

NOTES

Continuity and Change in Euro-Mediterranean Governance: From the Barcelona Process to the Mediterranean Pact

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The Barcelona Process, launched in 1995 with the ambitious aim of transforming the Mediterranean into a region of peace, stability, and security—through the promotion of democracy and the establishment of a free trade area by 2010—ultimately failed to generate substantial momentum or to exert a meaningful impact on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP).

Preoccupied with its own internal challenges, Europe proved politically weak and unable to develop the leadership role widely expected of it. This was accompanied by limited engagement on the part of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, which were not able to effectively manage the contradictions and the profound economic and social transformations entailed by the integration process. As a result, the main objectives identified by the Barcelona Process remained far from being fully achieved.

The persistence of relatively high technical barriers to trade—such as technical standards and sanitary and phytosanitary measures—imposed both by the European Union and by the countries within the region has constituted a significant constraint on trade liberalization and on the process of economic and commercial integration. Agricultural trade continues to be restricted by a system of import quotas and seasonal calendars designed to limit the expansion opportunities of Mediterranean countries in sectors where they could potentially enjoy a comparative advantage.

One of the major challenges to be addressed in the pursuit of effective liberalization concerns the harmonization of quality standards and the mutual recognition of regulations.

In an effort to strengthen the European Union's policy commitment toward the Mediterranean, in 2003 the European Commission recommended a redefinition of cooperation policies with neighboring countries aimed at creating an area of prosperity and good neighborliness, thereby launching the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The most distinctive feature of the European Neighborhood Policy lay in its allowance for each country to progress individually in its rapprochement with the European Union, according to its own interests and capacities, while still maintaining a regional framework consistent with the objectives set out in the Barcelona Process.

The operational instrument of the Neighborhood Policy was the Action Plan, negotiated directly between EU institutions and the authorities of partner countries. These plans were the

outcome of a mutual understanding that took into account the specific political, social, and economic conditions of neighboring countries, as well as the state of their relations with the EU.

Action Plans were not international treaties, but rather technical or political bilateral agreements, partly based on Association Agreements or Partnership and Cooperation Agreements. Action Plans had a very limited time horizon and were subject to continuous revision and updating based on the results achieved. While they contributed, to some extent, to improvements in infrastructure, access to credit for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and trade integration with the EU, their impact on political reform and regional stability remained limited.

Overall, the impression is that the interventions implemented—despite the financial commitments undertaken by the EU—failed to produce tangible effects on the real economy. More precisely, they did not generate meaningful engagement among economic operators in the implementation of the partnership and were instead perceived as a set of fragmented and weakly participatory measures.

In 2021, the European Union launched the New Agenda for the Mediterranean alongside the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), through which the EU not only provides direct financing but also acts as a “lever” to attract substantially higher levels of investment—both public and private—particularly in partner countries such as those in the Mediterranean. The objective is to mobilize up to €30 billion in public and private investments in the Southern Neighborhood over the decade. During the same period, the political and industrial framework underpinning many large-scale “infrastructure” projects was articulated through the Global Gateway initiative (covering sectors such as energy, digitalization, and transport).

In October 2025, the EU launched a new initiative—the Pact for the Mediterranean—aimed at creating a connected, prosperous, and resilient common space based on concrete projects in areas such as clean energy, youth employment, security, and migration management, thereby continuing the work initiated under the Barcelona Process. The Pact builds upon the Agenda for the Mediterranean presented in 2021 by the European Commission, which sought to strengthen cooperation in support of human development, governance, climate action, and economic growth.

Although presented as an initiative consistent with the Barcelona Process, the Pact nonetheless marks a shift in the EU’s approach toward its partners on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. It represents a strong political commitment aimed at the joint implementation of initiatives in priority policy areas of mutual interest. The Pact is grounded in the principles of co-ownership, co-creation, and shared responsibility.

The Pact complements existing Association Agreements and strategic partnerships, which it seeks to encourage and modernize. The Association Agreements envisaged cover two fundamental dimensions that are not included within the Pact itself: political issues—addressed within the framework of Association Councils—and trade-related matters. As in the past, these agreements provide for trade facilitation measures, particularly through the establishment of free trade areas between the EU and its southern Mediterranean partners and the reciprocal reduction of customs duties.

In summary, the initiatives of the Mediterranean Pact are structured around three main pillars:

1. *People*: the Pact promotes initiatives in higher education, vocational training, employment, culture, tourism, and sport, placing particular emphasis on youth.

2. *Economies and the environment*: the Pact aims to strengthen existing trade agreements, improve support mechanisms for start-ups, promote digital infrastructure and cybersecurity, enhance commitments to renewable and clean energy, and advance sustainability processes and the blue economy.
3. *Security and migration*: the Pact seeks to enhance cooperation in judicial matters and migration management, given that the central Mediterranean remains the most heavily trafficked migration route.

One key source of uncertainty arising from the Pact concerns its financing, as it does not benefit from any new dedicated financial allocation. Funding will be provided on a budget-neutral basis through existing financial instruments—primarily those related to neighborhood policy and development cooperation, including the Global Gateway and international cooperation mechanisms—within the framework of the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

It should be acknowledged that policies toward the Mediterranean regions have been shaped by the geopolitical, economic, and conflict-related dynamics that have emerged in recent years across the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern area. These include, in particular, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change-induced vulnerabilities in food supply chains, and the broader economic repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, alongside ongoing regional conflicts in Gaza, Syria, Morocco, and the wider Middle East. These dynamics have been compounded by widespread protests led by Generation Z, denouncing corruption, social inequality, and deficiencies in public services—such as health care and education—in several MENA countries, which have further intensified instability across the region.

Against this backdrop, the new Pact for the Mediterranean signals a shift in the language and policy rationale adopted by the European Union in the Mediterranean area. EU policy discourse increasingly reflects an effort to adapt to emerging needs and evolving productive and economic scenarios, particularly those related to sustainability, technological innovation, and human capital development.

At the same time, however, the new Pact for the Mediterranean reveals a degree of continuity with past approaches. An examination of the instruments and intervention procedures employed recalls longstanding shortcomings, such as limited operational concreteness, modest long-term effectiveness, weak territorial impact, and insufficient bottom-up participation in fostering broad-based and sustainable socioeconomic development across the Mediterranean region.

What is needed instead is the development of multisectoral forms of cooperation aimed at expanding productive bases through a logic of regionalization that extends beyond trade to include institutional dimensions. Such an approach would help promote synergies and stronger linkages among civil societies and local economic actors within the framework of a shared development project.

Euro-Mediterranean countries already cooperate through shared intergovernmental institutions, notably the Union for the Mediterranean, and through multiple energy- and climate-related platforms. However, a more integrated and holistic strategic vision is required to effectively leverage the region's energy potential, strengthen long-term partnerships, and enhance collective sustainability and security.

The EU should indeed propose win-win partnerships for the region to promote new mod-

els of Mediterranean cooperation, balancing trade concessions with mechanisms capable of enhancing territorial potential by leveraging previously underutilized competitive advantages and accelerating energy and technological transition.

This also means greater investments in terms of physical capital, advice and technical support from agricultural services, human capital (vocational training and acquisition of new qualifications), public and private initiatives to improve the diversification of activities, and naturally the living conditions and incomes of the most vulnerable households. This includes the relocation and organization of economic and rural activities managed by civil society groups that are deeply familiar with local needs and capabilities.

Mediterranean cooperation should therefore be equipped with new instruments that can effectively impact not only productive activities, but also social, environmental, and cultural spheres, as well as foster deeper integration among peoples.