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Subject: Council conclusions on a renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new agenda for the Mediterranean

Delegations will find in the Annex the Council conclusions on a renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new agenda for the Mediterranean, as approved by the Council via a written procedure on 16 April 2021.

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON A RENEWED PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD – A NEW AGENDA FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

1. A democratic, more stable, greener and prosperous Southern Neighbourhood is a shared strategic priority and fundamental interest for both the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood partners. Global and regional challenges have increased and highlighted our mutual interdependence. Only through stronger action in a spirit of partnership and joint ownership will the objectives set 25 years ago in Barcelona to bring peace, stability and prosperity to the people of the Mediterranean be fulfilled.
2. Recalling the European Council Conclusions of December 2020 and the Statement of the members of the European Council of 26 February 2021, the Council reaffirms its determination to renew and further strengthen the EU's strategic partnership with its Southern Neighbourhood Partners to address common challenges, take advantage of shared opportunities and unlock the potential of our shared region. It is committed to do so together with Partner countries, building on the joint reflection with Southern Neighbourhood Partners initiated at the EU-Southern Neighbourhood Ministerial meeting held in Barcelona on 26 November 2020.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on both the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood Partners with negative implications on both health and livelihood of citizens. The Mediterranean area is also recognized as a major hotspot of climate change, already heavily impacted by accelerated desertification, water scarcity and increased temperatures. These crises demonstrated the increasing interdependence of the Mediterranean region and highlighted the need to strengthen common resilience and to open new paths for enhanced cooperation. Together with the new opportunities brought by the green and digital transitions, this opens new opportunities to develop a positive agenda for the partnership.

4. In this context, the Council welcomes the Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative on a renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood and its proposal for a new Agenda for the Mediterranean and calls for its speedy and efficient implementation. This renewed EU engagement is guided by the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 and the key principles of the European Neighbourhood policy, builds on the latter's achievements and experiences, and is supported by the effective use of all EU instruments. The Council welcomes the presentation of an Economic and Investment Plan that can help address challenges and protect our Mediterranean common goods at national, local, multi-country and regional levels.
5. There is a need to significantly strengthen the political dialogue across the Mediterranean. In this regard, the Council proposes that EU and Southern partner Foreign Ministers meet on a yearly basis to review progress in the implementation of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. Heads of State and Government Summits could also be organized in order to enhance the political guidance and visibility of the renewed Southern Partnership. In this framework, while taking into account the work of the Union of the Mediterranean, it encourages also Sectoral Ministers to meet when relevant to advance in specific areas of cooperation for the Southern Neighbourhood. Full use should be made of established channels, notably the Association Councils and Partnership Priorities, which remain the fundamental political framework and basis of assistance programming, and the Council will be fully involved in their preparation.
6. The Council stresses the importance to ensure adequate visibility of the political engagement and cooperation with Southern Neighbourhood Partners, including through outreach, public diplomacy initiatives, and joint efforts of EU institutions and Member States. It calls for the further strengthening of the EU strategic communications with the South, in close coordination with Member States. The Council encourages cooperation with Southern Neighbourhood Partners to promote the realisation of healthy information environments and freedom of expression and of the media as well as measures addressing disinformation and misinformation.

7. Spurring long-term sustainable socio-economic recovery and job creation in the Southern Neighbourhood is a key shared priority and the innovative cornerstone of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. The Council recognises that mobilising investment, including from the private sector, and financial and technical support will be key to unlock the potential of the region. The EU should use all its instruments and engage with European and International Financial institutions to ensure the efficient, effective and tailor-made rollout of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. Effective implementation of reforms by Southern Neighbourhood Partners in the areas of governance, rule of law, macroeconomic stability, socio-economic development and the business environment will be key to reap the full benefits from the Economic and Investment Plan and enable the joint success of the renewed Partnership.

