



REX/540
A new Agenda for the Mediterranean

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee
Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood
A New Agenda for the Mediterranean
[(JOIN/2021/2 final)]

Rapporteur: **Helena De Felipe Lehtonen**

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC applauds the Communication's renewed commitment to the rule of law, human and fundamental rights, equality, democracy and good governance as a cornerstone for the development of equitable, inclusive and therefore prosperous societies, as well as its particular focus on young people, women and disadvantaged groups. At the same time, it welcomes the new social objectives of the Porto Summit, which must have an impact in the implementation of the Joint Communication.
- 1.2 The EESC is very pleased to note the EU's commitment to promote a culture of rule of law by closely involving civil society and the business community. Civil society organisations and social partner organisations remain key partners in shaping and monitoring EU cooperation. The EESC's Group on Fundamental rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL) is a good example of how civil society organisations are growing stronger in EU countries.
- 1.3 The EESC warmly welcomes the proposals to involve the private sector more closely in the development of the region to supplement the necessary public investment, and to deepen public-private dialogue with a view to ensuring social and economic sustainability, which will lead to the creation of decent jobs. This approach should be promoted both at the regional Euromed level and at national and local levels.
- 1.4 The EESC welcomes the decisive support for strengthening cooperation in multilateral fora, with the UN at its centre, in particular on peace and security, in order to develop shared solutions and to address the issues hindering stability and progress, despite the fact that after 25 years of the Barcelona Process, the same problems continue to plague the region when it comes to peace, security and economic development. The Committee calls for action based on synergies between the instruments provided by the UN Charter and the EU Security Union Strategy and believes that a significant increase in the EU's efforts in the region is needed.
- 1.5 The EESC believes it is important to improve regional, sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation, mainly through the Union for the Mediterranean, the League of Arab States, the African Union, the Five plus Five (5+5) Dialogue or other regional players and organisations that promote pragmatic multi-level governance through initiatives based on variable geometry and triangulation, which also help promote cooperation with the entire African continent and the Gulf and Red Sea regions.
- 1.6 The EESC stresses that the focus must be on tackling the root causes of migration in the respective partner countries. People must be provided with a decent life, employment and prospects in their own countries, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), so that people do not migrate due to a lack of life chances. Examples of this would be better access to education or measures to create quality jobs.
- 1.7 The EESC calls on the EU to ensure that the green transition is not perceived as a model imposed from the outside. Investment in awareness-raising campaigns is recommended, as is involving civil society in this effort.

- 1.8 The EESC highlights the importance of the Communication's emphasis on the essential role played by the social partners and civil society organisations – both formal and informal – as key players in the design and implementation of public policies and as watchdogs of respect for the rights of citizens and the rule of law. Trade unions and business organisations play an important role in this within the framework of social dialogue. The Committee therefore considers it crucial that the EU support and promote the action of the different institutions and networks of civil society organisations in the broad sense of the term at Euro-Mediterranean level so that they can carry out their work in the best possible conditions.
- 1.9 The EESC considers that gender equality is not only a universally recognised human right but also an imperative to well-being, economic growth, prosperity, good governance, peace and security; we must step up our efforts, including through gender mainstreaming in all cooperation programmes and target actions, in line with the EU's third Gender Action Plan.

2. **General comments**

- 2.1 On 9 February 2021, in order to relaunch and strengthen the strategic partnership between the European Union and its partners in the Southern Neighbourhood, the European Commission's High Representative adopted a new policy statement: the Communication on Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean.
- 2.2 A dedicated Economic Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood aims to ensure that the quality of life of people in the region improves and that the economic recovery, also covering the health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening the implementation of the COVAX facility and reinforcing sustainable public infrastructure, leaves no one behind. Respect for human rights and the rule of law are an integral part of the Communication and are essential to ensure citizens' trust in the institutions.
- 2.3 Under the EU's new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), up to EUR 7 billion will be earmarked for its implementation between 2021 and 2027, which could harness up to EUR 30 billion in public and private investment in the region over the next decade. Through the NDICI, the EU will also boost for sustainable investment under the EFSD+ by leveraging capital to complement direct external cooperation grants. The EFSD + will be backed by an External Action Guarantee of EUR 53 400 million, which will also cover the Western Balkans.
- 2.4 The new agenda focuses on five policy areas:
- Human development, good governance and the rule of law;
 - Resilience, prosperity and the digital transition;
 - Peace and security;
 - Migration and mobility;
 - Green transition.

