



# Policy Brief

February 2008

The King Baudouin Foundation and Compagnia di San Paolo  
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## Union for the Mediterranean, disunity for the EU?

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### Background

In speeches from Rabat in 2005 to Toulon in 2007, presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy set out his “Mediterranean dream” of *rapprochement* between the two shores, saying the time had come for “the Mediterranean and Europe to realise that their destinies are tied together”.

Behind the vision were both domestic political issues and a bid to reassert French influence in the EU, as well as in North Africa and the Middle East, and to try to shift Turkey from candidate for EU accession to member of a looser framework for regional cooperation. The proposal suggested a desire to re-brand France’s traditional *politique arabe* and to shake up the enlarged EU by giving new impetus to Paris’ traditional role in the European integration process.

In Toulon, Mr Sarkozy fleshed out his vision: to establish something akin to the EU in the Mediterranean region, and go beyond existing policies, allegedly weakened by Europe’s focus on the East. He

mentioned the possibility of creating a ‘*Conseil de la Méditerranée*’ and suggested various areas for common policies – such as the environment, migration, the fight against terrorism and organised crime, or a common judicial space.

After his election victory, work began on turning this ‘dream’ into a reality, while at the same time the Quai d’Orsay recast the project’s ambitions in light of the reactions from possible partner countries during President Sarkozy’s numerous trips to the region (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Jordan) and in Europe itself, during which he alluded to the Mediterranean Union project but without giving it much substance.

#### A lukewarm reception

Despite his efforts to co-opt partners, President Sarkozy’s enthusiasm is not shared by many: the official policy of the EU institutions, other Member States and most South Mediterranean countries is to ‘wait and see’ what final shape

the project takes, without making great efforts to hide their unease in the meantime. Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers merely took note of the initiative, but underlined their expectation that it would be “complementary to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership”.

A few have been outspokenly critical. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in particular, openly accused France of excluding non-Mediterranean countries in an attempt to sideline existing EU policies and hijack European funds to support French foreign policy initiatives. London announced that it would not spend an extra penny on the project, and Ankara denounced the plan as a ploy to bar Turkey from EU membership (although it said that it would participate as long as the project did not damage its path to EU accession).

The French were not prepared for such opposition from their European partners: the German reaction was

especially important, as Chancellor Merkel insisted on Germany's right to participate fully in the process (an issue between Berlin and Paris which remains unresolved).

Given these tepid or even negative reactions, France has been gradually scaling down its grand vision. The Quai d'Orsay is still working on a concrete proposal to present to its partners at a conference in July 2008, under the French EU Presidency. The government also appointed a special ambassador, Alain Le Roy, who has shuttled between the European institutions, national capitals and think tanks to try to convert the sceptics and pick up ideas for improving the project. Paris has, in other words, begun seeking consensus *ex post* on an idea that it did not discuss in advance with potential partners but now cannot

afford to either drop or pursue in isolation.

For the Mediterranean Union to develop any credibility, France needs Spain and Italy on board; i.e. the countries that, with France, have driven EU policies towards the Mediterranean to date. Yet even in Madrid and Rome, caution – if not scepticism – has been the dominant sentiment.

Both have strong interests in the Mediterranean basin (Spain has a particular attachment to the Barcelona Process) but consider collective EU participation crucial to share the burden of meeting the challenges from the Southern Mediterranean, with illegal migration top of their agendas. But, the success or failure of their bid to 'Europeanise' Sarkozy's project largely depends on the underlying motivations driving the French proposal.

The wording of the '*Appel de Rome*', jointly launched by the three countries just before Christmas, reflects French diplomats' efforts to move towards their European partners' expectations.

Spain and Italy have decided to participate as much as possible in every stage of the project's development in order to be able to adjust it if need be. The three governments have agreed to systematic coordination of their preparations for the Mediterranean Summit in July, and their leaders are expected to undertake common visits to some South Mediterranean partners to present the revamped initiative. Furthermore, to avoid any confusion between the 'Mediterranean Union' and the 'European Union', the project has now been renamed the 'Union for the Mediterranean' (UMed).

## State of play

In almost a year of speeches and declarations, references have been made to many institutional formats that might inspire the UMed: the G8, the Council of Europe, the Helsinki Process, a 'group of willing states' and a 'union of projects'.

