the will to create partnerships, but the will to tell people what to do," rather than any single act responsible for the breakdown of relations. In part for fear of retribution, European officials are traditionally less willing to openly criticize China. Nevertheless, politicians in Brussels, Paris and Berlin have expressed concerns over transparency in China's narrative of Covid-19, leading towards a deeper anger with potentially wide-ranging consequences. EU member states are already working on policies to lessen dependence on China along with keeping a check on potential predatory Chinese investments, measures that could hurt EU-China trade worth approximately 750 billion dollar in 2019 (Crawford & Martin, 2020). Thus, EU-China relations are not at their best currently. In contrast and despite concerns expressed by the EU politicians, China's perception in the Mediterranean, particularly in Greece and Italy, remains generally positive.

The Perception of China in Italy

Bilateral relations between Italy and China entered into a new phase when Italy became the

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first G7 country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) after signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in March, 2019. Italy's joining of the BRI brought in high expectations along with critique and support, in terms of cultural, economic and financial fallout. In August 2019, the political landscape in Italy was completely redefined after a crisis hit Northern League/Five Star Movement coalition was leading the Italian government. By the rapprochement with Beijing, the relationship between Rome and Brussels and generally Rome's friendship with Washington were put under stress. Despite the fact that these factors constituted a well-known challenge, their relevance and complexity were more apparent after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic (Russo, 2020).

According to China Mediterranean website , a University of Torino research platform promoted by Torino World Affairs Institute, , Italy was probably the only country in Southern Europe where Chinese "Mask Diplomacy" proved to be effective despite accusations against China's conduct as being cynical. In a recent poll carried out by the SWG polling company, China is ranked first by the Italians as the friendliest country. Between 2019 and 2020, positive opinion grew by 42 per cent (from 12 percentage points to 52 percentage points). Furthermore, according to poll results, 36 per cent of the correspondents believe that in the future, Italy should align with China while 30 per cent of correspondents favor a close relationship with the US. To some extent, credit for such public support in favor of China should be given to the media reports during President Xi Jinping's visit to Italy in 2019 and also to the fact that more media coverage was given to the Chinese medical aid than American aid.

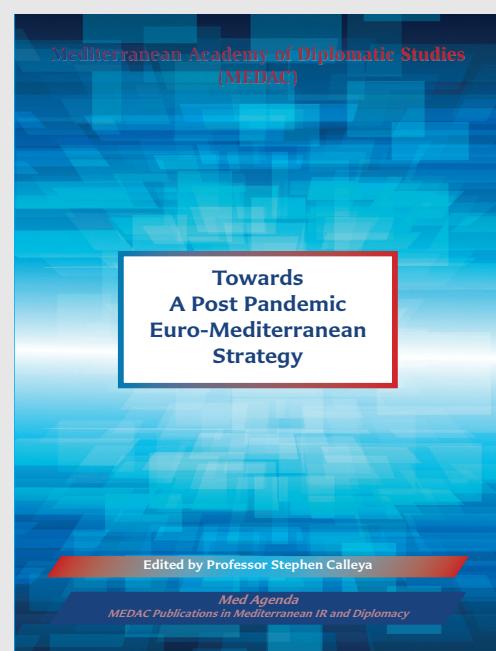
The perception of China among the ruling party of Italy is positive. However, the Democratic Party of Italy is apprehensive towards China's mask diplomacy and considers it as China's gimmick to divide the west. Senator Alessandro Alfieri argues that the geopolitical focus of Italy should remain with the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance. Many of Alfieri's colleagues in Italy's Democratic Party believe that China has two main goals to achieve in its relations with Italy. Firstly, in order to counter its

negative image in Europe, which is based on the fact that the outbreak originated in China, China is propping up its soft-power through health diplomacy. Secondly, China's better relations with Italy will provide it an opportunity to regain momentum for BRI-linked projects which are yet to be fully developed. For example, the port of Genoa and Trieste could be crucial for China's Maritime Silk Road, while China's Digital Silk Road will get a new impetus by introducing 5G in Italy (Russo, 2020). Therefore, Italy holds a strong significance for China's geoconomics in the European Union. Italy's friendliness towards China will provide China with an impetus to leave its footsteps in the Mediterranean as well as in the EU.

