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“The European Union as a Regional Actor: Assessing the European Neighbourhood Policy
from a Multi-level Governance Perspective”

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Abstract

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is considered to be part of the broader foreign policy of the European Union (EU). The ENP has been gradually developing as a distinct policy field since 2003 onwards, principally aiming at promoting prosperity, stability and security for neighbouring countries of the EU at its Eastern and Southern borders. Respectively, a number of different policy mechanisms have been employed supporting its implementation phase, such as the Eastern Partnership, the Southern Neighbourhood, the Neighbourhood-wide cooperation and the cross border cooperation.

This article utilizes the above mechanisms aiming at shedding light on the institutional constellation of actors that participate in the implementation of the ENP, focusing on the Committee of the Regions and the “Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly” (ARLEM) initiative, as well as the cooperation with other established organizations (Union for the Mediterranean – UfM). Taking into consideration the broader implications for the role of the EU as a regional ‘soft power’ actor, it is argued that the EU has expanded its presence as a regional actor by simultaneously providing new opportunities for subnational mobilization across the EU borders. Empirical evidence is drawn from the financial instrument of the ENP, the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).

Keywords: ARLEM; Committee of the Regions; European Neighbourhood Policy; subnational mobilization.

1. Introduction

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2003 (Commission of the European Communities, 2003) and has been further developed ever since (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). The principal objective of the policy has been to promote cooperation and partnership between the European Union (EU) member states and their neighbourhood countries, with a view to increase the process of democratization, prosperity, stability and security as well. Based on principles and values such as democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, good governance, as well as the principles of a market economy and sustainable and inclusive development, the ENP's scope has broadened after successive revisions (2011, 2015) taking into consideration additional policy fields such as economic development and security and migration. In essence, the ENP requires a long-term engagement between the EU and the neighbouring countries.

Prima facie, the policy is based particularly on norms/values (democracy; human rights; rule of law) and objectives as well (stability; security; sustainable development). According to the current legal framework for 2014-2020 period the ENP aims at protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, the ENP focuses on tackling inequality and the fight against every form of discrimination, and promoting sectoral and cross-sectoral cooperation. Other objectives of the policy include: the creation of better conditions for the organisation of legal migration, the support of smart and inclusive development, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, sub-regional, and interestingly, regional and European Neighbourhood-wide collaboration as well as cross-border cooperation. In addition, key-principles of the ENP are differentiation, partnership and co-financing. Differentiation is mostly related with the diverse need(s) of the partner country(-ies) and the commitment to facilitate certain policy objectives such as democratization and the rule of law. With regard to the geographic dimension of the ENP, the policy is implemented in countries that are located in the South (10 countries) and in the East (6 countries) of the EU. The ENP is financially supported by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). The total amount of funds that are expected to support project proposals is estimated to reach 15.4 billion euros for the 2014-2020 implementation period.

Since 2010 the European Committee of the Regions has launched two political initiatives that are in line with the core objectives of the ENP in the Eastern and the Northern borders of the EU. The first initiative is related with countries located in the Eastern borders of the EU and the respective political platform which summarizes the initiative is the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP). The members of the CORLEAP are the EU and the six member countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and

Ukraine. According to the European Commission and the High Representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, the EaP is a joint action of the EU and the six countries, based on bilateral and multilateral initiatives. The bilateral component aims to advance the relations of the EU and each eastern partner country, while the multilateral component of the EaP works mostly as a platform for promoting political dialogue and exchanging ideas as well as knowledge and expertise on a variety of policy areas: good governance, energy issues, security and economic integration. (European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015a, p. 2). To this purpose ordinary meetings are held in order to promote political discussions and enable the fulfillment of the EaP objectives.