None, however, has generated much enthusiasm, although the G8 model is still canvassed by the Elysée as the most likely option, with a rotating sequence of regular summits to be held alternatively on the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Whatever the external shape of the final product, some of its basic aspects now seem clear. The 'Union for the Mediterranean' will essentially be a forum for intergovernmental cooperation, with a small secretariat possibly flanked by several agencies dedicated to specific fields of cooperation. Non-governmental organisations, including companies and local authorities, are explicitly

mentioned in the '*Appel de Rome*' as key players in implementing cooperation in the field, although their role in designing the initiative, choosing areas of cooperation and directing projects is still unclear.

The UMed is scheduled to be launched at a summit on 13-14 July held under the aegis of the EU Presidency – a move designed to address partners' concerns. It will, however, be preceded by a meeting reserved for countries which have Mediterranean shorelines. It is hoped that participants will agree on a common 'declaration of principles' and the creation of a secretariat, approve a list of concrete cooperation projects and draft an agenda for future meetings.

### Ins and outs

The exact 'geography' of participating countries is not yet fixed either. The Quai d'Orsay has been exploring several options since last summer:

- a strictly Western Mediterranean project (which would be much easier for the French, given their relations with the Maghreb states);
- involving the full Mediterranean perimeter, including the Balkan states (which would make more symbolic sense for a regional initiative but would obviously entail many political hurdles and unknowns);
- an enlarged option, including all EU Member States and other countries interested in Mediterranean issues, such as the Gulf States.

The final choice will probably resemble the second option, with the UMed starting from the Mediterranean rim proper plus Portugal, Mauritania and Jordan, with the EU Presidency, the European Commission and the Arab League as full members, and the possibility for other countries or regional institutions to participate as associate members or observers.

If the UMed's architecture and geography have not generated great enthusiasm among Sarkozy's partners, the fields of cooperation identified so far might well be more appetising. The 'union of projects' envisages selecting a number of areas in which stronger *ad hoc* cooperation could be sought, allowing participants to cherry-pick partnerships in energy, trade, migration control, cooperation between small- and medium-size enterprises, education, and

pollution control (to make the Mediterranean, as President Sarkozy put it, "the cleanest sea in the world").

According to the French, the 'union of projects' approach is inspired by EU founding father Jean Monnet's functionalist method and his *solidarités de fait* (fostering solidarity through concrete achievements).

Core policies, such as conflict resolution or political reform and

democratisation, are being excluded in favour of small-scale cooperation in key areas of common interest, with the aim of improving the overall political climate in the region. The Quai d'Orsay has drawn up a very extensive shopping list of possible areas of cooperation and is expected to publish a shorter list of about 20 projects which could, ideally, be launched immediately after the July summit. As far as funding is concerned, the French insist on public-private partnerships.

## Prospects

The key question, however, is whether the UMed will be primarily a national initiative to revive French leadership at the regional level, or whether – if redirected properly and with a more cooperative logic and inclusive style – it will help strengthen Europe's presence, influence and visibility in the Mediterranean.

These two main options do not just reflect marginal nuances: what is at stake is whether the idea was conceived to bypass the collective dimension of EU foreign policy in favour of stronger bilateral and *ad hoc* ties, or whether it is meant to serve as a driver to innovate common EU policies towards its Southern neighbours. If it is the latter, what added value could it bring?

### Pros and cons

The Quai d'Orsay argues that UMed will inject new political impetus into strengthening relations with the South through summits, the creation of new and jointly designed projects, and the involvement of the private sector. French officials also insist that it will not interfere with existing EU policies, including enlargement.

Those who have welcomed the initiative see it as a chance to give a new lease of life to

existing EU policies towards the region. It would give a boost to the oft-considered moribund Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and reach out to those countries that have not been enticed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which introduced stronger bilateral incentives for countries keen to deepen their relations with the EU by jointly selecting areas for further cooperation.

France also presents the UMed as the long-awaited initiative that could bring some coherence to all the existing cooperation initiatives in the Mediterranean, building bridges and filling gaps between the '5+5 Group' (which was launched by France in 1990 and includes Italy, Spain, Portugal and Malta, plus the five Maghreb Union countries: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia), the Med Forum, the EMP, the ENP and other schemes. The function of UMed summits would be to bring up new ideas, as the G8 does: in this framework, the secretariat could act as a co-pilot for Mediterranean regional programmes.

