The cruel sea

The Mediterranean will be atthe heartofMalta’s EU presidency—forall the wrong reasons



“A

LL that concerns the Mediterranean is ofthe deepest inter-

estto civilised man,” wrote Edward Forbes, a 19th-century

naturalist. Europe’s great sea will loom large as Malta, the Euro-

pean Union’ssmallestmember, takesup the rotatingpresidency

ofits Council ofMinisters for the first halfof2017. That is fitting,

forthe Mediterranean hasdefined the destinyofthisspeck south

of Sicily. The Great Siege Road, which runs along the northern

edge ofValletta, Malta’shandsome capital, recallsthe island’sre-

pulsion ofOttoman invadersin 1565, an actofdefiance that reso-

nated across Christian Europe. A covetous Napoleon said con-

quering the strategically located island was “worth any price”.

Centuries later a bull-headed Maltese prime minister shoe-

horned a chapteron Mediterranean securityinto the Helsinki Ac-

cords, a cold-warcompactbetween the Westand the Soviet bloc.

Yet Malta’s fellow Europeans have not always been so inter-

ested in the Mediterranean. The accession ofMalta and Cyprus to

the EU in 2004 marked the end ofthe club’s expansion in the re-

gion. An ill-fated “European Neighbourhood Policy” failed to

drawthe littoral statesto the eastand the south closer to the EU. In

2008 Nicolas Sarkozy, then France’s president, launched a 43-

country“Union forthe Mediterranean” to much fanfare butzero

effect. Since then the menace ofRussia and the plightof Ukraine

have drawn European attention eastwards. To the south, the EU

has merely watched helplessly as the promises of the 2011Arab

uprisingswere swallowed bycounter-revolution and civil war.

Todaythe Mediterranean maybe back, butnotforhappy rea-

sons. If, in the words ofDavid Abulafia, a historian, the sea was

once “the most vigorous place of interaction between different

societies on the face ofthe planet”, for Europe it now represents

onlydangerand instability. Malta’spresidencyplan drawsatten-

tion to the Mediterranean’s “ongoing conflict, socioeconomic

challenges, terrorism, radicalisation and human-rights viola-

tions”. Analystswarn ofa “wall ofpoverty” to Europe’ssouth.

Chief among the concerns, of course, is migration. This is

nothingnewforMalta; between 2002 and 2012 thousandsofref-

ugees fleeing war-torn African states like Somalia and Eritrea

threatened to overwhelm the tinyisland. Utterlyunprepared for

the arrivals, the Maltese shoved them into grim detention cen-

tres, which remain open today. Malta’sbid forsolidarityfrom its

EU partners went nowhere. Its relationship with Italy soured in

rowsoverresponsibilityformigrantspicked up atsea.

Howthingshave changed. Thanks, saysome, to a mysterious

deal between Italy and Malta not acknowledged by either side,

fewirregularmigrantsnowdisembarkin Malta; the Central Med-

iterranean route runsalmostexclusivelybetween Libya and Italy.

More importantly, a separate crisisin the Eastern Mediterranean

jerked migration to the top of Europeans’ concerns. The refugee

crisis of 2015-16, when over1m migrants hopped from Turkey to

Greece and thence towards Europe’s heart, so traumatised Eu-

rope’sleadersthattheyhave turned to the Central Mediterranean

route with renewed vigour. Here the numbershave edged rather

than rocketed up: 181,000 reached Italy in 2016. The difference is

thattheynowhave Europe’sattention.

Perhaps the trickiest taskofMalta’s presidency will be an in-

ternal one: brokeringagreementamongthe EU’sgovernmentson

howto share the burden ofirregularmigration. ButJoseph Mus-

cat, the prime minister, hasbiggerideas. He wantsthe EUto strike

dealswith African countriessimilarto thatagreed with Turkeyin

March 2016, which drastically slowed the flow of migrants to

Greece. Details are unclear, but Mr Muscat mentions joint naval

patrols of North African waters. Others have revived an old no-

tion ofoffshore asylum-processing centres in Egypt and Tunisia.

“I’m aware these are controversial ideas,” says Mr Muscat. “But

there isno otheroption.” He will advance hisargumentsatan EU

summitin Malta nextmonth.

The prime ministersays most EU leaders agree with him. But

the Turkey deal offers few lessons for Africa. Almost half of the

migrantsin Greece lastyearfled the civil warin Syria. Butmostof

the migrants in the Central Mediterranean are seeking better

wages, notfleeingwar, which meanstheirasylum bidsare likely

to fail. Failed asylum-seekers are devilishly difficult to deport, as

countrieslike Germanyhave been learning. And where Turkey is

well governed (if increasingly despotic), Libya is in chaos. This

weekItalyreopened itsembassyin Tripoli and signed a migration

and security agreement with one of Libya’s two governments.

But such is the volatility in Libya, says Mark Micallef, a Maltese

Libya-watcher, that there is no guarantee Italy will have any

partneratall in a fewmonths.

The thickblue line

The Mediterranean is not without hope. Against the odds Tuni-

sia, just300 milesfrom Malta, isconsolidatingitspost-revolution-

arydemocracy. The EU seemsdetermined to buttressLibya’sno-

tional government, if only to have a partner to help it stem the

migrantflows. To Malta’seast, hopesare high that2017 mayfinal-

lybringan end to the decades-longdivision ofCyprus(reunifica-

tion talkswere beingheld asThe Economistwentto press). ACyp-

riotdeal could improve the EU’srelationswith Turkey, unlock oil

and gas supplies in the eastern Mediterranean and smooth the

burgeoningrelationship between the EU and NATO.

But the EU has cleaved the sea in two. “Club Med” may have

struggled inside the euro, but EU membership has consolidated

democracyin Portugal, Spain and Greece. Malta itselfis economi-

cally thriving and a far more relaxed place than the hidebound

country that joined the EU in 2004. Outside the union, to the

south and east, the Mediterranean is a sea of troubles. Malta’s

politicianshave often warned thatifthe EU failsto exportstabil-

ity to its southern neighbourhood it will find itselfimporting in-

stabilityinstead. So far, theyhave been proved right.