

The Mediterranean Region as a Phenomenon and an Object of Analysis in the Field of International Relations

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This article offers an understanding of the Mediterranean region as a rare phenomenon in the international relations and consequently the non-uniform ways in which it is analysed within the science of International Relations. Three prevailing interpretations of international relations in the Mediterranean region are shown, namely the definition of the Med as an EU foreign policy object, as an inter-regional space based on diverse sub-regions and as an area of autonomous regionalisation process. Furthermore, scientific approaches analysing the three aspects are presented. A critical analysis and evaluations of both, the phenomenological and scientific domains of the region, leads to a conclusion where the author indicates the already notable and potential future implications of the research results for both, the political practice of international relations and the development of the science of IR.

Key Words: The Mediterranean region, political phenomenon, science of IR

The Mediterranean is not an institutionalised region in the form of a regional governmental organisation (RGO). However, it is one of the oldest regions in-the-making. Long before the institution of sovereignty was introduced, international relations were performed by other-than-state entities and the Mediterranean was perceived and lived as a unit, be it during the Ottoman Empire, Italian city-state merchant influence, the *Pax Romana* (3000 b.c.–565 a.d.), or the Arab hegemony from the 8th–13th Century (Calleya 1997). Various states have had an interest in the region since the 17th Century when domestic and foreign authorities fought for the access to the sea and tried to balance their power in this strategic trade area, deemed as the centre of the world (Amin 1989; Braudel 1990). If

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one looks only at the last century of its regional processes, the first formal governmental regional organisation of a strictly functional nature of co-operation was founded already in 1910, but ever since, only one other all-Mediterranean RGO, two sub-regional and one inter-regional have been founded, all having extremely low profile and non-political mandate (Bojinović Fenko 2009a).¹ A lot of initialled ideas of Mediterranean states for regional cooperation have been presented after the Cold War, but quite some have failed (Bojinović Fenko 2009a) and it is the EU that has since 1995 represented the most influential, even hegemonic regional actor in the Mediterranean (Pace 2006), namely by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), complemented by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Currently, the institutionalized but rather non-treaty based governmental co-operation in the field of regional politics is framed within the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The latter represents an upgrade of the previous EU-sponsored regional frameworks for cooperation with the southern Mediterranean partners. However, several factors such as the global financial crisis, persisting economic imbalance, ongoing territorial disputes, new security threats (such as terrorism, piracy), cultural disputes such as the 'Cartoon Crisis' and increasing ethnic intolerance in Europe contributed to weaken, and even block region-building processes (Panebianco 2010, 153). Cooperation in the Mediterranean region further failed to gain importance after the uprisings in the Arab Mediterranean in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st Century.² The provisions of the UfM's founding document – the Paris Declaration ('Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean' 2008) for tightening the institutional framework and diversifying cooperation into political and more functional fields (concrete economic, energy, education, development and environmental projects), have now resulted in practicing only those regional activities of the minimum common denominator; that is reflected in the 6 so-called priority regional projects, which are of primarily apolitical and exclusively functional nature. The latter are performed in the fields of De-Pollution of the Mediterranean, Maritime and Land Highways, Civil Protection, Alternative Energies, Higher Education and



Research, and The Mediterranean Business Development Initiative ('Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean' 2008, Annex). However, even agreeing on projects of technical cooperation is hampered by politicization.³ In sum, Bicchi's assessment (2012, 13) of the UfM's institutional logic intersecting politicization in nature of policy and bilateralism as types of instruments applied as well as Gillespie's (2012, 217) estimation of the UfM's project activity being 'technical' rather than politically-focused in character, have proven to be correct.