Perception of China in Greece

Diplomatic relations between Greece and China date back to the 1970s. However, since 2006, relations between the two have upgraded to a Strategic Partnership, aspiring to maintain mutually beneficial and multi-level cooperation (Greece MOFA). Moreover, Greece is the latest country to be part of China's "16+1" cooperation making it "17+1", which China views as a 'win-win' situation for all countries participating in the initiative and also for the EU. However, opposing voices consider it China's divide and rule strategy that will only benefit China at the cost of the European Union.

The Covid-19 pandemic has cemented the Chi-



na-Greece relationship. The Greek government immediately expressed its sympathy after the outbreak of pandemic in Wuhan, China. The Greeks were more concerned to defeat the pandemic at home rather than engaging in a blame game. In a similar context, Sino-Greek cooperation has remained positive as criticism of China only appeared in the international section of the news. China also provided medical aid to Greece when the pandemic arrived there. During that time, Chinese Ambassador to Greece, Zhang Qiyue, wrote an op-ed titled, “The Single Soul of Empathy in our Bodies” in which the ambassador eulogized China-Greek relations (Tzogopoulos, 2020). Moreover, perception of China among the Greeks is generally positive. According to China Mediterranean website, a University of Torino research platform promoted by Torino World Affairs Institute, 43 per cent of poll correspondents put China among the winners of the current situation. Moreover, despite the decrease in President Xi’s popularity by 16 per cent to 37 per cent, he still remains more popular than US President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. These trends delineate positive perceptions of China despite the polls showing that 44 per cent of the Greeks believe that China is responsible for the Covid-19 spread, which is slightly more than the 39 per cent who do not consider it a man-made virus. Thus, China holds a strong influence in Greece despite strong opposing voices across the Atlantic alliance.

Conclusion

The perception of China in Italy and Greece is generally positive. For China, its health diplomacy bears fruitful results in the Mediterranean. Positive relations with Italy and Greece provide China with strong ties within the European Union. Despite President Trump’s rhetoric against China, the perception of China has not been affected much across the world. China’s diplomatic efforts, dubbed mask diplomacy, bore fruits for its positive image particularly in Italy and Greece, which will help China promote its BRI within the region. However, the pandemic is not yet over and it is yet to be observed how China will be perceived in a post-Covid-19 world.

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II. Mask Diplomacy and Risks to the Rule of Law

The Democratic Toll of Strong Anti-Pandemic Measures: The Case of Montenegro

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed different emergency concepts and unprecedented efforts of countries to contain the spread and to revive their economies. One of the emerging phenomena was the restoration of strong governments in the century of liberalism. Even without an in-depth analysis we can observe the side effects have led to even greater disruption of the legacy of liberalism: The respect of fundamental rights and the rule of law. In the second quarter of the year 2020 the epicenter of pandemic moved towards the Mediterranean and recently more precisely to Balkans, the same concerns occurred in these countries.

The case of Montenegro, a small-size country in the Mediterranean that is also a candidate country to European Union, could serve as a good example of how some government responses and emergency concepts were problematized and criticized as inappropriate and unnecessary amongst the democratic population. The question of sacrificing democracy for the sake of public health and for the purpose of absolute supremacy in controlling every aspect of peoples' lives, arose as dominant.

During the first two months of the pandemic in Montenegro, the government seemed to follow the path of the Western European countries by closing borders, putting restrictions on social gatherings and distancing rules, in some cases even further precautions like prohibiting inter-city transportation and introducing periodical curfews. The fears of people, due to a poorly evaluated health care system, ranking the country among the lowest in the Europe, the government managed to compensate with a firm and immediate response that managed to slow down the expansion of virus for a certain period of time. However, some government moves have been severely criticized by NGOs working on democracy development and monitoring of the protection of human rights and the rule of law.

