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Role of cohesion policy in addressing multidimensional environmental challenges in the Mediterranean Basin

European Parliament resolution of 9 May 2023 on the role of cohesion policy in addressing multidimensional environmental challenges in the Mediterranean basin (2022/2059(INI))

(C/2023/1061)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union and Articles 174 to 178 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy ⁽¹⁾ (Common Provisions Regulation),
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) ⁽⁵⁾,
- having regard to Directive 2014/89/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning ⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 19 April 2021 on a renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood — A new agenda for the Mediterranean,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 4 February 2022 entitled '8th Cohesion Report: Cohesion in Europe towards 2050' (COM(2022)0034),
- having regard to the Commission's communication of 9 February 2021 entitled 'Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood' (SWD(2021)0023),
- having regard to the Commission's communication of 11 December 2019 on the European Green Deal (COM(2019)0640),
- having regard to the agreement adopted at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris on 12 December 2015 (Paris Agreement) ⁽⁷⁾,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 60.

⁽³⁾ OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 94.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 21.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ L 257, 28.8.2014, p. 135.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ L 282, 19.10.2016, p. 4

- having regard to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) of 29 October 2021 entitled ‘Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood — A new Agenda for the Mediterranean’ ⁽⁸⁾,
- having regard to the CoR opinion of 14 October 2020 entitled ‘Towards sustainable use of Natural Resources within the Mediterranean insular context’ ⁽⁹⁾,
- having regard to the CoR opinion of 11 October 2022 entitled ‘Towards a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean’,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 September 2022 on Economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU: the 8th Cohesion Report ⁽¹⁰⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 September 2022 on EU border regions: living labs of European integration ⁽¹¹⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 7 June 2022 on EU Islands and cohesion policy ⁽¹²⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 8 March 2022 on the role of cohesion policy in promoting innovative and smart transformation and regional ICT connectivity ⁽¹³⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 9 June 2021 on the gender dimension in cohesion policy ⁽¹⁴⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 20 May 2021 on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments ⁽¹⁵⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 25 March 2021 on cohesion policy and regional environment strategies in the fight against climate change ⁽¹⁶⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 28 November 2019 on the climate and environment emergency ⁽¹⁷⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal ⁽¹⁸⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 March 2018 on lagging regions in the EU ⁽¹⁹⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 June 2018 on cohesion policy and the circular economy ⁽²⁰⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 3 July 2012, entitled ‘Evolution of EU macro-regional strategies: present practice and future prospects, especially in the Mediterranean’ ⁽²¹⁾,
- having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Regional Development entitled ‘Islands of the European Union: State of play and future challenges’, published in March 2021,
- having regard to the European Parliament Research Service study ‘Working towards a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean’, published in October 2021,

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 440, 29.10.2021, p. 19.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 440, 18.12.2020, p. 114.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 125, 5.4.2023, p. 100.

⁽¹¹⁾ OJ C 125, 5.4.2023, p. 114.

⁽¹²⁾ OJ C 493, 27.12.2022, p. 48.

⁽¹³⁾ OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 37.

⁽¹⁴⁾ OJ C 67, 8.2.2022, p. 16.

⁽¹⁵⁾ OJ C 15, 12.1.2022, p. 125.

⁽¹⁶⁾ OJ C 494, 8.12.2021, p. 26.

⁽¹⁷⁾ OJ C 232, 16.6.2021, p. 28.

⁽¹⁸⁾ OJ C 270, 7.7.2021, p. 2.

⁽¹⁹⁾ OJ C 162, 10.5.2019, p. 24.

⁽²⁰⁾ OJ C 28, 27.1.2020, p. 40.

⁽²¹⁾ OJ C 349 E, 29.11.2013, p. 1.

