Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Area: Implications of EU-Africa Migration and Cooperation Policies.

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Abstract:

The Mediterranean geographical area is an interesting case study in terms of sustainable development. This region, with its rich historical past, is home to a variety of cultural traditions and political development models, with the result that the wealth gap between neighboring regions in the Mediterranean is one of the widest in the world.

EU cooperation and trade policies, currently the most industrialized side in this area, play a key role in the regional development. The launch of the Barcelona process in 1995 was intended to bridge the previous gap, which, unlikely, increased over the subsequent 15 years, posing a serious threat to the stability in the region. According to OECD figures at the time, the forecast was that “40 million jobs must be created over the next 15 years (i.e. until 2023) in order to simply maintain unemployment at the current levels in the southern Mediterranean countries” (as highlighted in the declaration of the “Union for the Mediterranean” created in Paris 2008).

Furthermore, as environmental data dramatically shows, climate change is also heavily affecting this area of the world: the Maghreb, the Nile Valley, the Middle east, and southern Europe countries. The increasing migration trends from southern to northern Mediterranean countries is a collateral phenomenon.

Is latest statistical evidence confirming the challenges to the sustainability of development in this critical area? Has the EU’s policy response been effective to date? This paper seeks to provide some evidence-based answers to these questions.

1. Introduction

The Mediterranean are, due to its geographical location at the crossroads of three continents and the historical past, is a problematic case in terms of sustainable development. Statistics presents a picture of a dis-homogenous economic condition, mainly between the “north” (i.e. Southern Europe), with European Union (EU) countries, and the “south”, the Maghreb (i.e. Northern Africa) and the Middle-Est (i.e. western Asia).

A long wave of cooperation policies, starting from the “Barcelona process” in 1995 attempted to govern this area development to mitigate instability and people flaws. As expected, the main responsible of migration in this area are conflicts, socio-economic problems, rural-urban development gaps, abject poverty, and unemployment.

This paper presents the Gross domestic Product (GDP) trend in the area to understand the criticalities on sustainability and the effectiveness of policy making, mainly driven by the European Neighborhood Policy (NEP) by EU.

2. The Cooperation Policies in The Mediterranean Area

An important step in the process of cooperation in region started in 1995 with the *Euro-Mediterranean Partnership* (Euromed) that was set up as a result of the “Barcelona process”. In 2004, with the Agadir Agreement, a *Euro-Mediterranean free trade are*a (EU-MEFTA) was created, that become in force in 2012. In 2005 the *Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean* (PAM) was established as an international organization. In 2008, at the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, with an aim of reinforcing the Euromed a new intergovernmental organization, the *Union for the Mediterranean* (UfM) was set up. The Arab Leage, joining most of the southern Mediterranean countries, participated to the UfM meetings.

The leading role in this regional cooperation process was plaid by the EU, the richest side of the Mediterranean area. We expected to see the EU economy to be a driver of development for the full region over the years.

3. Administrative Subdivision and Data Available

Based on data availability and previous studies, the Mediterranean area is subdivided in 24 political entities, some of them national countries, some other limited recognized administrative areas (Pizzoli, 2008, 2018).

We find 8 member countries of the EU, 4 countries with an ongoing process of entrance into EU, 2 city-states (Gibraltar and Monaco), 9 members of the Arab League and 2 areas with limited political status (North-Cyprus and Palestinian territories).