Civil protection: The rule of law or emergency clause

Among the first critics of the government's actions were accusations, made by the opposition that the government was abusing the situation to act without democratic checks and balances. At the center of debate was the absence of parliamentary sessions in the first weeks of the pandemic, as well as the establishment of the national coordination body for containing the spread of virus (NKT), which was considered to have been created unconstitutionally, as there was no consultation of the parliament. The second point of dispute was the exclusive right to put in place a range of measures and post-corona development strategies that was delegated to this body, with no procedure of ratification or parliamentary agreement as required, but rather a communication through reports of so far accomplished results. The additional doubts were related to the composition of this body, it was said to be political as only pro government and politically eligible experts were involved, followed by criticism of NKT statements that were seen as having political content, targeting opposition parties and influencing other institutions and branches of power, thus going beyond the scope of the envisaged duties. The exclusive right of assessing necessary measures and using the financial funds during the whole period also stayed with the NKT, which on the other hand offered periodical reports on spending and donations to public. The cases for the assessment of its legality and legitimacy at the moment are still before the Constitutional Court. Nevertheless, the government would have had the right to take full control over the situation, if it had declared a state of emergency, which was not the case due to a lack of constitutionally required conditions.

Respect of fundamental rights: Freedom of speech and right to privacy during the pandemic

As many measures were necessarily restricting fundamental rights to some extent, the possible abuse and unjustified limitation of the same, can be assessed based on the statement on the processing of personal data in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak of the European Union, published on the 19th of March 2020. Many NGOs in Montenegro used the statement and prescribed tests of proportionality, necessity

and appropriateness of measures to accuse the government of an actual abuse. The most frequently discussed measure was the publication of names and addresses of people that returned from abroad and were forced to be self-isolated for 14 days (later extended to 28 days) with the explanation of societal surveillance of disobedient neighbors. Here, numerous fundamental human rights (right on privacy and protection of family life) were violated and the violation was praised by the government. It was also considered to be supportive of more worrying acts that occurred, like a leaking of the list of infected people, exposing them to many threats, along with a creation of an app that could detect the distance of those people that were on the mentioned lists. These subsequent acts were criticized but the publication of the initial list was still praised as necessary and efficient by the government. Furthermore, the inconsistency of the penalties for people that broke the measures, brought concerns of disproportionate and selective enforcement. Together with apprehending people for spreading misinformation and imprisoning them, these actions were condemned by NGOs and foreign embassies, as disproportionate and a threat to freedom of speech, thus spreading people's fear of sharing their opinion in public and criticizing of the government. The number of cases and such responses by the government and of state prosecutors, still represent a major concern among human rights observers in Montenegro.

As soon as the number of infected hit zero, after two months, many of these actions became irrelevant and an assessment of their implications for democracy was unnecessary for the general population. Controversial measures and rigid rules were rather accepted and unconditionally supported by majority. This also puts a doubt on the quality of political culture and human rights protection awareness of a society as a whole. Though the justification came along with results, the measures actually proved to be unsustainable, as the economy hit the bottom and every economic analysis showed the dramatic consequences due to a collapse of tourism (accounting for about a fifth of the whole economy) and the fact that necessary reopening of borders led to a return of the virus. As estimated by the IMF, tourism-dependent countries like Montenegro, have

been hit the hardest and will require the longest recovery period. In the case of Montenegro the estimated drop in GDP of nearly 9 per cent in 2020, the country will need a period of 2-3 years to rebound to the pre-pandemic GDP level.

Due to solidarity of many countries and especially the European Union, a large amount of money and equipment was donated, but also due to huge loans from the IMF (emergency loan worth 83.7 million dollar under the IMF's Rapid Financing Instrument) the government was able to meet the loss in tourism revenue and a necessary increase in government's expenditures to fight the pandemic. Nevertheless, further recovery still depends on very unpredictable indicators, such as: The rate of new infections, the relaxation of containment measures in countries where the majority of tourists come from, the medical advancement of treatments, and the dent to disposable incomes globally.

