

# The European Union's policies towards North Africa: what role for Spain?

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»» Spain's policy towards North Africa has remained practically unchanged since the Popular Party (PP) took power at the end of 2011. Many Spanish foreign policy interests are concentrated in the region and it is the one area where cross party consensus was reached prior to the change of government. When the uprisings started, the PP, then in opposition, offered its collaboration to foreign minister Trinidad Jimenez in order to forge a consensus in support of the Arab transitions. It urged a more proactive response, modelled on the approach of the German party foundations.

Since then, both the Socialist and PP governments have voiced support for countries in transition but this has lacked vigour and traction in foreign policy. Although the transition states of North Africa are one of three geographical priorities for official development aid, the overall aid sums available have been cut drastically by 65 per cent. Mariano Rajoy's first official visit was to Morocco, and foreign affairs minister José Manuel García Margallo has visited Algeria and Tunisia.

But the last few months have seen much greater activity surrounding the Arab Gulf countries in a push to boost Spanish commercial diplomacy. A foreign policy narrowly focused on economic interests will not enable Spain to play a leading role within a European Union (EU) seeking to open a new chapter in its relations with North Africa. Instead, Spain should adopt a longer-term strategy – even if it entails some short-term losses – that identifies mutual interests and fosters interdependence among Euro-Mediterranean partners.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- EU member states must make an effort to align national policies with EU directives and offer credible and implementable incentives.
- Spain should focus on the long term and the possibilities for productive integration and complementarity with the economies to the south.
- A new impetus should make the Union for the Mediterranean the preferred vehicle for regional dialogue and sectoral cooperation.

»»»»» **A 'NEW' NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY**

The uprisings in North Africa throughout 2011 moved the EU to revise its main policy framework towards the region. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), as revised post-uprisings, aimed to spell out a 'new' policy approach which would accommodate the new scenarios developing in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, whilst also promoting more gradual openings in other important partners like Morocco and Algeria. It offers 'money, markets and mobility' on a 'more for more' basis and attempts to embed political reform within broader socio-economic development. This includes greater support for civil society, for which a new specific instrument initially endowed with €22 million has been created. Nevertheless, the revised ENP merely tweaks policy at the margins rather than providing the strategic overhaul such momentous changes required.

Intra-European debates have since emerged around the implementation of the new principles advocated by the revised ENP. Within these, Spain falls squarely in the 'more for more' but not 'less for less' camp. The new government continues to favour positive conditionality, non-interference and socialisation and is unlikely to criticise human rights violations or democratic backtracking. It defends a more lenient, big picture approach that allows the necessary time and space for reform. The merits of such an approach are easily defended, but it is unclear if Spain advocates this out of conviction or expediency. On the one hand, conditionality does implicitly carry some colonialist connotations anathema to the newfound spirit of empowerment and independence in the region; but on the other, Spanish governments have traditionally been over-accommodating to authoritarian governments. Spain has always been cautious to avoid the perception of interfering in other countries' affairs, in part as a means of preserving stability and defending its short-term interests. The PP government's unquestioning support for Morocco, despite pre-electoral indications that it would seek a more neutral

stance, and Margallo's unfortunate comments welcoming the continuity signalled by Algeria's legislative elections are two clear examples. Such an attitude is not exclusive to Spain, but also prevalent at the European level. This is demonstrated in EU policies towards Jordan, in which the prioritisation of stability has resulted in policies characterised as 'more for the same'.

Even if implemented, there are important questions surrounding the effectiveness of conditionality and 'more for more' as applied to the southern Mediterranean. Unlike for eastern partners, membership is not an option; which only makes it even more important for the EU to be more forthcoming with the available incentives. Since the uprisings the EU has in fact demonstrated a much greater willingness to negotiate on trade and mobility issues, which unfortunately tends to run counter to member states' protectionist tendencies. In order for the revised ENP to succeed, EU member states must make an effort to align national policies with EU directives and offer credible and implementable incentives. Yet differences on trade, migration and security are stark and member states are often the dependent party in terms of energy, security and migration control issues. Spain is no exception: the country's only recent disagreements with Brussels' external policies have been in relation to the fishery and agricultural agreements with Morocco.

This, however, is a position from which Spain could show some leadership. Given its close relationship with North Africa, Spain should be at the forefront of comprehensive European policies backing reform. The economic crisis prevents Spain from incurring significant financial outlays, but the country can be more accommodating in terms of markets and mobility. This will require courage as it might entail short-term sacrifices in an economically difficult context, but it offers a coherent long-term strategy. Spain should avoid facile protectionist measures and realise that short-term expediency to safeguard investments and security interests will merely delay fundamental

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and unavoidable changes. It should also avoid a defensive attitude to its 'backyard' and appeals to a 'special relationship'. Instead it could work in favour of the EU as a whole, leading by example in aligning its policies with EU indications. It could also exercise leadership in the ongoing negotiations for the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020, where a battle is being waged around the distribution of resources between Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods.