8. The Council reaffirms its principled policy on good governance, human rights and fundamental freedoms promotion and protection, democratic institutions and the rule of law. They are an integral part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and of our partnership since the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, and are essential to guarantee long-term stability, security and sustainable development in the region. The Council recalls that the Southern Partnership is developed to benefit people on both shores of the Mediterranean and that its human dimension is central to its success. Good governance, including through effective, fair and transparent public administration, enhanced fight against corruption and equal access to justice, also act as a foundation for growth, investment and jobs. In line with the “EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024”, the Council stresses the importance it attaches to continued work with Southern Neighbourhood Partners to promote the respect for human rights and democracy, and its mainstreaming in the agenda of our cooperation. The EU shall promote reforms in these areas, including through the incentive-based approach as set out in the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe), whereby additional financial support will be provided to those countries which show strong commitment to implement and progress towards, inter alia, democratic, good governance and rule of law reforms, in particular those reforms jointly agreed.

9. Promoting credible and sustainable opportunities for youth should be at the heart of our cooperation. The Council calls for increased efforts to strengthen the participation of youth in public debates and to mainstream the youth agenda in our cooperation, reinforce our support for education and increase people-to-people contacts, including under Erasmus+, in a safe and protected environment. It also supports the enhanced cooperation in Research and Innovation and Culture, including through association with the Horizon Europe Programme and Creative Europe programme. Furthermore, in order to foster cooperation and mutual understanding between the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood, civil society dialogue between both shores of the Mediterranean should be reinforced. The Council underlines that it is essential to strengthen the EU's support for civil society, including the promotion of a safe and enabling environment, as any democracy relies on a free and vibrant civil society. This will be an integral part of the implementation of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. It also highlights the importance of ensuring the protection of human rights defenders, as well as independent and pluralistic media and safety of journalists. It calls for increased efforts in strengthening women's rights and in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, including via mainstreaming gender across all instruments and cooperation programmes, as well as the Economic and Investment Plan, and taking note of the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative on the third Gender Action Plan (GAP) and the EU Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security.

10. The Council highlights that resilient, sustainable, inclusive, and connected economies are essential for social justice, decent work and effective government action as well as trade and attraction and retention of investment with the aim of creating decent jobs and opportunities especially for youth. It emphasises the importance of diversification of economies and value chains, including through the creation of industrial partnerships, and an improved business climate that would benefit the private sector, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, and could create new opportunities, including “nearshoring” when this helps to address specific value chain needs, taking into account lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The modernisation of trade and investment relations at the multilateral level in the context of WTO, bilateral, sub-regional, regional continental levels, including through regulatory approximation, and the progressive removal of non-tariff barriers and trading costs, as well as the swift development of the Trans Mediterranean Network and better digital connectivity and innovative digital transformation, will be powerful drivers of competitiveness, economic integration and the creation of decent employment. The Council calls on the Commission to pursue the full implementation of and compliance with existing trade agreements, as well as to stimulate further the utilisation of preferences. The Council highlights the importance to progress in the modernisation of trade and investment relations between Southern Neighbourhood Partners and the EU, starting with advancing towards the establishment of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas. It also looks forward to new opportunities that may result from the upcoming discussion on the EU Trade Policy Review in this regard. The Council supports the adoption and implementation of the revised Regional Convention on pan-Euro-Mediterranean preferential rules of origin (PEM Convention), which will foster further regional integration. The Council expresses the EU’s readiness to work with Southern Neighbourhood Partners to support their economic, social, trade and investment policies that promote equal opportunities and gender equality, prioritise inclusion, meaningful social dialogue and well-targeted social protection to reduce existing social and territorial inequalities.