The situation remains unpredictable and many concerns have not been properly resolved by the Constitutional Court of Montenegro, it is unforeseeable how the developments of pandemic and new future elections would affect a future government's actions and further implications on democracy and human rights. What stays, as a concrete concern, is a lack of critical thinking and the low level of democratic awareness of people that could result in further violations of human rights.

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III. Post-Pandemic Conflicts = Pre-Pandemic Conflicts?

Implications of Covid-19 on Security Sector Reform: Perspectives from the MENA region

It is evident that the health emergency has been securitized across the globe (see for example Krasna 2020)). Consequently, as Trenkov-Wermuth argues, “(t)he coronavirus pandemic will have long-lasting repercussions for governance, justice, and security” (Trenkov-Wermuth 2020). The question about what impact such developments have on security sector reform (SSR) in the MENA region will be raised in this essay.

This essay applies a “whole of society” approach to Security Sector Reform (SSR), which includes state security providers and state justice providers; non-state security providers and non-state justice providers; oversight and management bodies as well as public and civil society oversight bodies (Bryden / Chappui 2016, 6). However, it focuses on state security providers and civil society actors and in particular their empowerment (or disempowerment). A broad understanding of the security sector leads towards a broad understanding of SSR as the process through which a society seeks to review and/or enhance the effectiveness and the accountability of its security and justice providers.

An analysis put forward by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) on the pandemic responses of 66 countries concludes that the less a political culture is open to civilian participation in decision-making and accountability, the more likely it is to allow for indefinite emergencies and disproportionate securitization with military personnel assuming control of the decision-making process. (DCAF 2020, 17) Ultimately, these findings imply that states that have problems in the realm of SSR are likely to exacerbate those with the type of response that they assume to the pandemic situation. This is certainly also the case in the MENA region where the hope of advancing SSR measures ignited by the Arab Spring events in 2011 has largely given way to disillusionment. Since the Arab Spring events, SSR efforts have been undermined by conflict (especially in Syria and Libya) and resurgence of military rule

(especially in Egypt and Algeria), although some progress has been registered in Tunisia and possibly to some extent in Morocco.

The fact that most MENA countries securitized their response to the pandemic and relied heavily on the security sector will further affect the SSR agenda in the region. This dependence on the security sector has not always resulted in proportional responses, and in some cases granted special powers to the state security providers. To give an example, in Egypt, the health emergency has been used by the regime to put into place legislative amendments, which will give additional sweeping powers to President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and security agencies, without a time-horizon for their withdrawal.

MENA countries quickly enacted extraordinary legal measures and declarations of states of emergencies. MENA states have had a long history of using and abusing such measures. Algeria was under emergency rules for some 20 years, and Egypt for even longer (Human Rights Watch 2020). Even Tunisia has been under a state of emergency since 2015, following a terrorist attack.

Civil society actors such as civil society organizations, but also protest movements

ZEI-MEDAC Workshops

The cooperation between ZEI and MEDAC dates back to the origins of both institutions in the late 1990s. Since 2010, ZEI and MEDAC hold annual workshops in Bonn on the most burning issues of the Mediterranean agenda including as asylum, economic and security policies. The workshops bring together ZEI Master Fellows with young diplomats studying at MEDAC.



and the media were restricted not only by the exigencies of the health crisis and any necessary containment measures that were put into place but also by heavy-handed interpretations of the measures and direct crack-downs on dissenters. (Yerkes 2020) The crackdown on the Algerian protest movement and the prosecution of thousands of Moroccans for violating the state of emergency illustrate this trend further. (Laaroussi 2020) (Aissani 2020) Lynch argues that in the MENA region “(r)egimes will seize this opportunity to shut down what had been a robust regional protest wave and seek their recurrence.” (Lynch 2020, 4)

Since 2011, Tunisia has been somewhat of an exception in the region. The pandemic arrived at a difficult time for Tunisia, which experienced political deadlock and a wave of public discontent and which according to some observers was at some risk of backsliding towards autocratic practices. However, many observers agreed that in its pandemic response Tunisia’s government “is unlikely to abuse these powers or resort to excessive force” (Abouzzohour 2020, 51) and that “overall, there have been encouraging signs of democratic checks and balances preventing a broader militarization or securitization of the crisis.” (Wehrey 2020)