- having regard to the First Mediterranean Assessment Report on Climate and Environmental Change in the Mediterranean, released by the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and environmental Change (MedECC) in 2020,
 - having regard to the 2021 Regional Progress Report on Gender Equality — Union for the Mediterranean Regional Dialogue on Women Empowerment in the Euro-Mediterranean region ⁽²²⁾,
 - having regard to the 2022 UN Report ‘Dimensions and examples of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, the role of women as agents of change and opportunities for women’,
 - having regard to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (the Barcelona Convention), adopted on 16 February 1976 by the Conference of Plenipotentiaries of the Coastal States of the Mediterranean Region for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea,
 - having regard to the mission report of the Commission on Petitions following the fact-finding visit to the Mar Menor (Murcia), Spain, of 23-25 February 2022, in relation to the environmental deterioration of the Mar Menor,
 - having regard to the European Court of Auditors’ Special Report No 09/2022 entitled ‘Climate spending in the 2014-2020 EU budget: Not as high as reported’,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Fisheries,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development (A9-0094/2023),
- A. whereas the countries of the Mediterranean basin, which include EU Member States, candidate and third countries, are home to 250 million inhabitants, half of whom live in the European Union and one third of whom live in coastal areas; whereas strengthening cooperation within and beyond the EU’s borders is crucial in order to address common challenges such as environmental deterioration, pollution and climate change, rising water temperatures, the proliferation of extreme weather events, water shortages, biodiversity loss and food insecurity;
 - B. whereas the Mediterranean basin is a cohesive geographical area whose inhabitants share a common historical, cultural and environmental heritage;
 - C. whereas the European Regional Development Fund is required to allocate 30 % of its funds to environmental and climate measures in the current programming period, 2021-2027, with the overarching objective of supporting the transition to a climate neutral economy;
 - D. whereas the Mediterranean is a semi-enclosed sea with a very slow exchange of its waters, a rich biodiversity and a high proportion of endemic species;
 - E. whereas the Mediterranean Sea is one of the most overfished basins in the world and there are still significant concerns over illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; whereas increased pollution from human activities, habitat degradation, the introduction of non-indigenous species, and the impact of climate-driven changes on the marine environment and ecosystems are compromising the sustainability of Mediterranean fisheries;
 - F. whereas, in addition to the continuous growth of the populations living in the coastal areas, the Mediterranean also hosts 31 % of world tourism on less than 6 % of the world’s land area;
 - G. whereas water resources in the Mediterranean are becoming increasingly scarce, giving rise to conflicts between different water-use sectors (agriculture, tourism, industry and people living in the region, as well as biodiversity conservation);

⁽²²⁾ Union for the Mediterranean, 2021 *Regional Progress Report on Gender Equality*, Barcelona, 2022.

- H. whereas the quantity of waste has more than doubled over the past 30 years despite several EU-funded programme, such as H2020 Initiative for a Cleaner Mediterranean, as well as activities under the aegis of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM); whereas the improper management and treatment of waste from rivers and urban areas make the Mediterranean the area with the sixth largest accumulation of marine litter in the world; whereas the damaging impact of an estimated 730 tonnes of plastic waste, in particular, that are dumped every day in the Mediterranean basin and of the municipal solid waste generation that has been increasing across the whole region since 2014 call for ambitious measures;
- I. whereas maritime transport in the Mediterranean, which carries 20 % of the world's trade in an area which makes up only 1 % of the world's ocean, generates between 100 000 and 200 000 tonnes per year of hydrocarbon discharges such as oil spills, necessitating a transition to greater sustainability; whereas industrial activities and intensive farming may result in run-off into rivers and contamination of groundwater, and contribute, along with offshore oil and gas refineries, to worsening sea pollution in the whole basin;
- J. whereas Mediterranean marine mammal numbers have declined by 41 % over the last 50 years and around 80 % of fish stocks are suffering from overfishing; whereas the objective of sustainable fishing is achievable, provided that Member States have the political will;
- K. whereas the Mediterranean basin is warming 20 % faster than the global average; whereas global warming will cause severe consequences that must be anticipated, particularly in terms of precipitation and the hydrological cycle, but also mean warming and heat extremes (in both the terrestrial and marine environment), sea level rise and sea water acidification, as described in the 2020 MedECC report; whereas sea levels could rise by up to 25 cm by 2040–2050; whereas meeting the Paris Agreement limit of 1,5 °C of warming will require the EU's energy demand to be halved by 2050 compared to 2015 levels, which means priority must be given to energy efficiency solutions and increased cooperation on sustainable energy projects with the other countries around the coast of the Mediterranean by using the region's untapped potential to help the EU reach both its energy and climate targets;
- L. whereas the EU is committed to spending at least 20 % of the 2014–2020 MFF on climate action; whereas the 2021–2027 EU budget includes an increased target of 30 % on climate action; whereas, the Mediterranean is more exposed to climate change than other regional seas, and its coastal zones face heightened disaster risks, including flooding and erosion, and the salinisation of river deltas and aquifers, which endanger food security and livelihoods;
- M. whereas several transnational and territorial cooperation frameworks and initiatives have been developed over the years in the Mediterranean, such as the UfM, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly of the European Committee of the Regions (ARLEM), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the EU Initiative for the Western Mediterranean (WestMED), Interreg and ENI CBC programmes (e.g. MED, EURO-MED, ENICBC Med, NEXT MED, ADRION, MARITTIMO), the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (MedCoopAlliance), the networks of Regions and Local administrations (CPMR and its Intermediterranean Commission, MedCities, Latin Arc), and Euro-regions (Adriatic-Ionian, Pyrenean-Mediterranean);
- N. whereas macro-regions play a key role in strengthening the economic, social, and territorial cohesion of the European Union and its close neighbourhood by empowering cross-border areas to address specific, shared challenges collectively, through exchanges and cooperation and joint implementation, contributing to increased policy effectiveness and impact;
- O. whereas there is a need for Mediterranean territories to finally have an operational instrument, such as a macro-regional strategy enabling them to develop and implement a concrete action plan and joint projects in response to common priorities identified in existing frameworks such as the UfM or ARLEM;
- P. whereas an integrated and sustainably managed blue economy strategy has the potential to address the multidimensional environmental challenges faced by the Mediterranean basin, while providing decent jobs, preserving the livelihoods of local communities, contributing to food security and underpinning the green transition of the broader Mediterranean area;
- Q. whereas the Member States should apply an ecosystem-based approach to maritime spatial planning, including a robust strategic environmental assessment that takes into account the cumulative impacts of all maritime activities, climate change, the precautionary principle, sensitivity mapping, and active stakeholder engagement in a way that is consistent with the EU Green Deal's climate and biodiversity goals;