11. Climate action and energy issues, in particular the advancement of green energy transition, are a fundamental pillar of our policy in the Southern Neighbourhood. The Council is convinced that by working together with our Southern Neighbourhood Partners, in line with the 25 January 2021 Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy, we can turn climate and environmental challenges into major opportunities for sustainable development, contributing to just and inclusive green transition, including through the creation of green jobs and relevant skills' development. In line with the external dimension of the European Green Deal, the EU will work with its Southern Neighbourhood Partners to meet their National Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and to increase their climate ambitions, including by supporting the acceleration of the energy transition. The EU will also work with its Southern Neighbourhood Partners to promote interconnections and trading in sustainable energy carriers with the EU. It will engage with European and International Financial Institutions and the private sector to promote the development of an economic and financial system that supports sustainable growth, including sustainable financial products, and is adapted to climate constraints. The EU will also work with Southern Neighbourhood Partners to promote energy transition while enhancing energy security, taking into account each partner's situation. The Southern Neighbourhood will play an important role in attaining the objective of a climate neutral world as well as regarding energy relations vis-à-vis the EU, amongst others in the framework of cooperation for the production of renewable energy. The Council also highlights the importance of supporting measures to conserve, protect, restore and sustainably use the rich biodiversity of the Mediterranean basin, a unique centre of diversification for fauna and flora species, of ensuring sustainable resource management, including water, and strengthening sustainable food systems.

12. The Blue Economy represents a powerful tool to manage the Mediterranean common goods, thus promoting sustainable economies in the Mediterranean region as it reconciles economic growth, improved livelihoods and social inclusion with the conservation, protection and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystems and biodiversity, sustainable resource use, the promotion of sustainable tourism, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The EU will integrate the Blue Economy's potential of the Mediterranean Sea in economic development planning, alongside the social economy. In this framework, the Council highlights the need to take stock of the Union for the Mediterranean Ministerial declaration on Sustainable Blue Economy (2 February 2021) and of the work implemented within the Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean region (WestMED Initiative).

13. The Council underlines the importance of working together to jointly address in an efficient and effective manner the challenges of forced displacement, irregular migration, as well as all other aspects of migration and mobility, including legal migration, in line with EU and Member States' competences, through comprehensive, tailor-made and mutually beneficial partnerships, based on common interests and commitments. In pursuing this cooperation, the EU will apply a "whole of route" approach, will also take into account our partners' effective cooperation and implementation of existing and future EU agreements and dialogues on migration, aim at tangible results and strive for effective coordination between EU, Member States and Southern Neighbourhood Partners efforts in line with the Team Europe approach. In this context, the EU maintains its strong commitment to international protection, and to providing for life-saving solutions, including the prevention of the loss of life at sea, as well as support for host and transit communities in the region. It will also work with the Southern Neighbourhood Partners to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, building socio-economic opportunities, especially improved perspectives for young people, including through initiatives foreseen in the Economic and Investment Plan in the context of the COVID-19 recovery. Strengthening capacities for effective migration and asylum governance, including on border management, providing capacity building in the field of search and rescue, enhanced and comprehensive cooperation on return and readmission, using all relevant policies at the EU's disposal, and sustainable reintegration, including fostering voluntary return, will also be key priorities. Common efforts to combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling should be significantly stepped up. The EU also wishes to engage Southern Neighbourhood Partners in addressing mobility and all aspects of migration, including legal migration, in line with EU and Member States competences. Cooperation at the regional and sub-regional level should be explored further, including through triangular and south-south cooperation as well as via trilateral cooperation with the UN and regional actors. The EU will fully support these efforts by mobilising all relevant policy tools and instruments, and ensuring adequate and predictable funding in line with relevant available instruments, including the NDICI-Global Europe. This could entail the use of the flexible funding mechanism as outlined in NDICI-Global Europe.

14. Building on the solidarity reaffirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council supports the cooperation between the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood Partners to strengthen the preparedness and response capacities of healthcare systems, and to help the most vulnerable and those at-risk. The Council remains committed to improving access to vaccines for priority groups in our neighbourhood and beyond, based on common principles, and to supporting a global approach through the COVAX Facility as the global initiative to ensure that all countries have equitable and fair access to safe and effective vaccines. It recalls the role of the EU and its Member States as the main donors to the COVAX facility, which will provide vaccines to all participating Southern partner countries in a fair and transparent manner.

