



**European Committee
of the Regions**

CIVEX-VII/010

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OPINION

Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood A new Agenda for the Mediterranean

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the Commission's initiative to renew its partnership with the EU's Southern Neighbourhood in the interests of peace, stability and prosperity in the region;
- calls on the EU and its partner countries to make specific and appropriate use of local and regional authorities as drivers for territorial development close to the people;
- notes that the European Committee of the Regions and the local and regional associations active in this context set up the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) in 2010 to give local and regional authorities (LRAs) a voice in the Euro-Mediterranean process;
- stresses the need to strengthen existing instruments to protect human rights, as, although positive, what the EU has actually done in this respect is not yet sufficient. Would welcome, in this connection, that all nationals of non-EU countries who are members of the partnership benefit from an upward convergence of rights and responsibilities in the area of equality and non-discrimination;
- proposes that ad hoc forums for dialogue and multilevel exchange be set up between representatives of local, regional and national authorities and representatives of civil society from European and Southern Neighbourhood countries to promote good governance and involvement in decision-making processes;
- is committed to promoting women's empowerment and gender equality, in terms of rights and opportunities, as an essential resource to promote regional stability and socio-economic development;
- stresses that it is crucial to pursue a balanced approach which takes into account all relevant aspects of migration;
- in view of the strengthened geographical approach and in line with the priorities set out in the agenda, urges all the EU institutions to consider local and regional authorities and their associations as key factors for sustainable development and partners in programming.

Rapporteur

Vincenzo BIANCO (IT/PES), Member of Catania Municipal Council

Reference documents

Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A new Agenda for the Mediterranean
JOIN(2021) 2 final; SWD(2021) 23 final

Joint Staff Working Document on Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours Accompanying the document Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A new Agenda for the Mediterranean
JOIN(2021) 2 final; SWD(2021) 23 final

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A new Agenda for the Mediterranean

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

a) General remarks

1. points out that, historically and culturally, the Mediterranean Sea has, over the centuries, been a natural unifying force rather than a dividing line for peoples from different continents;
2. welcomes the Commission's initiative to renew its partnership with the EU's Southern Neighbourhood in the interests of peace, stability and prosperity in the region; supports the prospect of post-COVID recovery outlined by the Commission in the Joint Communication as a rare opportunity to focus the Mediterranean agenda on people;
3. welcomes the fact that for the first time the EU is addressing a specific communication to its southern neighbours, as this demonstrates the importance of the relationship for both sides;
4. firmly believes that delivering tangible results through cooperation is crucial for a more prosperous, fair, sustainable and safe future for the Mediterranean;
5. calls on the EU and its partner countries to make specific and appropriate use of local and regional authorities as drivers for territorial development close to the people. The benefits of cooperation must extend beyond capitals. The huge subnational disparities within neighbouring countries must not be increased, but reduced by new initiatives. In this respect, the development of cross-border projects that strengthen relations between regions on the three shores of the Mediterranean – providing added value by responding to global problems from a local perspective – should be paid particular attention. Given the crosscutting dimension of the SDGs and their potential to bring about change, the EU should build regional strategies to recover from the COVID 19 crisis and speed up the transitions to sustainability in the Mediterranean over the next ten years around a Mediterranean macro regional governance framework that includes the different levels of government;
6. notes that the European Committee of the Regions and the local and regional associations active in this context set up the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) in 2010 to give local and regional authorities (LRAs) a voice in the Euro-Mediterranean process;
7. highlights that efforts will continue to enhance regional, sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation, with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as a focal point and its Agendas as common reference;