Short of abandoning conditionality, Spain should emphasise interdependence and advocate the creation of a web of multilateral and regional relationships on the basis of shared interests. Its

traditional position in support of greater regionalism and its active participation in fora like the 5+5 would lend credibility to such a proposal. The discredited hub-and-spoke Euro-Med paradigm could give way to

broader regional integration with cooperation clusters forming around diverse issues of common concern. Cooperation and interdependence will prove a more solid basis for relations than demands and rewards, especially within a shifting geopolitical scenario where, contrary to the view of EU representatives, the EU is no longer the key player.

#### MARKETS AND MOBILITY

As part of its incentives under the 'markets' label the European Commission has a mandate to start negotiations to establish deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTAs) with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia with a view to eventually including them in the common market. Given its economic structure, Spain is apprehensive. Officials profess their willingness to make asymmetrical trade

concessions, provided that these take place within a framework for negotiations that respects the Commission's previously agreed parameters. However, Spain's euphemistically labelled 'intelligent approach' should not serve as an excuse for protectionism. The prime minister's affirmation that 'upholding a strong Common Agricultural Policy, in order to defend our key agricultural and livestock sectors, as well as an active participation in the ongoing reform of the Common Fishery Policy, are unavoidable tasks' could be hinting at precisely this undesirable subversion of EU strategic priorities for the sake of short-term national interests.

But the protection of tomatoes does not constitute an intelligent geostrategy. The pursuit of commercial interests could lead to a purely mercantilist approach which would end up being self-defeating. The new government has unambiguously stated that diplomacy will have a 'clear economic orientation in order to encourage emergence from the crisis and the creation of employment'. Moves in this direction are clear from the number of visits by officials, including the Foreign Affairs, Public Works and Defence ministers, to the Arab Gulf states. But there is an inherent contradiction between trying to pry open markets for national companies on favourable conditions and then stating, as the average Spanish politician quickly does, that 'we simply must protect our farmers'. The crisis makes it more likely that an overall conception of trade as a zero-sum game will prevail, to the detriment of a multilateral system that works to the benefit of all. Statements by Spanish policy makers on how 'we must not allow the BRICs to encroach on our territory' (in terms of trade, energy and infrastructure) reveal such a mindset. The government should pursue commercial diplomacy but within a framework of mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation.

Spanish policy makers emphasise that Spain has much more to lose in terms of trade than its northern partners, given its shared defensive



## Spain should be at the forefront of comprehensive European policies backing reform

»»»»» interests with southern Mediterranean states. Spain favours a cautious negotiation process leading to a win/win situation. Global agreements that include services and safeguards for investments in these markets are a reasonable demand, but Spain will also undoubtedly have to incur some short-term losses. Spain considers that the agricultural agreement with Morocco ratified by the European Parliament in February, with all Spanish MEPs voting against it, was signed at its expense. Instead of simply denouncing this, Spain should be focusing on the long term and thinking in terms of the possibilities for productive integration and complementarity. The success of democratic and economic reforms in North Africa is crucial for Spain. However, it is also very difficult to adopt measures which might sting domestically in the short term but would undoubtedly offer long-term benefits, all the more so in the current context of crisis. If Spain manages to do precisely this, it could aspire to lead the EU by example in its bilateral relations towards the Southern Mediterranean. This is especially relevant in terms of opening markets to agricultural products and improving labour mobility schemes with the region.

Alongside financial assistance and DCFTA negotiations, increased mobility between North Africa and the EU is also a proposed incentive within the 'more for more' approach. That incentives necessarily stop short of full EU integration (unlike for eastern partners) clearly limits what the EU can offer. Nonetheless, increased mobility is still an important tool which can generate benefits through visa facilitation and liberalisation schemes. Some may be apprehensive about increased immigration in an economically difficult context, but so far visa facilitation schemes are only being considered for the 'easiest' categories, including business people, students and frequent travellers. There has also been some progress in terms of Mode 4 which allows for short-term (less than three months) service sector employment without a work visa.

Due to its geographical position Spain may be one of the countries potentially most affected by increased Mediterranean mobility. As a result, the Spanish official attitude is cautious, avoiding raising expectations which it may not be in a position to deliver on and focusing instead on negotiating concrete agreements. This approach is understandable, but it should not be used as an excuse to limit what can be offered or a strategy to delay progress. Spain has a positive record in terms of the integration of its migrant population and its nuanced response to migratory pressures that avoids their over-securitisation. Spanish support for dialogues with southern partners with a view to establishing Mobility Partnerships with them is an encouraging sign. This positive approach must continue and be supported by the recognition that mobility can benefit not only southern partners but also EU countries. Seeking mutual interest in positive migration policies by fostering business and civil society contacts not only contributes to economic and social developments on both sides of the Mediterranean, but can also establish a network of people-to-people contacts that counterbalances state-to-state relations. Strengthening these exchanges can help foster interdependence between the EU and its southern partners, which can contribute to positive political developments and greater stability.