- R. whereas, as highlighted by several reports, the adverse effects of climate change are often felt more keenly by women than men as a result of systemic gender discrimination and societal expectations related to gender roles;
- S. whereas providing social security benefits for fishers, in particular those working in small-scale fisheries, is key to ensuring the resilience of the sector and the transition towards more sustainable fisheries;

The Mediterranean: a challenge for Europe

1. Recalls that the territory of the EU covers half of the Mediterranean basin and the European Union cannot remain passive in the face of the multiple political, social, economic, demographic and environmental challenges confronting the Mediterranean basin; stresses the importance of direct and diversified cooperation for regional peace, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean;
2. Deplores the continuous degradation of the environment in the Mediterranean basin, the loss of biodiversity and the increasing air and marine pollution;
3. Stresses that cohesion policy still has further potential for action to provide appropriate responses to the challenges facing 110 million Europeans; believes that the measures provided for under cohesion policy must be coordinated with and complementary to measures under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and other national policies;
4. Is concerned about the increasing pollution by plastic and domestic waste and calls for a historic effort to limit and manage them by promoting the circular economy, in particular in highly urbanised areas and on island territories, where space and resources to store and process waste are limited; calls on the Member States, regions and the relevant managing authorities to plan and use the cohesion funds to invest in technologies and infrastructure specifically aimed at recovering materials from residual waste for circular economy purposes; calls on the creation of a pilot project on zero marine pollution in the Mediterranean, thus testing the core principles of a Mediterranean macro-regional strategy around a concrete objective;
5. Points out that water security is one of the key factors in the well-being of the Mediterranean; calls for sustainable water security measures and for a more sustainable approach to be taken to adapting Mediterranean agriculture to the scarcity of water, bearing in mind its impact on the water ecosystem;
6. Notes with concern, that the European shores of the Mediterranean suffer from greater environmental degradation than the shores of Northern Europe (especially in port cities that do not benefit from the protection of emission control areas to reduce airborne emissions);
7. Considers environmental problems to be cross-cutting and complex, such that each entity, region or state acting alone can only provide partial solutions, and that it is necessary to ensure a broad, integrated and common approach embracing the whole Mediterranean area;
8. Considers that a dynamic of cooperation set in motion by the EU and its Member States and regions can have a knock-on effect on the whole basin; recalls that direct and shared management programmes, such as European territorial cooperation programmes, represent a major opportunity to facilitate an alignment of objectives, funds and projects;
9. Considers it essential to establish a system of up-to-date information on investments made in the Mediterranean area in order to monitor the environmental effectiveness of the funding involved; calls for more effective and better coordinated use of existing funding instruments to meet the challenges arising in the Mediterranean basin, such as measures to improve marine biodiversity and to restore and protect marine habitats and species; notes that expenditure for the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhoods has been increased by EUR 280 million in the 2023 budget and calls for this financial allocation to be used, inter alia, to support ambitious environmental measures in the Mediterranean; notes that in the current CFP architecture and with the funding possibilities available to fisheries through the EMFAF, funding is mostly decoupled from cohesion policy, although some interlinkages can be developed on an ad hoc basis; points out that a large amount of funding can be mobilised through the EU budget to support Mediterranean projects as well, through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, European Territorial Cooperation, Horizon Europe, LIFE and Erasmus programmes, which are also open to non-EU countries;

