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DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE OF A SHARED MEDITERRANEAN

A roadmap for the implementation of the EU Pact for the Mediterranean

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PREFACE

This policy roadmap and the recommendations it contains are the result of a collaborative effort by a multidisciplinary team of young researchers and practitioners aged 24 to 29, originating from and living across the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond, including Iran, Italy, Spain, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom. Bringing together diverse professional backgrounds and working environments, this initiative embodies the core mission of the Observatory for EU-MENA Relations of the European Student Think Tank: bridging analytical research and concrete, actionable policy practice.

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1. Setting the analytical framework

1.1 A decisive moment for Euro-Mediterranean relations

Thirty years after the launch of the 1995 Barcelona Process, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation stands at a critical crossroads. The Southern Mediterranean remains essential for European prosperity and security: it underpins Europe's energy transition, anchors critical industrial and supply chains, and constitutes one of the primary theatres for European migration governance. Yet, as global and regional actors such as China, Russia and the Gulf countries expand their presence and offer alternative partnerships across the region, the European Union's (EU) historic standing as the primary economic, security and diplomatic partner faces unprecedented erosion amid heightened regional instability and geopolitical fragmentation.

The EU first demonstrated an awareness of this shift with the establishment of the dedicated Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA) and of the specialised Commissioner for the Mediterranean. This step effectively decoupled the Southern Neighbourhood from the Eastern enlargement framework, which was collected under the umbrella of the Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST).[1] The structural separation recognised that the Southern Mediterranean shore requires its own tailored focus, rather than a one-size-fits-all neighbourhood policy.

The work of the Commission continued in this direction with the launch of a new flagship initiative in November 2025: the Pact for the Mediterranean (hereinafter "the Pact"). With the Pact, DG MENA declared its intention to move past the old policies that failed to bring Southern Mediterranean countries closer to the EU, and its commitment to co-creating a space of peace, prosperity, and stability through a genuine partnership.

This commitment has been implemented from the outset: the process for the Pact began with open-ended discussions with Southern Mediterranean partners to identify priority issues and generate project ideas, taking a more participatory approach than previous EU efforts at consultation, which tended to present stakeholders with a pre-prepared draft to respond to.[2] Civil society and public consultations have also been facilitated through the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), which has engaged civil society organisations, youth organisations, researchers and other stakeholders across the Euro-Mediterranean region in discussions on the Pact and its implementation.[3] Importantly, this participatory process has not ended with the Pact's adoption: the EU has continued consulting civil society during the initial implementation phase, including in areas where the operational framework is still being developed.

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1 Sidlo, K. (2025). *New Pact for the Mediterranean: The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Relations on the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process.* IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/new-pact-for-the-mediterranean-the-futureof-euro-mediterranean-relations-on-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-barcelona-process/

2 Ibid.

3 See: IEMed (n.d.). Support to Reflection and Consultations on the Pact for the Mediterranean. https://www.iemed.org/projects/support-to-reflection-and-consultations-on-the-pact-for-the-mediterranean/

Built across three pillars reflecting three interconnected dimensions—politico-military security, economic cooperation, and human interaction—the Pact adopts a more comprehensive approach to partnership to foster free trade and investment, deepen single-market relations, establish joint security mechanisms, and "achieve deeper integration within the common Mediterranean space".[4] The Pact has now entered its first phase of implementation, with an initial Action Plan translating its pillars into concrete initiatives. As the EU is still engaging with civil society and other stakeholders in several policy areas during the implementation of programmes, there exists an important window in which consultation can shape how the Pact's commitments are translated into practice.

However, policy frameworks are only as effective as the underlying assumptions on which they are built. For decades, European external action across the Mediterranean has oscillated between short-term crisis containment and asymmetric donor-recipient dynamics.[5] While the Pact is branded as a bold "paradigm shift,"[6] practical implementation risks repeating legacy mistakes by reproducing a top-down model where Brussels designs a predetermined set of initiatives for partner countries to select from, falling short of a truly reciprocal exchange. For example, the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy also included wide consultation in the preparation process, but Southern Mediterranean partner countries ended up with no significantly greater ownership.[7] It remains to be seen how the Pact will be different.

Furthermore, relying on fragmented bilateral deals and selective conditionality—frequently driven by domestic European anxieties over border containment—directly undermines the creation of a coherent regional architecture. At the same time, treating economic corridors and security apparatuses as mere technical fixes overlooks the political realities, local threat perceptions, and sovereignty concerns of partner states. This was reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, which had limited consultation and prioritised "migration management" while neglecting issues of human rights abuses and the treatment of migrants. This approach[8] to border management also led the EU to collaborate with authoritarian regimes while promoting democracy and human rights, losing credibility among citizens of these countries.[9]

To fulfil the Pact's ambitious vision, the EU cannot settle for a rearticulation of existing tools under new institutional branding. Moving beyond the limitations of the Barcelona Process requires a transition from unilateral crisis management to co-owned, localised action, and mutual resilience. This roadmap provides the analytical framework and actionable recommendations that we deem to be necessary to bridge the gap between the Pact's rhetoric of partnership and the operational reality on the ground.

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4 European Commission (2025). *Joint Communication on the Pact for the Mediterranean*. European Union, p. 1. https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/joint-communication-pact-mediterranean_en

5 Roggero, I. (2024, July 23). *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Three Decades of Trials and Triumphs*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-euro-mediterranean-partnership-three-decades-of-trials-and-triumphs-181462

6 European Commission (2025). *Joint Communication on the Pact for the Mediterranean*. European Union, p. 1. https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/joint-communication-pact-mediterranean_en

7 Sidlo, K. (2025). *New Pact for the Mediterranean: The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Relations on the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process*. IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/new-pact-for-the-mediterranean-the-futureof-euro-mediterranean-relations-on-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-barcelona-process/

8 Ibid.

9 Roggero, I. (2024, July 23). *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Three Decades of Trials and Triumphs*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-euro-mediterranean-partnership-three-decades-of-trials-and-triumphs-181462

1.2 Decentering the EU in implementation and "debordering solidarity"

Underlying this roadmap is the belief that delivering on the paradigm shift promised by the Pact entails more than greater consultation with Southern Mediterranean partners: it requires a change in the position from which Euro-Mediterranean policy is conceived. Three mutually reinforcing principles should therefore guide implementation: decentering the European perspective, localising decision-making and implementation, and debordering solidarity.