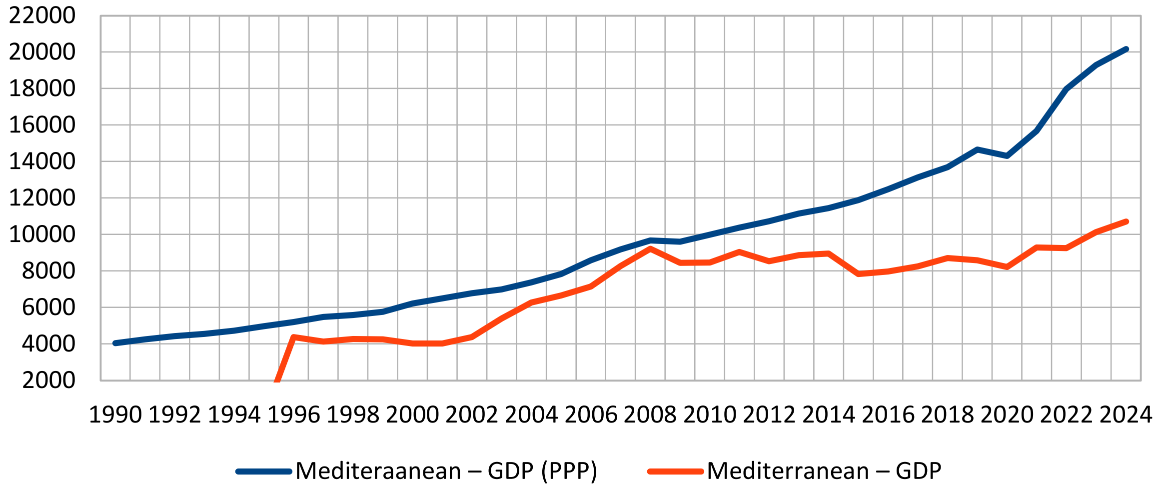
Aggregated data of GDP and further statistical indicators are available I the World bank online dataset (World Bank, 2024).

4. GDP Comparison from 1995

A long-run view of the economic trend of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the region from the 90s, allows to understand the Mediterranean growth and crisis periods linked to the global economy (Fig. 1).

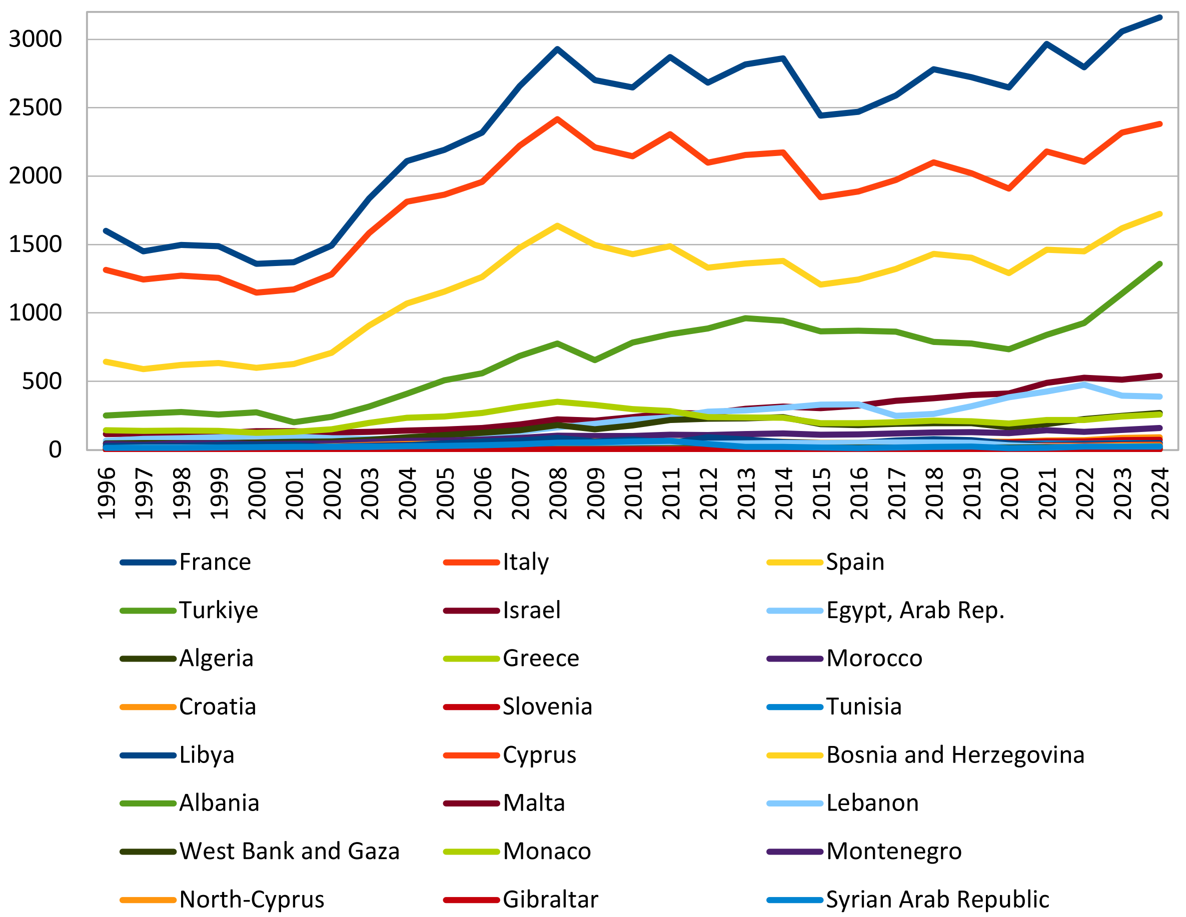
The 1995 Euromed arrived in a period of overall growth in the region during the 90s. Just after, the UfM in 2000s faced a turbulent period with economic and political instability. There was a recession in 2009, after the 2008 global financial crisis; a further recession in 2012, following the political wave of “Arab spring” in several southern countries and the civil war in Syria; in 2020 again during Covid-19 pandemic and the second civil war in Syria.