The second policy initiative of the CoR is geographically located to the Southern borders of the EU, namely the Mediterranean basin. Respectively, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) was set up in 2010 with a view to deal with the southern neighbourhood of the EU. According to the CoR, the ARLEM is the EU's political assembly of local and regional political representatives, and is related with the territorial dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). It allows for the elected representatives from states around the Mediterranean to get involved in a joint political platform and support dialogue and cooperation in the broader area.

Finally, the UfM is the intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organisation gathering all 28 countries of the EU and the 15 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. Its main objective is to promote regional dialogue and cooperation amongst its members. The UfM has the status of a regional organization and was formerly known as the "Barcelona Process" (Xenakis, 1999) which initiated in the mid 1990s but with rather marginal effectiveness and results. The initiative was restarted in 2008 establishing the UfM, with the aim to contributing to the Euro-Mediterranean political dialogue as well as promoting economic integration across 15 neighbours of the EU to its southern borders (North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans region). Along with the 28 EU member states, members of the UfM are also the (15) Southern Mediterranean countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Syria (currently suspended), Tunisia and Turkey. The UfM represents an opportunity to make institutional relations more functional by launching specific subnational programmes which cope with issues related to economy, environment, energy, migration, education and social affairs as well.

Drawing on the premise of multi-level governance theoretical conceptualization (Hooghe and Marks, 2001) the central hypothesis is that the expansion of EU external relations to neighbouring countries through the ENP is facilitated by the

CoR's initiatives, which in essence, allow for new opportunities for subnational mobilization in a policy area, the ENP. It worth mentioning that, generally, external relations are a policy field that is traditionally monopolized by national authorities. The research question deals with the new available channels of mobilization for subnational authorities and the opportunities they provide for increasing the participation of subnational entities in international fora. It is argued that the CoR plays a critical role in the implementation phase of the ENP promoting the role of subnational actors through their participation in joint projects with EU neighbouring countries, thus expanding the critical role of the EU outside its borders. Methodologically, the paper utilizes empirical evidence from the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) and its relations with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) to justify the interplay and the significant role of sub-state authorities represented by the CoR in the broader policy field of the EU external relations.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section takes into account the theoretical point of view. Part three presents opportunities for sub-state mobilization through the European Neighbourhood Policy and part four discusses the available access points of SNAs to the ENP. The last section summarizes the main points.

2. Theoretical considerations

In the early 1990s the multi-level governance (MLG) approach appeared in the literature of EU studies by the seminal work of G. Marks (1992). Other academic scholars as well discussed the concept (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Bache & Flinders, 2005; Bache, 2008) and developed it further by proposing certain MLG typologies on the basis of the sharing of authority between different administrative levels (Hooghe and Marks, 2003) whereas others argued about its potential for becoming a fully-fledged theory (Piattoni, 2009) despite the drawbacks.

Generally, MLG postulates that the policy-making process in the EU has ceased to be monopolized by central state institutions. When considering the European arena, according to Hooghe & Marks (2001, pp. 3-4): i) competencies are shared by actors situated at the supranational (European) and the subnational level as well, ii) individual national governments have partly lost control of the decision-making process, and iii) European political arenas are interconnected rather than nested. Respectively, extensive multi-level cooperation and interweaving among actors takes place (Hooghe, 1996, p. 17). In addition, the gradual empowerment of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) which serves as the representative body of regional and local authorities in the EU,

in particular after the Lisbon Treaty, has allowed for the subnational authorities to improve their institutional position within the EU.

Respectively, a multi-level governance system provides more opportunities to subnational authorities (SNA) for participating in policy areas as well as in political processes, thus allowing for their (financial/regulative) mobilization (Hooghe, 1995; Callanan and Tatham, 2014). The Committee of the Regions is the representative body of local and regional authorities in the European political arena and many of its initiatives facilitate and propel an enhanced role of the subnational institutions in the EU political environment. The Assembly of the Regional and Local Authorities in the Mediterranean and its cooperation with the Union for the Mediterranean constitute two exemplary paradigms which are linearly related with the implementation phase of the ENP. In particular, policy projects implemented by local and regional authorities within the broader framework of the ENP allow for the better fulfillment of the policy objectives. This type of efforts is mostly related to the financial type of mobilization. In addition, the implementation of the ENP is complimented by other actions aiming at closer cooperation and synergies of subnational institutions located in all shores of the Mediterranean. By the same token, this type of action facilitates policy diffusion and policy learning between actors, thus a more cooperative type of subnational mobilization, and is considered to be the respective policy tool for promoting the objectives of the ENP.

