

Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood - Pathways for a revived relationship



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Current state of play

The end of 2022 will mark the 27th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration. Its adoption in 1995 opened a new chapter in the relations between the European Union and the Southern Neighbourhood countries. The aim of this initiative was to strengthen cooperation, address common challenges, guarantee peace, stability and prosperity of the region through sustainable and balanced economic and social development. It was full of good intentions and brought plenty of hopes. In addition, 2022 marks also the 11th anniversary of the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, since the 2011 uprisings, Europe's Southern Neighbourhood has experienced sustained turmoil. According to the Global Peace Index 2021, the Middle East and North Africa region is the least peaceful in the world. From Morocco to Syria, every single country has been destabilised and witnessed either protests, conflicts, or crisis in one way or another. Most of the countries have undergone or continue to know internal protests. Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have managed to overthrow their autocratic regimes but continue to face instability, Algeria has witnessed protests with the Hirak movement and Syria is still plunged into a civil war. Even Morocco and Jordan, the two stable kingdoms in the region have faced several protests but decided to respond with reform rather than repression. Today, Libya, after failing to hold its elections in December 2021, is still struggling with instability and uncertainty about its future; Tunisia is facing a political and constitutional crisis, Lebanon is plunged into its deepest economic crisis ever a multifaceted crisis; and war in Syria has raged for 11 years, with the Assad regime still in power due to the involvement of foreign actors. Finally, the Israeli-Arab conflict has escalated again in May 2021 and Israel had to face a wave of terror attacks beginning of 2022, despite the normalisation of ties between Israel and certain Arab countries per the historic Abraham Accords. Unfortunately, today, the Arab Spring left many with unfulfilled

promises. The optimism that inspired the different revolutions in the Arab world has vanished, the region continues to go through an immense uncertainty especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the fundamental challenge it presents for Europe.

To ensure the success of future initiatives, it is essential that we understand that Europe's Southern Neighbourhood does not constitute a homogenous space; rather, each country faces its own internal and external challenges. Some countries are more stable or more economic and institutionally developed than others. This makes adopting a cohesive, 'one-size-fits-all' approach an insufficient strategy to approaching the region as substantially proved by the previous attempts of cooperation. Lack of regional integration and cooperation, within the Southern Neighbourhood itself, is another major challenge. It renders all the more difficult attempts to untap the region's full potential. A successful European approach, based in full partnership, must include a broader regional perspective that embraces a case-by-case outlook and should be supported by enhanced bilateral relations between the EU and each Southern Neighbourhood country.

A strategic region filled with opportunities

Europe's links with the Southern Neighbourhood — geographical, historical and cultural, economic, energy, military and strategic — clearly align the region's stability and prosperity with Europe's own interests.

Geographical proximity of course means any instability in the region deeply and directly impacts Europe, as seen during the migration crises resulting from the Syrian or Libyan civil wars, or the migration crisis in Ceuta — revealing, like an Achilles heel, a fundamental vulnerability. We have also seen how governments belonging to other political families have exacerbated instability or delivered only empty promises to the region: for example, the diplomatic crisis created by the Spanish Socialist government with Morocco, which could have been avoided, or in the misguided French Liberal initiative for Lebanon.

Nevertheless, it is also important to keep in mind that due to their geographies, most of these countries constitute an important buffer zone against political and security threats emerging further to the south: in the Sahel or West Africa, for instance, but also from Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian-Arabian Gulf. Building resilience to any political, economic and security threats in Southern Neighbourhood countries, therefore, means shielding European citizens not only from those challenges or potential threats emanating directly from the region itself but also from those entering the Southern Neighbourhood from beyond.

Strong historic and cultural ties between several EU Member States and Southern Neighbourhood countries have resulted in the presence of important diasporas across Europe which continue to maintain significant ties to their countries of origin. The May 2021 conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians — amidst which pro-Palestinian protests, featuring sometimes antisemitic messages, were held all around Europe — provides a case in point. The size and impact of diasporas remittances and financial contributions to their respective countries of origin are significant. They amounted approximately €50 billion in 2018 for the region. However, diasporas make also non-financial contributions, which all together could highly influence and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They can play an important role in development, transfer of skills, knowledge and technology, reduction of poverty, reconstruction and growth in their countries of origin.