The Mediterranean: potential and problems

10. Highlights the potential of all the Mediterranean regions for the development of onshore and offshore renewable energy sources and for a just and inclusive ecological transition, to contribute to the fundamental transformation towards the most climate neutral economy possible in the years ahead, in particular by developing and expanding renewable forms of energy and increasing the interconnection of energy markets, as well as by cooperating on the production and transportation of renewable hydrogen; considers that it is highly uncertain whether higher demand for green energy can be supplied from within the EU unless further investments are made to secure these supplies in the region, as well as accelerating and simplifying procedures for renewable energy projects;

11. Underlines that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can contribute to finding innovative solutions not only for the deployment of renewable energies and the circular and blue economy; considers that further simplification should be promoted to ensure that SMEs across all European regions can access cohesion funds;

12. Recalls that overfishing and destructive fishing practices remain a threat to the survival of many species; is concerned about illegal bottom trawling inside Mediterranean marine protected areas; is convinced that the transition to a sustainable blue economy in the Mediterranean region will contribute to tackling environmental challenges, thus preserving the health of the oceanic basin and maintaining economic prosperity, while supporting sustainable and inclusive development and quality jobs with the direct involvement of fishery-sector operators and the representatives of the coastal communities; calls on the Commission to monitor data on stocks and to carry out impact assessments to take decisions on fishing quotas; calls on the Commission to promote the digital transformation and the use of new technologies in the fields of environmental monitoring, reporting and assessment, as well as for governance issues;

13. Expresses concern about the invasion of the Mediterranean by alien species, which can have serious repercussions for water ecosystems in the context of climate change, rising sea levels, heatwave shocks and increase in sea water temperatures;

14. Draws attention to the increasing density of maritime traffic and the danger of oil spills and the risks these activities present for marine ecosystems and particularly sea mammals;

15. Regrets that most EU Member States around the Mediterranean have not adopted maritime spatial plans; calls on the Commission to follow up with these Member States in order to ensure the swift adoption of such plans;

16. Draws attention to both the environmental and the social impacts caused by tourism due to its seasonality and its uncontrolled development (such as cruises, worsening coastal erosion, new polluting leisure activities, precarious seasonal work and rising housing prices; considers the need for a careful balance between the environmental objectives and the preservation of economic competitiveness and stresses the importance of promoting a responsible approach to tourism; calls on the Member States and Regions to devise sustainable tourism action plans in consultation with stakeholders and civil society and in line with a future European roadmap for sustainable tourism, and to make full use of the Next Generation EU funds and Structural Funds to finance tourism transition action plans in the Mediterranean basin;

17. Points out that island territories face economic imbalances linked to the handicaps associated with their relative isolation, which must be addressed by concrete measures, as required by Article 174 TFEU, in the economic, administrative, cultural and social sectors;

18. Stresses that women's economic participation continues to represent a significant challenge for gender equality in the Mediterranean basin, with uneven employment rates and levels of inclusion in decision-making processes among the countries of the region; recalls that empowering women and creating the preconditions for inclusive participation in public and private economic and social entities could lead to achieve the objectives of mitigation and adaptation to climate change;

19. Considers that the Mediterranean's geographical position between Europe and Africa and its role necessitates the development of a cooperative basin-wide approach to foster better and safer management of migration, address the drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement, and help put an end to the humanitarian disasters occurring in the Mediterranean sea;

