

Recommendations for the “Pact for the Mediterranean”

Amel Boubekur, Expert on Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation

Winfried Weck, Director, KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue and Regional Integration in the Southern Mediterranean (PolDiMed)

Executive Summary

This paper highlights both persistent lines of rupture as well as emerging opportunities for renewed convergence. Three central messages emerge: **credibility, co-ownership, and inclusiveness**. Credibility requires dedicated financial instruments that go beyond fragmented or rebranded envelopes. Co-ownership implies policies that generate shared value, not extractive dynamics. Inclusiveness demands that youth, municipalities, and civil society are integrated as full actors of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Building on these insights, the paper emphasises that the New Pact for the Mediterranean can only succeed if it transforms long-standing frustrations into actionable commitments. This means shifting from a discourse of promises towards instruments that restore trust – such as dedicated financial envelopes with clear visibility, legal migration pathways that offer genuine mobility, joint energy and climate ventures based on co-ownership and local value creation, inclusive platforms for youth participation and mobility, independent credibility monitoring tools, and governance structures that integrate municipalities and civil society.

Key findings:

- Security is framed differently on both shores: Europe focuses on border control and terrorism, southern partners on socio-economic fragility. Bridging these requires a broader definition of security.
- Migration credibility is at stake. Without legal pathways and co-responsibility, deterrence strategies risk failure.
- Economic integration remains unfulfilled, yet green and digital transitions offer realistic entry points.
- Youth is both the largest demographic and the most excluded group. Recognition, not just funding, is essential.
- Energy and climate cooperation can be transformative, but only if based on fairness, technology transfer, and job creation

Recommendations focus on five areas: (1) financing with visibility, (2) migration as co-responsibility, (3) digitalisation as a joint frontier, (4) a co-owned green transition, and (5) youth at the core. These are complemented by cross-cutting proposals on communication, governance, and measurement tools.

1. Introduction

Over the past thirty years, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has been framed through successive initiatives: the Barcelona Process as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Each sought to build a space of peace, prosperity, and partnership across the basin. Yet despite institutional creativity and sustained diplomatic investment, outcomes have rarely matched ambitions. Political rifts, economic asymmetries, and recurring crises have constrained the capacity of these frameworks to deliver.

In 2024 and 2025, as the thirtieth anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration approaches, a fresh reflection was launched through a series of initiatives led by KAS PolDiMed in collaboration with European and Mediterranean partners.

2. Shifting Context: From Barcelona 1995 to Barcelona +30

Today's environment is profoundly different from that of 1995. Then, the Barcelona Process was launched in the optimism of the post-Cold War era, with Europe projecting a model of stability anchored in market liberalisation and gradual political opening. Today, the region is marked by recurrent crises, from Syria to Libya, from energy shocks to climate stress and by profound changes in the international order.

Several elements frame this new context. First, the erosion of political reform agendas since 2011 has generated disillusionment on both shores. Southern partners have largely shifted from promises of democratisation to strategies of regime resilience. Second, the instrumentalization of economic tools has become more pronounced: investment facilities, trade agreements, and aid packages are often deployed less as vehicles for integration than as mechanisms of political management. Third, new actors, notably the Gulf states, China, and Russia, are now deeply embedded in North African economies and infrastructures, reshaping the balance of influence. Finally, the European Union itself is in transition, with internal divisions on migration, enlargement fatigue, and new security priorities altering its external posture.

The Barcelona legacy is ambivalent. It provided a vocabulary of a partnership and an institutional architecture that still exists, yet its shortcomings such as bureaucratisation, lack of ownership, and limited tangible results are widely acknowledged. The challenge is not to reproduce the formulas of 1995, but to reimagine cooperation under current conditions.

3. Emerging Questions

Migration: From Containment to Credibility

Migration remains a priority, yet in a different register than in previous decades. Southern voices stressed the credibility gap of European promises: while financial packages are announced, local actors perceive them as fragmented, short-term, and insufficient to alter structural drivers of emigration. Northern voices insisted on the political salience of controlling borders but admitted that reactive containment has failed to generate sustainable results. What emerged is a shared recognition that trust is at stake. Without credible instruments that link mobility to investment, the migration file risks undermining the entire Euro-Mediterranean agenda. One new approach could be to combine circular migration schemes, recognition of qualifications, and investments in sectors that can absorb youth employment. Yet doubts remain on whether the EU is prepared to allocate dedicated envelopes, rather than recycling existing funds.

Digitalisation: The Silent Frontier

The Mediterranean risks becoming a periphery of global digital flows, with infrastructure and standards largely defined by actors outside the region. For southern economies, digitalisation is both an opportunity for leapfrogging and a threat of further marginalisation.

Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has so far underinvested in this dimension. Linking digital transition to education, entrepreneurship, and governance emerged as a priority. There is scope for joint programmes on digital literacy, cyber security, and cross-border regulation. Importantly, this area is perceived as less politically sensitive than migration and therefore offers a space where concrete results may be achievable.

Energy and Climate: Between Transition and Dependence

Energy transition was one of the most dynamic areas of discussion. Southern partners stressed the paradox of being rich in solar and wind resources but dependent on external technology and financing. The urgency of diversifying energy sources after the war in Ukraine remains a challenge.

This convergence creates opportunities, yet the risk of reproducing asymmetrical dependencies is real. Several voices underlined that if green hydrogen or solar megaprojects are designed primarily to supply European markets, without creating local value chains, they will deepen inequalities. The debates called for a co-owned transition, with joint ventures, technology transfer, and vocational training at its core.

Youth and Employment: The Crossroads Issue

The demographic weight of youth, coupled with high unemployment, was repeatedly cited as the structural fault line of the region. Beyond slogans, cooperation frameworks should move from pilot projects to scaled initiatives capable of absorbing significant labour demand. Vocational training, SME support, and regional mobility programmes were proposed as priorities.

Underlying this debate was a sense that youth policy cannot be treated as a side programme. It intersects with migration, stability, and legitimacy. Without credible employment perspectives, political systems on both shores will continue to face volatility.

4. Assessing the Instruments: Strengths and Limitations

Three recurring critiques stand out.

First, the **fragmentation of financing**. Funds are dispersed across multiple EU instruments, often repackaged without clear visibility. This fuels scepticism about the EU's political will. Calls were made for dedicated envelopes that would signal ambition and allow long-term planning.

Second, the over-bureaucratisation of frameworks such as the ENP and Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Technical procedures and managerial logic often overshadow political dialogue. This alienates local actors and reduces flexibility in addressing crises. In this context, the question arises whether there is a growing overlap between the institutional role of the Union for the Mediterranean and the cooperation mechanisms of the European Commission's DG MENA / South Med. Clarifying this potential duplication may be important to ensure strategic coherence.

Third, the **limited inclusion of non-state actors**. Civil society, municipalities, and professional associations often feel marginalised, despite being key implementers on the ground. The discussions suggested that without their involvement, legitimacy and effectiveness will remain weak.

Yet the instruments also have strengths. They provide a platform for dialogue, symbolic capital, and a reservoir of expertise accumulated over decades. The UfM, for instance, while constrained, remains one of the few inclusive fora where European and Arab states sit at the same table. The challenge is therefore less about inventing entirely new structures than about revitalising existing ones with clearer priorities, stronger financing, and more inclusive participation.

5. Lines of Rupture and Possibilities of Convergence

Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is caught between recurring lines of rupture and fragile zones of convergence. Understanding these tensions is key to designing policies that are realistic yet ambitious.

Diverging Perceptions of Security

Security is a recurrent theme, though often framed differently by northern and southern actors. For Europeans, the Mediterranean is primarily seen through the lens of threats to be contained: irregular migration, terrorism, instability spilling over. For southern partners, security is more closely tied to socio-economic fragility, unemployment, and the inability of states to provide basic services.

This divergence matters because it shapes priorities. European funding often targets border management and counterterrorism, while southern actors ask for investment in education, health, and jobs. Bridging this gap requires a redefinition of security as a shared agenda that combines hard and human security dimensions.

The Credibility Gap in Migration Policy

Migration remains the most sensitive fracture line. There is a consensus that credibility has eroded. Southern partners see fragmented financing, frequent repackaging of old instruments, and insufficient attention to legal pathways. European actors stress the political pressure they face domestically but recognise that deterrence alone is unsustainable.

Unless credibility is restored through tangible opportunities for mobility, investment in local economies, and a narrative of co-responsibility, migration could undermine every other domain of cooperation.

Economic Integration: The Unfulfilled Promise

The promise of economic integration, central to the Barcelona Declaration, has not materialised. Trade remains limited, investment asymmetrical, and regulatory barriers persistent. The Agadir Agreement among four Maghreb and Middle Eastern states has not been scaled up.

Regional crises (financial shocks, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine) have reinforced protectionist reflexes. Yet, energy transition and digitalisation could create new incentives for integration. Joint supply chains in renewables, food security cooperation, and cross-border SME platforms are areas where progress could be feasible.

Youth and Recognition

The youth issue, while often raised, still suffers from lack of scale. Pilot projects abound but rarely transform structural realities. The real rupture is not simply economic, but also one of **recognition**. Young people across the Mediterranean feel excluded from political decision-making and marginalised in narratives of partnership.