Fig. 1 – Total GDP Trend in the Mediterranean Area – Years 1990 -2024



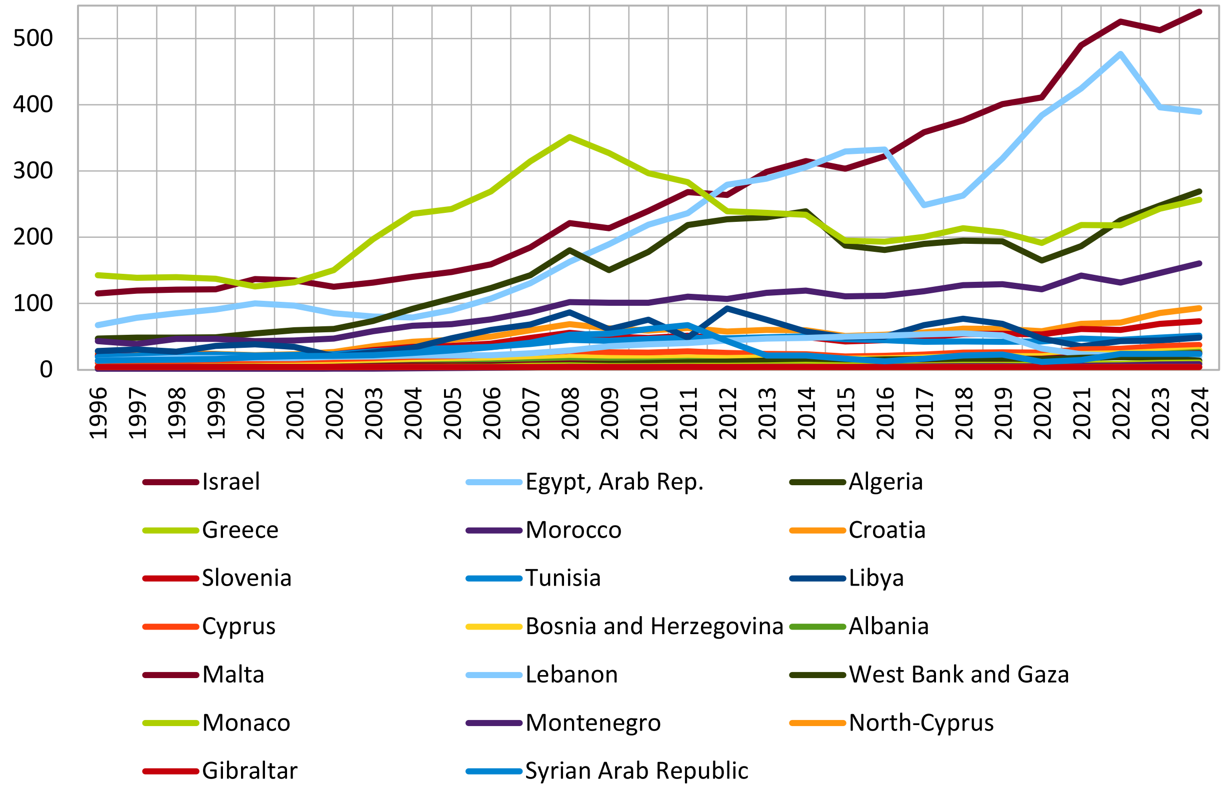
If we dis-aggregate GDP by country and we restrict the observation period from 1996, just after the Euromed cooperation agreement, we clearly see the behavior of the 4 largest economy in the region: France, Italy, Spain and Turkey /Fig, 2). A slow down of the economy until 2000-2001 and a period of growth before the UfM, and the global financial crisis in 2008. A new crisis for the EU in 2015 (with the Greek crisis) and 2020 (Covid-19).