Many countries at the EU's southern flank constitute important economic markets for European companies and offer future economic opportunities for not only European companies but also European citizens. In 2020, total trade in goods between the EU and the Southern Neighbourhood countries amounted to €149.4 billion ; it mainly covered trade in food and raw materials, chemicals, fuel and mining, textile and clothing, and machinery and transports. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, several companies are exploring possibilities for repatriating production closer to home; this new view of management of the supply chains, based in security, reliability and not exclusively in the value, could lead to a very positive outcome for the region in general.

The region also offers an important source of energy, in particular oil from Libya and Algeria and Algerian natural gas. Many countries also transport gas from further afield. Morocco, for example, has advocated for the construction of a pipeline from Nigeria to Europe — an extension of the existing West Africa Gas Pipeline — and could thus constitute an additional, though limited, alternative to Russian gas supplies to Europe. The Oil and Gas reserves in the Mediterranean constitute equally a strategic opportunity for Europe to diversify from Russian Gas, especially with the Mideast pipeline. Worth noting are the electricity imports from Morocco to Spain, with further interconnections foreseen between Portugal and Morocco and between Italy and Tunisia. Considering the Southern Neighbourhood's enormous potential for developing solar and wind energy, as well as green hydrogen, these interconnections would play a key role in advancing the European Green Deal objectives on decarbonising energy and reducing carbon emissions.

On a security level, very strong cooperation in intelligence sharing has always existed between the EU and Southern Neighbourhood countries; it is essential to deepen this cooperation further. The fight against terrorism and its financing but also radicalisation and violent extremism as well as dismantling of human and drug trafficking networks have always been a priority for both Europe and the Southern Neighbourhood countries. The other well-known issue is the foreign fighters, as many European citizens have departed to the region to join terrorist groups, with some then returning to their home countries to carry out attacks. The cooperation in this regard with Southern Neighbourhood countries has also been essential for preventing terrorist attacks in European soil. It is internationally reported that from some of the regional countries an organised and well-channelled “export” of militants to other conflict zones (such as from Libya and Syria to the Nagorno Karabakh) became another threat to the EU broader neighbourhood. On military level, the presence of Russia and Turkey through their military bases in several Mediterranean countries adds only further pressure on the EU and its Member States; the absence of an EU military presence makes it only more difficult for the EU to be considered a geopolitical actor in the region, capable of influencing the balance of powers on the ground. This has been the case with the war in Syria, where Russia and Iran, along

with Turkey have been among the key players in altering the balance of power and in maintaining in place the Assad regime. On the other hand, the different arms sales from Russia and Turkey to Southern Neighbourhood countries could pose a direct military threat to Europe. To make matters worse, human trafficking through Turkey not only constitutes a humanitarian tragedy but also a security threat". All these foreign actors have been participating in the destabilization of several countries in the region, and the European Union cannot and should not afford to be only the payer for the reconstruction of countries that have been affected directly or indirectly by such foreign actors. We need to ensure that the EU takes her place and becomes a global player in such a geostrategic region.

Our priorities and action

The region is therefore of strategic priority to Europe: not only do we share a common history, but our futures are closely interlinked. Given the instability in the region and current state of play in relations between Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood, the time has come for Europe to review not only its approach but even its fundamental priorities. We need a long-term vision and strategy for a stable and prosperous neighbourhood enabling us to face common challenges and deliver on common interests. It is essential that our partners feel this to be a win-win situation, a true and tailor-made partnership and not the result of an agenda based only on EU priorities. On the other hand, we should not hesitate to address key security issues regarding the ongoing developments in the issue of migration. Hence, the European Commission's new strategy — which was much welcomed also by several countries in the region — entitled 'Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new Agenda for the Mediterranean' and published on 9 February 2021, goes in the right direction, by presenting a comprehensive strategy towards the Southern Neighbourhood, which will hopefully give a new impulse to the relations between the two sides. Furthermore, the Commission's new pact for Migration and Asylum, which includes provisions for some of the Southern Neighbourhood's countries could constitute a major step when it comes to our

cooperation in the fields of migration, border-control, fight against the organized crime, terrorism, economy, youth, green and digital transition. However, it is important to stress that deep understanding between the EU and its southern partners and strengthened bilateral dialogue are essential for a successful implementation of this broader and comprehensive new agenda.