Although the pandemic situation is a relatively recent experience and its full impact cannot be fully glimpsed yet, it is possible to say that in the MENA region the health crisis resulted in securitized responses. It empowered state security actors through emergency provisions while at the same time leading to sidelined civilian authorities, disempowered civil society actors and more often than not, to crackdowns on media, dissent and protest movements across the region. These developments further tip the power gradient away from civil society actors towards state security actors, in a region that has been marked by heavy reliance on state security actors, especially the military, in the context of assuring regime security. At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that the Covid-19 health crisis highlights the crucial role of SSR in the MENA region and the need for support from its European partners.

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III. Post-Pandemic Conflicts = Pre-Pandemic Conflicts?

Covid-19: An Opportunity for Further Decentralization in Libya

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a large part of the world in a state of emergency, characterized by uncertainty and extraordinary measures. The pandemic has affected all organs of the state and has called into question the viability of the world order as it is. However, one thing that did not seem to be slowed down by the global pandemic is the cycle of conflict. Here, in Libya, we have seen the littoral states of the Mediterranean Turkey, Egypt, France and Italy in direct political confrontation and military involvement. As the warring Libyan governments remain occupied with forging new and solidifying old international alliances and focusing on territorial gains locally; municipal councils and local actors have been left alone in the fight against the spread of the pandemic. Despite being underfunded, understaffed and often, plagued with corruption and nepotism, structures of local governance remain the only political entities able to deliver services to the population. With all the complications, Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for further decentralization and for the strengthening of local government structures and increasing trust between citizens and political actors. This article will look at the failure of the two central governments to impose regulations for controlling the spread of the pandemic, the role of the municipal councils in the Covid-19 response and possible ways to better equip municipal councils for further decentralization.

Covid-19 has put an extra strain on the central governments in Libya as the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) militarily backed by Turkey is battling the parliament-backed Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) which is militarily backed by Russia for control over the capital and various important oil fields. Whilst the GNA and LAAF mobilize for war, other actors have taken the lead in fighting the global pandemic. Both Libyan governments have created various committees and issued declarations for curfews in the hope of limiting the spread of the virus, whilst pledging millions of dinars towards the Covid-19 response. However, with many of the policing and armed forces fighting on the front lines, few were left to enforce curfews con-

sistently. The lack of social support measures, the difficult financial situation and the ongoing conflict have only exacerbated the situation and the curfew collapsed a few days after it was announced as citizens had to leave their houses in search of work or refuge. The political and geographic isolation of different regions in the country as a result of the ongoing conflict and political division has also affected the central governments' ability to provide services. Decisions taken by the central governments were often not implemented outside Tripoli and Benghazi, the strongholds of both governments. For many rural citizens, they did not fit their reality. Overly centralized governments geared for war are much less likely to be sensitive to the needs of local communities. In fact, a legacy of centralization has left Libya with an unequal spread of medical resources and health facilities as well as a huge reliance on a few main cities. United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) highlighted on numerous occasions the extent of corruption and money laundering that has plagued the executives of Libyan governments. The war economy was used to buy allegiances of different armed groups as well as fund the ongoing conflict. Big budgets have been allocated though to fighting the spread of Covid-19 but this opens the door for further corruption. For example large Covid-19 related contracts are given to people who owe allegiance to the governments.

However, amidst the struggles of the central government to fight the spread of the pandemic, various unilateral initiatives were being implemented by municipal councils and city-based community organizations. Municipalities were collaborating with citizen associations to conduct sanitization initiatives, distributing required products such as masks and were able to mobilize local communities. The work of municipalities remained limited though due to issues of funding and a lack of knowledge on how to tackle health emergencies. However, they were closer and more in touch with local actors to ensure their effective involvement. In the Libyan city of Misurata, the council coordinated with local businessmen to prepare facilities for quarantine and to import required medical equipment. This happened before the central government was able to designate quarantine facilities for the Libyan capital. Munici-

cipal councils are also much less occupied with the civil conflict and are more likely to prioritize the wellbeing of the residents due to their direct local accountability. In the municipality of Abu Slim in the Libyan capital, municipal councils launched initiatives to support the elderly through a community-support initiative. Municipal councils are also better equipped to understand the capacity and capabilities of their region and are better at implementing certain measures. In fact, various municipalities have imposed travel restrictions on their cities for incoming and outgoing people, which governments later imposed on all cities.