3. The EU's expansion in its Southern neighbourhood and the opportunities for subnational mobilization

The ARLEM, as part of the governance system of the Union for the Mediterranean, “provide operational dynamics and an integrated territorial dimension to the neighbourhood policy”¹. The ARLEM brings together 80 members, all representatives of the 43 UfM member states, and 2 observers from the EU and its Mediterranean partner countries. Members are representatives of regions and local institutions and hold an authority mandate. Its membership is divided up equally between the 15 Mediterranean partners² and the EU through the CoR. The Assembly is comprised of 40 members from the Mediterranean partners and 40 members from the EU (32 CoR members and 8 members from European associations of local and regional institutions involved in the

¹ <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/mlgcharter/Pages/European-Neighbourhood-Policy-and-Decentralised-Cooperation.aspx> (accessed: September 2018).

² Egypt (5); Turkey (5); Algeria (4); Morocco (4); Syria (3 – currently suspended); Tunisia (3); Albania (2); Bosnia and Herzegovina (2); Israel (2); Jordan (2); Lebanon (2); Mauritania (2); Palestinian Authority (2); Monaco (1); Montenegro (1). Syria is suspended due to the political situation whereas Libya participates as an observer. Number in parentheses indicates the allocation of seats for each country within the ARLEM. Source: cor.europa.eu/en/activities/arlem/Pages/arlem.aspx (accessed: October 2018).

Euro-Mediterranean cooperation³. The main objectives of the ARLEM focus on: promoting political dialogue and interregional cooperation; fostering of local democracy; enhancing decentralised cooperation and regional integration in the Mediterranean; exchange and diffuse of knowledge and expertise between its members⁴. In addition, the Assembly is institutionally related with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Economic and Social Committee⁵. It also has the status of observer with the parliamentary assembly of the UfM⁶. In addition, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe has the status of observer within the ARLEM. The Assembly organizes annual plenary sessions with the purpose of discussing and adopting countries' action plans, activity reports, and recommendations⁷. The Bureau of the ARLEM is responsible for the strategy of the platform. ARLEM is chaired by a co-presidency, representing the Mediterranean partners and the EU (through the CoR)⁸. In addition, the Commission for Sustainable Territorial Development of the ARLEM presents reports on a variety of policy fields such as: decentralisation, sustainable development in urban areas, cultural cooperation, the information society, migration and integration, small and medium-sized enterprises, trade, water and waste management, (solar) energy, agriculture and tourism, transport etc⁹.

With regard to the UfM, the principal added-value of the UfM is found on the interrelation that is created “between the policy dimension and its operational translation into concrete projects on the ground” (UfM, 2017, p. 8). Respectively, this interrelation promotes “the definition of relevant policies through a multi-stakeholder and inclusive approach” (ibid.). In fact, the project-based approach is placed at the very heart of the UfM activities and the UfM Secretariat, signifying the importance of role of regional and local institutions.

In particular, the UfM aims at enhancing the political dialogue amongst the member states by: a) promoting regional dialogue on political and stability related issues; b) strengthening inter-institutional work; c) building thematic common agendas in various policy fields such as transport, blue economy, employment and labour, environment and climate change, energy, digital economy, and the role of women in society (UfM, 2017, p. 11). The contribution of the UfM activities to regional stability and human development is facilitated by: a) intercultural and interfaith dialogue; b) mobility and migration schemes; c) projects aiming at preventing extremism and terrorism; d) projects that focus on the development of human resources' capacities.

