

# Working towards a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean

## SUMMARY

A rich tapestry of nations and cultures, the Mediterranean has always been a strategic area for the European Union (EU) and there is much mutual benefit to be garnered from closer cooperation with the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. As a geographical region whose countries face many shared challenges given their joint proximity to a common sea, the idea of establishing a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean region has been present in EU discourse from the very beginning, drawing support from institutions such as the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), with Parliament also contributing.

Discussions on the development of a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean have explored a variety of different scenarios, from an overarching strategy encompassing the whole region, to three separate macro-regional strategies or a combination of both approaches. Progress towards greater macro-regional cooperation in the region has, however, been slow. This situation has arguably been compounded by the challenges facing the region in general, which include issues such as digital transformation, climate change, migration and mobility, and environmental protection.

Whereas a large number of territorial cooperation initiatives have developed over the years to help countries work together to address these issues, the developmental differences between the countries of the Mediterranean are such that the priorities of the countries of the southern Mediterranean differ significantly from those of their northern neighbours, making it difficult to agree on a set of common priorities for a possible macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean.

This lack of consensus could ultimately prove to be the most difficult challenge of all. For while the European Council remains open to new macro-regional strategies, the lack of any agreement among the countries concerned regarding priorities or indeed geographical scope raises serious questions as to the prospects for the implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean.

*This briefing has been produced at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), in the framework of the Cooperation Agreement between the Parliament and the Committee*



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## Introduction

The Mediterranean region has been a forum for trade and the exchange of ideas for centuries. People have migrated across its length and breadth since time immemorial, their journeys facilitated by the sea that lies at its heart, these human contacts and trade links helping to spur development and forge a shared sense of belonging. Yet despite sharing a common history, the three shores of the Mediterranean face very different political situations today, with the stability of the northern shore contrasting sharply with the tensions present in certain areas of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The Mediterranean has always been a strategic area for the EU, with closer cooperation in the interests of all concerned. In 1995, the adoption of the [Barcelona Declaration](#) by the EU and Mediterranean countries helped launch the idea of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership, with the 'Barcelona process' of inter-governmental cooperation laying the foundations for the [European Neighbourhood policy](#) that has structured EU relations with the Mediterranean countries since 2004 and the [Union for the Mediterranean](#), which covers all EU Member States and the 15 Mediterranean countries of Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and Turkey, with Libya as an observer.

Building on the success of the pioneering 2009 EU [strategy](#) for the Baltic Sea region, recent years have seen the development of macro-regional cooperation in several regions across Europe. One of the EU's main instruments for promoting European territorial cooperation, macro-regional strategies (MRS) bring together regions from Member States and third countries confronted with a common set of challenges. While each MRS is unique in terms of the countries it brings together and the scope of its policies, each has the same aim: to ensure a coordinated approach to issues that are best tackled together. As a geographical region whose countries face a number of shared challenges in view of their joint proximity to a common sea, the idea of establishing a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean region has been present in EU discourse from the very beginning.

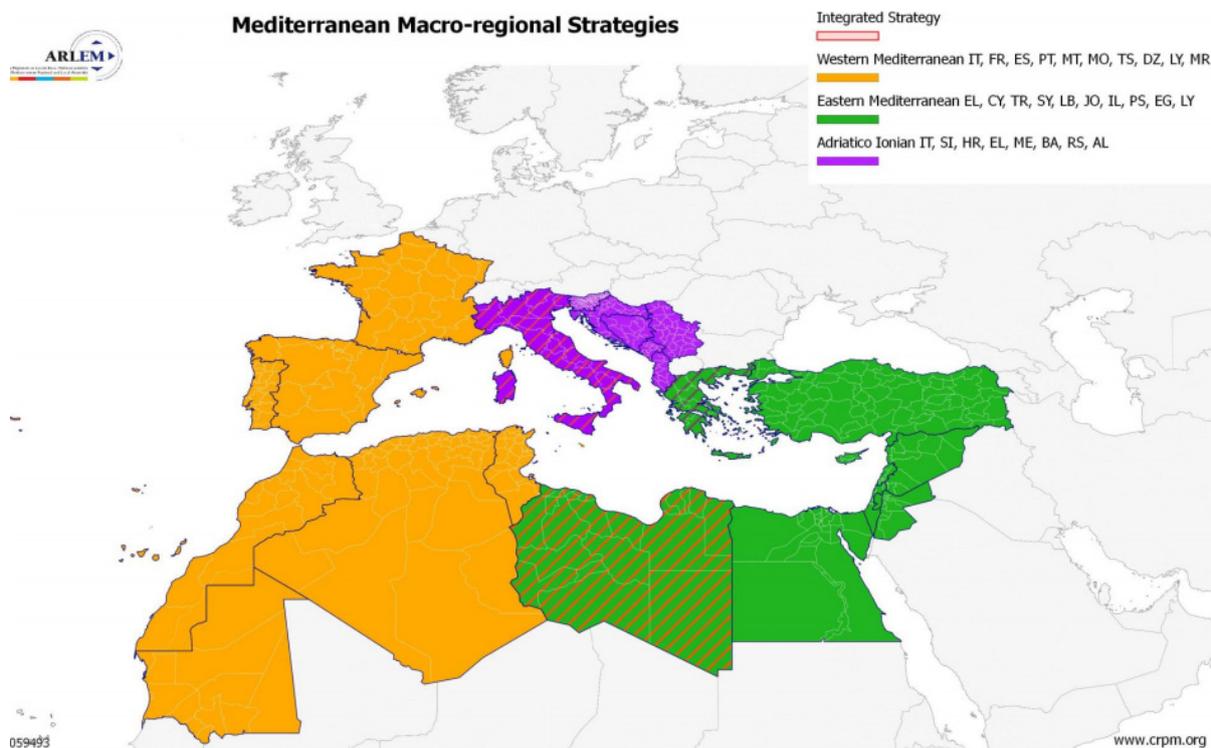
## Discussions on a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy

As early as 2010, just one year after the launch of the EU's first macro-regional strategy in the Baltic Sea, the European Parliament [identified](#) the Mediterranean as a future EU macro-region alongside the Danube and Alpine regions, an idea developed further in its June 2012 [report](#) on the evolution of EU macro-regional strategies. Explicitly supporting the implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean basin, this report argued that a Mediterranean MRS involving European, national, regional and local authorities, regional organisations, financial institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from both shores of the Mediterranean and open to neighbouring and/or pre-accession countries would significantly improve territorial cooperation in the area in both political and operational terms. It also emphasised that a Mediterranean macro-region could help ensure that the EU's various Mediterranean programmes complement one another and that existing financing is used as efficiently as possible. The report identified three potential macro-regions for the Mediterranean basin: in the western Mediterranean, the central Mediterranean (the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region) and the eastern Mediterranean.

This idea of establishing a number of distinct sub-regional strategies across the Mediterranean was also taken up by the EESC. Noting that the new macro-regional strategy should encompass all Mediterranean countries, the Committee's December 2012 [opinion](#) proposed the creation of two sub-regional policies for the eastern and western Mediterranean that would be coordinated with an Adriatic-Ionian strategy. The opinion outlined a strategy based on six pillars: economic cooperation and development; environmental protection and climate change action; transport; energy cooperation; innovation and competitiveness and, immigration and mobility. The EESC's 2013 [opinion](#), meanwhile, emphasised that a macro-regional strategy would help regions address the causes of uncertainty that dominate the area, and put forward a governance structure based on a multilevel approach involving regional, national and EU institutions.

In parallel, the CoR, recalling declarations by the foreign ministers of the Adriatic-Ionian countries in support of a macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian area, issued an [opinion](#) in November 2011 calling for work to begin immediately. One year later, in November 2012, the European Commission adopted a [communication](#) on a maritime strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. Crucially, the document opened the way to the development of an Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy, noting that should the Member States ask the European Commission to prepare an MRS, 'this maritime strategy might constitute the first component of such an EU macro-regional strategy'. With the macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region starting to take shape, ARLEM, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, published a [report](#) on a cohesion policy for the Mediterranean in February 2014 advocating the creation and implementation of three integrated macro-regional areas, which could, in the long term, lead to the creation of an integrated supra-regional strategy for the whole Mediterranean. It recommended a voluntary, step by step approach to the development of the three strategies, with EU Member States and Mediterranean partner countries participating on a gradual basis to avoid possible political obstacles, a process referred to as 'variable geometry', potentially involving bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Figure 1 – Mediterranean macro-regional strategies proposed in the 2014 ARLEM report



Source: 2014 ARLEM [report](#).

Carried forward by significant political momentum, the macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian was officially launched in November 2014, marking the completion of the first of the three Mediterranean macro-regional strategies. The ideas set out in ARLEM's report on a cohesion policy for the Mediterranean were subsequently taken forward by the Inter-Mediterranean Commission of the Council of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR), which published a [road map](#) for macro-regional and sea basin strategies in the Mediterranean in December 2014. Designed as a rolling document, the report set out a course of action to develop a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy, outlining key measures and a timetable and serving as a reference point for subsequent discussions. The report proposed adapting the macro-regional and sea-basin approaches rolled out by the EU in the Baltic, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine regions to the Mediterranean region, capitalising on the EU's experience in this area but leaving the door open, from the outset, to the gradual participation of countries from the whole region. One of the proposals set out in the document was to create a maritime strategy for the western Mediterranean, developed in close

connection with the [Adriatic-Ionian strategy](#) (EUSAIR), with the report arguing that this maritime strategy could help strengthen cooperation in other areas with a view to adopting a broader macro-regional scope as a result of spill-over effects, stressing the importance of adopting a 'step-by-step' voluntary approach regarding cooperation with Mediterranean countries.