DECENTERING THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

The concept of decentering emerged in critical approaches to International Relations and EU foreign policy as a response to the Eurocentrism embedded in both scholarly analysis and policy practice. Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis' seminal formulation calls for the provincialisation of Europe, engagement with alternative worldviews, and the reconstruction of analytical frameworks from these encounters. Subsequent work has sought to operationalise this approach by questioning the spatial, temporal, normative, political and disciplinary assumptions through which Europe constructs its relationship with the rest of the world.[10]

Applied to the Mediterranean, decentering means moving beyond a model where Europe remains the primary subject that defines problems, establishes priorities and proposes solutions, while Southern Mediterranean countries are positioned principally as recipients, implementers or objects of European policy. Zardo and Wolff, for instance, show how migration governance in the Mediterranean has often been approached through European conceptualisations, with non-European actors being treated as targets of EU policies rather than as agents and loci of governance in their own right.[11] Similarly, research adopting a decentering perspective on EU-Mediterranean relations has emphasised the importance of examining local needs, expectations and interpretations of EU policies, rather than evaluating the region exclusively through European policy objectives.[12]

For the Pact, decentering implies a shift from merely consulting partners on European priorities to jointly defining those priorities. Consultation is meaningful only if it can alter the framing of the problem, the objectives pursued, and the instruments selected. Partner governments and societies should therefore have the capacity not only to select among pre-designed initiatives, but to challenge European assumptions and introduce alternative understandings of security, development, mobility, connectivity and regional cooperation. Decentering does not mean replacing a European perspective with a single Southern perspective: it means creating a framework in which multiple situated perspectives can shape the definition of the common agenda.

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10 Onar, N. F., & Nicolaïdis, K. (2013). The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(2), 283-303. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084725;
Keukeleire, S., & Lecocq, S. (2018). Decentring the analysis of EU foreign policy and external-internal legitimacy: (re-)introducing polity. *Global Affairs*, 4(2-3), 341-351. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23340460.2018.1532307

11 Zardo, F., & Wolff, S. (2022). Decentering the Study of Migration Governance in the Mediterranean. *Geopolitics*, 27(3), 687-702. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1978944

12 Pace, M., & Roccu, R. (2020). Imperial Pasts in the EU's Approach to the Mediterranean. *Interventions*, 22(6), 671-685. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1749702

This principle is particularly important in migration and security policy. Research on EU border externalisation increasingly demonstrates that externalisation should not be understood as a one-directional transfer of European border practices to third countries. Border regimes are relational and co-constituted through interactions between European and non-European actors operating across different levels of governance. A genuinely decentered approach must therefore recognise the agency of partner states, local authorities, civil society, and other actors in shaping regional governance, while also acknowledging the unequal power relations within which these interactions take place.[13]

The EU cannot design regional connectivity or security architectures in a vacuum. Effective and durable policy requires evaluating initiatives through the eyes of partner Mediterranean communities, accounting for their local circumstances, self-defined risks, strategic priorities, and regional alignments. Regional partners cannot be treated as "receivers" or "executors" tasked with implementing pre-packaged European solutions.[14] Instead, cooperation must acknowledge the agency, sovereignty, and diverse conditions across the region.

LOCALISING INITIATIVES

Decentering must be accompanied by localisation. Recognising the agency of Southern Mediterranean actors has limited value if decision-making and resources remain concentrated in European and central-government institutions. Agreements negotiated solely at the state level can struggle to reach the communities most directly affected by socio-economic hardship, conflict, displacement and environmental pressures. The EU's migration partnerships with Tunisia and other Southern Mediterranean countries illustrate how high-level agreements negotiated primarily between European and national authorities can marginalise broader participation and limit opportunities for democratic scrutiny and accountability.[15] Moreover, as Panebianco and Gruarin[16] demonstrate, migration governance is also shaped through everyday gatekeeping practices enacted by local actors. Although local actors are often best positioned to challenge and transform securitised and macro-economic dynamics through their situated knowledge and everyday practices, their capacity to do so remains constrained by the very governance structures within which they operate, which are largely shaped by state priorities and donor conditionalities. The implementation of the Pact should therefore establish meaningful channels of engagement and, where appropriate, direct access to resources for municipalities, local civil society organisations, universities, independent media, youth organisations and grassroots actors.

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[13] See recent literature on decentering EU border externalisation, for example Zardo, F., & Wolff, S. (2022). Decentering the Study of Migration Governance in the Mediterranean. *Geopolitics*, 27(3), 687-702. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1978944

[14] Petrova, I., & Delcour, L. (2019). From principle to practice? The resilience-local ownership nexus in the EU Eastern Partnership policy. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(2), 336-360. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1678280

[15] Arnoux Bellavitis, M., & Ripoll Servent, A. (2026). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum in a shifting political context: Depoliticization and repoliticization in EU external migration policy. *Mediterranean Politics*, 31(3), 631-640. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2025.2498846

[16] Panebianco, S., & Gruarin, V. (2026). Mechanics of gatekeeping at EU-Libya-Tunisia borders: Navigating the complex of coercive migration governance via humanitarian practices and return procedures. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2026.2767010

Localisation should not, however, be understood merely as a technical delivery mechanism. Local actors should participate in identifying needs, designing projects, monitoring implementation and evaluating outcomes. This would transform localisation from a means of implementing European priorities into a mechanism through which priorities themselves can be contested and reconstructed from the ground up.

To overcome this systemic bottleneck, the implementation of the Pact must be deliberately localised. This requires establishing direct channels of engagement and resource allocation with municipal networks, local civil society organisations, independent media and grassroots actors who sustain social cohesion, and delivering on-the-ground public services on a continuous basis.[17]

DEBORDERING SOLIDARITY

A third dimension concerns the meaning of solidarity within the proposed "common Mediterranean space."[18] The EU's external action has frequently combined the language of partnership and solidarity with policies that reinforce the territorial distinction between European citizens and those on the other side of the Mediterranean. This tension is particularly visible in migration governance, where cooperation with Southern Mediterranean partners has often been structured around preventing mobility towards Europe and externalising border control.[19]

The concept of debordering solidarity, developed in the literature on grassroots solidarity practices in migration governance, offers a valuable analytical lens for re-examining this relationship. Ambrosini and related scholarship[20] draw attention to forms of solidarity that challenge the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, authorised and unauthorised migrants, by responding to people's needs irrespective of their formal legal status. Such practices can contest bordering processes not only through political claims, but also through everyday forms of assistance, social inclusion and community-building.[21]

For the Pact, debordering solidarity should not mean eliminating the legal or political significance of borders. Rather, it means ensuring that borders do not become the organising principle for determining whose mobility, protection, dignity and access to opportunities matters. A common Mediterranean space cannot be built solely through trade corridors, security cooperation and investment flows, while human mobility and solidarity remain structured primarily around containment. The Pact should therefore seek greater coherence between its commitment to human interaction and the EU's migration and border policies. This should include: expanding safe and

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17 Mediterranean Alliance of Think Tanks on Climate Change (2025, August). *Mediterranean 2030: How the EU can deliver its New Pact for the Mediterranean.* ECCO, p. 5. https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Mediterranean-2030_How-the-EU-can-deliver-its-New-Pact.pdf

18 European Commission (2025). *Joint Communication on the Pact for the Mediterranean.* European Union, p. 1. https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/joint-communication-pact-mediterranean_en

19 Del Sarto, R. A. (2021). *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833550.001.0001

20 Bonizzoni, P., & Hajer, M. (2023). Civil Society Actors and the 2020 Italian amnesty: bordering to deborder?. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 44(1), 44-60.
Kriesi, H., Altiparmakis, A., Bojar, A., & Oana, I. E. (2021). Debordering and re-bordering in the refugee crisis: a case of 'defensive integration'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(3), 331-349.