#### **THE REGIONAL DIMENSION**

The revised ENP stresses the importance of the regional and sub-regional dimensions, as a complement to bilateral relations between the EU and its southern neighbours. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and the League of Arab States are seen as important partners in the search for durable solutions to the challenges faced by the region. Spain, a traditional supporter of greater regional integration, should contribute to strengthening these processes by not only actively taking part in, but also establishing synergies among different fora and encouraging a break from the strictly euro-med approach in favour of greater multilateralism.

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The UfM is the most ambitious regional initiative in which the EU participates, although its limited success warrants a thorough revision of its objectives and tools. Fraught by political confrontations, the UfM has attempted to strengthen its technical character as a means of escaping institutional deadlock, through the promotion of eight strategic regional projects (such as the Mediterranean Solar Plan), for which it is also responsible for raising funds. Within the current economic context funds have not been as forthcoming as they may otherwise have been, but news that the European Investment Bank (EIB) will contribute €500 million to the UfM is a positive step that may make other investors follow suit. These flagship projects, however, cannot be the UfM's sole activity. Instead, they should be seen as a first step towards boosting sectoral cooperation and fostering common regional policies and regulations. This requires a political impetus that appears more likely at present thanks to the transfer of the UfM's Northern Co-Presidency to the EEAS, and the associated rapprochement between the Commission and the UfM.

The goal of this new impetus should be to make the UfM the default vehicle for regional policy dialogues and ministerial level sectoral cooperation. This could generate large mutual benefits in areas such as energy, transport, infrastructure, environmental protection, education, new technologies and tourism. Spain's reading of the current North African political scenario emphasises the need to be patient and adopt a longer term perspective. It holds that internal political developments, bound to suffer ups and downs, should be accompanied by external support for the economy, since progressing the latter can have a positive knock-on effect on political stability. Spain should work to place this vision at the heart of the UfM's approach. While attempting to completely de-politicise the UfM is unrealistic, its more technocratic aspects will be probably more palatable to Southern partners than political conditionality. This more active

role will require contributing means and personnel to strengthen the UfM's Secretariat capacities, and providing substantial support for initiatives that foster inclusive economic growth. Zapatero's government pledged €300 million to the EIB of which €100 million have been disbursed to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The remaining €200 million are to contribute to a larger multi-donor instrument to promote private sector initiatives and modernise Southern Mediterranean economies. In the future the UfM framework could possibly provide support for these types of initiatives that promote SMEs alongside clear regulations to encourage inter- and extra-regional investment. Spain's leadership on this front could raise its profile within the EU's Mediterranean policies. This should not be used to defend its sphere of influence, but rather to foster mutual interests in the form of economic growth and development.

The UfM should also capitalise on synergies generated with other organisations. The 5+5 cooperation group, centred on the Western Mediterranean and made up of five Northern (France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) and five Southern (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) states, would be a logical priority. Growing out of a shared security-centred agenda, the 5+5's areas of work now include education, tourism and renewable energies. Its smaller size and informal character have allowed the 5+5 to build a certain degree of trust among members. This helps political dialogue and can make the 5+5 a middle ground for channelling decisions either up to the UfM's sectoral dialogue arenas, or down to the sub-regional level to reinvigorate the AMU. The Maghreb is not only the area economically and politically closest to the EU, but also the traditional focus of Spain's interests. Spain should take the 5 + 5 Heads of State summit in Malta next October as an opportunity to identify areas of mutual interest such as tourism, education, mobility, energy and transport, which can then be transferred to the UfM's agenda.



»»»»» **CONCLUSION**

The political changes in North Africa have coincided with a critical European economic scenario. This has not only diminished the resources available to support these changes, but also diverted political attention towards intra-Eurozone debates. Nevertheless, the uprisings have opened up a new scenario for EU-Mediterranean relations which should be seized. The effectiveness and legitimacy of traditional policies have been shattered by the region's internal political dynamics which the EU not only failed to foresee, but was also slow in supporting. The revised ENP aims to set the record straight but one year on progress has been limited.

Spain should not miss the opportunity provided by this context to take on a leadership role within the EU, but not in order to defend its interests or to protect its perceived vulnerabilities. Instead, Spain should turn its interdependence with southern partners into political capital which confers it credibility to lead the EU's policies towards the region. Less tainted by past interference or regressive immigration policies than France and Italy respectively, Spain can be a more legitimate actor. However, an honest embrace of the 'more for more' approach may require Spain – and the EU as a whole – to be brave in giving up defensive attitudes towards agriculture, trade

and migration. Efforts should also be directed at expanding the existing web of government and people-to-people contacts and at reinforcing mutual interests around energy, infrastructure and security. The ultimate goal should be to foster an inclusive economic model capable of creating growth and jobs, and attracting global investments to both shores of the Mediterranean. But this focus on stable political frameworks should not detract from the need to support North Africa's democratic aspirations. While the Popular Party was quick to criticise the previous government's supposedly overly-ideological initiatives, the new government should also be wary of an overly pragmatic approach. As the uprisings demonstrated, prioritising stability to the detriment of accountability and democracy is not always a winning strategy.

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