Yet despite the ambitious plans and timetable set out by the CPMR, the road map has spawned relatively few results thus far. For while one of the ideas set out in the document, a maritime strategy for the western Mediterranean, came to fruition in 2017 with the launch of the [WestMED initiative](#), there has been little progress in recent years on the rollout of macro-regional strategies for the western Mediterranean, eastern Mediterranean or for the Mediterranean region as a whole. In particular, while the April 2017 Council [conclusions](#) on the implementation of macro-regional strategies clearly stated that the Council was open to examine any commonly agreed and mature initiative of Member States facing the same challenges aimed at setting up a new macro-regional strategy, a stance reiterated in [June 2019](#) and in [December 2020](#), Council has yet to make any direct reference to the establishment of a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy.

Discussions on developing a macro-regional strategy for the region have nonetheless continued and even intensified in recent years, with many key players joining forces, leading to the creation of the Med Cooperation Alliance. Set up in 2019, it brings together a number of networks active in the area of multi-level transnational governance in the region, [calling](#) on them to work to promote the alignment and integration of all strategies and initiatives with a view to creating a unique, integrated long-term strategy for the Mediterranean and to evaluate the creation of a basin strategy complementary to the EUSAIR and WestMED initiative for the eastern part of the Mediterranean.

As one of the leading advocates of macro-regionalisation in the region, the CPMR's Inter-Mediterranean Commission has also continued to promote the idea of a macro-regional strategy for the region, with its 2020-2021 [action plan](#) advocating, among other things, the possible extension of the WestMED Maritime Initiative to the entire basin. This could represent a first step towards a macro-region in this area, potentially complementing the EUSAIR strategy and possible future strategies. More recently, the CPMR General Assembly's July 2021 [declaration](#) emphasised that a global macro-regional strategy linking in with other Mediterranean macro-regions and initiatives such as the Adriatic-Ionian MRS and WestMED would strengthen cohesion, with the development of a Mediterranean macro-regional governance framework, covering the various levels of government, providing an excellent opportunity for recovery from the pandemic.

The discussions surrounding the new multiannual financial framework (MFF) and, in particular, the greater focus placed on macro-regional strategies under the EU's new cohesion policy framework, especially the June 2021 European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) [Regulation](#), have arguably renewed hope on the part of stakeholders promoting the idea of a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy. As highlighted by a 2021 [report](#) by Andrea Noferini, the 2021-2027 MFF is creating high expectations regarding the funding and mainstreaming of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funds in the Mediterranean region. In accordance with the new Interreg Regulation, in cases where a transnational cooperation programme supports a macro-regional strategy or sea-basin strategy, at least 80 % of the ERDF contribution must contribute to the objectives of that strategy. Furthermore, with post-2020 Interreg programmes able to allocate up to 20 % of the ERDF contribution to the Interreg specific objective of 'better cooperation governance', it is expected that this will boost the impact of projects as ERDF resources can be used to increase coordination, institutional capacity and effectiveness among local and regional authorities (LRAs).

While the debate on the macro-regionalisation of the Mediterranean continues, the European Commission has recently renewed its efforts to create a strong Mediterranean partnership within the framework of the EU's European Neighbourhood policy, with the publication in January 2021 of a [communication](#) on a renewed partnership with the southern neighbourhood. Proposing a new, ambitious and innovative agenda for the Mediterranean to relaunch cooperation and harness the region's untapped potential, this new agenda aims to achieve a green, digital, resilient and just

recovery, outlining objectives on how to establish fairer, more prosperous and inclusive societies. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its foreign policy focus, this new initiative does not refer to the question of a macro-regional framework in the region, leading the Med Cooperation Alliance to once again [highlight](#) the need for a macro-regional approach for the Mediterranean basin.

Indeed, as highlighted by Andrea Noferini's 'Mediterranean +25 Going macro-regional?' [report](#), the two macro-regional strategies for the western and eastern Mediterranean have yet to feature on the political agenda, while recent positions on macro-regionalisation in the Mediterranean have been very prudent. Against this backdrop, the report states that it remains to be seen how much the 2021 agenda for the Mediterranean, and its new commitment between Member States and the southern neighbourhood countries will be able to strengthen regional cooperation and support sub-regional, inter-regional and trilateral cooperation, especially with the African partners.