This already fragile region will see further challenges in the coming years following the pandemic; and yet there is momentum for helping these neighbours not only recover but achieve long-term objectives: for a more resilient, sustainable environment able to absorb and respond to any future shocks.

In 2015, during the Madrid Congress, the EPP changed its statutes and adopted a new partnership programme in order to cooperate closer with political parties from the Southern Neighbourhood. The idea behind this new programme was to establish an open, long-term dialogue with partners from the region on a variety of key issues — but also to enhance mutual understanding. Since the Madrid Congress, four parties have joined the EPP as partners: two from Lebanon, Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party, and two from Morocco, Istiqlal and RNI.

In the general framework of this new strategy and taking into consideration recent developments in the region, we as the European People's Party, have identified the following key priorities:

Fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and contributing to increased global vaccination

In order to be able to implement all the other priorities, we first need to get out of the COVID-19 crisis. A global approach is the only way to get out of the current pandemic. If we fail in doing so, millions of people in a region which is already affected by conflict, insecurity and natural disasters will be at risk. This might cause only further turmoil in an already very fragile region. We therefore welcome the initiative of Team Europe. It has mobilised over EUR 40.5 billion to assist partner countries

in addressing the crisis; among which €3bn have allocated to COVAX, the global vaccine alliance, which so far has provided close to 100mio vaccine doses to more than 130 countries worldwide.

To support third countries, especially in the Western Balkans, Eastern Neighbourhood and Africa, the EU has set up a vaccine sharing mechanism to support Member States who wish to share vaccine doses; EU Member States have committed to sharing at least 100 million doses by the end of 2021. Worth noting that the EU has exported as many vaccines as it has received for its citizens namely over 350 million.

Some of the largest manufacturers of COVID-19 vaccines are situated in the EU and they are the largest global suppliers. In addition, the EPP welcomes the new Team Europe initiative which will mobilise EUR 1 billion to help boost manufacturing and access to vaccines, medicines and health technologies in Africa.

b) Peace and Stability

Stabilising and securing the region is the prerequisite for implementing all other priorities. Greater engagement and leading the way in conflict resolution is not only in the interest of the region but also of Europe.

Instability will only further deteriorate the economies of the region and create further turmoil than already exists. It is worth reminding that the economic cost of violence for the region is important even though it has improved over 2020. For instance, in Syria alone it is equivalent to 81,7% of its GDP, reaching €20 bn. As for Libya, it amounted €15 bn in 2020. Therefore, reducing the economic cost of violence in the region - i.e., reducing not only the costs of armed conflicts but also the costs of military expenditure and internal security - would allow governments to invest this money for other purposes. Research has shown that improvement in peace goes along with improvement in economic growth but also employment. It is in Europe's interest, therefore, to try to help countries find solutions to ongoing conflicts, considering the regional dimension.

The EU should engage further with the countries of the region by solving conflicts such as in Libya and Syria and by engaging with the US in reviving the Middle East Peace Process to end one of the longest-standing conflicts anywhere in the world. The Abraham Accords, a treaty of peace, diplomatic relations and normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel, was also signed by Bahrain and Sudan and led to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Morocco. The momentum and full potential of the Abraham Accords remains largely untapped as long as the peace process leading up to a two-state solution remains in a deadlock.