- b) Human development, good governance and rule of law
8. stresses the need to strengthen existing instruments to protect human rights, as, although positive, what the EU has actually done in this respect is not yet sufficient. Would welcome, in this connection, that all nationals of non-EU countries who are members of the partnership benefit from an upward convergence of rights and responsibilities in the area of equality and with regard to all forms of discrimination;
 9. also proposes that the process for a Mediterranean Charter of Human Rights open to signature by the members of the partnership be set in motion. Incorporating the content of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, this would be the basis for a substantial convergence with the EU in terms of human rights. In this regard, points out that some of the countries that were originally signatories to the Barcelona Declaration are now EU Member States (Cyprus and Malta);
 10. proposes that ad hoc forums for dialogue and multilevel exchange be set up between representatives of local, regional and national authorities and representatives of civil society from European and Southern Neighbourhood countries or that existing multilateral forums be promoted, such as the Three Cultures of the Mediterranean Foundation, in which entities from the three shores of the Mediterranean Basin take part, in order to promote good governance and involvement in decision-making processes;
 11. is committed to promoting women's empowerment and gender equality, in terms of rights and opportunities, as an essential resource to promote regional stability and socio-economic development. Women and girls should participate equally in leadership positions, both in the public and private sphere, to achieve a fully functioning democracy and economy, and to fulfil human rights for all. The conditions need to be created for increasing participation and leadership by women in politics and public life in the region and in local, regional, national and international decision-making. Any legal or other barriers to women being politically involved in electoral processes and represented in election results, including leadership positions, must be removed to combat gender inequalities and help build more inclusive societies that have a more equal and sustainable social fabric in cities and regions in the Mediterranean Basin;
 12. points out, in this connection, that promoting the role of women in the sphere of public policy must go hand in hand with legal frameworks to eradicate all gender-based violence, recognition of civil liberties and an end to the gender pay gap. A holistic approach is needed reconciling work and family life in order to improve the current situation;
 13. calls on the EU to strengthen the economic and social rights and to empower women and girls so that they have equal access to education and everyone, in all their diversity, has equal opportunities and access to decent employment while ensuring equal pay for equal work. Furthermore, women and men should equally share care responsibilities and have access to adequate social protection services. Overall, action should contribute to reducing labour market segregation, boosting women's leadership and increasing their bargaining power while creating an enabling environment for their economic empowerment;

14. welcomes all efforts made in partnerships and cooperation, such as the recently launched Monitoring Mechanism on Gender Equality in the Euro-Mediterranean Region, which aims to gather gender disaggregated data on the four priority areas of the 2017 Ministerial Cairo Declaration. This follow-up mechanism, backed up with indicators to monitor progress, aims to evaluate the gender gap and provide data for scientific-based recommendations to decision-makers, in order to monitor women's quality of life and role in our societies;
 15. calls on the EU to make it easier for citizens in the Southern Neighbourhood to be involved in EU programmes involving exchanges in the areas of research, innovation, culture and education;
 16. calls on the EU to strengthen the role of local and regional authorities in promoting digitalisation and e-government services, as they are in a position to connect better with the local private sector, helping to make central government programmes more effective and efficient;
 17. calls on the EU to advocate policies to reduce the number of young people leaving school in non-EU countries that are members of the partnership, also targeting groups of young people with an immigrant background and, in particular, districts and schools with highly complex situations, giving these young people a second chance to receive education and training and promoting labour market integration programmes;
- c) Resilience, prosperity and digital transition
18. welcomes the new agenda's approach of placing people, particularly young people, at the heart of the new European political agenda, given that almost 50% of the population in the Southern Neighbourhood are under the age of 25; in this regard, highlights its specific contribution to youth entrepreneurship, especially in areas such as the digital transition – which opens up prospects for increasing efficiency, innovation, growth, competitiveness and inclusive and sustainable development – and to creating a local ecosystem conducive to entrepreneurship with the launch of the *ARLEM Young local entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean Award*; highlights the key role that innovation ecosystems¹ can play in fostering economic recovery after the devastating socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic through a green, digital and inclusive transition;
 19. calls for an EU initiative to facilitate job creation by improving the local business environment, stimulating entrepreneurship and attracting investment to promote sustainable economic development in the Southern Neighbourhood; the Euro-Mediterranean partners should step up their efforts to improve the ecosystem for Mediterranean SMEs: harmonising legislation, sharing good practice, encouraging new SME start-ups and improving access to funding;

¹

The CoR is carrying out a study in this regard for the ARLEM report on "Innovative ecosystems and start-ups in the Mediterranean as a means of recovering from the COVID-19 crisis" which is currently being drawn up.