21 Ambrosini, M. (2024). Humanitarian Help and Refugees: De-Bordering Solidarity as a Contentious Issue. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 22(3), 517-530. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2022.2059823

regular mobility pathways, strengthening access to protection, and supporting forms of trans-Mediterranean civil-society cooperation that connect communities across borders.

Taken together, these three principles imply a different understanding of partnership. Decentering changes who defines the agenda; localisation changes where decisions and resources are situated; and debordering solidarity changes who is understood to belong within the community toward which cooperation and solidarity are directed. They provide the normative and analytical foundation for assessing whether the Pact represents a substantive transformation of Euro-Mediterranean relations, or primarily a reconfiguration of existing instruments and institutions.

1.3 Structure and scope of the roadmap

To advance this vision, this roadmap is structured into two chapters. The first, dedicated to security, identifies four priority areas where the EU should reconsider and strengthen its implementation approach, focusing on transitioning from border containment toward structural preparedness, co-ownership, and policy coherence. The second chapter turns to the human dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, outlining three important pillars—mobility, civic space safeguards, and youth engagement—to ensure the Pact's implementation is directly benefitting the people of this region. The roadmap closes with a conclusion that charts a path forward, situating these thematic recommendations within the broader principles that are essential to building a peaceful and prosperous Mediterranean region.

2. Rethinking Mediterranean security

The Mediterranean has never been merely a body of water. Its ports, trade routes, and political connections have historically made it a space of exchange and competition, thus leading to interdependence between its northern and southern shores. Today, these connections have acquired a renewed strategic significance. Armed conflicts, displacement, organised crime, disruptions to energy and transport routes, attacks on critical infrastructure, and the growing geopolitical importance of maritime and digital connectivity increasingly demonstrate that security challenges do not stop at national borders.

However, European policy has consistently approached the Mediterranean primarily through the logic of protection. It has treated the Mediterranean as a space through which instability, migration and other external risks might reach Europe. This has encouraged policies centred on containment, externalisation and crisis management. Security cooperation has therefore frequently been measured through indicators such as irregular arrivals, border controls or short-term stabilisation, while the wider political, economic and infrastructural conditions that produce insecurity have received less attention.

Thus, the challenge is not simply to expand the EU's security engagement, but to reconsider the framework through which security itself is understood. The Mediterranean cannot be treated solely as a buffer zone at Europe's southern frontier. It is a shared and interconnected security space in which instability, economic disruption and geopolitical competition circulate through maritime routes, transport corridors, energy infrastructure, digital networks and human mobility. Preparedness must therefore extend beyond responding to crises once they arise, and instead address the structural vulnerabilities through which risks emerge and spread.

Facing this challenge requires a shift in both perspective and practice. Firstly, this chapter argues that security cooperation should move away from increasingly fragmented architecture built on multiple instruments, agencies and short-term initiatives. Rather than continuously expanding the number of mechanisms, the EU should strengthen coordination and develop approaches that are flexible enough to reflect different political, institutional and local realities across the region. A broader understanding of security must also move beyond migration as the dominant indicator of success. Instead, it should recognise institutional resilience, infrastructure development, local capacity, organised crime prevention, and environmental risk preparedness as interconnected dimensions of regional stability.

Second, a more effective security framework requires a reconsideration of how partnerships are formed. The Pact's references to co-ownership and joint responsibility will remain rhetorical if priorities continue to be largely defined in Brussels and implemented elsewhere. Mediterranean partners do not necessarily understand security threats through the same categories or attach the same urgency to them. Their participation must therefore extend beyond project implementation to the earlier stages of defining risks, identifying priorities, and preparing responses.

Third, connectivity itself has become a central dimension of security. Energy corridors, commercial shipping routes, ports, subsea cables and digital infrastructure sit at the intersection of economic interdependence and geopolitical competition. Their protection cannot be separated from the political relationships surrounding them. Infrastructure diplomacy must therefore be embedded within broader and more balanced partnerships with transit and regional actors, rather than approached solely as a technical or economic question.

Finally, the credibility of this approach depends on political consistency. The EU's capacity to present itself as a value-based security actor is weakened when human rights, democratic principles and political conditionality are applied selectively. Security cooperation cannot generate sustainable trust if partners perceive European commitments as flexible according to geopolitical convenience. Hence, for security policy to be seen as legitimate, it must be grounded in transparency, accountability, and predictability.

Taken together, the sections of this chapter argue for a broader shift in the EU's approach to Mediterranean security. The objective should not be to construct a larger security architecture, but a more coherent one—one that is less prescriptive and centred on containment and more attentive to structural preparedness and genuine collaboration, more conscious of the strategic role of connectivity, and more consistent in the political principles underpinning cooperation.

2.1 Redefining the strategic framework

For years, the EU has approached Mediterranean security through a lens of continuous expansion, adding layers of new instruments and initiatives onto an already fragmented institutional framework. Cooperation is currently scattered across diverse financial mechanisms, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, and bilateral arrangements. Yet, the conceptual foundation remains largely static: the region is still primarily viewed as a frontier to be contained, where success is narrowly measured by the ebb and flow of irregular arrivals rather than broader stability.

A meaningful redefinition of this strategic framework requires a shift across three interconnected dimensions, supported by a more streamlined institutional design. Firstly, the EU must move away from treating the Mediterranean as a mere buffer zone, and instead recognise it as a shared security space defined by mutual interests. Despite rhetoric regarding co-ownership, policy has consistently favored containment and crisis management. This perspective casts partner countries as security providers for Europe, tasked with managing borders and intercepting networks, rather than as equal stakeholders in a regional order. Consequently, these partnerships are often perceived as serving European domestic agendas rather than generating mutual benefits. The Pact should instead prioritise joint investments in institutional resilience, maritime governance, and local capacity, understanding security as a common public good. Such a transition would place existing disagreements within a strategic framework of shared interests rather than asymmetric burdens.

Secondly, embracing a shared security space also necessitates a different temporal logic. While border-centric models concentrate resources where risks become visible, a corridor-based approach follows the actual movement of energy, goods, and people. By addressing vulnerabilities along the entire length of these routes rather than only at the edges, cooperation can move away from containment checkpoints toward a human security paradigm that actively regulates and protects the safe transit of people and resources.