Moreover, the situation in Lebanon should be not forgotten, a country on the verge of collapse because of the unwillingness of the political elite to look for a political consensus and adopt the reforms needed to end the endemic corruption that continues to plunge the country into deeper crisis. In fact, according to the latest World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM) released June 1st, 2021, the Lebanese economic and financial crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe global crisis episodes since the mid-nineteenth century. The EU should take Lebanon's crisis seriously and put all the efforts to avoid further destabilization in the country. In addition, the EU should also play a role in taming the ambitions of regional powers — such as Iran, and its proxy Hezbollah — in fomenting destabilisation. We should not forget that the Iranian Ballistic missile program poses a real security threat to Europe. The EU should use all the tools available – including targeted sanctions – to neutralize those terrorist groups and entities operating under Iran's aegis in their efforts to further destabilise the region. Europe cannot afford to rely only on the United States or other allies to solve crises in the EU's own neighbourhood and must take a clear and proactive instance in dealing with these security threats.

Of utmost importance is encouraging and influencing governments to design and adopt inclusive recovery measures, in active consultation with civil society and with youth. Stability is not sustainable without human development, good governance, and the rule of law. It is essential that we therefore encourage and even push our partners to adhere to

our core values: i.e., a commitment to democracy, fighting against corruption and respect for the rule of law and for human rights. It is equally important that the European Union adapts its financial assistance to the Southern Neighbourhood countries strategically, by using this leverage to push them for more respect to human rights, rule of law and the fight against corruption, making the financial assistance reversible and conditional to the compliance of our core values. The EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy should be applied wherever and whenever there are proofs of human rights abuses.

Many concerns are being raised about ongoing emigration and persecution of Christians of the region. The share of Christian population historically enrooted in many countries of the region, such as Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel due to different causes is constantly dropping and multicultural heritage is put at risk. EPP calls for targeted assistance to these communities.

It is only by intensifying dialogue, on a regular basis, between the EU and Southern Neighbourhood partners — for instance, through the Union for the Mediterranean or other fora — that we can meaningfully contribute to solving conflicts and enhancing security cooperation in the region. For instance, concrete steps should be taken to increase border protection, intensify data exchange and share best practice aimed at countering radicalisation, organised crime and illicit trafficking in persons, arms and drugs.

c) Prosperity and investment

Modernising the economies and making them more resilient, sustainable and inclusive; creating jobs; encouraging, supporting and increasing trade and investment in the region: these should be Europe's priority. While it is true that the MENA economies have been hit hard, affecting the public as well as private sectors and leading to higher unemployment, now is also the right moment — building on the positive momentum of global trends — to restructure global value chains. We need to make sure to increase the region's attractiveness for European

investors through a strengthened business environment, good governance, fair competition, anti-corruption efforts and respect for the rule of law. It is essential that the European Union supports the region with all the funds needed for its transition and recovery: such as the Economic and Investment Plan proposed by the European Commission . Investing in these countries and their economies is a way of contributing both directly and indirectly to the management of migration, legal and illegal, and therefore to solving the correlated brain drain from the region and the subsequent loss of immense human resources and potential for the needed stabilization.

Until now, the EU has signed several Association Agreements which include trade agreements with countries from the region. However, this remains insufficient. Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreements should be bilaterally negotiated with all the countries from the region, including legal EU rules that would facilitate and attract more foreign investments. New impulse should be given to those already on the negotiation table, such as with Morocco and Tunisia. Until now, the economic ties between the EU and countries from the southern neighbourhood vary greatly, there are three types of relations: those who have deep links to the EU such as Morocco and Tunisia, others such as Egypt and Israel who have significant trading relations with the EU but do not dependent solely on it and finally those who benefit from substantial EU assistance but have very low trade relations with EU such as Jordan or Lebanon. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we adapt our strategies to these facts.

