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Deliberating and Monitoring Climate Action: How the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean Can Increase Its Relevance

Inter-parliamentary assemblies have been portrayed as having the potential to contribute to the legitimacy of intergovernmental climate debates. This policy brief focuses on the specific case of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM). Based on a rigorous analysis of the functioning of the Assembly, we demonstrate how this inter-parliamentary institution can play a relevant role in deliberating and monitoring regional climate action. Since this potential is hampered by several limitations, we propose three main recommendations that could strengthen the added value of parliamentary involvement in interregional climate policy agreements. First, the members of parliament of the EU should promote climate change action as a common good, with special attention paid to the needs of the most disadvantaged societal groups. Second, they should pay more attention to the power asymmetries within the Union for the Mediterranean, as Southern Mediterranean neighbourhood countries often have lower capacity levels. Third, they should more actively reach out to interest groups (including civil society) to participate in the climate change debates of the PA-UfM and promote parliamentary democracy in the member countries of the UfM.

Introduction

Climate change policy has become a key dimension of European foreign policy while inter-regionalism is considered a major instrument to export the EU's norms, including on climate change (De Lombaerde, Söderbaum & Wunderlich 2015, Hardacre & Smith 2009). However, while climate change has indeed become a key priority in the EU's inter-regional relations, the EU's approach has suffered from severe democratic deficits. The influx of migrants and instability on Europe's southern doorstep following the Arab Spring has constituted a major challenge to EU integration (Verbeek & Zaslove 2015). The extent of these challenges was dramatically shown by the Brexit vote and the appearance and rapid growth of nationalist and populist tendencies in many European countries (Verbeek & Zaslove 2015).

This policy brief shows how inter-parliamentary engagement regarding climate change in the EU's interregional relations with the Mediterranean Neighbourhood only partially serves as an effective tool to both promote climate change policy and counter these threats to legitimacy. Since the Arab Spring, the EU has made the Mediterranean area a priority area, intensifying its involvement in the region through the UfM (Vanda Amaro 2013). The Mediterranean area is one of the world's most vulnerable climate change hotspots. It is prone to water scarcity and desertification, and faces issues relating to the concentration of economic activities

and population in coastal areas and its reliance on climate-sensitive agriculture (UNEP/MAP 2017).

The UfM and climate action

Launched in 1995 through the Barcelona Declaration, the UfM is an intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organization bringing together the countries of the EU and 15 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean¹. It is unique in that it brings together delegates from Palestine, Turkey, Cyprus, the Balkan states, North African states such as Morocco and Tunisia, and the EU - countries bordering the Northern, Eastern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean. While its existence originates in an interest to promote energy security, socioeconomic development, and stability in the region, in the past decade climate action has increasingly become a key agenda priority for the UfM.

Across five domains in the Mediterranean area (water, ecosystems, food, health and security) climate change scenarios consistently point to significant and increasing risks in the coming decades (Cramer Wolfgang et al. 2018). Since 2014, combatting climate change has been part of the mandate of the UfM with the aim to promote low-emission and climate-resilient development.

However, the UfM's commitment to a climate change mitigation agenda should be met with scepticism. Upon closer inspection, of the 51 projects financed under the partnership since 2012, no single project

¹ Its 43 members are Albania, Algeria, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania,

Luxembourg, Malta, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, The Netherlands, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Syria (suspended since December 1, 2011), Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom. Libya is an observer.

focused on climate change². An examination of the Southern Mediterranean countries' National Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the UNFCCC pointed out that many of the Southern Mediterranean governments support a move towards gas based energy supplies rather than renewable sources as part of their proposed climate mitigation strategy. The exploration for fossil fuels in the region has also not stopped. New drilling concessions approved on the territorial seabed, are causing severe environmental damage³. Examples include the ten concessions given by Egypt in 2018 to three European companies, namely the Italian energy company 'Eni', the 'British Petroleum' company and the Italian company 'Edison'. This has contributed to a serious questioning of the UfM's legitimacy when it comes to the promotion of climate change action.

The PA-UfM and deliberation and monitoring of climate action

Although the PA-UfM lacks formal power in decision-making, literature on inter-parliamentary cooperation and parliamentary diplomacy⁴ has identified inter-parliamentary assemblies' deliberative and monitoring functions as being key to their involvement in international affairs (Costa and Stavridis 2013).

First, via monitoring they can help assure the legitimization of multi-level governance and democratic control of public policies (Cofelice and

Stavridis 2017). Second, their specific setting should allow participants to behave less strategically and update their opinions based on arguments and new information to enable real deliberation. By adding democratic representation to the regional intergovernmental organisation, a parliamentary dimension can provide mechanisms for improving the legitimacy of regional governance.

Our analysis showed that the PA-UfM⁵ has indeed made use of its monitoring and deliberative functions, contributing to the legitimacy of climate action in the UfM. Climate change has clearly been given space in the debates of the PA-UfM. Since 2005 it has been a constant agenda item and has been discussed in conjunction with many other issues indicating a recognition of the issue's broad relevance and importance. Moreover, the promotion of fossil fuels has steadily declined. While in 2007, additional fossil fuel investment was still being discussed, in the following years, fossil fuels were only been mentioned in the context of phasing them out or of the need to undertake environmental assessments. In contrast, renewable energy and energy efficiency became hot topics in the energy debate. Energy efficiency and clean energy are by far the two most mentioned subjects.