³ cor.europa.eu/en/activities/arlem/Pages/arlem.aspx (accessed: October 2018).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

4. Discussion

Subnational authorities can play a crucial role particularly during the implementation phase of the ENP. The CoR provides two major institutional forums (CORLEAP and ARLEM) for political dialogue and cooperation between SNAs that serve as opportunities for subnational cooperative mobilization. In addition, it serves as a proxy for subnational authorities since it formally participates in the UfM (though with an observer status).

Regarding the ENP, during the period 2007-2013 the policy was financially backed by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) which was replaced by the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for the period 2014-2020. The majority of the programmes funded by the ENI are based on bilateral cooperation between the EU and neighbouring partner countries. Other types of programmes include multi-country programmes and cross-border cooperation programmes which address cooperation between one or more Member-States of the EU and one or more partner countries (and/or the Russian Federation).

Focusing more closely in the implementation phase of the ENP for the 2014-2020 programming period, it is found that the ENI provides in total EUR 15,4 billions¹⁰. There are two multiannual allocations, for first four years and the remaining three years respectively. Bilateral programmes receive up to 80% of the total budget of the ENI, multi-country programmes receive up to 35%, and cross-border cooperation (often referred to as "CBC") up to 5%. The policy areas that are financially supported cover issues such as human rights and good governance; sustainable development; mobility and migration; natural resources; agriculture; transport and infrastructure; education and training; energy, mobility of persons, goods and capital¹¹. It is estimated that for the cross-border cooperation dimension of the ENPI 2007-2013 programme there were found 729 actors; the amount of funding reached 205 m. euro (183 m. was the ENPI contribution); the average amount of money spent in projects was 2.1 m. euro (min.:429 thousand euro; max: 5 m. euro). In total 95 projects (4.76% from the 1994 proposals in total) were implemented by SNAs as major coordinators.

When taking into consideration the 2015 ENP review, the UfM has acknowledged the fact that certain actions should be taken that are mostly related with the following parameters: a) increasing synergies and coherence and avoiding duplications between Euromed and UfM activities; b) promoting regular consultations between the EU and the UfM so as to increase access of UfM projects to EU funds; c) strengthening efforts for

¹⁰ Regulation (EU) No 232/2014, *ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

greater coordination of the existing financial instruments; d) improving the regional dimension of the ENI (UfM, 2017, p. 20).

With regard to the UfM, until 2017 it had financed 47 projects in total. More than two thirds did not include investment or infrastructure but rather focused on training, networking, capacity-building, exchanges of best practices and pilot projects (UfM, 2017, p. 23). Those projects could be regarded as “soft” projects, however, 33 out of them have included actions on the policy areas of “inclusive growth, youth employability, higher education, environment and women empowerment” (UfM, 2017, p. 23). Their total amounts are in general rather small and they may also be promoted by different partners (governments, organisations of civil society –NGOs, associations- private sector, universities, and research centres) (ibid).

According to estimations made by the UfM Secretariat (UfM, 2017, p. 17) the potential for increasing the extremely low level of economic integration in the Euro-Mediterranean region is high since the trade flow distribution in the region reaches approximately: 90% within the EU; 9% between the EU and its Southern neighbouring countries; only 1% between the Southern neighbouring countries. In this state of play, subnational authorities may significantly contribute through project investments and deeper cooperation in trade. In addition, since in the very heart of the economic cooperation lays the prerequisite of promoting political and social dialogue, other stakeholders and institutions, can also contribute, such as with civil society, private sector and universities.

Table 1 summarizes the major characteristics of the ARLEM and the UfM. As it can be deduced, synergy and coherence during the implementation of joint projects are essential preconditions so as to be effectively implemented by different actors located in different countries. Could the UfM and the ARLEM initiative provide the opportunity for “paradiplomacy” (Tatham, 2013), the phenomenon where regional and local institutions act either alone or in line with national authorities in foreign affair issues? There is no evidence that this can happen due to the objectives of the programmes that are implemented by the authorities.

