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Back to the Future: The Pact for the Mediterranean and the Mirage of Euro-Mediterranean Integration

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Summary

The European Union (EU) and southern Mediterranean partners launched the Pact for the Mediterranean in November 2025 to reset relations with the EU's "Southern Neighbourhood" in an increasingly challenging regional context. The Pact comes 30 years after the 1995 Barcelona Process promised to foster economic – and to a lesser degree political – integration in the Mediterranean Basin. The Pact's declared objective is to "achieve deeper integration within the common Mediterranean space" (EC & HR, 2025). This policy brief discusses the Pact's prospects for achieving this goal, which previous efforts have failed to reach.

For long-time observers of Euro-Mediterranean relations, the Pact appears to be a "back to the future" approach. Its three substantive "pillars" (people, economies and security) echo the three "baskets" (political/security, economic and socio-cultural) of the original Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Structurally, it relies on the same mix of differentiated bilateral agreements (now termed "comprehensive partnerships") within a multilateral regional framework.

The Pact's success depends on whether the EU and Mediterranean partner countries can resolve four core dilemmas that have long challenged their relations:

- The "autocracy dilemma": balancing the need to work with authoritarian governments with European interests in supporting democracy.
- The "migration dilemma": securing borders while respecting human rights.
- The "rentierism dilemma": finding solutions to immediate economic, social and environmental challenges while making necessary reforms to rentier political economies.
- The "regionalism dilemma": cutting bilateral deals while trying to build regional structures to address collective action problems.

The term "pact" is normally used to describe an agreement between two partners, setting out agreed objectives and actions for both sides. The Pact for the Mediterranean is an EU policy framework that, at most, represents a tacit agreement with southern Mediterranean governments, without committing either side to policy changes or reforms that might have long-term implications.

The Pact for the Mediterranean has potential to strengthen sectoral cooperation, for example on renewable energy, connectivity infrastructure and labour mobility. If accompanied by sufficient resources and mutual trust-building, this functional cooperation may create incentives for deeper integration. This, in turn, will still depend on whether the EU and southern Mediterranean governments can move beyond transactionalism and invest in partnerships between their societies: support for democratic movements and institutions, investment in public goods, protection of the natural environment and investment in collective regionalism. Thus far, there is little indication that the EU and southern Mediterranean governments will take advantage of this opportunity.

EU political and economic interests behind the pact for the Mediterranean

The Pact for the Mediterranean is framed by the European Commission as a comprehensive strategy to reset relations with Europe's Southern Neighbourhood after years of piecemeal initiatives. The EU's declared ambition for the Pact is to achieve deeper integration in a "common Mediterranean space" that is more connected, integrated, prosperous, resilient and secure. This ambition highlights shared interests in regional peace and stability, and a commitment to the multilateral rules-based international order. This has both political and economic dimensions.

A central objective for the EU is to increase its geopolitical influence in a region where other powers, including Russia and China, are increasingly active, while the presence of the United States has become progressively transactional under the second Trump Administration (Hefele & Afterman, 2025). The Pact is framed as a means for the EU to reaffirm its role as the primary partner for Southern Neighbourhood countries.

A second political objective is to protect Europe from threats it perceives as emanating from the Southern Neighbourhood. The EU aims to enhance cooperation on security through an "EU-Med Peace and Security Initiative" and to manage migration in a "fair, protective, and comprehensive" manner (EC & HR, 2025, p. 19). The Pact thus implements the directive from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's 2024 mission letter to DG-MENA Commissioner Dubravka Šuica, which calls for "operationalising the external aspects of EU migration policy, bolstering strict border controls, combatting human trafficking and establishing 'ad-hoc' partnerships with transit countries" (Errichiello, 2025).

Economically, the Pact seeks to deepen trade relations and foster integration across the Mediterranean. The EU is the Southern Neighbourhood's largest trading partner, and through the Pact, it aims to further integrate supply chains while promoting sustainable trade and investment (EC & HR, 2025, p. 10). The Pact's scope extends beyond the southern Mediterranean, offering opportunities for economic cooperation with partners in the Gulf, Asia and Africa (EC, 2025).