Thirdly, this broader understanding requires more sophisticated indicators of success. As discussed above, while the Pact adopts a wide definition of security, migration continues to dominate the political landscape, with success often equated to reduced arrivals or increased returns. This narrow focus risks addressing only symptoms while ignoring the structural conditions such as economic decline, institutional weakness, and climate pressures that generate instability. As long as migration remains the primary yardstick, cooperation will be judged on short-term fluctuations rather than long-term regional stability. A more balanced approach would incorporate metrics for governance, cross-border crime, and environmental risk, helping to reduce the perception that Mediterranean partnerships exist solely to address European domestic concerns.

Finally, achieving these goals depends on a more coherent institutional design. Simply adding layers to the security architecture often results in overlapping mandates and administrative burdens for partners with limited capacity. The current landscape is highly fragmented, with various agencies and Member States pursuing similar objectives through separate, often competing, channels. Rather than further expansion, the focus should be on rationalising existing structures. This will ensure that policy objectives in maritime security, counter-terrorism, and infrastructure protection are pursued through a single, coordinated political framework.

This fragmentation is particularly evident in the lack of engagement with local governance. Most cooperation is negotiated with central authorities, yet municipalities are often the first responders to migration pressures and infrastructure vulnerabilities. In North Africa, local actors possess vital knowledge but frequently lack the resources or access to European programming.[22] The Pact should therefore establish a stronger local dimension through structured partnerships with municipalities, supporting networks for expertise exchange on urban resilience and emergency planning. By rationalising existing instruments and fostering municipal cooperation, the EU can make its security engagement more predictable, practical, and responsive to the needs of those delivering services on the ground.

Redefining Mediterranean security should focus on building a more strategic framework rather than widening it. It requires treating the region as a shared space of circulating risks and opportunities, building preparedness into structural corridors rather than just borders, and evaluating success through broad indicators of resilience. By rationalising existing mechanisms and including municipal actors, the EU can move toward a framework that both sides recognise as a genuinely collaborative undertaking.

2.2 Institutionalising balanced security partnerships

A more balanced security partnership requires the EU to move beyond cooperation in which priorities are mainly defined in Brussels and later implemented with partner countries. The Pact speaks about co-ownership and joint responsibility, but these ideas will remain limited if Southern Mediterranean partners are included only after the main agenda has been decided. Co-ownership should mean participation from the beginning: when priorities are defined, when risks are assessed, and when possible responses are prepared.

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22 Mixed Migration Centre (2021). *Urban mixed migration: Experiences of migrants moving to, through and from cities in West and North Africa*. https://mixedmigration.org/resources/urban-mixed-migration-6/

Current cooperation is still often bilateral, transactional, and strongly shaped by EU interests. This can weaken regional cooperation and create the perception that Mediterranean partnerships mainly serve European security concerns. The EU should therefore move towards jointly defined agendas in which partner countries actively shape priorities. It should also strengthen multilateral and triangular cooperation, where regional actors participate as co-designers rather than only as recipients of EU programmes.

An important part of this approach is recognising that the EU and its partners do not always understand security risks in the same way. What the EU defines as migration management may be understood locally as a question of sovereignty, economic pressure, border communities, or domestic stability. Organised crime may also be connected to armed groups, corruption, weak institutions, and local economic structures. If these differences in outlook are not addressed, cooperation may formally exist while partners still disagree about the nature of the problem.

The Pact should therefore introduce regular partner-country threat perception assessments. These assessments should identify how Mediterranean partners understand their main security risks, where these priorities differ from those of the EU, and which local actors influence them. They should remain short and practical and involve partner governments, EU delegations, local experts, civil society, and relevant international organisations.

The case of Egypt shows why this matters. While the EU often discusses the war in Gaza through humanitarian assistance, regional stability, and migration, Egypt has also treated the possible displacement of Palestinians into Sinai as a question of sovereignty and national security.[23] Libya provides another example: EU policy often focuses on migration, border control, and smuggling, but the security environment is also shaped by armed groups connected to formal institutions and local power structures. The clashes in Tripoli in 2025 showed once again how armed competition can quickly affect civilians, migrants, and state authority.[24]

Joint assessment should also be connected to joint preparedness. The Pact should organise politico-military crisis-scenario exercises with willing Mediterranean partners. These should not be large military drills, but practical tabletop exercises where EU and partner-country officials test how they would respond to realistic situations. This could take place through discussion-based simulations such as militia violence, cross-border arms trafficking, sudden displacement, or criminal networks operating across borders. Such exercises would help to identify coordination problems before a real crisis, and improve the use of existing institutions without creating another large structure.

A balanced partnership requires partner involvement in defining priorities, understanding risks, and preparing responses. Co-ownership should not mean implementing an agenda that has already been written, but participating in shaping the understanding of security itself.

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[23] Reuters. (2025, February 25). Egypt rejects proposals to displace Palestinians. https://www.reuters.com/world/egypt-rejects-displacement-palestinians-threats-countries-national-security-2025-02-25/

[24] See: International Organization for Migration (2025, 15 May). *Statement by IOM Spokesperson on Escalating Violence and Risk of Displacement of Civilians in Tripoli.* https://www.iom.int/news/statement-iom-spokesperson-escalating-violence-and-risk-displacement-civilians-tripoli

2.3 Leveraging infrastructure diplomacy

Connectivity has become one of the central battlegrounds of Mediterranean security. Energy corridors, commercial shipping routes, ports, subsea cables and digital infrastructure sit at the intersection of economic interdependence and geopolitical competition, and their protection can no longer be separated from the political relationships that surround them. As global and regional actors—from China's Belt and Road investments to Gulf-backed port and digital infrastructure initiatives—increasingly offer their own connectivity projects across the region, the question for the EU is no longer only how to protect existing infrastructure, but how to embed that protection within broader, more balanced partnerships with the transit and regional actors through which this infrastructure runs. Infrastructure diplomacy and maritime security should be treated as two dimensions of the same challenge: corridors run through maritime space, and maritime security increasingly depends on the resilience of the infrastructure that corridors rely on.

Large-scale connectivity projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the EU's own Global Gateway strategy illustrate how energy and transport corridors have become instruments of geopolitical positioning as much as of economic integration. For the EU, this means that securing a corridor cannot be reduced to protecting physical assets: it requires sustained diplomatic engagement with the transit and regional partners along its route. This ensures that infrastructure investment translates into durable political relationships rather than one-off projects vulnerable to shifting alignments. Infrastructure diplomacy, in this sense, should be pursued as a deliberate complement to the EU's existing connectivity initiatives, embedding corridor security within broader, more balanced partnerships rather than approaching it solely as a technical or commercial question.