While progress towards greater macro-regional cooperation in the region has suffered from a lack of political support at both EU and national levels, it has also arguably been compounded by the nature of the challenges facing the region in general. Before proceeding to examine the cooperation initiatives in place in the Mediterranean, it would therefore be useful to discuss these challenges in more detail to gain an understanding of the issues that any macro-regional strategy should address.

## Challenges facing the Mediterranean region

### **Political tensions and instability**

Peace and stability are often taken for granted by people living on the Mediterranean's northern shore but this is far from being the case in the region as a whole. As highlighted by a 2019 CoR [study](#), certain disputes, such as the frozen conflicts between Greece, Turkey and Cyprus or Israel and Lebanon, date back many years and continue to blight relations between countries, with a 2018 [report](#) noting that the region is currently characterised 'more by conflict than by cohesion'. The November 2020 [statement](#) by the foreign affairs ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) meanwhile highlighted the need to relaunch negotiations to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and find a political solution to the crises in Libya and Syria. Such disputes are serious obstacles to closer integration in the region, and affect all levels of government. The importance of this issue is acknowledged in both the European Commission's new agenda for the Mediterranean, which notes that the region's protracted conflicts affect the social and economic prospects of entire societies and are a major obstacle to political stability and sustainable development, and the UfM's 2017 [roadmap for action](#), which identified regional stability as one of its three main priorities. On top of existing tensions between countries, political instability within individual countries presents a further problem, with the rule of law and respect for human rights key challenges for many countries in the Mediterranean region.

### **Achieving sustainable and inclusive economic development**

In its new agenda for the Mediterranean, the Commission emphasises that economic growth in the southern Mediterranean is failing to keep pace with demographic change, with substantial economic and gender inequalities persisting across the region, noting that developing sustainable economic growth and building prosperity represents a major challenge for the countries of the southern Mediterranean. Fragmentation is also increasing in the region, with an ever-growing gap evident between the countries of the northern and southern Mediterranean, a gap that may widen further as the recovery process gets underway in the Mediterranean's EU countries, driven by support under the EU's recovery and resilience programme. Inequalities both within and between the individual countries across the region constitute a barrier hampering closer cooperation within the wider region. Unemployment is a particular challenge, especially among young people, and the EU considers that the empowerment and participation of young people is key to achieving the priorities of the United Nations [sustainable development goals](#). With some [studies](#) showing that gross domestic product (GDP) could increase by as much as 1.3 % over the next 10 years in southern Mediterranean countries if women were fully integrated into the labour market, promoting the role of women in society represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the region's development.

## Climate change

As highlighted in the UN Environment Programme Mediterranean [strategy](#) for sustainable development 2016-2025, climate change is a developmental challenge that needs urgent and dynamic policy and technical solutions at all levels. According to a 2019 [report](#) by the Network of Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change, the Mediterranean basin is warming 20 % more rapidly than the world average, with temperatures expected to rise by 2.2 °C (compared with pre-industrial levels) by 2040. In addition, some 250 million people are expected to be 'water poor' within the next 20 years, making the region one of the world's major climate change hotspots. The importance of this issue has been highlighted in the Commission's 2021 new agenda for the Mediterranean, which emphasises that the unsustainable use of natural resources and climate change are jeopardising access to water, food, and energy, accelerating desertification and loss of biodiversity, and threatening lives and livelihoods. The UfM has meanwhile [acknowledged](#) that sustainable access to, and provision and use of water and related sanitation arrangements, are key challenges to sound socio-economic development and environmental protection in the Mediterranean. It is clear that the impact of climate change extends well beyond the environmental realm and that climate change, if not addressed, will [pose](#) a serious risk to economic growth.

## Environmental protection

Far more than just a body of water shared by the countries of its northern, southern and eastern shores, the Mediterranean Sea is part of the region's natural heritage and central to the fishing, aquaculture and tourism sectors, which support many communities in the region. As such, the protection of this unique environment is crucial to securing a sustainable future for the next generation and preventing further environmental decline. Marine litter is a key challenge in this respect. As highlighted by the December 2019 [Naples Ministerial Declaration](#), the Mediterranean Sea is one of the most marine litter-affected areas in the world, with plastics representing up to 95 % of all floating marine litter and over 50 % of seabed marine litter. More broadly speaking, biodiversity loss is a major challenge, with the UfM's 2020 ministerial [statement](#) highlighting the need to reverse the dramatic loss of biodiversity in the Mediterranean region. With the Mediterranean and Black Sea region recording the lowest percentage of sustainable fish stocks worldwide in 2015 (37.8 %), and 78 % of fish stocks fished at biologically unsustainable levels, as noted in the Naples Declaration, minimising the impact of ever greater competition for marine resources is another critical challenge.