Investing in youth, civil society and enhancing cooperation with local and regional authorities

Children and young people constitute nearly half the population across the Southern Neighbourhood. According to the World Bank, by 2050, 300 million new jobs will be needed to absorb the labour demand of the young people now entering the labour market — a group which will bear a significant socio-economic burden in the wake of the Covid-19

pandemic, due to adverse effects on mental health and meagre job prospects. Generally, young people pursue their education with hope for a better future; unfortunately, in the Southern Neighbourhood, having a high education is not synonymous with finding a meaningful job, and many graduates face unemployment. Mass youth unemployment (30%) regionally creates a massive waste of human resources, making them more inclined to follow criminal activities or political extremism, while they could be contributing to economic growth, stimulating innovation and enhancing social cohesion. Investing in education, therefore — mainly in public, and especially in early age education and in vocational training — should be the priority. Every child should have access to education, especially girls and displaced children and youth, which is particularly a problem in conflict areas where most of them have been out of the educational system for years. The EU should help countries in the region improve their educational systems governance, addressing root causes of youth not in employment, education or training (known as NEETs), but also providing them with the skills needed to drive the economies of the future. Education cannot be improved without skilled teachers and trainers, who need constantly to improve and enhance their professional development; the EU should play a role in this process too. It is crucial to empower and encourage youth to create start-ups and to support training and knowledge-sharing in fields with high potential. Also essential is avoiding further brain drain; it is not sustainable to have the brightest and the most educated young people leave the region because of unemployment rates or lack of prospects. People to people contact remains a key component to empower youth from the region, therefore, allowing them to be part of European programmes such as the Erasmus + programme is more than welcomed. The EU should also encourage more exchanges in education within the region itself as it will only enhance the exchange of knowledge and resources between the countries of the region nourishing the idea of more regional integration and cooperation.

Civil society also plays a key role and should be given proper scope. Civil society is not only a main ingredient to the region's development but is also a key stabiliser, often filling the gap when government leaves a vacuum, or playing the role of watchdog to monitor governments and

hold them accountable when human rights and basic freedoms are not respected. These organisations also serve as mediators between citizens and governments: to establish dialogue and rebuild trust. The stronger the civil society, the stronger the democracy. Strengthening and working with civil society across the region should therefore be among our key priorities.

We should also not forget the crucial roles played by local and regional authorities as they do not only provide daily basic services but have a deep understanding of local needs and how to best improve citizens lives. Therefore, as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) mentioned in its opinion on the Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood- A new Agenda for the Mediterranean, “the EU and its partners should make a specific and appropriate use of local and regional authorities as drivers for territorial development in the Euro-Mediterranean region, building on the experience of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) set up by the CoR to give local and regional authorities (LRAs) a voice in the Euro-Mediterranean process” .

Migration

Not only is the European Union under pressure due to migration, but many Southern Neighbourhood countries are as well, either because they are transit countries — such as Libya, Tunisia or Morocco for illegal migration— or some have even become host countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan who host huge numbers of refugees. Under the existing EU legislation, including the Dublin III regulation, frontline states have been carrying a burden beyond their capacity while other Member States have been disproportionately burdened by secondary movements. Due to the demographic development and climate change, the migration pressure will certainly not decrease in the coming decades. Therefore, adopting a comprehensive and visionary strategy to fight the root causes of migration is therefore essential. Most of the pressure is coming from the regions adjacent to Southern Neighbourhood countries, such as Sub-Saharan Africa or the Sahel.

Therefore, if we want to reduce illegal migration to Europe, we should encourage not only the integration of markets within the African continent itself but also investment in several sectors such as education, infrastructure, reduction of poverty, creation of jobs, better services (school, hospitals) and conflict resolution. Managing migration also concerns border protection and returns, well-negotiated readmission agreements in addition to supporting capacity building for transit countries to host and repatriate migrants. If we can bring stability, prosperity and investment in youth to the region — such that younger generations could envision a promising future for themselves there, where they are from — then migration towards Europe will drop drastically. We should work together with Southern Neighbourhood partners to ensure legal channels for migration to Europe: not just for skilled workers but for unskilled migrants who may be needed in certain sectors in Europe.

Migration policy should take into account the humanitarian principles that guide EU policies and at the same time consider the feasibility and limits for our European society and our welfare states. This requires a balance between human rights protection, targeted assistance for persecuted people, the EU's need for immigration of qualified workers, integration capacities and the preservation of internal security in our EU Member States without forgetting the need of solidarity among EU Member States in sharing the burden with frontline states.