Fig. 2 – GDP Trend by Country in the Mediterranean Area – Years 1996 - 2024



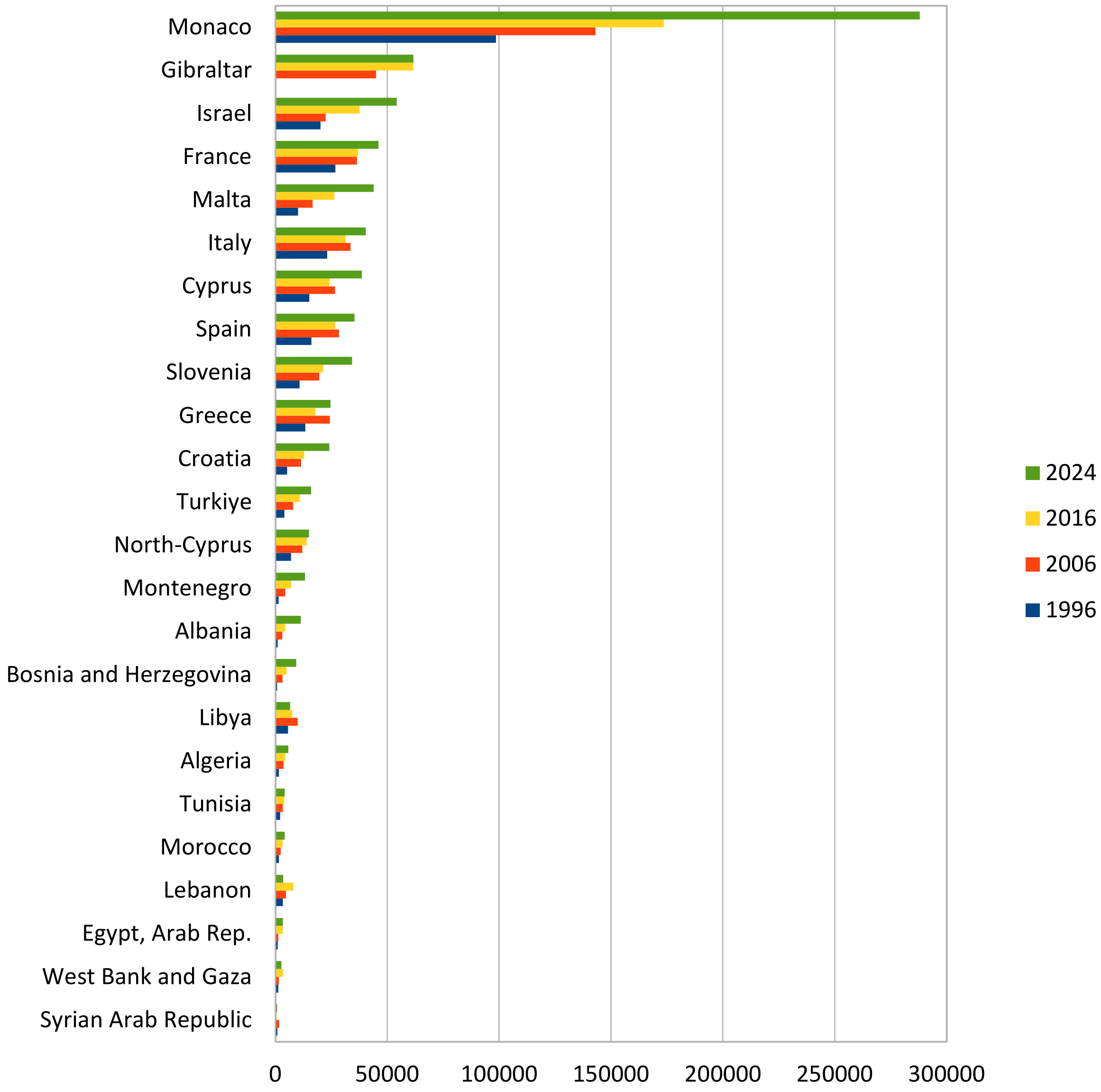
Israel, followed by Egypt, shows the strongest growth of the economy in the area (Fig. 3). To the contrary, one of the most growing countries from 2000, Greece, experienced a deep and long lasting recession from 2009 financial crisis. Syria economy also collapsed after the civil war in 2012.