20. stresses that economic development must go hand in hand with inclusive and sustainable social development facilitating implementation of the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in order to help build resilience in the population and overall stability;
 21. continue to address the structural barriers, including persisting stereotypes, that underpin the digital divide to work towards an inclusive digital transformation, promoting gender-responsive programmes that support partner countries' fair digital transformation;
- d) Peace and security
22. considers peace and security to be prerequisites for achieving all the other objectives set out in the agenda and considers it necessary to address the factors that counteract stabilisation: poverty, inequality, corruption, climate change, poor economic and social development and lack of opportunities, in particular for young people;
 23. advocates synergy between the instruments provided for in the United Nations Charter and the EU Strategy for the Security Union, to bring about a secure environment sufficient for the needs of the future to tackle the developing threats (protection from terrorism and organised crime);
 24. recalls the Nicosia initiative² of cooperation with Libyan municipalities as a concrete example of city and peer-to-peer diplomacy where local and regional authorities can make a key contribution to addressing long-term international challenges in a sustainable way;
- e) Migration and mobility
25. with regard to migration, considers that the positive measures recently adopted by the EU in this area are not yet sufficient. In the absence of further joint instruments at European level, including an appropriate distribution mechanism to relocate migrants, the burden of managing the migrant emergency falls primarily on the local and regional authorities of the European countries on the front line, in particular the border regions and communities in the south of the EU, which are under greater pressure from migratory flows in the Mediterranean; at the same time, considers local and regional authority involvement and EU support to be essential for the EU to raise European public awareness on issues such as solidarity, tolerance, and respect for legality and dialogue, in order to improve the way migrant-related issues are perceived;
 26. stresses that it is crucial to pursue a balanced approach which takes into account all relevant aspects of migration. To this end, welcomes the new agenda's proposal to bring all relevant EU policies and instruments to bear to support these comprehensive, balanced and mutually beneficial partnerships with its southern neighbours in the area of development cooperation, visas, trade and investment, employment and education;

²

Launched in 2015 it will enter a new phase in 2021, with different and substantial new projects funded mainly by the EU starting for capacity-building for municipal staff, local economic development as well as local governance. (more info; <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Libya.aspx>).

27. welcomes the European Commission's efforts to reform the Common European Asylum System set out in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum and recognises that the external dimension of this pact is a key aspect of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. Calls on the European Union to allocate sufficient funds for regional and local authorities to roll out their integration and inclusion policies. Welcomes the Commission proposal to provide financial support to third countries which are countries of origin or transit countries that are ready to develop joint policies on migrants;
 28. stresses the need to combat human traffickers and create safe routes to the EU for people entitled to protection status under international law, and calls for special protection for potential victims of trafficking (women, young people, children);
 29. considers that EU cooperation on migration with third countries, in particular its southern neighbours, needs to be stepped up, and welcomes the intention to support migration and asylum policies, including partner countries' border management capacities. Moreover, calls for the European Union to allocate sufficient funds to the regions and local authorities to enable them to develop their own integration and inclusion policies; suggests encouraging cooperation with third countries of origin or transit with a view to the acceptance of returns of irregular migrants, albeit with the exception of access to international protection for refugees who need it;
 30. welcomes assistance aimed at creating socio-economic opportunities for migrants, people who have been forcibly displaced and host communities, including in the context of COVID-19 recovery, with a particular focus on marginalised regions, and reiterates its readiness to facilitate dialogue and cooperation with local and regional authorities in migrants' countries of origin and transit countries;
- f) Green transition: climate resilience, energy, and environment
31. stresses that the European Neighbourhood is one of the main hotspots in the world as regards climate change and environmental degradation, and therefore calls on the European institutions to supplement the European Green Deal as soon as possible in the EU Southern Neighbourhood to cooperate on a large Mediterranean Green Deal and increase funding for climate-related objectives under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), including with initiatives to rediscover and protect the Mediterranean Sea, which is the marine area most affected by pollution, biodiversity loss, sea level rise, floods and rising water temperatures and whose potential for economic development in the field of the environment is huge: in this regard, points out that in 2016 the blue economy accounted for 1.3% of EU GDP³;
 32. points out that in the Mediterranean region, concrete local and climate action is particularly needed as national policies do not respond to the hot-spot challenges and where actions should be originated and tailored to local circumstances and the need of resident constituencies. To this

