

## STRENGTHENING THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: TOWARDS A TRUE MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP

*A non-paper co-sponsored by DE, EL, ES, FR, HR, IT, CY, MT, PT, SI.*

Summary: The Mediterranean region is affected by pressing threats and challenges. It is time to provide responses both at multilateral and bi-regional level, including through the review of the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean. Building on proposals presented in 2023 (“*Implementing the New Agenda for the Mediterranean - Advancing the Southern Partnership*”) and subsequent discussions, this non-paper identifies five building-blocks and a series of proposals aimed at: a) defining the principles that should inspire the review of the EU Southern Neighbourhood (SN) Policy, b) promoting the re-introduction of the Mediterranean partnership and the SN at the top of the EU agenda, c) providing the SN format with a solid institutional architecture, d) identifying priority areas for bi-regional cooperation with Mediterranean partners, e) ensuring complementarity with efforts made in multilateral fora, particularly the UfM, and f) making good use of relevant financial instruments.

The New Agenda for the Mediterranean (NAM), adopted in February 2021, sought to address threats and challenges affecting the Mediterranean, identify opportunities of mutual interest, enhance regional cooperation, and renew the EU strategic partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood (SN).

In the SN, successive crises - recently the war in Gaza after the terrorist attacks by Hamas, the military response by Israel and its regional spillover - have nevertheless amplified risks. Indeed, today the region faces unprecedented threats and challenges, including: geopolitical competition, political instability, protracted and emerging conflicts, migration flows, climate change, natural disasters, water scarcity, food insecurity, financial difficulties, energy transition, digital transformation, artificial intelligence impact, unemployment rates and educational gaps impacting the role of youth and opportunities for the future, etc.

On the EU side, defining common positions and a thorough implementation of programmes are required to show our strength, credibility and coherence.

Despite the achievements of the NAM, recent bilateral partnership agreements and support given to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and its reform process, the EU and its partners have not been able to unleash the full potential of the Mediterranean partnership and have not fully managed to prevent or mitigate the above-mentioned challenges.

Current challenges cannot wait until 2025 to be addressed, neither at multilateral (the Mediterranean partnership and the UfM), nor at bi-regional level (the EU SN Policy, i.e. 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean). Multilateral and bi-regional responses should be ambitious, coherent and mutually enriching. We welcome the announcement of the new post of the Commissioner for the Mediterranean and also of the establishing of the Directorate General for the Mediterranean – both decisions will send a clear message of the importance the EU attaches to its Southern shores.

At multilateral level, in 2023, the UfM Co-presidency, supported by the UfM Member States, launched a strategic discussion on how to strengthen the organisation. This is an ongoing exercise at senior official level and will possibly lead to an orientation debate at the IX UfM Regional Forum, scheduled to take place in Barcelona in October 28<sup>th</sup> 2024 before the formal endorsement of a strategic reform plan and an updated UfM Roadmap in 2025.

At bi-regional level, based on solid building blocks, this document puts forward a set of proposals to feed the revision of the NAM and high-level debates scheduled to take place also in Barcelona. It builds on the non-paper “*Implementing the New Agenda for the Mediterranean - Advancing the Southern Partnership*”<sup>1</sup> and on the recent impetus provided by the Spanish and Belgian Presidencies of the Council of the European Union.

The overall goal is to revamp and strengthen the EU SN Policy, achieving a genuine strategic bi-regional dynamic that complements EU efforts at both bilateral and multilateral/UfM level.

## **1. Building blocks**

- 1) The upcoming revision of the Southern Neighbourhood Policy announced by the Commission and the EEAS.** A strategic discussion has been on the table for a while, paving the way for the current review. Although we must wait for the revision’s disclosure, we already know that it will be two-folded: a regional scheme is to be developed in parallel with a bilateral one. We must ensure that this new double approach is *tailored, balanced* and *pragmatic*.
- 2) The bilateral strand, which has come to the fore over the last year.** As a result of partnership agreements signed with the EU – represented by the Commission – Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon have achieved a new level of partnership. These tailor-made agreements could be conceived both as a way to deepen bilateral relations and as building blocks for a repowered regional architecture. In any case, we should avoid the risk of other SN countries feeling left behind. In parallel, Association Agreements and the Partnership Priorities should be kept effective and up to date, as they remain fundamental political

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<sup>1</sup> This non-paper was endorsed in February 2023 by IT, HR, CY, FR, EL, MT, PT, SI, and ES.

assets for interaction by establishing agendas for political and economic reform with short and medium-term priorities of between three and five years. Moreover, support to regional organisations cannot remain symbolic and should be seriously revamped. A comprehensive and inclusive approach is needed, including with countries that have faced unique challenges over the last years.