The empowerment of municipal councils also ensures better transparency and accountability. It is difficult for citizens to hold a distant politician who resides in the country's capital accountable. This is especially the case where extraordinary measures are taken and extra powers are put in the hands of the executive and the judiciary is suspended due to the pandemic. Furthermore, we have seen that citizens are much more engaged with municipal councils. This does not mean, however, that municipal councils have had no record of corruption, but it means that corruption in municipal council tends to be more obvious and visible. Citizens are thus able to effectively engage in discussions regarding corruption.

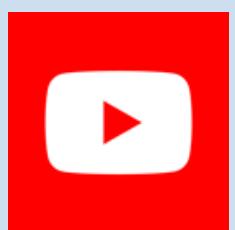
One must not overlook the various obstacles facing municipal councils responding to the Covid-19 threat. Municipal councils lack the skills and expertise that are available at central ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, and might not be able to design the right measures. However, the Ministry does not have the ability to enforce its measures on different localities without the support of municipalities. In matters requiring medical expertise, it becomes essential to engage municipal councils no-

nethless to ensure that measures are framed in a manner that is applicable in the locality. Nor can we overlook the influence that unofficial armed groups and militias have over some municipal councils, which opens the door for the redirection of funds armed groups. In smaller political entities, such as the municipality, the relationship between the local communities, local armed groups and municipal councils is one in which local armed groups derive their power and legitimacy from support of the community. In fact, we have seen that armed groups take an active role in supporting the local communities in times of crisis. It is this dynamic that creates a loose dependence between the three actors. However, it is essential that the transfer of funding to municipalities is done under regulatory scrutiny. The scrutiny of the Audit Bureau, which has been one of the few functioning bodies of accountability in the country, as well as the classification of the type of contracts that the municipality could engage in for the Covid-19 budget, could provide some safeguards from money laundering and corruption.

Whilst neither central nor local governments in Libya have the capacity to provide a response to Covid-19 that is as effective as in other countries, municipalities have proven to have a better record of dealing with crises. Central governments are too focused on their war force and security concerns to act effectively. Any action by central governments regarding Covid-19, is unfortunately framed in a manner to be used for political gain. It is, therefore, essential that we call for further decentralization in the Covid-19 response in Libya.

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III. Post-Pandemic Conflicts = Pre-Pandemic Conflicts?

Standing in its Own Way: The EU in Syria

The conflict in Syria has been raging for nine years and yet the EU has so far only assumed the role of a bystander, rather than actively contributing to the settlement of the conflict. This is in spite of the fact that the EU has a particular interest in peace and stability in Syria, given the number of refugees that have come to Europe and the domestic political consequences this has had. The reasons for the EU's passiveness are manifold and often external factors have played a crucial role. Much has been written about the involvement of powers like Russia and Iran and how it has impacted developments on the ground and prevented the EU from getting involved more directly. What has not been discussed often, are aspects within the European Union that have kept the bloc from making a difference on the ground. That is what this article will attempt to do.

One shortcoming in the EU's policy on Syria are certain miscalculations. When the Arab Spring started in Syria in 2011, the EU assumed the uprising would take a similar course as in other North African countries and come to an end relatively quickly. EU policymakers did not imagine the violence that would soon erupt, let alone that the protests that started as peaceful calls for democracy would turn into a proxy war. When it became clear that the conflict would not be settled quickly, the EU responded with condemnations and sanctions. The assumption was that the weight of the bloc and its economic importance for Syria would cause the regime to back down – another miscalculation. The EU underestimated the extent to which Russia and Iran would seize the chance of pursuing their own interests in the region and provide support to their longtime ally, Assad. Due to this support, Syria was able to alleviate the repercussions resulting from the EU sanctions, which meant that they had little to no effect on the regime. To make matters worse, being no longer able to exert pressure through trade or funding projects meant that the EU had robbed itself of the only way to exercise influence on the Syrian government.