The Pact emphasises three strategic economic priorities. First, it supports green and digital transitions, encouraging renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and the modernisation of regional economies. Second, it seeks to improve trade and investment relations, thus reviving the Barcelona Process-era goal of creating a "common area of shared prosperity" by supporting the business environment and attracting foreign investment. Third, it promotes connectivity within the region and between the Southern Neighbourhood and the EU. The Pact proposes increased European investments in transport, energy and digital infrastructure, linking them to the EU's Global Gateway connectivity infrastructure initiative. Realising these priorities would require stronger regional networks, which should, in theory, drive deeper economic integration.

The Pact thus reflects a selective articulation of EU interests, prioritising economic cooperation, stability and functional engagement while leaving other long-standing political objectives unaddressed or even sidelined. The Pact does not promote democratic transformation or governance reform in southern Mediterranean countries. Instead, it aligns more closely with the logic of a "geopolitical Europe", focusing on migration management and energy security while also dealing with authoritarian regimes. This does not translate into greater strategic influence. In major geopolitical developments shaping the region – especially the Israeli government's brutal efforts to reshape the strategic balance in the Levant, and the US-Israel war on Iran – the EU and its members have remained marginal actors.

What southern Mediterranean partners want from the Pact

A "pact" is, by definition, an agreement between two or more parties. The public relations around

the launch of the Pact for the Mediterranean stressed how the framework is not only a European one but the result of extensive consultations with governments, stakeholders and experts from the 10 partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia (EC & HR, 2025, p. 2). The Pact was thus developed in an inclusive process, and governments, civil society, youth and the private sector in the southern Mediterranean have expectations regarding what it should deliver to them.

The Barcelona IEMed institute was contracted by the European Commission to gather southern Mediterranean inputs to the Pact in a series of "consultation circles" meetings. Participants highlighted the widespread demand for Europe to contribute more to inclusive economic development in southern Mediterranean countries and acknowledged the EU's potential to do so via meaningful commitments to rights and sustainability. With regard to migration, mobility and talent partnerships were repeatedly flagged in the consultations, stressing legal pathways, skills-matching and seasonal or permanent work opportunities in the EU. Participants warned against policy approaches that are too focused on migration control (EuroMeSCo, 2025a).

According to the EU, the Pact has incorporated these views. However, as Al-Ghwell (2025) notes, the extensive consultation process created a problem concerning the management of expectations. Many of the inputs the Commission received from governments, think tanks and civil society groups raised expectations that were incoherent with each other and thus impossible to serve.

Since the Pact's launch in November 2025, experts and stakeholders in the southern Mediterranean have continued to express a mixture of high hopes and deep scepticism. Their voices – documented in opinion pieces, local media and a comprehensive survey conducted by IEMed – converge around a few key themes.

First, there is a strong preference for greater sovereignty in partnership design. Southern partners want the Pact to recognise their geopolitical priorities as well as Europe's. This preference is not always expressed coherently. Interpretations of "co-ownership" diverge significantly between non-governmental and government actors.

Civil society calls for deep, structural inclusion of multiple stakeholders across all stages of the Pact, from design to implementation and evaluation. Algerian respondents to the IEMed survey argued that the EU had not engaged local actors sufficiently, terming this a "top-down approach that is insufficiently rooted in local realities" (EuroMeSCo, 2025b, p. 17). In contrast, governments stress the Pact's focus on sovereignty, security cooperation and economic benefits, emphasising flexibility and minimal political conditionality. Some commentators point out that some southern partners have applied leverage. For example, Lemaizi (2025) notes that Rabat deliberately stalled negotiations with the EU to extract stronger diplomatic support for its position on Western Sahara.

Second, environmental issues are emphasised across the region. Observers have called for serious commitments on climate adaptation, water security and renewable energy projects that serve local populations. The IEMed survey found that a slightly higher percentage of southern Mediterranean respondents (25 per cent) wanted the Pact to prioritise environmental issues than did EU-based respondents (22 per cent) (EuroMeSCo, 2025b, p. 16). There are concerns that EU-backed "green" projects, such as hydrogen production, will serve European energy needs without addressing local vulnerabilities, such as water security and agricultural resilience (EuroMed Rights/MATTCCh, 2025).

Third, although more legal migration is generally welcomed, migration specialists warn against reducing the region to a "*réservoir de talents pour l'UE*" (talent reservoir for the EU) (Lemaizi, 2025). Southern Mediterranean governments treat migration as a transactional issue, using cooperation on border management to secure con-

cessions such as visas or financial support (Dimitriadi, 2025). In contrast, civil society organisations and experts advocate for a values-based approach that emphasises legal pathways, human rights, rule of law and democratic principles. The investigative platform ENASS documented how EU funding has supported migrant pushbacks, thereby implying the EU's complicity in human rights abuses. One observer noted that "European states […] outsource human rights violations to third countries" (ENASS, 2024). This illustrates a strong demand for the EU to condition funding on human rights safeguards and to channel resources through civil society actors, not just governments.