Addressing this requires more than funding. It implies creating **structured platforms for youth participation**, not just consultation exercises. It also requires mobility schemes that are accessible beyond narrow elites, so that opportunities do not reinforce existing inequalities.

Climate and Energy as a Test Case

Energy and climate transition emerged as both an opportunity and a potential fracture line. The opportunity lies in the abundance of renewable resources and Europe's urgent need for diversification. The risk is that projects will reproduce **extractive logics**, with southern territories providing resources for northern consumption without local benefits.

Unless value chains, technology transfer, and training are embedded, the transition could become another form of dependency. The solution could be a **co-owned green transition**, anchored in fairness and shared prosperity

6. Towards a New Pact: Actionable Recommendations

a. Financing with Visibility and Credibility

The first recommendation is to move from fragmented, repackaged instruments to **dedicated envelopes** for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Without a clear budget line, trust will remain low. The amounts matter less than the visibility and predictability they provide. Multi-year envelopes could allow local actors to plan, signal political ambition, and restore credibility.

A problem that has to be dissolved consists in the discrepancy between the political weight of labelled instruments (such as EU cohesion funds) and the opacity of Mediterranean financing. Establishing a Mediterranean Facility with clear governance and transparent criteria would demonstrate seriousness.

b. Migration as Co-Responsibility

A second recommendation is to reframe migration policy as a **co-responsibility agenda**. This means combining three elements:

1. expanding legal mobility pathways, particularly for students and seasonal workers;
2. investing in sectors that can absorb labour locally, from agriculture to digital services;
3. creating monitoring tools that measure credibility, not just numbers of returns.

In this context, **credibility is the core metric**. Unless policies are seen as fair, balanced, and delivering on commitments, cooperation will falter. This requires both new instruments and a change of narrative.

c. Digitalisation as a Joint Frontier

A third recommendation is to integrate digitalisation into the heart of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. This could include:

1. joint programmes on digital literacy and coding in schools;
2. regional regulatory dialogue on data protection and cyber security;
3. support for start-up ecosystems that link both shores.

Digitalisation is less politicised than migration and can deliver visible results. It also resonates with youth aspirations. Making it a **flagship of Barcelona +30** would signal adaptation to twenty-first century realities.

d. Co-Owned Green Transition

The fourth recommendation concerns energy and climate. The emphasis should be on co-ownership:

1. joint ventures rather than unilateral projects;
2. technology transfer clauses in investment contracts;
3. vocational training aligned with green sectors.

e. Youth at the Core

Finally, the fifth recommendation is to place youth at the **core of the partnership**, not at its margins. This means scaling initiatives from hundreds to tens of thousands of beneficiaries, institutionalising youth councils linked to Euro-Mediterranean institutions, and ensuring mobility schemes are accessible beyond elites.

Youth is the transversal issue: it connects to migration, stability, and legitimacy. Treating it as such would mark a shift from rhetoric to strategy.

f. Additional Recommendations

Communication Strategy as Policy Tool

One of the blind spots of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is communication. Citizens on both shores rarely know about the initiatives carried out in their name. A dedicated strategy should not only publicise projects but also create a sense of ownership by telling success stories, engaging youth influencers, and ensuring that the narrative of partnership reaches beyond ministries.

Independent Monitoring of Credibility

Traditional evaluations focus on financial absorption or project numbers. What is missing is an independent credibility scorecard, tracking whether commitments translate into perceived trust. For instance, migration policy should be evaluated not only by returns or visas issued, but by whether citizens feel cooperation is fair and sustainable.

Municipal Diplomacy and City-to-City Networks

Cities have emerged as laboratories of innovation, from climate resilience to integration policies. Municipalities should receive direct support and be formally integrated into Euro-

Mediterranean frameworks. Pilot projects in city-to-city diplomacy can show quick, tangible results that resonate with citizens.

Gender as a Driver of Transformation

Empowering women is not only a normative goal but a driver of economic growth and social stability. Programmes should focus on reducing barriers to female employment, fostering women-led start-ups in the digital sector, and ensuring gender mainstreaming in green transition projects.

Conflict-Sensitive Programming

Every initiative should adopt a conflict-sensitive lens. Energy projects, for instance, must consider how benefits are distributed to avoid fuelling grievances. Migration cooperation must avoid reinforcing local inequalities. Embedding this logic in programme design will prevent unintended negative effects and enhance legitimacy.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Winfried Weck
Director, Regional Programme Political Dialogue and Regional Integration in the
Southern Mediterranean (PoDiMed)
European and International Cooperation
www.kas.de

winfried.weck@kas.de



Der Text dieses Werkes ist lizenziert unter den Bedingungen von „Creative Commons Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 international“, CC BY-SA 4.0 (abrufbar unter: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>)