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Southern Europe and its Prospects in 6 Q&As

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By Effie G. H. Pedaliu, Fellow at LSE IDEAS and James D. Athanassiou, UK based freelance journalist.



1. What is Southern Europe?

- A. **Southern Europe is the part of Europe that always plays catch up!**
- B. **Southern Europe is synonymous for resilience in adversity.**
- C. **Southern Europe is where the 'boat-people' from the Global South meet the North.**

2. What Southern Europe is not!

It is not a periphery. It is an integral part of the European Union. Semantics do matter. The term 'periphery' needs to be eliminated from all discussion on Southern Europe. The term leads seamlessly on to the word peripheral, which in turn, implies marginal. If a region is peripheral it is not part of the core so that, no holistic and sophisticated solutions need be elaborated to address its

problems. As for the problems themselves, they can be reduced to being merely Southern European and self-generated rather than, in fact, being aspects of a systemic problem that can have far reaching effects on the political and socio-economic stability of the whole Union. If the term 'periphery' were ever to be internalised by Southern Europeans then it would be accompanied by a, perhaps rational, failure to find solutions to their own problems.

3. How did Southern Europe Come About?

Southern Europe arose from of a chain of events over the last two centuries and went through many formative stages. In present day Southern Europe, the Cold War, decolonisation and European integration have been the major forces behind region-building. In this respect 'Southern Europe' is a new phenomenon that emerged in the C20th a couple of decades later than the categories Western Europe and Eastern Europe acquired popular political currency. The countries that make up current day Southern Europe are Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece as well as Cyprus and Malta. However, first four countries have more experiences in common than the latter two. Indeed these four countries underwent similar experiences in the 19th and early C20th centuries that had a formative impact on their development. The Napoleonic Wars affected all four disrupting Mediterranean shipping and trade and creating suspicion and animosity towards 'foreigners' or the 'other'. A deep cleavage opened up between liberals and authoritarians that has typified their political systems ever since. Fragile democratic institutions have been a feature common to all of them throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. All have experienced coups, authoritarian rule, dictatorships and Fascism was born in the region. Their economies have remained underdeveloped bar from the Italian North and some industrialised pockets in Spain. Exclusive clientelistic and nepotistic societal networks have defied change and have never been displaced by inclusive meritocratic systems.

Their commonalities however, did not lead to patterns of direct interaction. Relations in the wider Mediterranean world were traditionally, not conducted along East-West alignments but through North-South, coast to coast channels that were determined by commercial and colonial interests. The Cold War disrupted these and created frameworks where interaction among the Southern European states became institutionalised. Over time, this allowed for what they had in common to become intelligible to Southern European themselves and also, the wider world.

By 1953, the countries of the North Mediterranean, from Portugal to Turkey, had become part of an American centred security system either through membership of NATO or through bilateral treaties in the case of Franco Spain. The Marshall Plan promoted affluence. Security and a newly acquired prosperity were accompanied by a wide-ranging American cultural transfer to all these countries. Quite quickly, common cultural features became evident.

At the same time, decolonisation, the demise of the Levant, the Arab-Israeli dispute and the rise of Arab nationalism in the Maghreb and the Mashreq hardened the 'North-South' political and cultural divide of the Sea.

By the mid-1970s, the experience of dictatorship and disillusionment with the US – because of its perceived toleration of the dictators – made Greece, Portugal and Spain look to the EEC for political models rather than to the US. Their goal became to join the Community.

The eventual Northern Mediterranean enlargement of the EEC was the product of political calculation. For a while in the 1970s, it had looked as if the Southern Flank was about to unravel, especially after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the revolutionary upheaval in Portugal. In response, the EEC stepped in, willingly, to stabilise the Cold War geostrategic community the US had created in the northern Mediterranean littoral. By doing so the EEC was able to maintain Western security and the cohesion of the Southern Flank. It also came to assume a major political role in international affairs that had hitherto eluded it.

4. What are the origins of Southern Europe's current problems?

During the 1980s and 1990s the Southern European countries grew rapidly. This endured until the financial crisis of 2007-8. The three newer member states had hoped that entry would help them achieve stable economic development and growth. They had entered the European Community with small public sectors in comparison with their Northern counterparts. Now they had a choice to make. They could let their private sectors and market forces meet the needs of growth, or they could opt to maintain and enhance the economic and political roles of the public sector. All three opted for the latter choice. Their choices were not challenged nor discouraged at the time by the EEC or even later by the EU. The model they chose for economic growth however, did not come without problems. Its counterparts were a widespread black-market, tax evasion and a gigantic public sector that almost strangled private enterprise. The seeds of many of the problems that Southern Europe faces now were sown during these years.

5. Are there any developments that suggest that better collaboration and integration in the region are in the offing?

When the 'euro-zone' or 'sovereign debt' crisis struck, it impacted not only on the economies but also on the politics and societies of Southern Europe and the Union itself. The societal and political dualism that has challenged Southern Europe since the 19th century between those seeking democratic solutions and those seeking authoritarian – perhaps even, xenophobic – solutions has emerged once again. At the same time, the crisis has promoted a North-South fragmentation within the EU which in turn, has set-off a further round of 'southern-europeanisation'. The economic crisis, austerity and abysmal levels of youth unemployment have spilled over into the political, social and cultural affairs of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece with unintended consequences. It has made Southern Europeans re-assess their political beliefs and the way they have mentally constructed their national and regional identity over the last thirty years. The result has been the appearance of a new type of regional thinking – one missing until now – a development of feelings of solidarity and common destiny arising out of shared problems.

6. Will this latest wave of region building be sustainable?

Only time will tell. However there are some obvious imperatives. The Southern European governments need to work together to find common solutions to their shared problems. They must do so in order to salvage their economies, exploit their existing and potential resources in a way that is mutually beneficial to all of them and maintain their security. Above all, they need to recover political moral authority. They owe it to their citizens who have been extremely resilient in the face of much hardship. They owe it to neighbours in the Mediterranean South. They owe it to their allies in the EU. Only through close cooperation can the Southern European countries withstand the threats to their and the EU's well-being from international events, terrorism and transnational organised crime.

SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel has described the high youth unemployment in Southern Europe as Europe's 'biggest disgrace'.^[1] Few can disagree with him. However, there is potentially, an even bigger disgrace – that of Southern European governments failing to come together to find solutions to their common problems and continuing to attempt to gain favour with their Northern allies through a studied unilateralism. Such practices will result only in cold comfort. They will serve only to perpetuate Southern European weakness and maintain the current North/South disequilibrium of the EU. Bold and visionary steps towards effective regional cooperation are needed quickly in order to prevent the current situation from becoming one of long-term stagnation and regression.

For more thought provoking analysis read the LSE IDEAS Special Report: [A Strategy for Southern Europe](#).

The LSE IDEAS Southern Europe International Affairs Programme was launched on Monday 14th October. More on the launch [here](#).

References

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/18/us-germany-europe-spd-idUSBRE99H0AH20131018>, accessed on 18 October 2013.

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