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In addition to the described non-treaty based mode of the UfM, the informality of the Mediterranean region has always been strengthening by non-governmental co-operation even during, but especially after the end of the Cold War (Šabič and Bojinović 2007). The UfM umbrella itself provides a special attention to civil society-based regional cooperation by placing The Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly and The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures as integral institutions of the Euro-Mediterranean relations ('Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean' 2008, points 17–18). Bojinović Fenko (2012) identified various types of non-governmental actors in the region, namely transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with Mediterranean offices, Mediterranean NGOs and multi-actor coalitions active in various fields of functional cooperation, such as environmental protection, sustainable development, water-related issues etc. (Ibid.). Especially EU-supported NGOs in the field of human rights and inter-cultural dialogue have spurred from the EU's support for development of the third basket in the EMP, namely the Socio-Cultural Cooperation on the basis of exchange and strengthening civil society, leading to assumptions of a new Euro-Mediterranean cultural identity (Panebianco 2003). Nevertheless, the three dimensions of Euro-Med cooperation, political, economic and identity dimension, have not been developing in parallel with equal speed nor results. Furthermore, the non-homogeneity of state and non-state actors in the Mediterranean region in terms of defining the needs and outcomes with respect to these three regional dimensions prevent the region to perform as a

[78] common project of and for the Mediterranean society. For this reason, from the perspective of prevailing cases of world regions, this is an unusual case of a region, on the one hand performing centuries of long non-state regionalisation process from within and at the same time struggling with regionalism as internal states' project for the last 70 years with strong pushes also from outside of the region.

Within the above defined problem, this article offers an understanding of the Mediterranean region as a rare phenomenon in the field of international relations and consequently the non-uniform ways in which it is analysed in the science of International Relations (IR). The method pursued in this research article is first, a thick description of the ontology of the Mediterranean region and second, a conceptual analysis of theoretical approaches in the field of IR explaining and understanding this phenomenon. Within the two parts of the article, a critical analysis and evaluations is performed of both. Conclusion indicates the already notable and potential future implications of the research results for the practice of international relations and the development of the science of IR.

THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION AS A PHENOMENON IN THE FIELD OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Its boundaries are not drawn either by space or time. One does not even know how to determine them and on what basis. They are not economic not historical, not state- nor nation-based: they are similar to a chalk-drawn circle which permanently appears and is being erased, a circle which is being widened and narrowed by winds and waves, works and inspirations.

Matvejević (2000, 16)

Since the Mediterranean lacks a presence in the form of an RGO, reference to it is sporadic and uninform. Especially in non-scientific contexts, politicians, experts and journalists mainly expose it in terms of well-known historical references, such as *mare nostrum*, oblivious of the fact that this notion already denotes the 'ownership' of the region to its northern societies; the Med being a natural



extension of Europe. These definitions appeared at the time of important regional political events, led by the EU, such as the signature of the Barcelona declaration in 1995 or the Paris declaration on the UfM in 2008 (e.g. *The Economist* 2008). A second notion in a rather more critical understanding of the Mediterranean is a reference to a 'sphere of influence', either in the historical cadre of colonisation and Cold-War power game of the two blocks or in terms of a more recent understanding of outside influence and presence in the region; not only by states but also by international universal and regional governmental organizations and global NGOs. According to this perspective, the Mediterranean is not defined only by Europe (as above) but by a *pleiade* of influential external actors. In brief, it is defined from the outside (Ismael and Ismael 1999; Leontidou 2004; Walters 2004; Moulakis 2005). The latter is highly representative by a discursive reference to the region, defined according to political pragmatism and the use for the external actors; the EU defines the region as Euro-Mediterranean, sometimes also Southern Mediterranean, or Southern Mediterranean Partners, when referring to security issues and unresolved conflicts the terms used are Maghreb, Mashreq and Middle East. When the post-Yugoslav space was treated as a post-conflict area, it was not defined as part of the Mediterranean by the EU, whereas Slovenia (since 2004 as the EU member state) and states of the stabilized Western Balkans region (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania) have been included in the UfM only since 2008, when the EU updated and thus reconceptualised its relations with the region. Calleya (2005, 42) estimates that this is a consequence of permanent changes in patterns and types of relations within the region. The USA, for example, as another influential actor, refers only to the Middle East or to the MENA region (Middle-East North Africa) (Craig 2004).