Fig. 3 – Lower GDP Countries' Trend in the Mediterranean Area – Years 1996 - 2024



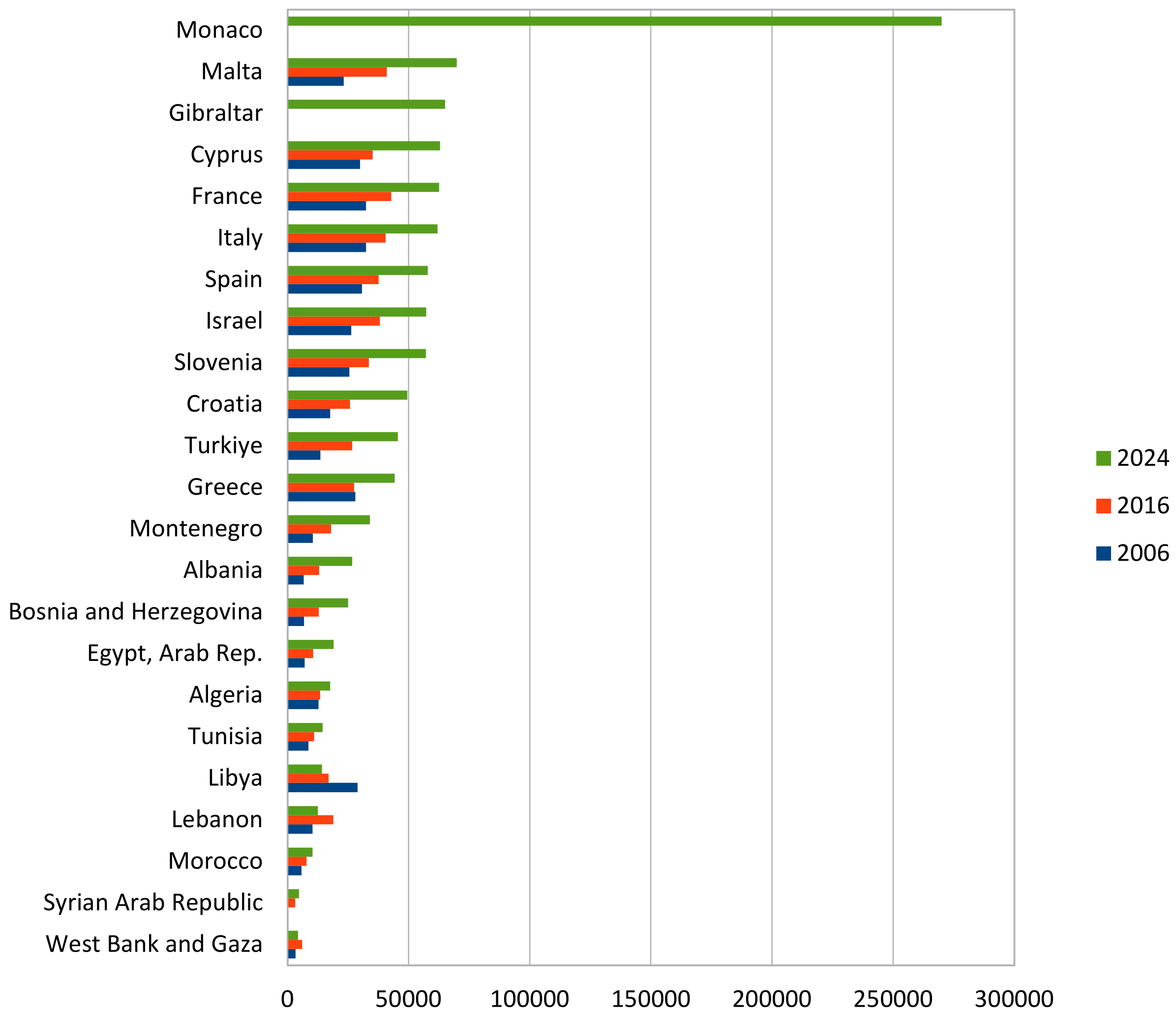
Moving to the GDP per capita, the distribution of income in the region, already disperse and unequal in 1996, as shown from previous studies (Pizzoli, 2008, 2018), diverges from in 2000s (fig. 4). In 30 years two city states (Monaco and Gibraltar) reached extremely high levels of income, followed by emerging Israel in the region, and two islands (Malta and Cyprus); overcoming traditional EU industrialized and richer countries as France, Italy and Spain. Some countries, already poor, get worse off: Syria, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Lebanon and Libya.

Fig. 4 – GDP per Capita in the Mediterranean Area – Years 1996 - 2024



The divide between north and south Mediterranean evidently increased over time in Purchasing Power Parities (PPP) terms (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – GDP per Capita at PPP – Years 2006 - 2024



5. Conclusion

Considering the main economic indicator, GDP, available from UN statistical databases, it seems clear that the joint political effort by EU, Arab League and further international organizations did not succeed in supporting a sustainable development path for the Mediterranean are.

In the last decades the EU cooperation, that was the main driver of development in the area, shifted from "solidarity aid" to self-interest defense. European policymakers often emphasized "pull factors" such as jobs and security in the cooperation agreements. Evidence is that EU's trade practices and foreign interventions have directly contributed to instability and economic underdevelopment, instead of sustainable development, in the south-east Mediterranean region. The EU's extractive trade policies (natural gas, etc.), arms exports, and selective interventions have contributed to this political instability and insecurity, and consequently underdevelopment, fueling the migration process. Just considering healthcare, most of the health personnel of the south moved in Europe (and north America). The health sector is poorly funded and under-resourced in the southern countries, that is why they are leaving searching better economic conditions (UNHCR, 2025a; 2025b). The problem is exacerbated by what is called the EU's double standards: open the doors for people from Ukraine, but when it concerns Africans and Asians, tighten the rules.

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