3. **Background to the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean**

3.1 Twenty-five years after the Barcelona Declaration, the new, ambitious and innovative Agenda for the Mediterranean proposes to relaunch the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

2004: Launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

2008: Birth of the Union for the Mediterranean as an intergovernmental organisation

2015: Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, setting stabilisation and security as the main policy objectives

2020: European Commission proposal for a new Pact on Migration and Asylum

3.2 The working document on the Southern Neighbourhood Investment Plan contains concrete proposals for initiatives in four of the five priority areas. The investment plan is expressly intended to be developed in cooperation with Member States, possibly through joint programming. It is essential to involve civil society organisations and the social partners in the programming process. Likewise, the investment plan has to be reachable for these social actors.

4. **Human development, good governance and the rule of law**

4.1 Promoting the rule of law in partner countries is essential. Social organisations, especially trade unions, play a central role in this. This ensures that social and workers' rights are enforced. In the region, "sustainable economic growth"¹ must be promoted accordingly. The EU can play a crucial role in terms of enhancing the business environment to allow private companies to take root and flourish, avoiding bureaucracy and facilitating the setting-up of new businesses. In this regard, businesses, especially SMEs, could genuinely prosper and should also create quality jobs that contribute to combating the social causes of unwanted migration, in particular.

4.2 Furthermore, good governance, the rule of law and human rights, including social and labour rights, social dialogue and equal access to justice promote peace, inclusive prosperity and stability. The EESC encourages greater commitment to the consideration of ILO rules² and their effective implementation in partner countries on the basis of the Agenda 2030. Reducing bureaucracy is essential to improve cooperation between the EU and partner countries.

4.3 A good example of the good governance approach in the region is a clear focus on supporting the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as a forum for exchange and cooperation. In September 2020, the EESC renewed its Memorandum of Understanding, joining forces with a view to stepping up the involvement of economic and social stakeholders from UfM countries in order to achieve the objectives of the 2008 Paris declaration on active civil society participation.

¹ Sustainable Development Goals, [Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth](#).

² As set out in the core conventions and in particular in the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (Point 2.2 of the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Mandatory due diligence* (INT/911), [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 136](#)).

4.4 The EESC encourages cooperation with the southern partners, to promote the establishment of healthy information environments and media freedom as measures to tackle disinformation and misinformation. It is important to promote good governance, through effective, fair and transparent public administration, a more decisive fight against corruption and equal access to justice.

5. **Strengthen resilience, build prosperity and seize the digital transition**

5.1 The Communication proposes to help the Southern partners "take advantage of the digital transformation and become a competitor in the global digital economy". The skills of workers, self-employers and entrepreneurs should be specifically promoted in order to make them fit for the digital transformation in the world of work.³

5.2 Trade and investment contribute to the development of the region. Support for the integration of North African countries into the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is welcomed. However, regional economic networking between North African partner countries also needs to be promoted. The dismantling of non-tariff trade barriers (a major obstacle to trade integration in the region) should be promoted accordingly, taking into account existing economic asymmetries. For example, the EU's negotiations with Tunisia and Morocco - DCFTA- have stalled because existing asymmetries are not sufficiently taken into account.⁴

5.3 Particular emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for young people through employment and education support programmes, with a focus on boosting access to finance, especially for SMEs, by far the largest employers in the region, through the use of new financial instruments such as venture capital. Also, it is desirable to establish mechanisms to transition from the informal to the formal economy based on self-employment and quality jobs.

5.4 The EESC considers educational and vocational training, as well as Mediterranean Erasmus+ schemes, a priority for young people, as an opportunity for employment, promoting the transition from school to work. Digital infrastructure is a priority for the region and the impact of digitalisation on work in the form of teleworking gives workers more autonomy and balance between their professional and private life⁵.

5.5 The aim of deepening cooperation on cyber security and harnessing digital technology in law enforcement "in full respect of human rights and civil liberties" is a cause for concern, given the past lack of transparency in the observance of human rights in the region.

³ Points 2.4.1 and 2.4.4 of the Information report of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Digitalisation and SMEs in the Mediterranean region* (REX/519).

⁴ Points 3.2.9 and 4.1.2 of the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *EU and Africa: Making an equal development partnership a reality based on sustainability and common values* (REX/527), [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 105](#) and points 4.1 and 6.1 of the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *External aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce the reasons of economic migration, with a special focus on Africa* (REX/516), [OJ C 97, 24.3.2020, p. 18](#).

⁵ Points 1.12 and 2.2.7 of the Information report of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Digitalisation and SMEs in the Mediterranean region* (REX/519).