Digitalisation

Digitalisation should be part of the EU's involvement with Southern Neighbourhood countries and could be further integrated into the EU's broader digital agenda through existing research programmes and industry involvement. The EU can help lend the necessary expertise, know-how and investment to assist the partner countries from the region to achieve their transition to the digital economy. Such engagement would facilitate the further integration of economies across

the Mediterranean and result in more widespread prosperity and stability.

For example, and as an important first step of any digital transformation, the digitalisation of Southern Neighbourhood governments specifically could boost the quality of public services delivered to citizens, thereby creating more trust and an environment conducive to economic activity — ranging from large investment projects to small-scale finance.

The digital transition also provides an opportunity to build on national strategies in coordination with various stakeholders and to share best practices on digital policy.

Both the EU and the Southern Neighbourhood region are comprised of various national contributions and performances with respect to digitalisation. Stakeholders in both regions know that one-size-fit-all policies cannot apply but that a degree of harmonisation can help maximise economic impact. Most the Southern Neighbourhood countries have a digital transformation agenda, with some political and financial commitment to create a dynamic digital economy, or digital strategies in place. However, not all have a clear vision of what a digital economy will mean for their citizens and businesses, or of how digitalisation can help rapidly kickstart the recovery.

The EU and several of its Member States have developed a range of digital strategies and could therefore share with the Southern Neighbourhood governments their lessons learned. These roadmaps can be useful in raising awareness about digitalisation as a priority for economic development, selecting appropriate policy visions, defining achievable objectives, monitoring progress, and efficiently targeting investment. In particular, the EU could share its approach to digital policy — based on the promotion of trust, transparency, ethics and accountability — and its objectives to achieve a ‘twin transition’ build on digital and green pillars. The EU has also rolled out a number of targets

to enhance, through 2030, key capabilities — from technologies to talent and e-government — via the Digital Compass. Exploring where synergies could be found with Southern Neighbourhood countries could support and inspire all stakeholders' agendas and optimise each's competitive advantages.

The potential of Southern Neighbourhood countries in the digital economy has yet to be fully tapped, and their digital markets and connectivity are growing. The region is home to a young population, and the adoption of Internet services is expanding. Online consumption trends will lead to a population that is more digitally savvy, and more of them will become digital creators — leading the way for broader business and government digitalisation. This represents a promise for successful, long-term public-private sector collaborations, both within and across the region, and also with the EU.

Some Southern Neighbourhood countries have become key IT-outsourcing hubs for foreign tech companies. The region has active and vibrant start-up ecosystems which represent the promise of future high-quality jobs both in the region and the EU, given the potential for sharing digital talent. It therefore makes sense for the EU and European industry to work more closely with the Southern Neighbourhood governments and the tech sector. Both sides should work together to reach out more to — and to connect — their civil society, bloggers, young entrepreneurs, digital champions, and ICT innovators. To ensure they can share more data securely and exploit open data together, EU and the Southern Neighbourhood scientific and research communities could work together to boost the connectivity of their digital infrastructure and jointly explore common standards for data sharing. Israel particularly stands out as a major digital player with whom the EU has a long history of successful scientific and technological cooperation. The EU should ensure Israel remains a close research partner — for instance, in AI, supercomputing and quantum projects — and a beacon for its neighbours in these key areas.

Greater collaboration through existing digital cooperation initiatives, relevant organisations such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and specific inter-ministerial conferences on the digital economy could support the current global discussions on the governance of the online environment, including with respect to data protection, online content, cybersecurity, digital trade and technologies like AI. In addition, new regional trade, investment and economic partnerships and initiatives launched during the pandemic and supported by the EU and the OECD could help businesses from both shores of the Mediterranean take greater advantage of opening digital markets.

