



DECLARATION OF THE 10TH SUMMIT OF THE SOUTHERN COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

VALLETTA, 29 SEPTEMBER 2023

We, the Heads of State and Government of Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Italy, and Malta, and the Secretary of State for European Affairs of Spain met on 29 September in Valletta, for the 10th Summit of the Southern countries of the EU (MED-9).

We express our profound sorrow and solidarity for the terrible destruction and loss of life as a result of recent natural disasters in our neighbourhood. We will continue with our support to the affected regions.

The cooperation and coordination between us have been progressively gaining momentum, sharpening its focus and increasing its relevance within a regional context, whilst enhancing its value-added contribution to EU processes. Today's pivotal meeting comes at a period marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine amidst increasing economic, social and geopolitical pressures.

We, as the Southern countries of the EU, will endeavour to find and push forward innovative and strategic solutions based on dialogue, that contribute towards comprehensive European policies that promote peace, stability, and prosperity. In this regard:

- 1 We underline the importance of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Mediterranean for a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Europe. We welcome the renewed focus at EU level on strengthening the EU's relations with our partners in the Southern Neighbourhood, by progressively implementing and updating the New Agenda for the Mediterranean. This momentum needs to be maintained in order to restore the region's rightful place on the EU agenda. In this context, the European Council's call for strengthening and developing strategic partnerships between the EU and partners in the Southern Neighbourhood must be delivered upon. To this end, we will continue to emphasise the importance of taking this engagement forward on the basis of a comprehensive partnership approach that empowers our Southern Neighbours and that acknowledges their diversity, including by working on increased synergies with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). At the same time, we will continue to foster a strengthened governance of the Southern partnership, including through the organisation of EU-Southern Neighbourhood Heads of State and Government Summits and sectoral ministerial meetings. This engagement should identify common solutions for challenges shared across both shores of the Mediterranean, including those brought about by global trends, while in the same spirit, harnessing shared opportunities for mutual benefit. We will continue to encourage the full involvement and engagement of all EU Member States, EU Institutions and Services.

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We reiterate our condemnation of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, and reaffirm our determination to continue supporting Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. We call on Russia to cease its military activities and immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw from the entire territory of Ukraine. We remain committed to providing support to Ukraine, with the aim of bringing Russia's aggression to an end as soon as possible and saving lives while commencing the repair, recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine, in co-ordination with international partners. To support demining as one of the crucial preconditions for recovery and reconstruction, an International Donors' Conference on humanitarian demining in Ukraine will be held in Zagreb, Croatia on 11-12 October. We also call for Prisoners of War to be treated humanely in accordance with the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners, all forcibly removed persons - most notably children - to be returned safely as soon as possible and for attacks on civilians to cease immediately.

We commit to keeping security in our region high on the EU's agenda. The spill-over effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel and North Africa is negatively impacting security in the Mediterranean, and consequently, that of the EU. This is being further exacerbated by food insecurity which continues to require a comprehensive response, including through the continued use of Solidarity Lanes and the use of additional lanes, involving the Greek ports of Thessaloniki and Alexandroupolis in the Aegean. By terminating the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Russia further exacerbated the global food security crisis. In this context, we will continue to support EU's engagement towards affected partner countries, notably through EU's Solidarity Lanes which remain instrumental in bolstering global food security. These are major concerns which warrant ever-closer cooperation among us, increased vigilance, and outreach to partners in the South, including those in sub-Saharan Africa. It is incumbent on us to adopt a stronger paradigm for Euro-African cooperation on matters of peace and security so that we can ensure that we effectively respond to the needs of our partners. Adopting a broader approach, encompassing the entire African continent, will also contribute to this endeavour. We welcome the fact that the African Union has become a permanent member of the G20. This is an acknowledgement of Africa's role on the global stage.

We also remain fully committed to a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem, in accordance with relevant UNSC Resolutions and in line with the principles on which the EU is founded and the *acquis*. To this end, we call for the speedy resumption of negotiations and for the appointment of a United Nations Envoy who will provide critical support to this process. We also welcome the EU's readiness to play an active role in supporting all stages of the UN-led process with all means at its disposal, including the timely appointment of an EU representative. In view of the above, we condemn the incidents of assault against UN peacekeepers and damage to UN vehicles last month in Pyla, as well as other illegal actions on the ground, including in Varosha, and call for their reversal. Türkiye's concrete contribution to the resumption and conduct of negotiations for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem within the UN framework, remains crucial in this respect. We maintain that de-escalation of tensions, respect of international law, and promotion of good-neighbourly relations, are essential for regional stability and cooperation. We look forward to discussing EU-Türkiye relations, based on June 2023 and previous European Council Conclusions. Solutions to outstanding issues should be addressed by peaceful means and in full respect of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The sovereignty and territorial integrity of all EU Member States should be preserved, and their sovereign rights be respected.