## Migration and mobility

Migration has been a feature of life in the Mediterranean region for centuries. Yet recent refugee and migrant crises in the wake of conflicts, in particular the surge in the numbers of migrants and refugees in 2015, have exerted additional pressure on the systems in place to manage asylum and migration flows in some EU countries. As noted in the Commission's new agenda for the Mediterranean, irregular migration poses a number of challenges for both hosting societies and transit countries: not only does it deprive southern countries of their young people, the 'brain drain', it also strengthens the power of criminal networks engaged in smuggling. With attempts to reach Europe increasing since 2014, and many lives lost at sea, irregular migration is also a humanitarian issue. Yet while recent [statistics](#) show a substantial decrease in the number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU, migration has remained a key issue on the EU's political agenda, dominating the debate in certain EU Member States. The European Commission has placed migration and mobility at the heart of its new agenda for the Mediterranean, highlighting the importance of addressing the challenges of forced displacement and irregular migration jointly and seizing the benefits of legal migration by cooperating with the EU's Mediterranean partners.

## Digital transformation

With much activity moving online during 2020, the recent coronavirus crisis laid all too bare the problems arising from a lack of digitalisation and the impact this can have on society at large. This problem was felt particularly acutely in the countries of the southern Mediterranean. [Figures](#) suggest that despite an increase in the number of homes with internet access in southern Mediterranean countries, just 7 % of the population in countries such as Algeria and Egypt have

fixed broadband subscriptions. As noted by a recent [report](#), the digital divide is arguably emerging as a significant threat to the Barcelona process aim of bridging the gap in living standards for people living in the Euro-Mediterranean region. What is more, this digital divide does not only exist between the shores of the Mediterranean but also between different groups within southern Mediterranean countries themselves. This issue was highlighted by a November 2020 statement of UfM foreign ministers, which emphasised that digitalisation is a crucial vehicle towards smart, innovative and sustainable economic development that will facilitate trade interlinkages in the region and could become a vital tool to address youth unemployment.

## Mapping cooperation initiatives in the Mediterranean

As discussed above, the region faces a number of challenges, some of which are common to all countries while others affect primarily the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. To help countries work together on these issues, a large number of territorial cooperation initiatives have developed over the years. A more detailed look at some of these can help with identifying the priorities to be addressed by a possible Mediterranean macro-regional strategy.

### European Neighbourhood policy

Launched in 2004, [European Neighbourhood policy](#) (ENP) provides a framework for relations between the EU and its 16 partner countries to the south and east, to support stability, security and prosperity on the EU's doorstep through political dialogue, financial support and technical cooperation. Established to help promote the rule of law, democracy, respect for human rights and social cohesion, the ENP was revised in 2015, setting out three priorities for cooperation: economic development for stabilisation; security; and migration and mobility.

Looking more specifically at the EU's relations with its southern neighbours, the ENP encompasses eight countries in the Mediterranean: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. To ensure that strong Mediterranean partnership remains one of the EU's strategic priorities, the European Commission launched a new agenda for the Mediterranean in February 2021 to establish a renewed partnership with the southern Neighbourhood and employ the green and digital transitions to harness the region's unused potential. The agenda outlines a number of key directions for the EU's partnership with Mediterranean countries, such as action against climate change, a renewed commitment to the rule of law, human rights, equality, democracy and good governance, and efforts to address the challenges of forced displacement and irregular migration. To translate these broad objectives into concrete deliverables, the agenda puts forward a range of measures and actions across five key policy areas: human development, good governance and the rule of law; resilience, prosperity and the digital transition; peace and security; migration and mobility; and green transition: climate resilience, energy, and environment.

### Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

With 42 member countries, comprising all EU Member States and 15 southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (all countries except for Syria and Libya, which has observer status), the [UfM](#) has one of the largest memberships of any territorial cooperation initiative in the region. Established in 2008 and building on the Barcelona process, this inter-governmental organisation seeks to address the main strategic objectives of human development, economic regional integration and regional stability, by focusing on two key action pillars: human development and regional sustainable development. On 27 November 2020, the countries' ministers agreed that the UfM's work should focus on the following areas in the years ahead: environmental and climate action; sustainable and inclusive economic and human development; social inclusiveness and equality; digital transformation; and civil protection.

In terms of governance, ministerial meetings provide political direction, while regional dialogue platforms establish in-depth dialogue with the stakeholders involved in the various sectors of cooperation. The policy dimension is then translated into projects and initiatives, with over 50 projects worth more than €5 billion currently being implemented within the framework of the UfM's

six priorities. Examples of projects include Plastic Busters, a project that monitors the impact of plastic waste on biodiversity in protected marine areas and devises prevention schemes, and the High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment initiative, which provides international internships in nine Mediterranean countries, facilitating students' entry onto the job market.