This same logic of embedding technical protection within political relationships applies to the maritime domain. The latter occupies a central place within the Pact, particularly through commitments to strengthen border management, combat migrant smuggling, and protect critical infrastructure. These objectives remain important, but they continue to frame the Mediterranean primarily as a frontier requiring surveillance, which does not reflect how the maritime domain has evolved. Over the past decade, the maritime domain has come to encompass energy security, commercial shipping, subsea communications infrastructure, environmental protection and the disruption of transnational criminal networks, alongside its more traditional border-control functions. Addressing these challenges requires cooperation that extends well beyond coast guards and border authorities.

The Pact should therefore promote integrated maritime governance by encouraging information sharing between civilian and military actors, improving coordination among Mediterranean partners, and investing in joint maritime domain awareness. Greater attention should also be given to financial investigations targeting the criminal networks that profit from smuggling, trafficking and illicit trade, recognising that these organisations adapt more quickly than border-enforcement measures alone can respond to. A broader maritime strategy of this kind would strengthen regional security in its own right, while reducing the long-standing tendency to equate maritime cooperation almost exclusively with migration control. It also connects naturally to the corridor-based approach to infrastructure diplomacy set out above: subsea cables, energy pipelines and shipping lanes are, after all, maritime infrastructure, and their protection depends on exactly the kind of integrated maritime governance called for here.

Infrastructure and maritime security are, in this sense, no longer separable dimensions of Mediterranean cooperation, if indeed they ever were. Energy and transport corridors, ports, subsea cables and digital networks are simultaneously economic assets and strategic vulnerabilities. Their protection depends as much on the political relationships built around them as on technical or surveillance capacity. The EU should therefore pursue infrastructure diplomacy as a deliberate strategy for embedding corridor security within durable partnerships with transit and regional actors, particularly at a time when other global and regional actors increasingly offer their own connectivity alternatives. It should simultaneously move maritime security beyond border surveillance, and instead integrate civilian and military information-sharing, joint maritime domain awareness, and the financial disruption of criminal networks into a single, coherent approach. Taken together, these steps would allow the EU to engage with Mediterranean connectivity as a strategic asset to be secured through partnership, rather than merely a frontier to be monitored.

2.4 Creating a consistent value-driven policy

The credibility of the EU's security engagement in the Mediterranean depends not only on the objectives that it pursues, but also on the consistency with which it adheres to its own political and legal commitments. The EU continues to frame its external action around democracy, human rights, the rule of law and respect for international law. In practice, however, security cooperation appears to prioritise immediate stability, geopolitical interests and migration management, creating a persistent gap between political discourse and operational choices.[25]

This inconsistency in approach weakens the EU's credibility among governments and societies in the region. Political conditionality appears selective, while cooperation with security actors may continue despite concerns over democratic governance, human rights violations, or the consequences of EU-supported surveillance and border-control policies. At the same time, the EU's willingness to invoke its normative commitments seems to vary according to the strategic importance of individual partners. Such inconsistency risks reinforcing the perception that values function less as common principles than as instruments applied when politically convenient.

A more coherent approach does not necessarily require the creation of new conditionality mechanisms. Instead, the Pact should strengthen the consistent implementation, monitoring and enforcement of commitments that already underpin EU external relations. Security partnerships should be subject to clearer evaluation criteria, greater transparency regarding the use and consequences of EU assistance, and stronger mechanisms for political and parliamentary scrutiny. Predictability should replace selective conditionality: partners should be able to understand in advance which principles govern cooperation, and the consequences when these principles are seriously breached.

Policy coherence must also include a willingness to review existing agreements when fundamental commitments are violated. The EU's credibility cannot depend solely on demanding reforms from weaker or more dependent partners while avoiding scrutiny of strategically important states.

25 Del Sarto, R. A. (2021). *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833550.001.0001

Where serious and sustained violations of the principles underlying an agreement occur, the EU should be prepared to reassess, revise or, where appropriate, suspend elements of cooperation. This principle should apply consistently, including to existing Association Agreements.

The question is therefore not whether the EU should choose between values and security: treating these as competing objectives has itself contributed to the credibility gap. Security arrangements built on political inconsistency may produce short-term cooperation, but in the end, they are less likely to generate the trust and legitimacy required for durable partnerships. A more predictable, transparent and accountable approach would strengthen both the EU's normative credibility and its capacity to act as a long-term security partner.

2.5 Conclusion

The recommendations in this chapter call for a broader understanding of Mediterranean security. The region should not be approached as a buffer zone protecting Europe from migration and instability, but as a shared security space. This requires moving from short-term crisis management towards structural preparedness, assessing security through wider indicators of resilience, and simplifying existing cooperation rather than continuously creating new instruments. Security responses should also remain flexible enough to reflect the different political, institutional and local conditions across the region.

At the same time, security is increasingly connected to infrastructure and geopolitical competition. The EU should therefore connect cooperation in this area with infrastructure diplomacy, and build longer-term partnerships with transit countries, particularly in a region where other global and regional actors increasingly offer alternative forms of cooperation.

Finally, the EU's influence depends on the consistency of its own policies. Partnerships cannot be presented as value-based while political and human-rights commitments are applied selectively. Greater transparency, accountability and more predictable application of existing principles are necessary to reduce perceptions of double standards. Taken together, these recommendations support a Mediterranean security approach based on preparedness, strategic connectivity, simpler cooperation and greater political consistency, rather than containment, fragmentation and selective engagement.

2.6 Recommendations

- **Treat the Mediterranean as a shared security space** rather than a buffer zone protecting Europe from external instability.
- Shift security cooperation from border-based crisis response toward **corridor-based structural preparedness**.
- **Evaluate security cooperation** through indicators of governance, institutional resilience, cross-border crime, economic stability and environmental risk, rather than primarily through migration statistics.

- **Rationalise security cooperation** through a review of existing instruments and structured partnerships with municipalities, rather than continuously expanded with new mechanisms.
- **Operationalise co-ownership** by jointly defining security priorities with Mediterranean partners and strengthening multilateral and triangular cooperation.
- **Introduce regular partner-country threat perception assessments** to include Mediterranean partners' understanding of security risks in EU planning.
- **Organise joint politico-military scenario exercises** with willing partners to test coordination and preparedness for cross-border crises.
- **Secure energy and transport corridors**, including through initiatives such as IMEC and the Global Gateway, by pursuing infrastructure diplomacy embedded in durable partnerships with transit and regional actors.
- **Expand maritime security cooperation** beyond border surveillance to integrate civilian-military information sharing, joint maritime domain awareness, subsea and digital infrastructure protection, and financial investigations targeting organised criminal networks.
- **Apply existing political and human-rights commitments consistently** across security partnerships, through transparent evaluation, predictable consequences for serious violations, and the willingness to review or suspend agreements where fundamental principles are breached.