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After the Cold War, the perspective of understanding the Mediterranean changed from outside-in into a more inside-outward orientation. The latter was a result of various factors; the European Union enlargements and the strengthened interest in the southern neighbourhood (launch of the EMP), the breakup of Socialist Yugoslavia and the shift of Balkan Mediterranean states' interest from the Med

[80] to the South-Eastern Europe (partly France and largely Turkey and Greece), a renewed rise of Islamism and a new impetus for Israeli-Palestinian conflict solution (Aliboni 1996, 53–60). Despite this new centripetal trend, the region remained strongly penetrated by global international politics, as seen by the Gulf crisis and debates on democratization, fight against terrorism and so called ‘clash of civilisations’ in terms of variety of cultures. The notion that it is the diversity rather than commonalities that make up the essence of the Mediterranean region,⁴ is taken by Xenakis (1999, 257): ‘Mediterranean can be also seen as a network of diversities and dividing lines of co-operation between different socio-economic systems, political cultures and regimes, languages, forms of expression, and religions.’ Divergence is also taken into consideration when defining the Mediterranean in terms of conditions for and results of international development. Moisseron (2005, 25–38) refers to this phenomenon through a concept of ‘imbalanced actors’ in terms of the level of economic development and a strong trade and economic dependency of states in the Southern Mediterranean on Europe and from the perspective of the imbalanced demographical trends.⁵ Additionally, developing states and especially Arab critiques estimate liberalism as an unattractive plan of social and economic life because its fearless accentuation of individuality and competition weakens the community (Adler and Crawford 2006, 28–9).

Since 2011 political perspectives on the Med have resonated predominantly in linking the region as a space of transnational flows to sources of radicalism, international terrorism and religious fundamentalism (e.g. Drakos and Kutan 2003; Looney 2005; Fini 2006), and so have the critics of such one-dimensional framing of social deviation sources (Volpi 2006) and a political strategy of securitization by the EU in response to such definition of security threats (Bicchi and Martin 2006; Pace 2010). One of the recently highly exposed sources of instability and threat deriving from or through the Mediterranean is (illegal) migration, but this is far from a novel phenomenon; King (1998) has referred to the Med as Europe’s Rio Grande almost 20 years ago. Next to these transnational flows not liable to state-control, nowadays two main state-level obstacles pre-



vent closer regional cooperation in the Mediterranean, namely the unfinished process of state-building (Ayoob 1999, 251–52; Bill and Springborg 1999, Chapter 2) and (also partly in this context) a continuation of unresolved disputes and conflicts, especially Israeli-Palestinian (Adler and Crawford 2006, 29–30).

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On the basis of the above outlined various interpretations of international relations in the Mediterranean region, I can summarize that the latter is understood through three prevailing definitions: (a) as a neighbouring area and thus a foreign policy object of Europe, (b) as an inter-regional space, where diversity derives from different sub-regional units and (c) as an area of autonomous regionalisation process. In this framework, the area is also taken into consideration in the prevailing scientific literature on IR, which I will discuss in the following part.

THE MEDITERRANEAN AS AN OBJECT OF ANALYSIS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Mediterranean question has existed for less than three centuries. In classical and medieval times a Mediterranean problem was not possible due to a simple reason that there existed nothing but the Mediterranean. [...] The Mediterranean problem started with the British occupation of Gibraltar on 4 August 1704.

Federzoni (1936, 387, 389)

The influence of the EU on the Mediterranean is analysed within the literature of IR and European Studies. Predominantly, the reference is on the analysis of EU external action though the concept of actorness or foreign policy. Second to that is the placement of Euro-Mediterranean area into studies of inter-regionalism and finally, a handful of authors focus on the Mediterranean area from the perspective of regionalism and studies of regionalisation process. The focus of researchers on EU policies towards the Mediterranean has twofold implications; the enquiries of such studies mainly aim to assess the effects of EU foreign policy on the EU members states