### **EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region**

Launched in 2014, the [EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region](#) (EUSAIR) covers nine countries comprising four EU Member States – Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia – and five accession countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The strategy's thematic priorities are based on four main pillars: blue growth, connecting the region, environmental quality and sustainable tourism, with each pillar divided into specific objectives led by different countries. The **'blue growth'** pillar, led by Greece and Montenegro, covers the specific objectives of blue technologies, fisheries and aquaculture, and maritime and marine governance and services. **'Connecting the region'** focuses on maritime transport, intermodal connections to the hinterland, and energy networks, and is led by Italy, Serbia and North Macedonia. The **'environmental quality'** pillar, led by Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, covers marine environment and transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity. Lastly, the **'sustainable tourism'** pillar, led by Croatia and Albania, covers diversified tourism offer and sustainable and responsible tourism management. Outputs include improved water quality in the Adriatic and Ionian seas through better water quality monitoring, improved blue technology knowledge transfer and supporting the distribution and supply of liquefied natural gas for maritime transport.

### **Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)**

Set up in 2010 by the CoR, [ARLEM](#) brings together local and regional elected representatives from the EU and the 15 countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. It has 80 members, divided equally between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, and is chaired by a joint presidency, representing the Mediterranean countries and the EU. Its thematic and political priorities are guided by an action plan adopted at an annual plenary session. Under its 2020-2022 [action plan](#), the Assembly is focusing on three fields of action: sustainable economic development; climate action; and women's empowerment. ARLEM has produced reports on issues including the promotion of renewable energies, the blue economy for local and regional authorities, urban development in the Mediterranean and cross-border cooperation. It also provides a platform for political dialogue with EU institutions and gives local and regional authorities a voice at UfM summits.

### **WestMED initiative**

Launched in 2017 by the European Commission, the Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean ([WestMED](#)) encompasses 10 countries of the western Mediterranean region: five EU Member States (Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Malta), and five countries from the southern Mediterranean (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia), building on the foundations of the [5+5 dialogue](#) for closer cooperation among the region's 10 countries. The 2017 framework for action accompanying the Commission communication that launched the initiative set out three goals: a safer and more secure maritime space; a smart and resilient blue economy; and better governance of the sea. Building on the framework for action, in December 2018, the 10 ministers of the countries involved agreed a common roadmap for the development of a sustainable blue economy in the region, which outlined six priorities to generate growth, create jobs and ensure a better living environment. These are: maritime safety and the fight against marine pollution; maritime cluster development; skills development and circulation; sustainable consumption and production; biodiversity and marine habitat conservation and restoration; and development of coastal communities and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.

A total of 22 projects have been implemented thus far. Major projects include NewTechAqua, a €6.7 million project to develop and diversify the production of fin-fish, molluscs and micro-algae through the technologically advanced, resilient and sustainable applications, DigCircl, a project to create a European cluster-led accelerator for the digitisation of the circular economy, and DIVE SAFE, a project to establish an integrated system for scientific and environmental underwater surveys.

### **CPMR: Working group on territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies**

Set up in 2014, the [working group on territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies](#) is part of the CPMR's Inter-Mediterranean Commission and covers eight Mediterranean countries (Albania, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Morocco and Spain). Its overall aim is to assess and implement possible measures to enhance governance and territorial cooperation in the region, while strengthening the role of territorial organisations and regions. Under its 2020-2021 [action plan](#), its three main priorities are to promote the development of a macro-regional and sea basin strategic approach in the Mediterranean, to increase and improve coordination with Mediterranean organisation networks, and to develop monitoring and support activity for neighbourhood policy, development cooperation in the Mediterranean and territorial cooperation tools, while supporting decentralised cooperation and south-south cooperation, among other areas. The working group brings together some 40 regions from across the Mediterranean, all CPRM members. The working group and the CPMR's Inter-Mediterranean Commission have produced a number of key reports, not least the influential [2014 road map](#), which helped move the debate forward at EU level.

### **MED Cities**

A Mediterranean network of cities established in 1991, [MED Cities](#) acts as a Mediterranean voice for local authorities, helping them to address the challenges of local governance and implement their strategic priorities. It brings together some 60 local governments from 10 countries in the region: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, and Morocco. With four main areas of activity - developing and implementing projects, sharing knowledge and building expertise in local authorities, facilitating cooperation and multilateral action between municipalities and metropolitan areas, and participating in regional and international political processes - MED Cities' primary goal is to implement projects with its members. Focusing on capacity-building, technical assistance and knowledge transfer, its projects cover three areas: city development strategies, urban services and environment, and economic and social development. Ongoing projects include a project to enhance urban water via innovative actions and instruments in Gabes, Tunisia, a coastal protection strategy for the Balearic Islands to counter climate change, and the promotion of inclusive employment and the green economy in Chefchaouen, Morocco.