Fourth, local economists want the Pact to deliver tangible socio-economic improvements, especially jobs for youth, vocational training, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and long-term investment in sustainable industries. Tunisian economist Ghazi Ben Ahmed called for the Pact to support "economies rather than regimes" (Dahmani, 2025). According to respondents to the IEMed survey, there is a risk that transactional, slow or conditional EU engagement which fails to address daily economic and governance needs would undermine the Pact's credibility (EuroMeSCo, 2025b).

Southern Mediterranean partners expect the Pact to deliver a combination of tangible socio-economic benefits and locally driven reforms while fostering a more balanced political partnership. Thus far, most observers have placed this onus on the EU. This perspective tends to downplay the reality that the EU's ability to support sustainable development is limited, as long as the region's autocratic, reform-averse governments resist change.

Table 1: Stakeholders and interests in the Pact for the Mediterranean

Actor type	Stakeholder	Key interests in the pact
State actors	European Union institutions (Commission, EEAS)	Strengthening geopolitical influence; managing migration; securing energy supply; promoting economic integration and stability in the neighbourhood
	EU member states	National security and migration control; economic opportunities for firms; energy diversification; political influence in the region
	Southern Mediterranean governments	Access to investment and financial support; trade and market access; infrastructure development; regime stability; selective cooperation on migration and security
	Third-country powers (Gulf states, US, China, Russia)	Expanding regional influence; investment opportunities; strategic positioning; offering alternative partnerships to EU framework
Non-state actors	Private sector (EU and Mediterranean firms, investors, SMEs)	Market access; investment opportunities; participation in infrastructure, energy, and digital projects; regulatory stability
	Financial institutions (EIB, EBRD, development banks)	Financing large-scale projects; risk-managed investment; supporting green and digital transitions
	Civil society organisations	Promotion of human rights, governance and social inclusion; participation in policy-making; accountability and transparency
	Youth organisations and education institutions	Skills development; mobility opportunities; employment pathways; participation in policy dialogue
	Local authorities and municipalities	Access to funding for infrastructure and climate projects; local economic development
	Research institutions and think tanks	Policy influence; knowledge production; shaping implementation and evaluation frameworks
	Migrants and diaspora communities	Legal mobility pathways; recognition of skills; economic opportunities; protection of rights

Source: Author, based on data from EuroMeSCo (2025a)

Table 1 presents a "stakeholder mapping", illustrating the complexity of interests in and expectations arising from the Pact for the Mediterranean. In general, state actors and the EU prioritise security interests and economic opportunities, while non-state actors emphasise inclusion, mobility and governance. The tension between these perspectives is reflected in the core dilemmas facing Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Four dilemmas facing the Pact's implementation

"Back to the future" is also an appropriate framework for the political and economic context surrounding the Pact for the Mediterranean, which faces a set of structural dilemmas that have long challenged Euro-Mediterranean relations. These dilemmas have become more pronounced in a regional context that is marked by increasing geopolitical competition, deepening authoritarianism, rising anti-democratic populism in Europe, ongoing conflict and unresolved environmental challenges.

The autocracy dilemma

The deepest and most pressing dilemma is that posed by the necessity of cooperating with authoritarian partners. The EU has no choice but to work with governments in its Southern Neighbourhood due to geographic proximity, thereby serving to entrench their autocratic rule (Schumacher, 2020). In the decade and a half since the Arab uprisings, most Mediterranean partner governments have become more authoritarian and less receptive to governance reform (Wehrey, 2023). At the same time, the risks posed by political instability in the region have weakened the EU's resolve to provide active support for democratic change. In the Communication announcing the Pact, the word "democratic" is only mentioned once in the context of support for civil society, indicating where democracy sits in the EU's hierarchy of priorities (EC & HR, 2025, p. 8).

Autocracy in the Mediterranean basin presents a strategic threat to Europe. In the short term, many people seek to migrate from authoritarian countries because they do not offer fairness and shared prosperity. In the longer term, the arbitrary repression upon which autocratic rulers rely can drive populations to rise up against ruling elites, creating conflicts that can escalate out of control (Miller & Peters, 2020). Channelling funds to support the authoritarian regimes' capacity for repression can achieve some short-term stability but may increase the longer-term risk of revolution and upheaval.