3) **The financial support to the SN and the Economic and Investment Plan.**

With an ambition to mobilise € 24 billion and € 5 billion committed since 2021, the EIP will continue progressing in its implementation. We must pay attention to ensuring an adequate financial support with the current balance (2/3 SN; 1/3 Eastern neighbourhood), as well as a clearer focus on priorities and results, guaranteeing that the already agreed replenishment of the so-called NDICI cushion be implemented in full. The mid-term revision of the MFF has provided for strengthening funds for priorities in Headline 6 of the European budget by 7,6 billion Euro, highlighting, inter alia, the need of supporting the Southern Neighbourhood and Africa. The mid-term revision of the NDICI-GE instrument should be in line with these goals. Global Gateway and Team Europe Initiatives are also powerful tools which remain relatively underdeveloped in the SN and should be further expanded.

4) **The SN counts with a solid policy framework and well-defined priority areas defined by the 2021 NAM.**

The 2021 Agenda for the Mediterranean and its five axes are an adequate guide to foster interaction. The key idea would be “make the most of it” while updating them to the current realities in the Mediterranean. In 2023, some of these areas were already identified as natural fields for greater cooperation, particularly energy, digital transformation, migration flows, civil protection, blue economy, economic integration, sustainable growth, vocational trainings and job creation, youth and civil society. Emphasis should also be placed on economic development processes linked to structural reforms, with macroeconomic support from the IFIs and the EU.

5) **The current SN architecture, which is far from being developed.**

Four ministerial meetings have taken place so far. The organisation of a fifth one has been postponed due to the Gaza war; we, however, deem it essential to take place. The project of a first summit has been left aside for now, but it must not be discarded. There are neither sectorial technical meetings nor high-level ones, all of these being essential. Together with formal and informal SOMs, the periodicity of these events should be sealed.

## **2. A set of proposals to enhance the EU Southern Neighbourhood Policy**

Based on the previous elements, bearing in mind the suggestions advanced in 2023's non-paper *“Implementing the New Agenda for the Mediterranean –*

Advancing the Southern Partnership”, we hereby present a set of proposals to be considered in the reflection on the future of the SN Policy:

**a) Revision of the SN strategy**

- There is **no need to start from scratch**. The EU New Agenda for the Mediterranean is only three years old and far from being obsolete.
- The SN policy must be **pragmatic and factor in the geostrategic evolution** affecting the whole neighbourhood, upholding the international legal framework, including UNCLOS.
- It should have a **flexible geographical and thematic scope**, also allowing for interlinkages with other regions, especially the Sahel, and a reinforced political dialogue with Gulf countries on the issue.
- In view of hints pointing to a **double-strand focus**, we must ensure that it is balanced and that in no way diminishes the regional approach.
- **Ownership and a sense of equal footing** are of utmost importance to ensure that partner countries perceive that policies and cooperation areas are not imposed by the EU and that their interests are taken into account.
- Finally, any review must pave the ground for a robust **Strategic communication** orientation, emphasizing the diversity of our partnership, common challenges and interests, and successes.

**b) (Re) introducing and maintaining the SN at the top of the EU Agenda**

- Attempts to include the SN in the EUCO agenda were met with relative success over the last years. Nevertheless, the SN should be present in **EUCO discussions** on a more regular basis, as needed, also in the light of the new political cycle.
- The new institutional cycle presents an opportunity to renew commitment to operationalising engagement with the SN.
- The amount and magnitude of deep geostrategic crises within the **FAC agenda**, leaves little room for other items to be considered. The SN format is rarely discussed, and this should change.
- At the level of Council working groups, this is also the case, and the **Magreb-Mashrek (MaMa)** group deals with the SN once per year on average. EEAS should include it more regularly as a point in the agenda.

**c) Towards a full-fledged Southern Partnership Architecture**

- Almost 30 years after the launch of the Barcelona Process, the SN is still deprived of an **institutional architecture**. It is time to take action.
- **Regional Senior Official Meetings (SOMs)**, be they formal or informal, back to back with UfM SOMs, should become a SN fixed, periodical feature which keeps the SN format vibrant without incurring large organisational costs.
- **Ministerial Meetings** should be convened on a yearly basis, back-to-back with the UfM Regional Fora, as it has traditionally been the case so far. In this regard, we particularly welcome the V EU-SN Ministerial Meeting taking place in October 28<sup>th</sup> 2024, back-to-back with the IX UfM Regional Forum.
- In specific areas of common interest, **sectorial ministerial and technical meetings** could also be convened when needed to deepen dialogue and

cooperation on condition that these are carried out in a spirit of complementarity with the work undertaken in the UfM and do not duplicate it.