### **MED Cooperation Alliance**

The [alliance](#) was set up in 2019 to encourage the EU and other international organisations active in the Mediterranean region to step up their efforts towards the development of macro-regional strategies and other cooperation instruments and initiatives. Bringing together regions from the CPMR's Inter-Mediterranean Commission, the Adriatic Ionian Euroregion, the Euro-Région Pyrénées-Méditerranée and the Med Cities and Arco Latino networks of local authorities, it has a wide membership base. Objectives include urging the EU and other international organisations to ensure the direct involvement of local, regional authorities and public and private stakeholders, assessing the creation of a basin strategy to complement the EUSAIR and WestMED initiative for the eastern part of the Mediterranean, and promoting the integration and alignment of all cooperation strategies in the Mediterranean region towards a single, integrated and long-term strategy.

### **European territorial cooperation**

Better known as [Interreg](#), European territorial cooperation was originally established to support activities in the field of cross-border cooperation but has expanded over the years to cover broader initiatives such as inter-regional cooperation, and trans-national cooperation, involving countries from a wider geographical area, such as macro-regions. Alongside the [Interreg Balkan-Mediterranean](#) programme, which has a rather limited geographical scope covering just five countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and North Macedonia), there are three main European territorial cooperation programmes covering the countries of the Mediterranean region.

### **Interreg Mediterranean programme**

Tasked with promoting sustainable growth in the Mediterranean region, the [Interreg Mediterranean programme](#) focused on four priority axes in the 2014-2020 period: promoting Mediterranean innovation capacities to develop smart and sustainable growth; fostering low-carbon strategies and

energy efficiency in specific MED territories: cities, islands and rural areas; protecting and promoting Mediterranean natural and cultural resources; and enhancing Mediterranean governance. Previously encompassing 13 countries and regions (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Montenegro, Slovenia, and selected regions from France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK), its geographical scope has been extended for the 2021-2027 period to include two new countries, Bulgaria and North Macedonia, taking the number of participating countries to 14 (10 EU Member States and four non-EU countries). According to its draft [programme](#), the main aim of the new Interreg MED will be to contribute to the transition towards a climate-neutral society: fighting the impact of climate change on Mediterranean resources, while ensuring sustainable growth and the well-being of its citizens. This will be delivered by focusing on three missions: a smarter MED, a greener MED and promoting green living areas.

### **Interreg ADRION programme**

Covering nine countries – four EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia) and five non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) – the [ADRION programme](#) is a transnational cooperation programme that promotes solidarity and cooperation among participating countries by enhancing European integration and strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion across the region. In the 2014-2020 period, the programme was structured around four priorities: innovative and smart region; sustainable region; connected region; and supporting the governance of the EUSAIR. Following a 2020 territorial analysis, the draft 2021-2027 [programme](#) is focusing on the objectives of a more competitive and smarter Europe; a greener, low-carbon transition towards a net zero carbon economy; a more connected Europe by means of enhanced mobility; and better cooperation governance.

### **Mediterranean Sea Basin ENI CBC programme**

The largest cross-border cooperation initiative managed by the EU under the European Neighbourhood Instrument, the [ENI CBC MED](#) programme covers 14 countries (Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Palestine and San Marino, as well as selected regions from Egypt, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Tunisia). With the overall aim of promoting fair and sustainable economic, social and territorial development to foster cross-border integration and harnessing countries' values, the 2014-2020 programme had two key objectives: promoting economic and social development and addressing common challenges in the environment. More specifically, it covered the four thematic objectives of SMEs and business development; technological transfer and innovation; social inclusion and fight against poverty; and environment and climate change, with 11 priorities encompassing areas such as sustainable tourism, professionalisation of young people and women, water management or integrated coastal zone management. Projects receiving funding include Aquacycle, which supports the sustainable treatment and reuse of urban wastewater using eco-innovative technology, and Cre@ctive, which aims to harness creative innovation to activate traditional sectors such as textiles, footwear and leather goods.

## **Outlook**

From an overarching strategy encompassing the whole Mediterranean region, to three separate macro-regional strategies or a combination of both approaches, there would appear to be little consensus on the best way to move forward or, for that matter, scant agreement regarding the utility of establishing such a strategy at all. Much has been made of the important developmental differences that exist between the countries of the Mediterranean basin which, compounded by the political instabilities that are a feature of the region, make closer integration within the framework of a macro-regional strategy a particularly challenging proposition.