6. **Peace and security**

- 6.1 Internal conflicts and regional disputes, which continue to rage in the region, (the Western Sahara, Libya, Israel/Palestine, Syria) represent a major challenge. The Communication emphasises the importance of relations between Israel and some Arab states being normalised for new initiatives to be launched. The EESC considers social dialogue between different cultures and civilisations and mutual respect are a basis for peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region.
- 6.2 The fight against extremism, radicalisation, cybercrime and organised crime must respect the rule of law and human rights, in particular. The state of emergency is an exceptional measure, during which fundamental rights of citizens must continue to be fully respected.
- 6.3 The Communication promises to strengthen police and judicial cooperation between the EU and ENP-Southern partnership countries, also by negotiating cooperation agreements between the EU and individual southern neighbours. Given the long history of cooperation, the statement that the EU will "engage with Southern partners in order to ensure that their law enforcement and judicial systems meet high standards of data protection and respect human rights" is a step forward in terms of joint approaches.

7. **Migration and mobility**

- 7.1 The Communication's provisions on migration management raise the possibility that financial assistance may depend, at least in part, on cooperation in this area. The EESC supports the fact that the EU will actively work to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement through conflict resolution and by addressing the socio-economic challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 with tailor-made solutions adapted to the Southern Mediterranean partners. Compliance with human rights (the Geneva Convention) is the basis of any cooperation in the field of migration. A lack of willingness to cooperate can only be countered with "incentives"⁶.
- 7.2 The Communication proposes to promote "Talent Partnerships", put forward in the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum . It seems that the new instrument aims to foster cooperation with third countries. This could be a potential area for linking vocational training, business networking, inter-regional value chains and circular migration to benefit people and economies on both sides of the Mediterranean. In any event, these plans must be reconciled with the need to retain sufficient skilled labour in the partner countries, which is essential for their sustainable economic development.

8. **The green transition: climate resilience, energy and the environment**

- 8.1 The Communication recognises the potential of the Southern Neighbourhood for the development of renewable energies, especially solar and wind energy, and hydrogen production,

⁶ Interview with migration expert Gerald Knaus: <https://www.dw.com/de/knaus-eu-migrationspakt-ist-unrealistisch/a-55058035>.

which it deems a "new strategic priority". The potential is clearly linked to the European Green Deal and the growing integration of sustainable development priorities into international global cooperation. In this context, the EESC points out that, in addition to (international) large-scale projects, it is essential to support projects with a direct local socio-economic impact.

8.2 The call for the European Green Deal should be applied to bring particular benefits to agriculture, a sector essential to the economies of most countries outside the EU, with initiatives aimed at rediscovering and protecting the Mediterranean Sea. The Blue Economy represents a powerful tool to manage the Mediterranean's common assets, and the EESC highlights the need to take stock of the UfM Ministerial declaration on a sustainable blue economy in the Western Mediterranean.

8.3 The EESC considers especially pertinent the conclusions of the first evaluated report in the Mediterranean from the MedECC, sponsored by the UfM, over the impact on climate and environmental change and its consequences in the region, promoting areas for joint cooperation between both shores, facing common challenges in terms of sustainable and climate resilience, to facilitate the transition to a green, blue and circular economy in the region.

9. **Gender equality and women's rights , LGBTIQ+ persons and persons with disabilities on both sides of the Mediterranean**

9.1 Extreme right-wing nationalist movements across Europe and conservative and Islamist movements on the southern shore, both using traditional and religious language, have recently been increasingly reacting against gender equality.

9.2 The EESC welcomes the initiative of the UfM to establish voluntary monitoring mechanisms for the commitments given by the governments in the region on gender equality standards in the form of concrete indicators.

9.3 The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation. Firstly, illiberal and autocratic governments have taken the opportunity to continue their attacks on women's and LGBTIQ+ rights. Secondly, various government measures enacted in response to the pandemic have effectively worsened the living conditions for women, LGBTIQ+ persons and persons with disabilities, which makes it essential to promote initiatives to protect the rights of these groups and their socio-economic, civic and political participation.

9.4 The European Union should intensify its efforts and cooperation on the ground to ensure that the fundamental rights of LGBTIQ+ people are respected without exception, that they are nowhere subject to criminal prosecution and that their participation in public life is strengthened⁷.

⁷ Point 1.11 of the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025* (SOC/667).

9.5 Although many partner countries have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is still a great need for improvement in their living situations. Therefore, the European Union should make a special commitment to the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities as laid down in the UN Convention.

Brussels, 7 July 2021

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