3. Putting people at the centre of the Mediterranean partnership

To ensure the Pact can effectively realise its programme and make strides towards its stated objectives, it is important to reflect on the way in which its contents are framed and conceptualised. This is particularly relevant for the Pact's section "People: driving force for change, connections and innovation": while the progress of cooperation in the Economy and Security chapters will be determined by partially unforeseeable political and economic developments, success in its implementation will significantly depend on how the Pact is perceived and received by the populations of Mediterranean partners. Therefore, the Commission should recognise the Pact's structural limitations and seek to address them throughout the implementation of its initiatives. In the absence of meaningful people-to-people relations and tangible dividends for populations across the Mediterranean, the Pact's ambitious goal of Mediterranean integration to counter the tides of growing regional and global instability may be fruitless.[26]

The Pact outlines a more comprehensive and detailed framework for pursuing Mediterranean integration than the preexisting Barcelona Process. However it is still founded on long-standing problematic premises of the EU's engagement with its Southern Neighbours: namely, the Eurocentric nature of the process, and the asymmetric dynamics of cooperation. The Pact's underlying assumption remains that the EU is a positive normative actor, whose action can reinforce and spread democratisation and human rights in neighbouring countries. Shaped by decades of asymmetric engagement, many citizens of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries perceive the EU as a self-interested actor.[27] Within this context, even well-intentioned initiatives risk being read as patronising or intrusive by populations positioned at the "receiving end" of the Pact.

Moreover, central to the Pact is the issue of migration, understood as a phenomenon to be managed and utilised to meet the EU's workforce needs, due to the demographic realities explicitly recognised in the Pact's text. Consequently, migration is to be balanced between economy and security—a balance that suits European domestic politics, where the far right's anti-migration discourse is gaining ground across EU member countries—framing Euro-Mediterranean relations in an inherently asymmetric dynamic.

Finally, while the Pact includes innovative and purposeful proposals to bring together civil societies, such as the Mediterranean University and shared civic service, these initiatives will require significant

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26 See, for example, Kourtelis, C. (2024). A quarter-century of studying Euro-Mediterranean relations: A systematic literature review. *Mediterranean Politics*, 29(2), 165-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2129189, who highlights the Eurocentric and asymmetric aspects of cooperation both in its frameworks and practices despite the Commission's efforts and commitment to equality and transnational justice.

27 Isani, M., & Schlipphak, B. (2016). The Desire for Sovereignty – An Explanation of EU Attitudes in the Arab World. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, DOI:10.1111/jcms.12485;
Fahmi, G., et al. (2025). *Chronology of EU-Arab engagement and Cluster of thematic contextual papers on EU-Arab relations*. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications.
https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_41_Chronology_of_EU-Arab_engagement_and_Cluster_of_thematic_contextual_papers_on_EU-Arab_relations_(D3.1).pdf

institutional backing and funding to be implemented.[28] Therefore, their success will depend on the EU's technocratic capacities and political will, rather than the active participation of civil society organisations. This will exacerbate the asymmetric role the EU is poised to have vis-à-vis its partners and civic actors across the Mediterranean.

It is also important to consider that the Pact fails to account for or address the Southern Mediterranean's discontent with the EU and, conversely, Europe's own public opinion turning against migration and towards xenophobia. The EU's strategic communication towards the Southern Mediterranean has failed to captivate its audience and promote its vision for the Mediterranean space, bleeding popularity and credibility—a fracture that has only widened with the ongoing war in Gaza and the EU's stances on the issue.[29] The Pact does not envision any process to bridge these divides. Yet, reconciliation should not be a wishful byproduct of the Pact's implementation, but rather a precondition to meaningful progress in Mediterranean integration.

A key difference between the Barcelona Process and the Pact is that the latter's programmatic content prioritises the domains of everyday politics, such as social and economic matters. In comparison, the former envisioned and partly achieved ambitious institution-building processes. This focus is a pragmatic choice, at a time of heightened political tensions, to unbind the progress of the Pact from the turns of geopolitical events, which significantly affected the Barcelona Process. This consideration is particularly valid for the "People" chapter, which, as mentioned before, can more easily be compartmentalised from global and regional instability.

Although the focus on everyday politics can safeguard the Pact from potential setbacks, the Commission should ensure such precautions do not devolve into timid and lacklustre engagement. If the objective is the enhancement of relations and exchanges between Mediterranean societies, engagement must be comprehensive and bold: the closer the alignment, the safer the partnership will be from external factors.

Similarly, the Pact purports to be based on the "principle of flexibility",[30] allowing partners to engage in variable degrees of participation on initiatives of their choosing, without committing to the whole process. This format will likely appeal to governments in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean who in the past avoided binding themselves to comprehensive agreements that included the normative values the EU professes. However, it might cause relations to become excessively transactional, with many proposals of the "People" chapter, especially those concerning democratisation and empowering civil societies, at risk of being sidelined by authoritarian partners. In fact, while the Pact purportedly states its normative commitments and adherence to the 2030

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28 Youngs, R. (2025, September 18). *The EU's Dead-on-Arrival Pact for the Mediterranean*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/the-eus-dead-on-arrival-pact-for-the-mediterranean

29 European Parliamentary Research Service (2016). *EU strategic communication with the Arab world* (Briefing PE 581.997). European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/581997/EPRS_BRI(2016)581997_EN.pdf; Fahmi, G., et al. (2025). *Chronology of EU-Arab engagement and Cluster of thematic contextual papers on EU-Arab relations*. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications. https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_41_Chronology_of_EU-Arab_engagement_and_Cluster_of_thematic_contextual_papers_on_EU-Arab_relations_(D3.1).pdf

30 European Commission (2025). *Joint Communication on the Pact for the Mediterranean*. European Union, p. 4. https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/joint-communication-pact-mediterranean_en

Agenda for Sustainable Development, transactionalism appears to be the overarching principle, reflecting the pragmatist turn that has characterised European external action in the Mediterranean over the past decade. In this context, while successfully enticing rulers in the Southern Mediterranean region, this approach may once again damage the credibility of the EU among the very populations the Pact aims to involve in its processes.

3.1 Expanding mobility and recentering Mediterranean skills

The section of the Pact on higher education and vocational training contains ambitious initiatives, well-suited to foster exchange and development of skills, and to create employment opportunities. Yet, these proposals must contend with the complexities of movement across the Mediterranean: for the projects to be accessible to their target audience of students and workers, mobility across the Mediterranean must be improved and guaranteed. At this time, entry into Europe is particularly challenging for youth, and often based on bilateral agreements rather than EU-level policy. The Commission should therefore consider granting access to Schengen visas for participants in the Pact's initiatives, and for youth engaging in projects and activities relevant to the Pact's mission.

Similarly, negotiating with Mediterranean partners to allow cross-country mobility for EU citizens would help foster better human relations between the two shores. The enhancement and stabilisation of mobility in the Mediterranean is crucial to enable the success of proposals like the Mediterranean University, Civic Service, and expansion of Erasmus+ exchange opportunities.