The Mediterranean: a common space to be structured

20. Considers that the Mediterranean is a cohesive geographical area sharing a unique historical and cultural heritage and a Mediterranean climate resulting in similar environmental characteristics, and that it faces similar risks of natural disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes, drought and increasing scarcity of water resources; notes that the Mediterranean basin has been hit by an ever-increasing number of extreme weather events and natural disasters in recent years; therefore invites the Commission to study the possibility of tailoring the EU civil protection mechanism better to the Mediterranean basin and to put forward a proposal for a strengthened Solidarity Fund; calls on Member States to adopt measures to mitigate the effects of heatwaves and droughts in coastal areas, which are expected to become more frequent in the context of climate change and which threaten human life and biodiversity and to dedicate cohesion policy funds in remedying ecological disasters that have taken place in the Mediterranean such as the one occurred in El Mar Menor; calls on Member States and the Commission to monitor areas in danger of becoming an ecological disaster and mitigate the impact with cohesion funds;

21. Welcomes the WestMed sea basin initiative in the Western Mediterranean and Interreg programmes such as Interreg Mediterranean, ADRION, NEXT MED and MARITTIMO, as good examples of direct and diversified cooperation, including at regional level, with shared objectives;

22. Calls on the Commission to tackle disparities in levels of development, including shortfalls in institutional and administrative capacities, infrastructure interconnections and trade relations;

23. Calls on the Commission to support, particularly by means of Interreg programmes, networks of marine protected areas in the Mediterranean along similar lines to those of the Mediterranean Protected Areas (MedPAN) network, and to work on the project to create a global network of marine protected areas ('Blue Belt'), linked with the outermost regions and the overseas countries and territories;

24. Welcomes the progress of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regional strategy (EUSAIR), which has mobilised the Member States and their regions, third countries and their local authorities; considers EUSAIR a successful example where the EU proved to be a driving force and a vector of openness, benefiting from the ADRION transnational programme, which aligned objectives supporting the fulfilment of the strategy's roadmap; maintains that these same principles and a similar common approach must be applied to the other areas of the Mediterranean; considers that such a macro-regional strategy can amplify and accelerate the policies necessary for the development and preservation of the available resources through the cooperation of all the actors involved;

25. Calls on the Commission to provide support for a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean taking its 'new agenda for the Mediterranean' into account, in particular its point five on the 'ecological transition, climate resilience, energy and the environment'; considers that the diversity and the size of the territory concerned also necessitate the implementation of three distinct but coordinated strategies, namely strategies for the Western Mediterranean, the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, and the Eastern Mediterranean; calls for the support of the countries and authorities concerned and for a central role of regions and local authorities in their governance;

26. Considers that a macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean, which would entail substantial and active involvement of the regional and local authorities concerned, has considerable potential for addressing the multidimensional environmental challenges of the whole basin; believes that this macro-regional strategy must be based on a solid and representative multilevel governance scheme involving regional and local authorities and entailing the participation of civil society actors; believes that such a strategy could be used more specifically to encourage circular economy projects, fight plastic pollution, protect biodiversity, strengthen relations with third countries to control IUU fishing and to ensure compliance with the policies of the UNCLOS, contribute to resolving use conflicts through proper maritime spatial planning, preserve the socio-economic contribution of fisheries to the well-being of coastal communities, in particular in islands, support the diversification of fishers' activities, including retraining and conversion, promote stock management measures throughout the Mediterranean basin, and encourage third countries to implement marine protected areas (MPAs) in their territorial waters;

27. Believes that small-scale fishers and those in the most vulnerable situations require ad hoc forms of financial assistance and support, in order to help fishers enter new market segments, limit the economic and social gap between north and south and avoid undermining fishing activities and employment in the sector;

28. Invites the Member States to make full use of FLAGs to design and implement local development strategies addressing economic, social and environmental needs; calls on the Member States to guarantee that FLAGs involve all stakeholders and that EU funding is spent according to objective criteria, in a manner that ensures the sustainable development of local communities;

29. Recalls that each successful cooperation experience contributes to the objectives of peace and security, prosperity, human development and good governance, which are the other cornerstone objectives of the agenda for the Mediterranean;

30. Invites the European Council to submit to the Commission a detailed macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean with a view to its approval under the Spanish Presidency of the Union in the second half of 2023;

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31. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national and regional parliaments of the Member States.