A number of proposals have been put forward to address this problem. With the establishment of the Adriatic-Ionian strategy marking the completion of a macro-regional strategy for the 'central' Mediterranean region, and continuing tensions in the eastern Mediterranean making closer integration on the eastern shoreline problematic, attention has focused on establishing a macro-regional strategy for the western Mediterranean. One idea that has been raised involves the

transformation of the WestMED initiative, which brings together five EU Member States and five southern Mediterranean countries, from a sea-basin strategy into a fully-fledged macro-regional strategy. Proponents of this idea point to the fact that a clear precedent already exists for such a move, as the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy evolved and developed out of a sea-basin strategy that was established for the countries of the region. A number of commentators have, however, cast doubts over the viability of transforming the WestMED initiative into a macro-regional strategy for the western Mediterranean. In his 2021 [paper](#) entitled '*From the Mediterranean Arc to the Western Mediterranean. Towards a macro-region?*', Thomas Perrin quotes a number of stakeholders involved in the WestMED initiative, who emphasise that the idea is not even a subject of discussion, adding that a macro-regional strategy would never materialise as it is too complex and would not provide enough added value. This leads the author to conclude that even if the external dimension represents an important element of macro-regional strategies, which can help organise relations between the EU and its neighbouring countries, a macro-regional strategy for the western Mediterranean would simply appear to be 'too open to be able to function'.

In view of these concerns, one alternative discussed by Perrin could be to create a macro-regional strategy for the countries of the 'north-west' Mediterranean (Spain, France, Italy, Malta and Portugal). A number of aspects would appear to speak in favour of creating such a strategy, not least the presence of a similar standard of living, similar culture and similar languages across the region. Such a strategy would, however, lack any external dimension, a key element of the four macro-regional strategies currently in place, which helps to forge closer ties with the EU neighbourhood by encouraging closer cooperation with its partners. What is more, the western Mediterranean region is already replete with numerous strategies and initiatives, which means that the new strategy would be entering into an already over-crowded market. In light of the above, it is difficult to see what the added-value of such a strategy could be.

One thing would, however, appear to be certain: as highlighted in Alessandro Laruffa's December 2019 [paper](#) on challenges facing the EU and macro-regional strategies, since the strategy can only have a substantial impact on Mediterranean transnational issues if is linked to policies and priorities important for both northern and southern Mediterranean countries, the effectiveness of any macro-regional strategy in the region will clearly be dependent on strong participation of partners from all shores. While this naturally implies the close involvement of all partners in the process of establishing the strategy, any attempt to create a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean region is likely to encounter a number of important challenges.

First, a lack of political will on the part of certain countries in the southern Mediterranean to cooperate with one another, which stems from existing political conflicts, has affected existing bilateral and regional agreements, a point highlighted by the CoR's 2019 [study](#) on the contribution of local and regional authorities to regional integration in the Mediterranean, placing a serious question mark over their participation under the framework of macro-regional cooperation. As noted in the same study, this situation is also arguably compounded by the high level of centralisation of public administration in countries across the region, which means that local and regional authorities – whose effective participation is a key element of macro-regional cooperation – have limited autonomy and capacity to participate in integration mechanisms and often also contend with insufficient funding and a lack of trained staff.

In light of the above, it is clear that the creation of a fair and effective governance structure, which is vital for the successful operation of a macro-regional strategy, represents a second important challenge when it comes to establishing a strategy in the Mediterranean region. As noted in the 2021 'Going macro-regional?' report, given the peculiar nature of macro-regional strategies, it is difficult to build an effective governance system, as a greater degree of coordination across different levels of government and increased civil society involvement in governance structures are the two basic elements needed to enhance relations between decision makers and key implementers. Yet owing to the highly centralised nature of government in the countries of the southern

Mediterranean, these are the very elements that are often missing from the systems of governance that exist in the region.

A third challenge highlighted by the 'Going macro-regional?' report concerns the question of how to identify a set of common policy priorities for a possible Mediterranean strategy. With a large number of strategies and initiatives already in place in the Mediterranean region, covering a whole range of priorities, from climate change to infrastructure and from digital transition to sustainable tourism, the identification of new priorities arguably has the potential to further blur the picture rather than provide more clarity in terms of aims and objectives. In this context, the report suggests focusing on how many and which of the priorities already in existence could be implemented at macro-regional level, noting that existing frameworks could act as a source of inspiration for the selection of a limited set of priorities. Based on the brief overview of the territorial cooperation initiatives discussed above, it is possible to identify a number of priorities common to several initiatives such as climate change, mobility and migration, sustainable economic growth or digital transformation, to name but a few.

Yet while there is some merit in this approach, which has indeed been adopted in this briefing, it conveniently ignores an awkward truth: the priorities of any future macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean must be agreed by all participating countries. In reality, the developmental differences between the countries of the Mediterranean are such that the priorities of the countries of the southern Mediterranean differ significantly from those of their northern neighbours, making it very difficult to agree on a set of common priorities. This lack of consensus could ultimately prove to be the most difficult challenge of all. For while the European Council remains open to the idea of a future macro-regional strategy in the region, the lack of any agreement among the countries concerned regarding its priorities or indeed its geographical scope raises serious questions as to the prospects for the implementation of a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean.

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