3 The challenge of irregular migration remains a sensitive and complex reality that requires a sustained and holistic European response, both in the short term and medium term. With the help of Frontex and the European Union Agency for Asylum, we need to respond rapidly to the recent challenge of increasing arrivals through Mediterranean routes. We, therefore, call on the co-legislators to step up negotiations on the Pact on Migration and Asylum to reach an agreement in all files before the end of the current legislative term. This agreement must provide the necessary assurances that the needs of frontline countries will be adequately met. In addition, we recall the need for a significant increase in the EU's efforts on the external dimension front with a renewed approach to effectively reduce primary movements and prevent departures, improve the rate of returns of failed asylum seekers and other third country nationals who have no legal right to remain in the Union, address the root causes of irregular migration while respecting the protection of fundamental rights and international obligations. Work to strengthen legal and operational aspects of external borders' surveillance; to dismantle smuggling networks; to disrupt the supply chain of criminal networks; and to prevent departure of vessels that do not comply with international safety standards needs to be stepped up while simultaneously continuing to promote safe, orderly and legal migration. The EU and the Member States need to work jointly on the external dimension of migration to achieve goals set in the Action Plans for the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and Western Balkans and to ensure their effective implementation. We therefore underline the need for more robust outreach to all our neighbours in the Mediterranean, to the African continent and to key countries of origin and transit, and for building comprehensive and strategic partnerships with these third countries based on mutual trust. In this context, we welcome the recent initiatives, such as the launching of the "Rome Process" at the Conference on Development and Migration in Italy on July 23rd. We call for the swift implementation of the agreement between the EU and Tunisia.

4 Our region has in recent months been deeply impacted by severe natural disasters, and extreme weather events, the vast majority of which is a result of climate change. These include floods, wildfires, extreme heat waves, drought and rising sea levels, especially in the Mediterranean Sea, leading to considerable loss of life and livelihood affecting our economies, societies and critical infrastructure, including healthcare systems. We firmly believe that these realities, especially in view of their cross-border and cross-sectoral implications, require urgent concerted climate action, grounded in scientific evidence. At the end of 2023, Slovenia will take over the Presidency of the Barcelona Convention. It is time that the Mediterranean countries step up the implementation of the commitments to protect our common sea. We also need to analyse the impact of climate change on areas which are crucial to our way and quality of life, including healthcare, agriculture, food security, energy, water resources and tourism. Climate adaptation efforts are key to strengthening the Union's resilience and crisis response capacity. We underline the need for a renewed discussion on European civil protection and crisis management, based on the entire disaster management cycle, focusing on climate change related disaster aspects. We need to strategically evaluate and strengthen the relevant mechanisms, including the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. We shall further develop our European emergency preparedness and response capacities, encourage private sector actors and individuals' involvement in civil protection systems, and improve the cooperation between national authorities responsible for civil protection and disaster risk management, including with non-EU partners.

5 The protection of our natural resources, including the management of farmland, water resources and the protection and conservation of marine and coastal ecosystems, forests and our region's rich biodiversity, must remain a priority. We are accelerating efforts to protect, conserve and sustainably use marine and coastal biodiversity, ecosystems and resources and we look forward to the 2024 Our Ocean Conference in Greece, building on the results of the II UN Ocean Conference that took place in Portugal in 2022 and leading up to the III UN Ocean Conference to be held in France in 2025, to make progress on all major issues concerning the oceans and seas. With increasing pressures on our natural resources and ecosystems, including those emanating from the effects of climate change, we must find innovative, coordinated and sustainable solutions at regional and EU level which are effective and take into account our specificities. Building on the achievements of the Paris Summit for a New Financial Pact, including the Paris Pact for the People and the Planet, a strong and united EU position on Climate Adaptation at COP 28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), is crucial to maintaining our strong leadership and political commitment to a just transition that tackles current problems emanating from climate change, whilst transforming climate threats into growth opportunities for our societies.

We believe that one of our main objectives should remain our direct contribution to the EU's collective climate neutrality targets to be achieved by the year 2050 – a gradual but sustained transition to a carbon neutral economy that combines the promotion of renewables and green energy, with stronger emphasis on energy efficiency and security of decarbonized energy supply.

Our region is endowed with the ability to generate renewable energy from wind and solar resources. In this regard, we welcome the efforts made by our Energy Ministers during the first MED9 Ministerial Meeting on Energy on 18 May 2023, in Valletta, committing our countries to contribute to our region's drive to accelerate the EU's decarbonisation efforts, and an energy-independent future. This can be ensured through the completion of energy interconnections in the EU and enhanced cooperation between Mediterranean countries to transform the region into a hub of Green Energy Corridors, also following the example of the ELMED interconnection with Tunisia, the Euroasia Interconnector between Greece-Cyprus and Israel and the GREGY Interconnector between Greece and Egypt. The MED 9 region's shared vision in the energy sector must be enhanced through active engagement with the European Commission to capitalise on, and combine, expertise in this regional effort leading to EU-wide social and economic benefits, making the most of our toolkit, including the Global Gateway, and also through a swift reform of the design of the electricity market to prevent excessive energy prices, foster industrial competitiveness and enhance the security of supply.