Sustainable energy and the fight against climate change

The focus of EU foreign policy here should be promoting 'climate resilience and sustainable energy transition' in the Southern Neighbourhood region. The Southern Neighbourhood region is projected to be one of the worst hit in the world as a result of climate change. It is one of the region's facing the largest number of ecological threats. Rising global temperatures and droughts are already impacting food and water security in the region and affecting migration flows — with these realities projected to worsen in the coming years. It is expected that by 2050, globally 1.2 billion people could be displaced due to ecological threats. Many of the countries which are most at risk from ecological threats are situated in Africa and will be facing at the same time an important increase in the population, this will most probably have a huge socio-economic but also political impact not only on the region but also on Europe.

The EU's priority should be assisting Southern Neighbourhood countries go beyond merely adjusting their economic activities and environmental policy to actually mitigate, and adapting to, the effects of climate change: with a focus on clean energy and sustainability. The Southern Neighbourhood region offers enormous potential in solar and wind, which could be tapped by EU investment. The European Green Deal, the implementation of the Paris Agreement on international climate action

and the UN Sustainable Development Goals should be the overarching framework for EU engagement, however, while this is one of the EU's main priorities, we need to have an open dialogue with the countries from the region to make sure that they advance on this path at their own and right speed and according to their needs.

As the EPP, we call on the European Union to work more on highlighting the incentives for sustainable transition in the Southern Neighbourhood region, among which are the following:

The role of the green sustainable transition in providing local job opportunities, fostering rural development, disincentivising migration, enhancing stability and reducing poverty through the sustainable use of natural resources, investments in renewable energy and the protection of ecosystems as a 'natural capital'. This can be achieved by injecting investment into the clean energy sector, especially solar and wind, as well as by promoting green hydrogen projects, while enhancing interconnectivity with Europe. According to the annual 'Solar Outlook report 2020', 'total investment of renewables in MENA between 2019-2023 is expected to represent approximately €60 bn, a 34 percent share of the total investment in the power sector [...] The solar industry is thrilled and proud to participate in this profound transformation of the energy system, contributing to limit climate change'.

The transboundary nature of the water resources in the region presents a challenge as well as an opportunity for cooperation, aimed at building trust and advancing the peace process. Better management and use of scarce water resources is key. Improved efficiency of irrigation technology in agriculture would significantly increase the availability of water for other sectors. Although there has been great progress in desalinisation technology, this continues to be both an energy- and capital-intensive process. Management of the water-energy nexus, therefore, remains a priority, making it more resilient and adaptive. Improving water savings in the domestic and industrial sectors is essential.

The focus on the sustainable mobility and public transportation. Redirecting subsidies from fossil fuels can help improve public transport and reduce the region's carbon footprint.

Addressing the issue of waste management and stimulating reuse and recycling.

Conclusions

For too long, Europe has been considered an 'economic giant but a political dwarf'. It is urgent for us Europeans, to change this dynamic if we do not want other actors to decide our future; we need to become global players and not only global payers. We cannot expect from our partners in the Southern Neighbourhood to cooperate less with actors such as China, Russia or Turkey; whose engagement in the region is interest based rather than value based, but, we, as Europeans, should engage more and adopt a visionary, proactive and strategic action plan towards Southern Neighbourhood countries. In addition, to implement an ambitious foreign policy, Europe needs first and foremost to behave and act as one; unity is the key to success in cultivating close and open dialogue, and ultimately forging win-win partnerships to the EU's south. Therefore, in order to have a more effective and stronger EU foreign policy, we need to seriously consider exploring the possibilities of majority votes when it comes to issues related to Foreign and Security policy as it has clearly proven until now, that the unanimity vote is the main impediment to common actions and decisions on some key issues. Managing this well will help in solving other issues and challenges caused by the situation on the ground, such as mass illegal migration. To invest in education is to invest indirectly in peace and stability, economic growth and the green transition, thus combatting illegal migration. And this strategy does not stop at the borders of the Southern Neighbourhood's southern borders; it should apply equally to the whole of the African continent and Asia as the pressure on all fronts will continue to rise.

Rue du Commerce 10
1000 Brussels
T +32-2-2854140
E connect@epp.eu

**If you have any question you
would like to ask please contact us.**