The EU's solution has been to stress the language of "mutual interests" and to make vague references to inclusive development. However, partnerships with authoritarian regimes attract the obvious criticism that the EU does not practice what it preaches. As ENASS (2024) notes, civil society actors in southern Mediterranean countries increasingly view the EU as complicit in repression.

Table 2: Four core dilemmas for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation

Cooperation with autocrats vs interest in democracy	Supporting authoritarian regimes secures short-term cooperation but undermines long-term interests in democratic peace and stability
Border security vs values	Border control practices undermine EU credibility on human rights
Bilateralism vs regionalism	Bilateral deals fragment cooperation and weaken collective solutions
Short-term stability vs long-term development	Externalising migration control displaces flows without addressing root causes

Source: Author

The migration dilemma

A second, closely related dilemma is that between border security and core values. The Pact is presented as a framework for promoting human rights, good governance and fundamental freedoms, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sus-

tainable Development (EC & HR, 2025, p. 4). However, as Dubois and Foy (2024) note, "concerned by rising support for far-right, anti-immigrant parties across the bloc, the EU is increasingly leaning on countries in the Middle East and North Africa to curb migration, offering financial support in return for tougher border control measures".

This approach has drawn much criticism. Sidlo (2025) notes that the EU's Mediterranean policy has become "transactional and reactive, prioritizing short-term border security over long-term stability". Human rights NGOs and the United Nations have argued that, by funding border forces in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, the EU is complicit in abuses. The European Ombudsman has opened an inquiry into the comprehensive partnership with Tunisia. ENASS (2024) points out that EU funds in Tunisia were used in contexts of arbitrary detention and the deportation of migrants.

Providing funds and equipment to southern Mediterranean border agencies helps European governments reduce migration flows in the immediate term. This is politically valuable in the EU, where migration is an issue that affects elections. Nevertheless, the EU may be disappointed with what they get for their money in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and even Jordan, where budget support backed by barely credible reform conditions serves only to increase the EU's vulnerability to blackmail.

The rentierism dilemma

A third dilemma lies in balancing short-term problem-solving with support for the foundation of long-term sustainable development. Participants in the pre-Pact consultations and respondents to the post-Pact survey concurred about the need for economic transformation in the region, "away from extractive models to regenerative, inclusive ecosystems" (EuroMeSCo, 2025a, p. 33). This counters the logic of rentier political economies with a model based on sustainability, inclusion and broad-based growth rather than reliance on resource rents or external aid.

However, as Boubekeur (2026, p. 64) notes, the Pact "consolidates hierarchy by institutionalising differentiated access, selective acceleration, and conditional partnership". Boubekeur argues that this is not an abrupt change of direction, but the continuation of a policy trajectory that has been developing for at least a decade. The EU's engagement largely remains limited to governments and well-connected elite actors. Benefits inevitably accrue to these elites and to European companies, and the Pact risks deepening these inequalities.

The regionalism dilemma

A fourth dilemma is bilateralism versus regionalism. The Pact is structured around two approaches that define cooperation measures for pursuing these objectives in various ways, depending on the partner, the specific constellation of interests and the format. Regional cooperation focusing on investment, migration and sustainable development addresses the reality that collective action challenges transcend national borders and require coordinated solutions that go beyond bilateral deals. Nevertheless, in parallel to the "common Mediterranean space", the EU has signed strategic, bilateral "comprehensive partnerships" with Egypt and Tunisia and is negotiating them with Morocco, Algeria and Jordan.

This structure is familiar to long-term Euro-Mediterranean observers. The Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) were also structured around differentiated bilateral agreements framed by regional structures such as the Union for the Mediterranean. The regional dimension has historically been the weakest aspect of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, not least because southern Mediterranean governments have shown little interest in multilateral engagement with the EU.

Observers have argued that the Pact's emphasis on comprehensive partnerships represents a significant shift away from multilateral cooperation. Sidlo (2025) calls this "the end of region-building"

because it abandons the collective ambitions of the Barcelona Process in favour of narrow bilateralism. The EU justifies this as "pragmatic realism" in an era of geopolitical competition, but its effect is to create a patchwork of uneven commitments (EC, 2025).