Table 1: Major features of the ARLEM and the UfM.

	ARLEM	UfM
Geographic area covered	EU; 15 Mediterranean countries: Egypt; Turkey; Algeria; Morocco; Syria*; Tunisia; Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Israel; Jordan; Lebanon; Mauritania; Palestinian Authority; Monaco; Montenegro (All members are representatives of regional and local bodies of the 43 UfM	EU; 15 Mediterranean countries (see left column)

	member states**)	
Members	80 (40 from the Mediterranean partners; 40 from the EU: 32 from the CoR+8 from local associations)	European Union and authorities from the 15 Mediterranean countries may apply for membership
Type of mobilization	Cooperative (increased synergies)	Cooperative (synergies) /Financial (projects implementation)
Main objectives	Provide a territorial dimension to the UfM; fostering local democracy, multi-level governance and decentralised cooperation; encourage North-South and South-South dialogue between SNAs; promote the exchange of best practice, knowledge and expertise; promote regional integration and territorial cohesion	Projects implementation, transferring of knowledge and expertise, promoting cooperation in a variety of policy areas
Means	Every year: activity report, action plan, recommendations and thematic commission reports; multiple meetings within the year	Coordination; Ministerial meetings, seminars, indirect contacts between members, project implementation co-funded by the EU

Sources: UfM (2017); [http:// cor.europa.eu/en/activities/corleap/Pages/corleap.aspx](http://cor.europa.eu/en/activities/corleap/Pages/corleap.aspx) (assessed: October 2018).

According to the CoR (2013), SNAs have gradually become important players in the enlargement process and in foreign policy in general. The added value of their participation is found on examples of multilevel governance and “city diplomacy” during the implementation phase of the ENP in its Mediterranean dimension (Committee of the Regions, 2013).

5. Conclusions

The EU has expanded its presence as a regional actor in the Mediterranean basin and has simultaneously provided new opportunities for subnational mobilization across the EU borders. In particular, the CoR plays a critical role in the implementation phase of the ENP, by promoting the role of subnational actors through their participation in joint projects with EU neighbouring countries, thus expanding the multifaceted role of the EU outside its borders. In this regard, subnational authorities may significantly contribute to and facilitate the international role of the EU by actively participating and implementing joint projects in the broader EU Southern region. In return, the EU is benefited by subnational authorities’ activities in terms of the promotion of European norms and values, such as democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and the fighting of social inequality. In addition, subnational entities may contribute to enhancing the economic environment of the neighbouring countries by increasing investments and improving trade conditions, in particular for the neighbouring countries.

Unquestioningly, the role of the sub-state authorities in the implementation of the ENP is crucial: the Southern Neighbourhood initiative (as well as the Eastern Partnership), which in essence represent core components of the EU foreign policy, is genuinely facilitated by initiatives that are upheld by the CoR such as the ARLEM (as well as the CORLEAP) allowing for the better fulfillment of the ENP objectives. In fact, the ENP is linearly connected with the EU foreign policy, aiming at bringing closer EU countries and their neighbours in the South (10 countries) and in the East (6 countries). Both ARLEM and CORLEAP are initiatives that link the EU with the Southern and Eastern partners respectively, thus allowing for regional cooperation and potential policy transferring of EU values and norms. In addition, the UfM serve as a unique regional organization for territorial cooperation and a platform for exchanging knowledge and expertise, thus facilitating policy diffusion and learning amongs its members.

Future research should focus more on specific case studies derived from these SNAs' access channels to the ENP and explore in detail certain aspects, such as the consequences of mobilization of SNAs in the international arena with regard to the impact on domestic inter-institutional arrangements and the intra-state relations of national and subnational authorities.

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