

CIDOB'S Conversations with ...



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Southern Mediterranean

Europe Must make an Effort to Understand Others – and So Understand Itself

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A man in a grey suit standing alone in an office, talking on the phone. Two hours before, the Egyptian army had announced what certainly looked like a coup d'état: they were giving president Morsi a forty-eight hour deadline to resolve the country's political crisis, or else. A major political crisis was erupting in his own yard: Bernardino León, EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, did not lose his calm – but he did exhaust the battery of his mobile phone.

Bernardino León is a seasoned diplomat and he looks like one: discreetly handsome, wearing a classical outfit and a pair of good-student glasses over his clear, wise gaze, he welcomes us with an empathic smile. Now in his late forties, he feels at ease with his current responsibilities, where he has to adroitly combine diplomatic and political action. This combination, which is one of his main biographical traits, he blames on his genes: "At university, I was very much into politics while studying international law. As Secretary of the President's Office (2008-2011), my role was more political than my previous post as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (2004-2008), but my mission included prioritizing international matters, so as to correct shortcomings in this field." Now, he feels that the two personality streaks in him are converging; he must be extremely diplomatic as EU Representative, but he is faced with situations which require, more than anything, a full load of politics. "A strict career diplomat would perhaps find it harder than me", he comments.

As a member of the European External Action Service (EEAS) headed by Catherine Ashton, Bernardino León knows full well that the European crisis is by no means exclusively economic. To him, the crisis in Europe is based on a dilemma: are we going to face the future as a Union, with one voice, or are we going to carry on being a heterogeneous lot? "The crisis is both a cause and a consequence", says

León. In our relations with the Southern Mediterranean, for example, we are currently burdened by the weight of the member states' colonial legacy: "It is not the EU but certain governments and individual politicians who went too far in their relations with North African dictators."

Bernardino León is proud of what he calls his "peripheral vision of things" (which he acquired in his university days in Malaga and in Barcelona, a city he particularly likes, for he studied at the local branch of the Diplomatic School to become a career diplomat), and so he feels fairly at ease with one of the defining traits of modern times: complexity. "There are no simple answers to complex issues. You cannot say white or black. The range of grays in the region is infinite." However, he warns (or is it a wish?) that a return to dictatorial regimes in Northern Africa is out of the question. He believes that Europe, as expected, will play an important role in the political and economic evolution of these countries, but it must be played wisely - among other things, to prevent polarization spreading to Europe, where several millions of its citizens are of North African origin. As far as the Egyptian crisis is concerned, León sees clearly that there will be many, in Egypt as in Europe, who will say that army intervention is incompatible with democracy, while others will hold that the intervention was needed to ensure the establishment of democracy, which is a concept the Muslim Brotherhood does not understand. "Reality is complex", he insists, "so policies have to be complex and solutions have to be complex as well".

Bernardino León has some experience in this type of situation, where democracy sits on the edge: his first posts as a diplomat were in civil war-torn Liberia and Algeria and, later, Greece during the Balkan wars; he was then appointed Chief of Staff of the EU Special Representative for the peace process in the Middle East (1998). He is well aware that in a multipolar world, Europe cannot do the job it is expected to (any more than the US or China on their own could), and so welcomes Qatari and Turkish involvement in the region. The challenges are huge - economic, political and cultural - and an on-going dialogue has been established (which León describes as "fruitful and presided by a high degree of understanding") between the EU and both Qatar and Turkey. "We share the conviction that changes are irreversible and that long-term stability will come, despite the many difficulties, with the success of the political transitions", says León, and he adds: "Qatar and Turkey agree on this. Al-Jazeera has played an important role throughout the Arab Spring and after, and Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) maintains its commitment to the promotion of democracy."

Even though the economic prospects for the region are bleak and some observers go so far as to wonder how some of these economies will be able to carry on much longer, Bernardino León is adamant: there is no other way but to tackle everything (economic and political) at the same time. He brings in Jeffrey Sachs's holistic approach ("if you concentrate just on a given organ of the body, you lose your patient") to defend his position: "If you do not create jobs and opportunities, the failure (which is a failure to each and every citizen, and has to do with their future and their families') is perceived as being a failure of politics. If we do not do it all at the same time, we will not succeed."

The economic side of things, however, is critical: reforms are necessary at all levels of decision-making, the financial sector requires modernization, and (priority number one) job openings for the young are urgently needed (there are 300.000 prospect-less university graduates in Egypt). In these circumstances, "it is impossible to carry out a political transition with any guarantees", says León. Are we to recognize any responsibility in this mess? "Yes, we must admit we have made several mistakes, and so has the IMF. But the sheer dimension of the current situation relocates the symbolic acknowledgement of past mistakes. It is important to admit them, but we must get down to doing some work now."

Bernardino León, who (unlike others in Europe) used to maintain regular contacts with the Tunisian and Moroccan opposition in the past, is categorical: Europe must understand that part of the answer to its problems is to help resolve its southern neighbours' plight. He says: "Europe must think what it can do in the region for its own sake." To him, the future belongs to dynamic regions establishing North-South relations: in Asia, Japan, China and Korea with countries in the South-east; in America, the union of the Pacific economies and the increasingly effective North-South integration. "But in Europe, an aging North is looking for opportunities... in China! If Europe does not find a way to work in/with the South Mediterranean countries, it will not only fail to help develop these countries, but it will fail itself. This is an ontological, existential challenge for the EU."

León thinks that recent developments (Iraq, Afghanistan) have exacerbated the cultural/religious gap between Europe and its southern neighbours and that Europe must make a resolute effort to explain the hard realities to its constituency. "For many people in Europe, for instance, Turkey's EU membership is a problem because of its Muslim identity", he says, "whereas one cannot avoid thinking what a great opportunity we are losing, what a significant overcoming of historical grievances we are preventing, and what a great capacity for coordinated action we are pre-empting!" Even though in Europe, as much as in Egypt, "the real enemy is polarisation", our traditional double standards have done no good to the cause of democracy. For its own good, Europe must shake off preconceptions from the old colonial days: "It must make an effort, a great effort, to understand – and in so doing, understand itself." And never again, he adds, act before understanding.