Prospects for deeper integration in the Mediterranean basin

The Pact for the Mediterranean represents the EU's most ambitious effort in decades to reinvigorate its relationship with its southern neighbours. The obvious question raised by the Pact's high-profile launch is whether there are signs that it will succeed in addressing the core cooperation dilemmas where previous policy frameworks have failed.

The likelihood of achieving deep integration, both among southern Mediterranean countries and between them and the EU, remains low. Historical experiences, entrenched political enmities, unresolved regional conflicts (especially Israel-Palestine, where the EU has been sidelined) and the EU's increased focus on short-term priorities limit the prospects for a truly cohesive Euro-Mediterranean space.

The Pact incorporates several mechanisms intended to foster regional cohesion, including flagship initiatives with a transnational scope, such as the Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy and Clean Tech Initiative (EC & HR, 2025, p. 13). The Pact creates cooperation opportunities across a range of sectoral initiatives, from green transition programmes to skills development, trade facilitation and flexible governance structures. This "variable geometry" approach allows coalitions of partners to advance specific projects, building networks that can create interdependencies and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, the Pact's flexible approach and project-based initiatives are more likely to produce sectoral and functional cooperation than systemic convergence. Southern partners, aware of their options for dealing with other global powers, are approaching the Pact with cautious pragmatism. They value its potential for tangible benefits and co-ownership but are sceptical of the EU's capacity or willingness to foster an equitable, region-wide partnership.

Whereas the Barcelona Process frameworks emphasised both the bilateral and regional dimensions, the bilateral comprehensive partnerships are the real core of the Pact for the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the Union for the Mediterranean remains under-funded and insufficiently mandated, despite its potential for catalysing regional integration (EuroMeSCo, 2025a, p. 10). It is therefore likely that the Pact marks a pause in serious EU efforts to foster integration in the Southern Neighbourhood.

The Pact is likely to be effective in supporting short-term stability in southern ENP countries. From the European perspective, the Pact opens up access to high-level policy discussions, and to natural and human resources, in a region where other international actors, especially China, Russia and the Gulf States, are also angling for attention and concessions. The Pact helps reinforce the cooperation of key countries with securing borders and accepting returnees. From the southern Mediterranean government perspective, the Pact provides support to state budgets and infrastructure investments, thereby helping existing rulers meet their obligations.

Beyond this, the Pact is unlikely to change much. It does not aim at political transformation, either through conditionality at the state level or by supporting change agents. Although such transformation is in the interest of the EU and its member states – and presumably also in the interests of most of the populations of Mediterranean partner countries – it is not in the interests of their autocratic rulers. Integration, if it occurs at all, is likely to be functional and project-based, rather than systemic and transformative.

The Pact for the Mediterranean exposes the growing tension between the EU's longstanding self-image as a "normative power" and its more recent aspiration to act as "geopolitical Europe". This shift reflects the move towards a more trans-

actional and interest-driven external policy, and yet it fails to deliver corresponding geopolitical influence. The Pact risks exposing the weaknesses of both paradigms. Transactional engagements with authoritarian regimes in the region are unavoidable, but they undermine the rules- and rights-based principles that underpin the EU's own legitimacy and long-term influence. European inaction in response to Israeli violations of international law in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iran dilutes the EU's relevance as well as its normative credibility. The inability to practice what it preaches weakens the EU's moral authority without securing any meaningful geopolitical leverage, thereby reinforcing a pattern of limited influence over the most consequential political, security and economic dynamics in the Mediterranean Basin.

A different approach is conceivable. The EU would be well advised to maintain its offer and capacity to support democratic processes, actors and institutions such as parliaments, independent judiciaries and media. The EU cannot democratise southern Mediterranean countries, but it can stand ready to back movements that emerge. Maintaining support for organisations such as the European Endowment for Democracy is crucial in this regard. More substantial Global Gateway projects in connectivity, health care and education could demonstrate that the EU can offer larger and more attractive investments. Making proposals that partners cannot refuse inevitably increases leverage. Issues such as better market access – especially for agriculture exports – training programmes with job guarantees and temporary work visas are all attractive to citizens in southern ENP countries, and could also be better leveraged by the EU and its members. Offering more to citizens could increase pressure on governments, as people may resent missing out on opportunities because of their governments' failure to implement reforms. Bilateral packages that provide support to governments for implementing sector-specific reforms as well as programmes offering real benefits to citizens could have a deeper integrative impact on the Euro-Mediterranean space than past approaches.

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