- Last but not least, **high level structured political dialogue** should be enhanced and the idea of holding a first **EU-SN Summit** should be followed-up on.

**d) Reinigorating the New Agenda for the Mediterranean: a leap forward in sectoral cooperation**

- The 2021 Agenda remains the **most accomplished framework** to advance interaction at bi-regional level. Its five axes speak for a modern agenda, which is valid but needs to be updated to the current challenges and needs. Sectoral cooperation should be encouraged but seen holistically in terms of actions that are mutually reinforcing, rather than pursued on an individual basis. This will enhance coherence, coordination as well as encourage the buy in of partners.
- Bi-regional cooperation in the framework of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean should focus on **areas of common interest** such as:
  - **Energy:** connectivity, energy security, enhanced energy efficiency and energy transition are a natural field of cooperation with the SN, where the development of a common Mediterranean energy policy represents a precious opportunity. Putting the energy sector among the Global Gateway's priorities would be paramount to contribute the strategic autonomy of the EU and favour virtuous bi-regional synergies.
  - **Digital** transformation and innovation as an accelerator of sustainable growth and integrated technology chains.
  - **Migration** and mobility, promoting comprehensive, balanced, mutually beneficial partnerships with our Southern neighbours and an enhanced approach towards other countries of origin and transit of migrants in the African continent, aiming at effectively countering human trafficking and migrant smuggling and at ensuring safe and legal pathways for migration.
  - **Mediterranean economic integration and economic and financial reforms** aimed at improving economic governance, fostering private investment, a stronger private sector and job creation.
  - **Civil protection** and risk management within the framework of a Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and solidarity mechanism. Cooperation should be enhanced, taking into account the UfM, to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to emergencies, natural disasters and humanitarian crises, with the assistance of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, as tested with the last humanitarian corridors, including the Cyprus maritime corridor to Gaza, and in line with the Union Disaster Resilience Goals.
  - Trade, sustainable **supply chains** and strategic raw materials, including economic integration and building mutually beneficial commercial relations.
  - **Climate change** adaptation and mitigation, and green transition.
  - **Human development**, building capacity and resilience in the region through higher education and research programmes and institutions, including the Euro-Mediterranean Universities, as well as vocational trainings and job creation, empowering youth, women and vulnerable groups in all roles in society.

- **Civil society dialogue**, to foster regional cooperation and mutual understanding.
- **Security and defence** based on common interest should include dialogue and cooperation on counterterrorism, maritime security and CSDP missions and operations. More in general, we should strive to enhance coordination and maximise synergies with the Common Foreign and Security Policy.
- The revised Agenda could also address avenues for greater cooperation in **other areas** such as agriculture, blue economy and health.
- Moreover, the revamped Agenda should expand the range of actors with which we work and give more **attention to civil society and business communities**. People-to-people dialogue and diplomacy needs to gain relevance to increase mutual understanding. In this regard, support to the Anna Lindh Foundation should increase.

e) **Bilateral, bi-regional and multilateral focus**

- Policies deployed to foster cooperation in the Mediterranean should be **complementary, balanced tailored and flexible** enough not to contradict each other.
- The **bilateral approach** (e.g. partnership agreements) should **be** regarded as complementary **to the bi-regional** one. Bilateral initiatives could be replicated when necessary, as an incentive to deepen regional cooperation. In parallel, work on the Partnership priorities must be pursued.
- The EU should also strive for **coherence with efforts made at the multilateral arena**, notably through a strengthening of the UfM, with greater support from the EU and MS and an update of its 2017 Roadmap for Action.

f) **Financing**

- It is fundamental to ensure adequate and predictable financing instruments, a result-oriented approach and a balanced focus and design for the SN in order to transform these priorities and proposals into tangible deliverables.
- Mid-term reviews of MFF and NDICI-GE have provided political guidance in this regard. The subsequent reprogramming of NDICI-GE, in which the Member States – who play a strategic guidance role – must be closely and regularly associated, must however ensure it **contributes to attain our priorities in a dynamic and effective way**.
- The top instrumental priority in this regard is improving mutual understanding and the perception of the EU in the region. Smart implementation of Global Gateway projects in the framework of the **Economic and Investment Plan**, propping up projects that boost the areas of common interest mentioned above, is key.
- The European Commission and the EEAS must ensure the flexibility of the EU financing instruments and their adaptability to changing contexts while ensuring their governance and rules. Moreover, cooperation with IFIs must be increased, as should engagement with the EU private sector (including SMEs).