[82] or the EU as a whole and only a small number of publications primarily assess the effects of the EMP, ENP or UfM for the Southern Mediterranean partners (e.g. El-Sayed 1999; Youngs 2002; Darbouche and Gillespie 2006; Pace 2006; Volpi 2006; Adler et al. 2006; Demmelhuber 2007; Bicchi and Gillespie 2012) what else the entire Mediterranean (e.g. Bin 1997; Stavridis 2002; Attinà 2003; Bojinović Fenko 2009b). EU foreign policy-focused studies assert a hegemonic position of the EU. All types of power in IR are conceptualized in this context, namely the EU's material power (security studies and realism) (Blank 1999; Biscop 2003; Balfour 2004), the EU's structural power (liberalism and political economy) (Kourtelis 2015; Lovéc 2015), the EU's discursive power defining the EU's Self though the Mediterranean as the Other (Pace 2006; Bicchi and Martin 2006) and EU's normative power (Tovias 2005; Bicchi 2006; Adler and Crawford 2006). The latter two approaches are strongly informed by social constructivism, imported from general philosophy of social science. Hegemonic influence of the EU on the Med is also conceptualised by referring to EU's strategy of 'buffering logic' (del Sarto and Schumacher 2005, 26), which as an effect reproduces 'peripheral dependency' rather than open regionalism (Joffé 2007).

Analysing the Euro-Mediterranean area within the studies of inter-regionalism is rather an alternative theoretical approach to the above described EU foreign policy focus. In this context, the Mediterranean is initially placed as an equal region to the EU despite the fact of its under-institutionalisation and inexistence in a framework of a formal region (RGO); thus rather common regional norms, values and practices of state and non-state actors are the focus of understanding – again strong elements of social constructivism (Bojinović Fenko 2009b). The above mentioned diversity of Mediterranean states' political systems, economic development, dispersed security and culture, and a partly visible but politically irrelevant idea of Mediterranean solidarity make Aliboni (2000) refer to the region as having a 'quintessential interregional nature'. A similar finding is noted also by Calleya (1997, 230); since pan-Mediterranean initiatives do not stand the ravages of time, states do not manage to develop such stability and intensity of relations



that a foreign policy of one of them would steer also the foreign policy of its neighbour. Within this approach, some researchers do not recognize the inter-regional nature of the Mediterranean due to its nascent nature but rather refer to a more static view of the area in terms of its sub-regions (Maghreb, Mashreq, Southern Europe, Balkans) (Aliboni 2004). Finally, some kind of inter-regional nature of the Mediterranean is researched within individual regional analyses of RGOS, in which individual sub-regions or states of the Mediterranean take part. However, there are very few cases of literature identifying overlapping political agendas of different regional spaces (EU, NATO, OSCE, Arab League, African Union and the UfM) (see Bojinović Fenko 2012).

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The third and the newest (still developing) approach to analysing the Mediterranean as a region is a presupposition of the area developing through a regionalisation process. This approach is conceptualized within the social constructivism-based New Regionalism Approach and presupposes a formation of an international region by all relevant actors (state-market-civil society), as a bottom-up spontaneous process – a response to globalization. Regionalisation is the actual process of increasing exchange, contact and co-ordination and may be caused by regionalism, but it may also emerge regardless of whether there is a regionalist project and ideology or not (Hveem 2003, 83). As in the Mediterranean, there are numerous non-state regional actors, such as NGOs, municipalities and cities as micro-regions, subnational regions, epistemic communities, research centres and businesses, this approach seems most applicable. In his historical analysis Calleya (1997, 67–8) refers to this nature of regional connections in the Med since the 11th Century as to ‘transnational area’. Some authors analysing individual regionalizing actors in this context are Jünemann (2002; 2003) and Feliu (2005), analysing the development of Mediterranean regional NGOs, and Youngs (2002), who assess that these actors have been empowered by the EU’s democracy promotion projects. However, as a consequence these bottom-up societal developments are understood as endangering the paper democratic regimes in some of the southern Mediterranean states. To gain legitimacy with the regimes, NGOs have ini-

[84] tiated so-called multi-actor coalitions (Šabič and Bojinović 2007, 330–1). These refer to cooperation between various types of regionalising actors at various levels of regionalism (states, NGOs, RGOS, subregions, inter-parliamentary) based in the region and external in different fields of regional cooperation, such as: environmental protection, sustainable development, economy and business, social development, human rights, culture, science and research, higher education and local governance (Bojinović Fenko 2012). Application of the New Regionalism Approach to the Mediterranean is performed by an analysis of levels of regionness, where the Mediterranean displays dynamic development of elements of regional society and regional community by various actors (Bojinović Fenko 2009b).

