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EFPU roundtable: 'EU Foreign Policy: The View from the Mediterranean'

Blog editor



On 19 January 2012 the LSE's European Foreign Policy Unit hosted the third roundtable on 'EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon', entitled 'EU Foreign Policy: The View from the Mediterranean'. The panellists were Professor Atila Eralp (Middle East Technical University, Ankara), Professor Richard Gillespie (University of Liverpool) and Dr Claire Spencer (Chatham House). The roundtable was chaired by Professor Karen E. Smith of the LSE.

The roundtable focused on the perception of EU foreign policy by Southern Mediterranean countries and, more specifically, on the role of the EU in the Arab uprisings. A shared opinion was voiced among the speakers that the EU played a minor role in shaping and understanding the revolts in the Arab world. Referring to the countries of the European Southern neighbourhood, Professor Eralp defined the problem of EU foreign policy as an issue of 'delivery deficit', which he described as consisting of five main aspects. First of all, the Mediterranean countries do not see a coherent and common EU approach. Second, the technical approach of EU policy, which lacks any political orientation, creates obstacles in delivering efficient policies. This is linked to the third element of the 'delivery deficit', namely

the lack of new incentives for these countries. Fourth, the EU approach has a limited flexibility that leads many people in the Southern Mediterranean countries to feel excluded. Finally, there is the general perception of a top-down EU approach rather than of shared ownership of the process.

Following this line, Professor Gillespie argued that all Mediterranean countries are aware of the EU discourse, its use of soft power and the double standards that it applies. Despite some common aspects, perceptions of the EU in the Arab world are more likely to change in those countries where there were revolutions (Tunisia and Egypt) than in those states where there is a controlled reform process (Morocco). Using the examples of EU policies in Tunisia and Egypt, he argued that Tunisians responded positively to the EU. This was because the EU found Tunisia to be a fertile ground (functioning institutions, market economy, etc.) for its approach. On the contrary, the protracted situation in Egypt made it difficult for the EU to have an impact, so that it is not positively seen by the population. From a general perspective, however, it can be argued that the EU had a partial impact on Southern Mediterranean countries through the third basket of the Barcelona Process, as it offered support for cultural initiatives and civil society empowerment that may have contributed to the development of those forces that sparked the revolutions.

On this idea of mixed perceptions of the EU, Dr Spencer offered the example of Morocco where the EU is only partially known beyond the circle of elites. In people's minds, countries like France and Spain are more involved economically and historically, and their presence is thus more perceptible. Broadening the perspective to the other Mediterranean countries, she stressed the fact that there is a general sense of disenchantment with the EU such that people want to be listened to and do not buy into the logic of conditionality anymore. Moreover, the young generation, which has been a prominent force in the Arab uprisings, is capable of offering a constructive and pragmatic approach in its relations with the EU. Dr Spencer also stressed the importance of mobility, one of the three Ms (together with money and markets) of the EU's response to the Arab Spring. The Southern Mediterranean partners expect it to become reality and this is a key aspect that needs to be delivered to them.

In conclusion, there was agreement on the limited role played by the EU in the Arab countries, especially during the uprisings. This absence opened up new room for manoeuvring for regional actors, among which Turkey is a key player. In light of this, the EU should develop its relationships with regional actors in order to play a stronger role in the region. Its effectiveness in the region can be further boosted if the EU adopts a more flexible model which takes into account the changes that has occurred during the Arab Spring and the new actors (e.g. the young) that have emerged. Words need to be translated into practice and concrete actions need to be taken if the EU wants to play a role in the Southern Mediterranean countries.

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