



Speech by President Oliver Röpke at 2023 Euromed Summit in Alexandria, Egypt

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Distinguished Presidents,

Dr Magdy Galal, who is here on behalf of His Excellency Tarek El Molla, Egyptian Minister for Petroleum and Mineral Resources,

Professor Ahmed Abdullah Zayed, Director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina,

Mr Nasser Kamel, Secretary-General of the Union for the Mediterranean,

Mr Josep Ferré, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation,

Mr Mohamed Abou El Enein, Deputy Speaker of the Egyptian House of Representatives,

Mr Ahmed El Wakil, President of the Association of Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry and of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce,

Professor Christos Zerefos, Secretary-General, Academy of Athens,

Dear participants,

- I am very glad to welcome you and to open the **27th Euromed Summit** of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions.
- I would like to start by warmly **thanking** this year's **co-organisers**: the **Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat**, the **Anna Lindh Foundation** and **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**.
- We are here at the **unique premises** of **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**, a wonderful example of international cooperation focused on culture.
- The **architectural competition** for this building was organised by the UNESCO and won by a **team** consisting of **ten members** representing **6 countries**.
- The library hosts the **world's largest collection** of **digital manuscripts**, which is of course a wonderful connection to the topic of "**digital transition**" that we will discuss tomorrow.
- The other two topics of this summit are **energy transition** as well as **water scarcity** and **desertification**.
- **Water is a prerequisite for human survival and dignity** and a fundamental basis for the resilience of both societies and the environment.
- Water is vital for human nutrition and health. It is essential for ecosystem management, agriculture, energy and overall security of our planet.
- **Water scarcity** is a **global problem**, which is putting a strain on our systems. The bad news is that it is getting worse, to the extent that water scarcity is now among the **main threats for our future**.
- According to **UN-Water**, water should be considered a **scarce resource**. The math is simple and worrying: freshwater is limited but the demand will only keep growing. This is placing a huge burden on societies, economies and the environment.
- As the **global population** grows, water resources and infrastructure in many countries **cannot meet** the demand for water. Today, more than 1.4 billion people – including



450 million children – live in areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability.

- The situation is getting worse because of **climate change**, which is **making rainfall more unpredictable**, but also biodiversity loss and pollution. The UN estimates that over **90 per cent of “natural” disasters are water-related**, including drought and aridification [the change of climate from wet to dry], wildfires, pollution and floods. They lead to injury, loss of livelihoods, even death. We expect 700 million people may be displaced because of water scarcity by 2030.
- The problem is particularly relevant for the **Mediterranean area**, where temperatures are rising **20% faster** than the global average. This is having a strong impact on **economic growth, agricultural land and food production**.
- Less water also means an **increase of conflicts** and more **people displaced** from places where the lack of water makes life impossible. Since 2010, there have been more than 460 **conflicts** worldwide over water control, most of them **in Africa and the Middle East** due to the combination of droughts cycles, physical water scarcity, poor water quality, poor water governance, weak institutional performance and forced displacement.
- Let me underline that water scarcity is **problem affecting many parts of the world**, and no one will be spared, also our home in Europe.
- Last summer **Europe** saw the most severe **droughts** in 500 years. Things are not very different in 2023, when extremely long periods of dry weather alternate with **devastating floods**, as in **Italy** just two months ago.
- The EU has partly anticipated these challenges, setting up **legal frameworks** for the **protection and management** of our freshwater resources in the context of the **EU Green Deal**.
- However, **more needs to be done**, and the EESC wants to contribute to scaling up **actions undertaken to fight against water scarcity and desertification**.
- We are calling for a change of attitude and to consider **water** as a **cross-cutting theme** in our work for 2023: we will adopt a **set of own-initiative opinions**, addressing the



topic from different perspectives and making **concrete proposals**¹. We call it in the EESC the "Blue Deal".

- Among our own-initiative opinions, there is **the EESC opinion on "Water politics – Between desertification and securitisation – Time for a Blue Diplomacy"**, which will be discussed tomorrow.
- The outcome of our **debates** will be integrated **in the final version of the opinion on the Blue Deal**.
- But the objective is also to have a change of mentality and **for this topic to be central in the new Commission**, the driving force of the European Union, which will change next year.
- Then come the equally important **digital and green transitions**. These **twin transitions** are of paramount importance for the **future**, and should be mainstreamed into **every policy area**, including the relations between the EU and its neighbours.
- As highlighted in our opinion "**Digital transition in the Euro-Mediterranean region**", the digital transition can genuinely contribute to **ecological, economic and social development**.
- The introduction of digital technologies has dramatically **accelerated** with the **COVID-19 pandemic**: it has helped with **social isolation** and has allowed us to **continue working during the pandemic**.
- There is no return to the pre-pandemic time, and **digital connectivity** is becoming a **right for every human being**.
- **This is the reason why the EU adopted 6 months ago a European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles** and that the UN Secretary-General published a Roadmap for Digital Cooperation with targets for 2030.
- It is crucial to avoid a **digital divide** where some generations, social classes or regions



of the planet are excluded from the opportunities of the digital world. We simply cannot afford this.

- Digitalisation can be an instrument of **social integration** and **economic prosperity**, not to mention that digital technologies will be of great use to **make the Green Deal happen**.
- This brings me to the **energy transition**, our topic for today's summit debates. This transition is of **absolute necessity**, for Europe and the rest of the world.
- **Russia's aggression against Ukraine** has shown how dangerous it is for our societies to depend on **one single energy supplier**. To remedy this situation, **we need to diversify**.
- The climate crisis calls for a **diversification**, not only of suppliers, but also of **energy sources**. If we want to move away from fossil fuels, we need more and more energy from **renewable sources like solar and wind**.
- Renewable energy sources are ready for **massive use**, and some EU Member States are leaders in their production. However, if we want to meet our goals of substantial emission reductions to reduce the speed of climate change, we need **cooperation with the rest of the world**.
- The countries around the Mediterranean have a **huge potential for solar-power** and could soon become net exporters of green energy.
- There is a lot we can cooperate on: from **green hydrogen**, to **energy efficiency**, **energy savings**, **connection to common grids**, **regulatory framework**, **funding**, **opportunities for SMEs** or the **fight to energy poverty**.
- These aspects are treated extensively in our draft opinion on "**Energy policies and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region**", that we will be happy to discuss with you today.
- Finally, allow me to end my opening speech with an issue that is **close to my heart**.
- Many of you will know that the **respect of human rights** in Europe and abroad is among



the **main priorities of my mandate as EESC President.**

- I was glad to hear about the **Egyptian National Strategy for Human Rights** adopted in 2021 and to address the question with his Excellency Dr Abdelatty in Brussels.
- The **implementation** of this strategy is of **key importance**, with trust and engagement as the good currency of our partnership between the EU and Egypt, this is why we are here.
- We are not here to give lectures on human rights, but let's **learn from each other** how to ensure the respect of universal human rights.
- Let's **enhance our cooperation** and **ensure the protection of human rights and workers' rights** for all our citizens.
- **Thank you for your kind attention.** I am glad that we are gathered here in this beautiful venue in Alexandria. I wish you an interesting and fruitful Summit.