In this context, the historian Morris (2003, 43–5) refers to a so-called process of Mediterraneanization, defined as a process of connection. He criticizes the prevailing historians' views of the Mediterraneanism in terms of a long *durée* (Braudel 1990), defined as connectivity, mobility and decentring (Horden and Purcell 2002), as too static and focused only on the analysis of short-term changes extrapolating them though time. This type of analysis presents the region as already integrated, fixed, or rather as if these elements were its permanent features (Morris 2003, 46–7). Mediterraneanization seems very complementary to the above presented features of understanding the Mediterranean through a regionalisation process in IR; looking at the area as a dynamic place, changeable in space and time, enabling a more complex awareness of this process' outcomes for individual actors. Namely, some social groups and/or political actors prosper as winners and some regress as losers, thus the Mediterranean in some places and for some actors is more and for others less.

CONCLUSION

In this article I focused on developing an understanding of the Mediterranean as a phenomenon in the field of international relations and on presenting the approaches though which it is analysed in the science of IR. I have shown three prevailing interpretations of international relations in the Mediterranean region, namely the



definition of the Med as an EU foreign policy object, as an inter-regional space based on diverse sub-regions and as an area of autonomous regionalisation process. While the first and the second interpretations by referring to Euro-Mediterranean, Middle East, MENA, Southern Med Partners, Maghreb, Mashrek, Southern Europe or Balkans, blur not only the notion but the very existence of the Mediterranean region, the regionalization enables the understanding of the Mediterraneanization in space and time. The implications of the findings for political actors, especially for the EU, point to a need for a highly responsible use of definitions and references to the Mediterranean region in political discourse as for example discursive reference to 'partnership' or 'friendship' raises aspirations whereas 'common norms and values' may raise concern and ambiguity with the addressees. Additionally, what is also evident, is that various ideas on regional cooperation may also be contested at various levels and by different types of actors, which calls for an open dialogue among parties and action *in bona fides*. Finally, as the regionalisation process performs with different outcomes for different regional actors, the notion of power as the central focus of political science remains pertinent also for IR analysis. In this context however, the circumstance of Mediterranean states never having developed a clear and operational autonomous regionalism project and the fact that the main framework for governmental cooperation in the Mediterranean region, namely the UfM, currently remains un-operational due to several regional and domestic political and external factors renders a classical IR analysis of interstate RGO activities unfit. IR thus gets informed by a social science theory, which is sensitive to understanding social processes and non-state actors and groups, such as social constructivism and even performs complementary to a novel history approach.

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NOTES

- 1 Commission internationale pour l'exploration scientifique de la Mer Méditerranée, founded in 1910 (23 member states), Le Centre International de Hautes Etudes Agronomiques Méditerranéennes (CIEHAM) founded in 1962 (13 member states), European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization (EMPPPO) founded in 1951 (47 member states), Middle

East Mediterranean Travel and Tourism Association (MEMTTA), founded in 1995 – not operational, and l'Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA), founded in 1989 (5 member states) (Bojinović Fenko 2009a).

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- 2 Additional factors impeding inter-state cooperation in the region are: individual internal states' hegemonic or incompatible pretensions in the region (e.g. French, Spanish, Italian, Israeli), conflicting agendas of external states (e.g. USA, Russia); the big constituency of UfM participating states (44) and its unclear institutional structure; unresolved Middle East Peace Process, overlapping political agendas of different regional spaces (e.g. EU, NATO, OSCE, Arab League, African Union and the UfM), and political instability and the challenge of regime change in the Mediterranean (see Bicchi and Gillespie 2012).
- 3 For example, a sectoral meeting on fresh water in April 2010, where 'the participants agreed on all the technical aspects of cooperation on water, but the agreement fell on the concrete wording in terms of referring to the Palestinian occupied territories' (Johansson-Nogués 2012, 30).
- 4 The most illustrative in this sense is the title of an influential scientific edited book *Convergence of Civilizations: Constructing a Mediterranean Region* (Adler et al. 2006).
- 5 The author notes that in the year 1950, the ratio of the number of inhabitants between the North and the South of the Mediterranean was 2 : 1 (140 million: 70 milion) whereas the estimation for 2025 is a complete turn of this ratio into 1 : 2 (Moisseron 2005, 35).

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