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Medgrid – the new French Desertec

Essentially a new version of the Transgreen project, Medgrid aims to provide Europe with inexpensive renewable electricity from northern Africa.

Back on July 13, 2008, the founding of the Union for the Mediterranean was announced, essentially as the revitalization of the by-then practically dormant Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which itself was originally founded in 1995. Under French leadership, the Union was originally thought to be at least partly an attempt by Sarkozy to expand French nuclear technology. At the same time, however, a Mediterranean Solar Plan was announced, with a project called Transgreen being set up soon thereafter.

Exactly a year later, the German version of Transgreen came into being, though some companies (such as Siemens) are members of both projects. Now, Transgreen has produced its first outcome – by changing its own name. How else to explain the otherwise unmotivated name change?

Medgrid and Desertec have a number of things in common. Most importantly, they bring together an international group of companies on projects that will require international political participation. They are also both focusing on feasibility studies. While a lot of press reports treat the two projects as though they are already planning a number of concrete projects, in fact, aside from a very small number of pilot projects, the focus is on getting everyone to the table to decide how to proceed – and at what cost. In the case of Medgrid, the preliminary studies are to be completed in 2013. The goal is to install 20 gigawatts of generating capacity, with five gigawatts being devoted to exports for Europe.

Although everyone would agree that concentrated solar power would be excellent as a part of Europe's power supply – it is the easiest way to get solar electricity in the evening after the sun has gone down but while everyone is still awake with lights on – these projects are viewed critically within the renewables community. First, the projects seem to suggest that Africa has (or could soon have) electricity to export, which is highly doubtful to put it mildly. Second, the projects represent a step away from distributed power by concentrating power production once again in the hands of large firms. Third, by the time the projects have produced their feasibility studies, the price of photovoltaics will have dropped below the price of concentrated solar power once and for all.

Finally, and most crucially, do the competing projects themselves not demonstrate that we are still unable to work together? As long as Germany and France each have their own projects, how do we expect to have power lines running from Morocco through Spain and France to Germany? Will Medgrid ever allow the German project to become more successful? And why do these projects coexist? Why don't the companies and governments come together in a single project? What advantages do competing projects offer?

The German press is full of reports about how Medgrid has the intention of complementing Desertec in the south and eastern part of the Mediterranean (and of how Medgrid is a reaction to Desertec and “based on the German example”), but a

look at the French press shows no such geographic restrictions, nor do the texts speak of Medgrid as being a "complement" to Desertec. Rather, they describe Desertec as being "dominated by German firms." Indeed, the French text also do not stress that Medgrid (if they mention Desertec at all – some don't) is based on the German example, but rather that it is the new name for Transgreen – which predates Desertec.

It's a bit like watching the Olympics in a foreign country. You realize that everyone everywhere mainly reports about how their own national team is doing, not mainly about who is winning which medals. It will be interesting to see whether such competing projects will one day promote each other. (cm)

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