Moreover, the implementation of these projects must centre the Mediterranean geographically as well as thematically, prioritising institutions that are physically closer to participants from both shores. These areas have remained peripheral, especially within Europe, with the most prestigious and expensive academic institutions located at the opposing poles of the Euro-Mediterranean region, namely Northern Europe and capitals such as Cairo, Rabat, and Beirut. Instead, areas like Sicily, Andalusia, Greece, Tunisia, and Türkiye would represent fairer and more inclusive options.

Centralising these areas would also mean that the living and travelling costs faced by students and trainees participating in these projects would be significantly lower. Otherwise, such initiatives would further privilege participants from the richer areas of Europe and the Southern Mediterranean region, where most opportunities are already concentrated. Thus, the Commission should ensure these initiatives are equally accessible, so that the term 'Mediterranean' doesn't become merely a label indicating the possibility for people outside the EU to participate in what risks becoming yet another Eurocentric reality, instead of a truly inclusive process.

Furthermore, the EU has lost touch with the feelings and perceptions of the Southern Mediterranean audiences, and along with it, its popularity and credibility in the region.[31] In the past, the EU promoted initiatives, such as the EU Neighbourhood Barometer (2012-2014) and the Arab Transformations Project (2014), which conducted extensive surveys in the Southern Mediterranean region to gauge opinions on the EU, its projects, and how it can better contribute to the stability and development of partner countries according to locals. Such initiatives should be revitalised to promote understanding between civil societies across the Mediterranean.

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[31] Morillas, P. (n.d.). The EU's Vanishing Impact and Visibility in the Mediterranean. IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-eus-vanishing-impact-and-visibility-in-the-mediterranean/

3.2 Enhancing connectivity and sustainable exchanges

The prioritisation of areas that are central to the Mediterranean space would be particularly relevant and beneficial to the proposals in the section regarding culture, sport, and tourism. The Pact is an opportunity to enhance connectivity and guarantee mobility through improving and expanding infrastructure, transport, and connections in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, this would intertwine with the proposals of the Pact's chapter "Stronger, more sustainable and integrated economies", as such projects should encompass the movement of people as much as that of goods and resources. There are three geographical points of contact between Europe and its Southern Mediterranean partners that the Commission should prioritise: those between Spain and Morocco, Italy and Tunisia, and Greece and Türkiye.

The relative economic underdevelopment and political marginalisation of these areas, especially within Europe, hinder the progress of Mediterranean cooperation and integration. Indeed, pursuing the enhancement of trade without addressing the underlying political inequality affecting these regions, and EU-Mediterranean relations as a whole, would limit the effectiveness of the Pact's initiatives, especially those in the "People" chapter.

Regarding sports, the Pact mentions the existing Mediterranean Games as a virtuous example that should be empowered: a prime case of an initiative whose popularity and importance are inherently connected to the accessibility of movement across the Mediterranean. In general, enhanced mobility can act as a multiplier for the involvement, attendance, and financing of cultural and sports events.

In particular, investing in transport infrastructure would enable the creation of tourist routes across the Mediterranean. As Southern European countries have become subject to overtourism, which actively damages social fabrics and local economies, offloading part of these fluxes towards the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean can foster horizontal, private-sector cooperation, exchanges, and links between populations. Furthermore, it can redistribute the dividends of the tourism industry in a way that is both fairer and more sustainable.

For these purposes, the Commission should prioritise geographical contact points between the two shores of the Mediterranean as destinations for the implementation of the Pact's projects, namely Spain and Morocco, Italy and Tunisia, and Greece and Türkiye. These areas have long remained underdeveloped 'border zones' that reflect the division within the Euro-Mediterranean region. Instead, they should be reconceptualised as shared spaces of integration and cooperation.

3.3 Protecting civic spaces and institutionalising youth participation

Enhancing regional mobility and recentering the Mediterranean geographically are measures that would also benefit the initiatives proposed under the Pact's section on empowering civil society, youth, and local communities. The questions of who can participate and where the initiatives will take place are relevant considerations: different solutions may significantly affect the inclusiveness and diversity of participation.

Nonetheless, an additional limitation arises from this section of the Pact. While the objective and potential benefits of the proposed actions are essential for supporting the role of civil society, media and youth in enhancing fruitful and open societies, they overlook a critical challenge: the increasingly restrictive civic environment faced in many Southern Mediterranean countries.

In several states, independent media and civil society actors operate under conditions marked by censorship, legal harassment, arbitrary detention , and restrictions on freedom of expression.[32] Furthermore, young leaders and online content creators have also become targets of monitoring and prosecution.[33] As a result, participation in EU-funded initiatives may expose participants to serious security and legal risks. Capacity-building and networking opportunities alone are not sufficient if participants cannot engage safely in cross-border exchanges and collaborative projects.

In light of the current landscape, a special protection framework designed to protect participants from political, legal and digital threats should be established. This framework should include a mandatory risk assessment for EU-funded cooperation projects, as well as access to legal assistance and emergency support for participants facing reprisal in their countries of origin, and strong data protection and confidentiality measures when needed.

These protection measures will enable not only stronger safeguards for participants, but will also enhance the inclusivity and long-term impact of the initiatives. In the absence of adequate security guarantees, many relevant participants may be unwilling to engage. As a result, programmes designed to foster connectivity and exchange will attract only those actors who already enjoy a relatively secure operating environment. If strong security guarantees are not ensured, the initiatives will risk becoming an exclusive forum rather than a plural and inclusive platform for civil society cooperation.

Moreover, when considering the initiative promoting the establishment of a Youth Parliamentary Assembly, questions arise surrounding the materialisation of exchanges into real policy-change. While the project could enhance youth participation and regional dialogue, its impact may be limited unless it possesses clear links to policy-making processes. Without these safeguards, the initiative risks becoming a symbolic consultative forum with limited policy influence. To prevent this, clear channels between the assembly and national authorities and institutions should be established. Additionally, the initiative should have clear and regular communications indicating to participants whether and how their contributions have taken part in policy-making processes. These guarantees will increase the credibility of the initiative and promote a realistic connection between participation and decision-making.

3.4 Conclusion

While the “People” section of the Pact presents relevant initiatives, it is vital to acknowledge that their successful implementation will depend on how the Pact’s structural limitations are addressed. The proper nature of this section makes its implementation highly conditional on the Pact’s perception among the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean populations.

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[32] HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement (2025, December 10). *On Human Rights Day 2025: Civic Space in the Middle East and North Africa under Systematic and Sustained Pressure*. https://humena.org/human-rights-day-2025/

[33] As an example, in August 2024, a youth delegate to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe was arrested at Ankara’s airport after statements made in this same Council of Europe body. See: Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. (2024, August). *President of the Conference of INGOs calls for the immediate release of the Congress youth delegate arrested in Türkiye*. Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/-/council-of-europe-congress-president-calls-for-the-immediate-release-of-the-congress-youth-delegate-arrested-in-t%C3%BCrkiye

In light of this, the Pact's Eurocentric perspective and asymmetric dynamics of cooperation need to be revised. Enhancing mobility across the Mediterranean, recentering the Mediterranean geographically, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility while preserving participants' security, and establishing clear links to policy-making processes are essential measures to facilitate the implementation of the proposed initiatives.