³

See the Report on the *Blue economy for local and regional authorities in the Mediterranean*, adopted by the ARLEM plenary session on 23 January 2020.

aim, suggests to build upon the successful Clima-Med project and invites the South Mediterranean mayors to continue joining the Covenant of Mayors⁴ and to promote twinning between EU and non-EU cities located in the Mediterranean countries as part of the Interreg MED Programme;

33. looks forward to building a strong partnership of LRAs towards the UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, UK, and the UNCBD COP15 in Kunming, China, with a view to enhancing LRA's role within the global governance for a better implementation of UN SDGs, lowering GHG emissions and raising climate ambition;
34. considers, therefore, that depollution and mostly pollution prevention together with the responsible use of the Mediterranean Sea represent a further development opportunity for all countries which border on the Mediterranean; notes that nature-based solutions are to be promoted to address these major challenges and believes that there is an urgent need to promote initiatives on sustainable production and consumption, resource efficiency, and waste management, including food waste and marine litter, to support biodiversity protection and restoration, including creation of effective and well-managed networks of coastal and marine protected areas as well as preservation of wetlands as cost-effective nature-based solutions, watersheds and transboundary basins;
35. calls for regional policy networks to be set up to strengthen social and economic ties based on the fundamental principles of the blue economy. In addition, advocates encouraging the creation of Mediterranean biospheres with a view to improving the relationship between economic activities and nature conservation, and working towards introducing regional monitoring systems for assessing the health of marine and coastal ecosystems and the impact of different industries on the Mediterranean biosphere, as well as developing initiatives aimed at raising public awareness of the importance of improving the situation of our marine and coastal ecosystems, understanding the benefits this brings to the present and to future generations;
36. calls for greater efforts to promote and advance a sustainable agenda for tourism, which is a key economic sector for the region, in order to reduce its harmful impact on the environment. This should be achieved mainly by means of planning instruments which are designed to manage human activities in natural areas taking into account ecosystems and landscapes in their interactions, and using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to reinvent the sector and link its prosperity to conserving the Mediterranean area;
37. hopes that the support for the European Green Deal will bring particular benefits to agriculture, a sector which is essential for the economies of the majority of the non-EU members of the partnership, especially through those countries applying the strict standards laid down in European legislation on the subject; invites to support, in line with the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy⁵, the design, investment in, and implementation of sustainable food systems, from

⁴ 62 signatory cities have already joined via the previous CES-MED project and over 250 are on the list to join.

⁵ See CDR-594-2020.

production to consumption, paying particular attention to food safety, plant and animal health and welfare, as well as with a view to ensure regional food security;

38. points to the recommendation made by ARLEM in its report on agriculture and food security in the context of climate change in the Mediterranean and, consequently, calls on the European Union and the Union for the Mediterranean to consider the development of a joint strategy for food security and food sovereignty in the Mediterranean, to promote an agro-ecological transition to practices that preserve soil and agro-biodiversity, and to consider introducing a "Mediterranean products" or "Mediterranean diet" label as part of a broader macro-regional strategy for the whole of the Mediterranean;
39. stresses that the necessary phasing-out of fossil fuel-based energy must be accompanied by support for a transition to alternative energy sources; moreover, it is essential to provide targeted assistance to support large-scale investments in renewables and clean hydrogen production for both domestic consumption and export, investments which are compliant with the "do no harm" principle and safeguard green areas and biodiversity. Notes that cities and regions have an essential role to play in this context, as they are responsible for implementing the various policies related to the SDGs: urban growth, climate change, socio-economic inequalities, energy, green and digital transitions, and good governance;