With such a broad list of participants, however, it is hard to see the UMed as a pioneering forum for new ideas to be passed on to the Barcelona Process, as the '5+5 Group' occasionally

manages to do, especially if the link with other EU policies is not spelt out more clearly.

This said, the project's framework will probably give everyone involved more room for manoeuvre. Countries like Algeria, an energy supplier which does not see the advantages of the ENP, and Libya, which so far has not been interested in upgrading its observer status in the EMP, could use the UMed to boost their trade and energy relations with both France and Europe without having to subscribe to the binding conditions the EU attaches to existing policies.

Getting these countries involved, however, comes with a price tag: it would mean compromising on the requirement for all EMP member countries to subscribe to the principles set out in the United Nations Charter (which some countries, such as Libya, do not wish to do). This would undermine the EU's clout and credibility in the political dialogue with its Southern neighbours.

Again on the plus side, regional and sub-regional co-operation – a dimension that was slowly dying in the Euro-Mediterranean context and is presently lacking in the ENP – could be revived on a case-by-case basis, with a view to closer engagement with Mediterranean countries and

developing projects that produce common benefits.

On the other hand, it is likely that the UMed will focus overwhelmingly on the immediate concerns of the EU members involved, such as migration control, border management, and access to energy sources and markets.

The first casualties would be the broader themes and issues that the EU has painfully introduced into the cross-shore political agenda, under the impulse of some Northern EU members and with the support of the Commission and European Parliament, such as pan-regional security, dialogue on political reform and human rights, and civil society exchanges. However weak such EU initiatives, the UMed may challenge this delicate balance between interests and values.

The issue of financial resources is not irrelevant either. Paris has raised the possibility of attracting private funders and creating an investment bank for North Africa and the Middle East (a previous proposal led to the creation of FEMIP, the Mediterranean branch of the European Investment Bank). Fund-raising for smaller *ad hoc* projects could be facilitated, especially if new potential donors, such as the Gulf States, are brought in.

The UMed is also supposed to attract non-state actors, notably by mobilising private business – a new attempt to drive the Mediterranean out of strictly public-sponsored economic development schemes.

However, it will be hard to stretch the blanket of economic assistance much further than it is now. There is a risk that the UMed will duplicate structures while also

competing for already limited resources, especially if the projects are in areas already covered by the EU's broad assistance programmes in the region.

From a strictly legal viewpoint, there is also concern about how the various sources of funding the French intend to mobilise would be employed: the use of EU resources outside the scope of EU external policies has been questioned, notably by Chancellor Merkel.

### **Renationalisation or regionalisation?**

There is, of course, ample scope for improving EU policies towards the South Mediterranean and for introducing new projects, including specially-tailored initiatives. If the UMed pioneers further cooperation, it would certainly be a welcome initiative. However, the debate so far demonstrates that deeper issues are at play.

The strictly intergovernmental and voluntary structure of the UMed could well drive a wedge not just into the EMP and ENP, but also into EU foreign policy as a whole. The main risk is of a further intersection and overlap between different EU policies towards the region, upsetting the delicate balance that has been carefully reached over the years between Northern and Southern EU members, between the various interests at stake in the Mediterranean, and between the Southern and Eastern spheres of the Union's neighbourhood.

These internal EU differences have been the main reason for the patchy and uneven development of Union policies towards its South. The UMed could thus further damage Europe's credibility in the region by reviving old bilateral diplomatic channels which

hampered progress in the past and lead to a 'renationalisation' of existing common policies.

Madrid and Rome have so far been relatively successful in their damage-control exercise and in bringing the UMed closer to (but not yet in) the EU fold: Paris has clearly taken on board the need to keep its EU partners involved.

If this continues, it could eventually result in a degree of 'regionalisation' of EU foreign policy, with groups of Member States leading EU initiatives in specific geographical areas. This already happens in the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) domain when it comes to conducting peace missions, but less so in foreign policy proper.

Only the Northern Dimension – involving the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, and led by Finland and other Nordic EU members – can be seen as a precedent, but the key to its success lies in the fact that participating states ensured that the project is implemented by the EU as a whole.

Resorting to 'enhanced cooperation' could be a way to guarantee that such regional strategies are tied to the EU Treaty framework and consistent with existing EU policies. The Lisbon Treaty makes this possible, but it is essential to prevent a proliferation of regional sub-formats and interest groups and, with it, a creeping fragmentation of common policies.

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