Another aspect in the EU's Syria policy is a lack of a common approach. This is a general shortcoming in the EU's foreign, security and defense policy. Consequently, there is little

guidance upon which the EU can base its Syria policy. There are only two strategies on Syria and the region that were drafted in 2014 and 2017 respectively, which heavily rely on UN Resolution 2254 and the UN Geneva Communiqué. This lack of a common position has been shown throughout the conflict, for instance, when France was isolated in its call for military intervention in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the civilian population in Ghouta in 2013 (which was intensified when the Obama administration too refrained from taking action despite having previously defined the use of chemical weapons a red line). A similar situation occurred in 2018, when France and the United Kingdom decided to join the United States in airstrikes against the Syrian regime in response to the renewed use of chemical weapons, this time in the city of Douma. While the remaining member states expressed their understanding of the measures taken, they merely called for the resumption of negotiations.

The question of how to deal with Damascus in the current state of affairs and which role Assad is to play in a future Syria is equally controversial among member states and shows the lack of a common ground. The camps are divided between what can be described as a principled and a pragmatic approach. The former is characterized by a focus on values and the opinion that Assad is unacceptable as the leader of a future Syria. In March 2020, Germany, France and the United Kingdom in a joint statement reiterated their adherence to the existing EU position with its focus on UN Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué and the political transition these documents envisage. Other European countries like Poland, Austria, Italy and Hungary take a more pragmatic position and are more inclined to acknowledge new realities on the ground, including accepting that Assad has won the war and will not go anywhere anytime soon. Some of these latter countries are now promoting re-engagement with Assad, arguing that a technical dialogue is the only way for the EU to have at least some influence in the shaping of Syria and that a failed state cannot be in Europe's interest as the resulting instability in the region would entail the risk of new waves of refugees and further radical movements.

Further erosion among member states is emerging in terms of reconstruction funding. Lucrative investment opportunities for European companies are currently blocked by sanctions and the conditions the EU has defined for a contribution to reconstruction: a genuine political transition must be underway. It comes as no surprise that in light of growing economic interests in Syria, some member states are increasingly questioning sanctions and adopt their own interpretations of the vague reconstruction conditions, often depending on the interests of domestic companies. France, for instance, follows a rather narrow interpretation of the conditions and opposes what is called resilience activities like rehabilitation services in regime-controlled areas. Germany is generally supportive of small-scale rehabilitation measures in regime-controlled areas under the UN Humanitarian Response Plan but places a greater emphasis on lifesaving and protection measures, while the Visegrád states single out projects they feel politically comfortable to support. In mid-2018, for example, Polish deputy foreign minister, Andrzej Papierz, payed a visit to Damascus, where on behalf of the Polish government he offered to pay for the construction of 100 houses for Christian Syrian refugees currently residing in Lebanon, to enable them to return to their home country. The problem the EU currently faces is that prohibiting reconstruction funds and investment aggravates the economic situation on the ground and the living conditions of the Syrian population. This is even more true in the current precarious Covid-19 situation. Not only would this make the return of refugees even more unlikely, it could also play into the cards of ISIL and re-fuel radicalization. Conversely, providing financial assistance to the regime whose policy caused the uprising in the first place would put the EU at risk of legitimizing Assad.