From the above it seems that climate change has featured significantly in the deliberation and

² Statements based on an in depth analysis of primary documents of the UfM's proceedings.

³ Egypt Today, 22 February 2018.

⁴ In the broadest sense parliamentary diplomacy could be defined as individual or collective action by parliamentarians aimed at 'catalyzing, facilitating and strengthening the existing constitutional functions of parliaments through dialogues

between peers on countless open policy questions across continents and levels of governance' (Costa and Stavridis 2013).

⁵ For more information on the analysis, see the paper in progress: 'The Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean: delivering on its monitoring and deliberative functions? An analysis of its climate debates' by Reinhilde Bouckaert.

monitoring activities of the PA-UfM. However, some important qualifications should be made, which point to the limitations of the PA-UfM in fulfilling its task. First, issues that are of utmost importance when it comes to tackling climate change in the Mediterranean such as climate adaptation measures, water provision, food security, agriculture, resilience and climate finance hardly feature in the PA's monitoring and deliberation strategy. When climate change is cited, this is mainly in relation to renewable energy. Second, the UfM's exclusive focus on energy projects, and the absence of climate-focused projects (see part 2 of this policy brief) has not been challenged in the PA-UfM. Third, and in the same vein, almost no mention is made of the ongoing exploration of fossil fuels in the region. Important issues such as the new drilling concessions given by Mediterranean countries to European energy companies have hardly been addressed. While in 2014 the focus was still on phasing out fossil fuels, in 2017 this had changed to simply creating an 'environmental impact assessment model for offshore hydrocarbons prospection, exploration and exploitation' (Recommendation of the Committee on Energy, Environment and Water 2017). This represents a step backwards from pursuing a policy of trying to phase out fossil fuels altogether, to one that instead only seeks to limit the damage of their continued exploitation. Fourth, there seems to be a downward trend with regard to position of climate change on the PA-UfM's agenda with levels of disagreement on the topic increasing over the past two years.

Furthermore, it appears that debates within the PA-UfM and its recommendations can sometimes reflect the EU's priorities to a greater extent than promoting the concerns of the Southern Mediterranean countries. Although examples of positive cooperative initiatives do exist, for example the Mediterranean Solar Plan may hold a formula for engaging Southern Mediterranean countries in win-win renewable energy projects⁶, the EU's promotion of renewables is not free from built-in tensions. For example, Escribano and San Martin (2012) have pointed out that the promotion of big renewable energy projects in the Southern Mediterranean region may end up benefiting only the EU and its renewable energy industry if they fail to alleviate rural energy poverty and do not promote technological and human resource development among local populations. The fact that the watchdog par excellence, namely the parliamentary dimension of the UfM, does not use its monitoring and deliberative functions to address these issues, undermines the Union's legitimacy with regards to its intergovernmental climate agenda.

Recommendations

It is clear that for the PA-UfM to be successful in its deliberative and monitoring functions members of the EU, and especially members of the European Parliament (EP), have an important role to play. They should use this position of influence to strengthen the legitimacy of climate change action in the Mediterranean. This can be achieved in three ways:

⁶ Darbouche 2012, 226.

- 1) First, EP delegates should promote climate change as a common good and develop a vision that supports the most vulnerable societal groups. While the EU upholds this position during international climate change negotiations, at the interregional level it seems instead to promote a more Eurocentric approach to the common good. Financing and adaptation measures to tackle climate change are urgently needed in the Southern Mediterranean, hence EP delegates should bring these to the fore in the debates of the PA-UfM.
- 2) Second, EP delegates should be aware of asymmetrical relationships. Not all member countries have enough resources at their disposal to prepare fully for PA-UfM meetings. This obstacle can be overcome through the adoption of a few, simple, practical measures. Documents should be made available on the official website of the PA-UfM in advance, including background documents. This makes it easier for the (new) delegates to prepare themselves for meetings. Also, a (clear) agenda should be made available and the date of the next meeting set at least one month in advance. As indicated by some delegates to the PA-UfM, 'it is difficult with a limited amount of resources to get everything organised. If also the agenda, which is mostly unclear, and the date of the next meeting arrive late, this makes it impossible to be fully prepared or even attend the meeting'. A clear agenda would enable more constructive debates and help to prevent the hijacking of meetings for the promotion of national agendas.
- 3) Third, some delegates clearly lack parliamentary independence. Despite the 'Arab Spring', several Southern Mediterranean states still suffer from a democratic deficit, while also in some Northern Mediterranean countries, the democratic processes have recently been eroded. Therefore, the EP should request that representatives of interest groups (including civil society) are also invited to participate in the climate change debates of the PA-UfM. More generally, it should prioritize promoting parliamentary democracy in the member countries of the UfM.

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