g) Implementation and Investment Plan

40. welcomes the Commission's proposal for an Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours in order to support the implementation of the themes highlighted in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean; focusing on the element to build resilience in the most fragile sectors such as water, environment, energy and promote for renewable resources' investment plans including water reuse and water recycling using renewable energy;
41. welcomes the identification of 12 indicative flagship initiatives in priority areas intended to strengthen resilience, build prosperity and increase trade and investment in order to support competitiveness and sustainable and inclusive socio-economic growth;
42. welcomes the Commission's proposal to channel up to EUR 7 billion into implementing the agenda. By including European Fund for Sustainable Development guarantees and blending under the Neighbourhood Investment Platform, up to EUR 30 billion of private and public investment in the Southern Neighbourhood could be leveraged;
43. welcomes the agreement reached by the Council and the European Parliament on the Regulation setting up the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe in the context of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), whereby setting aside EUR 79.5 billion in current prices will enable the EU to support and promote its values and interests worldwide effectively, while supporting global multilateral efforts;
44. agrees that at least EUR 500 million of the total amount earmarked for EU cooperation with neighbourhood countries under the geographical pillar of the NDICI - Global Europe should be

awarded to local and regional authorities; calls for these measures and resources to be sufficiently increased. Flexible funding should be promoted through local and regional authorities playing an active role, specifying the needs of the regions according to their relevance. Calls for an increase in funds dedicated to climate-related objectives under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI);

45. in view of the strengthened geographical approach and in line with the priorities set out in the agenda, urges all the EU institutions to consider local and regional authorities and their associations as key factors for sustainable development and partners in programming;
46. local and regional authorities in the Mediterranean and their cooperation networks, such as the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance, can play a key role in seeking greater coordination between existing transnational frameworks and laying the foundations for implementing policies and funds on the ground, while helping to inform higher levels of governance about local situations. Moreover, this makes different levels of support and more efficient initiatives possible.

Brussels, 30 June 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood A new Agenda for the Mediterranean
References	JOIN(2021) 2 final - SWD(2021) 23 final
Legal basis	Own-initiative opinion (Article 307(1) TFEU, Rule 41(b)(i) of the Rules of Procedure)
Procedural basis	Mandatory referral
Date of Commission letter	10 February 2021
Date of President's decision	1 March 2021
Commission responsible	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs
Rapporteur	Vincenzo BIANCO (IT/PES)
Analysis	5 March 2021
Discussed in commission	30 March 2021
Date adopted by commission	11 May 2021
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	majority
Date adopted in plenary	30 June 2021
Previous Committee opinions	Opinion on <i>Neighbourhood and the World</i> , rapporteur: Hans Janssen (NL/EPP), COR-2018-04008-00-00-AC-TRA Opinion on the <i>Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy</i> , rapporteur Anne Quart (DE/PES), COR-2016-00982-00-00-AC-TRA Opinion of 9 July 2015 on the <i>New European Neighbourhood Policy</i> , rapporteur: Nikolaos Chiotakis (EL/EPP), CdR 02671/2015 Opinion of 3 December 2014 on <i>Neighbourhood at the Crossroads: Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2013</i> , rapporteur: Olgierd Geblewicz (PL/EPP), CdR 04459/2014 Opinion on <i>Global Europe: a new approach to financing EU external action</i> , rapporteur: Lotta Håkansson Harju (SE/PES), CDR732-2012_AC Opinion of 14 December 2011 on <i>European Neighbourhood Policy Review</i> , rapporteur: Jacek Protas (PL/EPP), CdR 198/2011 Opinion of 9 October 2008 on <i>A strong European Neighbourhood Policy</i> , rapporteur: Sharon Taylor (UK/PES), CdR 134/2008
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A