Another issue that divides the principled and the pragmatic camp and that has seriously challenged the EU's cohesion in recent years is the refugee crisis, which in fact is also closely linked with the issue of reconstruction. The harder countries were hit by the influx of refugees or the more they are opposed to taking them in, the more inclined they are to the pragmatic approach. They push for re-engagement with Assad to push the reconstruction of Syria forward. Italy, one of the hardest hit countries and often left to its own devices by the EU, has

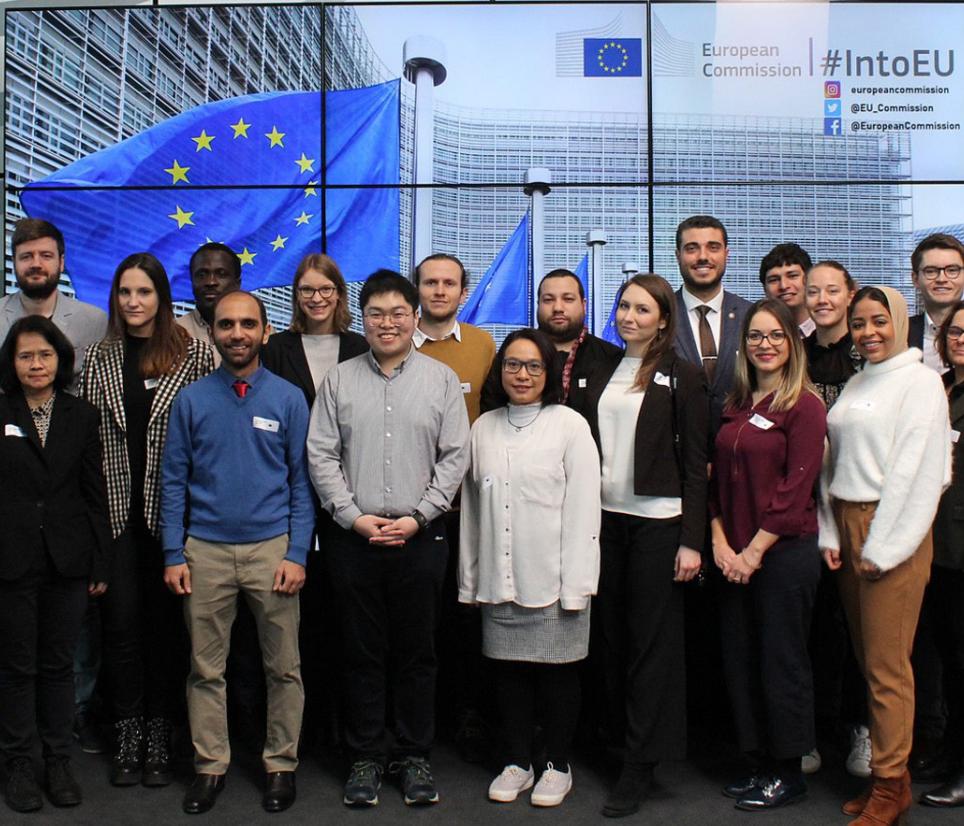
adopted a hardline policy on refugees that has included denying rescue ships carrying refugees to dock at Italian ports. The Visegrád states have adamantly refused to accept irregular migrants, citing national security as a reason. In contrast, the principled camp opposes rushed re-engaging with the Syrian regime and believes that a political solution to the conflict will reduce the pressure of refugees in the EU. For example, while being pushed by domestic pressure from the right to promote the strengthening of Frontex and adopt a tougher stance on illegal migrants, France has still accepted large numbers of refugees and favors a fair distribution system based on solidarity. The same holds true for Germany, which has also promoted an increase in Frontex's capacities while campaigning for an EU-wide approach and burden-sharing with frontline countries such as Italy and Greece.

The lack of a common action plan on Syria and diverging positions on reconstruction funding and the refugee crisis show how big a role domestic affairs in the member states play in the way the EU deals with Syria. By putting domestic interests first, the member states have paralyzed themselves and threatened the EU's cohesion. The pragmatic camp has a point in arguing that limited re-engagement is the only way for the EU to exercise some influence and safeguard its interests. Giving up all principles and values, however, come at the cost of the EU's credibility. Should the bloc decide to re-establish relations with Syria, it must first clearly define its objectives on the ground and adopt a common approach, one that strikes a balance between principles and pragmatism. Pursuing 27 different approaches, no matter how pragmatic or principled they are, will not do the trick.

Jette Knapp is a ZEI Master Fellow "Class of 2020".

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IMPRINT

ISSN: 2196-1409
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The Future of Europe
Observer is published three
times a year. Authors are
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