3.5 Recommendations

- **Enhance cross-Mediterranean mobility** through a common visa regime.
- **Recenter the Mediterranean geographically in the implementation** of the Pact's initiatives, prioritising Southern European and North African locations.
- **Promote polling and research initiatives** to gauge Southern and Eastern Mediterranean perceptions of the EU and its initiatives.
- **Ensure inclusivity and accessibility** in the Pact's initiative by establishing a dedicated protection framework to safeguard participants from political, legal, and digital threats.
- **Institutionalise formal channels between the Youth Parliamentary Assembly** and European and national decision-making bodies, including regular communications and feedback mechanisms.

4. Transforming policy frameworks into a lived reality

This roadmap comes at a key moment in EU-Mediterranean relations. With the establishment of DG MENA and the launch of the Pact, the EU has signalled its intent to deepen integration and cooperation with its Mediterranean partners. Yet, the EU is still at an early stage in designing the mechanisms that will deliver on this promise, and it is precisely at this stage that the direction it takes matters most. We present this roadmap now to urge the European Commission and in particular DG MENA to implement the Pact in a way that builds genuine partnership, rather than repeating the asymmetries of past frameworks.

The recommendations outlined throughout this roadmap share a common premise that security cannot continue to be pursued primarily through control, but must instead be built through shared agency, human security and local legitimacy. The European model has so far shown a predisposition for short-term stability through transactional deals, border externalisation, and backing authoritarian regimes. However, it has proven limited in establishing a genuine partnership and achieving inclusive security. The Pact offers a unique opportunity to break this cycle, but only if human security and people are positioned at the centre, even when addressing the politico-military and economic dimensions. Security cannot mean 'keeping threats out' but protecting the safety, dignity, and agency of communities on both shores, which is a core aspect of moving from responsiveness to preparedness.

While progress across the security and economic dimensions will remain vulnerable to volatile geopolitical disruptions, the long-term success of Mediterranean integration will ultimately be determined by how initiatives are perceived, accessed, and experienced by populations on both shores. Without tangible dividends for human dignity and civic freedom, technical agreements alone cannot sustain a common Mediterranean space.

Equally, the success of the Pact will depend on the Commission's willingness to practice institutional reflexivity. Creating a dedicated Directorate-General for the region is an important institutional milestone, but administrative structures alone cannot change policy outcomes. This means listening to partner threat perceptions before writing agendas, evaluating success through broader indicators than migration statistics, and applying the EU's commitments to democracy and human rights consistently, even when strategic or economic interests are at stake.

Across both the "Security" and the "People" dimensions of the Pact, this roadmap identifies three overarching principles that should guide implementation:

- **Co-ownership over conditionality**: Shift from top-down donor-recipient dynamics to joint agenda-setting through mechanisms such as joint politico-military scenario exercises, shared maritime governance, and the co-design of initiatives with civil society and youth platforms like the Youth Parliamentary Assembly.

- **Protection before projection**: Ensure that every EU external action, from border management to civil society capacity-building, first fulfils a strict duty of care that protects local partners from domestic reprisals or human rights violations arising from their cooperation with the EU.
- **Local grounding over centralisation**: Move beyond the centralised, state-centric bottlenecks by directing funding, mobility programmes and dialogues directly to municipalities, local ecosystems, and regional border zones.

In an increasingly multipolar world where regional actors in the Euro-Mediterranean and Southern Mediterranean are pursuing multi-alignment, the EU's greatest competitive advantage is not its financial leverage or military force, but its normative credibility. Preserving this credibility requires moving beyond paternalistic jargon and the selective application of normative commitments, towards centering the lived experiences of the region's people. Through recognising their partners in the Mediterranean as equal participants in shaping the region's future, the EU can contribute to building a shared Mediterranean space built on reciprocity, resilience and mutual trust.

Ultimately, the Mediterranean will remain little more than its original cartographic meaning as a geographical area unless its people are placed at the centre of its transformation. A 'common space' is an empty construct if it is not inhabited, shaped, and legitimised by the people and societies that share it.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Redefining Regional Security & Strategic Governance

- **Treat the Mediterranean as a shared security space** rather than a buffer zone protecting Europe from external instability.
- Shift security cooperation from border-based crisis response toward **corridor-based structural preparedness**.
- **Evaluate security cooperation** through indicators of governance, institutional resilience, cross-border crime, economic stability and environmental risk.
- **Rationalise security cooperation** through a review of existing instruments and structured partnerships with municipalities, rather than continuously expanded with new mechanisms.
- **Operationalise co-ownership** by jointly defining security priorities with Mediterranean partners and strengthening multilateral and triangular cooperation.
- **Introduce regular partner-country threat perception assessments** to include Mediterranean partners' understanding of security risks in EU planning.
- **Organise joint politico-military scenario exercises** with willing partners to test coordination and preparedness for cross-border crises.
- **Secure energy and transport corridors** by pursuing infrastructure diplomacy embedded in durable partnerships with transit and regional actors.
- **Expand maritime security cooperation** beyond border surveillance to integrate civilian-military information sharing, joint maritime domain awareness, subsea and digital infrastructure protection, and financial investigations targeting organised criminal networks.
- **Apply existing political and human-rights commitments consistently** across security partnerships, through transparent evaluation, predictable consequences for serious violations, and the willingness to review or suspend agreements where fundamental principles are breached.

Reimagining Mobility, Solidarity & Civic Agency

- **Enhance cross-Mediterranean mobility** through a common visa regime.
- **Recenter the Mediterranean geographically in the implementation** of the Pact's initiatives, prioritising Southern European and North African locations.
- **Promote polling and research initiatives** to gauge Southern and Eastern Mediterranean perceptions of the EU and its initiatives.
- **Ensure inclusivity and accessibility** in the Pact's initiative by establishing a dedicated protection framework to safeguard participants from political, legal, and digital threats.
- **Institutionalise formal channels between the Youth Parliamentary Assembly** and European and national decision-making bodies, including regular communications and feedback mechanisms.

Overarching Principles for Implementation

- **Co-ownership over conditionality**: Shift from top-down donor-recipient dynamics to joint agenda-setting.
- **Protection before projection**: Ensure that every EU external action first fulfils a strict duty of care that protects local partners from domestic reprisals or human rights violations arising from their cooperation with the EU.
- **Local grounding over centralisation**: Move beyond the centralised, state-centric bottlenecks by directing funding, programmes and dialogues directly to municipalities, local ecosystems, and regional border zones.

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