6 The European Union makes progress when Social Europe moves forward. In this sense, we will use the European Year of Skills to develop ambitious and innovative upskilling and lifelong learning policies that translate into improved wages and working conditions. Our region must push the EU to enhance its social dimension, empower and protect citizens, reduce inequalities through equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion, in constant dialogue with partners. We must put people and the social dimension at the core of our policy making to uphold the Porto Declaration and implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan 2021-2025. To that end, we look forward to new Social Partner Summit that will be convened at Val Duchesse in 2024. We further reaffirm our commitment to prioritise and invest in education and training and develop employees' skills appropriate for the digital age which are the key to our citizens' success in the labour market as well as to the regeneration of our Single Market and SMEs, including micro-enterprises, with a view to reduce complex administrative procedures and reporting obligations. Recognising the need to address demographic challenges, we also believe that human capital is essential for our societies and economies, directly impacts our growth, competitiveness and economic resilience. We therefore see scope to work together on policies that reverse negative trends in this regard.

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7 Conscious of the emerging global challenges, particularly those related to climate change and economic security we look forward to the conclusion of the reform of the Economic Governance Framework of the EU. We believe that the reform should strengthen Europe's ability to foster economic growth in a fiscally sustainable manner, while avoiding procyclicality and taking into account each country's characteristics while encouraging investment and reforms, particularly in the green and digital transitions and other sectors key to European sovereignty. We also recognize that since 2020 the Union has faced a series of unprecedented and unexpected challenges, and that there is a need for a mid-term revision of the 2021-2027 Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF). The latter should provide a targeted and balanced adjustment of the EU budget for the years 2024-2027 to respond to these new challenges, preserving the Cohesion, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Commission's proposed increases in the Solidarity and Emergency Aid Reserve. The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP) proposal is part of the European response to the need to boost investments in critical technologies in Europe. We are committed to doing our utmost to conclude negotiations by the end of this year and stand ready to assist the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU in its efforts on this file.

8 Drawing inspiration from the renewed impetus to reinforce the single market, in its 30th year, and implementing the Versailles Agenda, we commit to further strengthen the region's push to complete it and ensure a level playing field that contributes to the resilience of the EU economy, reduces our strategic dependencies and leaves no one behind, recognizing social, economic, and environmental sustainability as a key objective of green and digital fair and inclusive transitions. The geographical realities of all Member States must be considered, also by improving connectivity within the single market by recognising and addressing the existing challenges in the transport acquis that hinder mobility in our region. The importance of the aviation and maritime sectors in overcoming these challenges, is critical for our strategic partnerships in the area, especially in terms of developing and enhancing supply chains and improving passenger mobility. We believe that the single market also needs to be completed in the digital sector.

Such measures will push towards the creation of a more integrated and competitive European economy that will be able to fit a human-centred digital age – also by taking full advantage of innovative technological instruments, such as AI, to boost the overall industrial productivity of EU countries. We call for a Critical Medicines Act and for work to progress on the Commission's Pharmaceutical Reform Package, to ensure sufficient production, availability and affordability of the most critical medicines and components in the EU, that can be accessed by patients in all Member States. In this context, it is necessary to upgrade digital infrastructure, so that no country or region is left behind. We believe that legally binding rules on digital trade are a way to set standards at a global level.

A comprehensive free and fair-Trade policy is one of our greatest geopolitical assets for building new strategic alliances and shoring up existing ones, whilst enhancing the EU's competitiveness, diversifying and securing our supply chains in a sustainable way, protecting our strategic assets, maintaining a level playing field for our businesses, ensuring reciprocity and boosting our resilience and strategic autonomy. As set out in the new EU approach on trade and sustainable development, we also believe that an ambitious, flexible, coherent and sustainable trade policy leading in particular to the conclusion of mutually balanced agreements with strategic partners is key economic growth, the creation of jobs as well as to ensure environmental, social and labour standards at a global level and to ensure that the Union remains a global force, and secure the implementation and the enforcement of the commitments taken under the Paris Agreement. The agreements with MERCOSUR, Australia, India and Mexico, among others, are central to achieve these objectives, and an encouraging reference for an ambitious Mediterranean trade agenda.

- 9 Our commitment to strengthen the European project and complete the process of European integration remains steadfast. We will keep up the momentum that enlargement has gained over the past year and step up our support to our partners in their path towards accession on the basis of a fair and merit-based process, measured against the fulfillment of necessary criteria, while taking into consideration our own level of preparedness. Against this backdrop, we reconfirm our full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine.

We reiterate that the enlargement of the EU must be part of our common future, for the sake of enhanced regional peace, security, and prosperity. We therefore recognize the necessity to reflect on how the EU can prepare itself for the future, to remain able to act in a strong and sovereign manner.

- 10 The MED 9 group makes up a third of EU Member States. As agreed in our last meeting in Alicante, in December 2022, further to the regular coordination ahead of the October European Council meeting, our informal coordination has expanded to other thematic areas, with meetings for ministers responsible for Energy, the Digital Economy and European issues having taken place in Malta. These meetings have served to launch our vision for the Mediterranean region in various sectoral areas where coordinated and unified regional action could accelerate our common agenda. In this respect, we see merit in the intensification of follow ups at technical level to ensure that continuous progress is registered, and ultimately, that the goals set are achieved for the benefit of our citizens.

Our next summit will take place in Cyprus.