15. The conflicts and crises in the region are a major source of human suffering. They also constitute major obstacles to political stability and sustainable development. The Council calls for renewed efforts leading to conflict prevention and resolution, post-conflict stabilisation and peace-making, using all tools at the EU's and Southern Neighbourhood Partners' disposal, including the promotion of confidence building measures, in an integrated way and in close coordination with other international partners. An upgraded and intensified political dialogue across the Mediterranean should be developed to build trust, reduce tensions and help solve conflicts, also building on the momentum created by recent positive developments in the wider region. It recognizes that climate change exacerbates many challenges in the region. The Council reiterates that, in seeking solutions to the crises in the region, the EU will continue to support the United Nations (UN) and engage with regional and international organisations, notably the League of Arab States, the African Union, and relevant sub-regional organisations as well as other regional and global stakeholders. In this respect, it reiterates the importance to adhere to international law, including inter alia UNCLOS. The Council underlines the importance of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women as well as the key role of youth in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and peacebuilding.

16. The Council underlines that the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood Partners share a common interest in supporting a revitalised and fit for purpose multilateral system with the UN at its core. It is keen to engage with Southern Neighbourhood Partners in multilateral fora, notably on climate, peace and security, on global issues on the basis of Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals, and in strengthening rules-based trade, the rule of law, good governance and respect for human rights and international law.

17. The Council underlines that terrorism, violent extremism, radicalisation, cyber and hybrid threats as well as organised crime, including trade of illegal firearms and illicit trafficking of cultural property, are major threats that affect both shores of the Mediterranean and are often interlinked. The EU is keen to further develop cooperation with Southern Neighbourhood Partners in this field, in full respect of human rights, notably through deepening security dialogues, the reinforcement of capacities, including to counter money laundering, financing of terrorism, as well as illicit financial flows and illicit trafficking, and destruction of cultural heritage. It looks forward to enhancing cooperation against cyber threats by building cyber resilience, developing capacity-building activities and making full use of existing international frameworks to promote an open, free, stable and secure cyber space. The Council supports enhancing police and judicial cooperation between Southern Neighbourhood Partners and EU Agencies, including through the conclusion of relevant agreements, and the development of cooperation on Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Risk Mitigation and on civil protection and disaster risk management and on cybercrime. It welcomes the proposal to offer more comprehensive security packages to Southern Neighbourhood Partners ready to deepen cooperation on a range of issues, including operational cooperation. The EU will continue paying particular attention to insecurity in the Sahel-Saharan area due to its spill over effect for the Mediterranean region.

18. The Council recognises that regional dialogue and cooperation are the best way to optimise EU joint action with its Southern Neighbourhood Partners in addressing challenges, many of which are regional by nature. It calls to enhance regional, sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation. The Council acknowledges the role of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as an indispensable platform for regional cooperation, and calls for increased focus on sub-regional cooperation, taking account of existing dialogues. It also encourages initiatives to support the further advancement of cooperation on Mediterranean common goods. The Council welcomes the proposals to develop inter-regional cooperation, notably between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as with the Gulf and the Red Sea regions, including through pragmatic initiatives based on variable geometry, including trilateral cooperation as set out by the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative.

19. The EU will use all its instruments, including the NDICI-Global Europe and the EFSD+ to ensure the efficient, effective, swift and tailor-made rollout of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. The Council reiterates the principles of ownership and differentiation enshrined in the European Neighbourhood Policy. Partnership Priorities or equivalent documents remain the essential political framework for bilateral engagement with Southern Neighbourhood Partners. On the basis of the incentive-based approach set out in NDICI-Global Europe, the EU support will be adjusted to each partner's ambitions and their level of implementation as regards shared values and reform. This includes basing support on performance and progress towards reforms, in particular those reforms jointly agreed. The Council looks forward to the swift initiation of the negotiations of Partnership Priorities and full involvement of the Council in this process with all the Southern Neighbourhood Partners, as Partnership Priorities serve as the basis for programming of assistance and the coherent and integrated use of other instruments in line with EU and Southern Neighbourhood Partners interest and values. The Council remains committed to the Team Europe approach, stands ready to enhance efforts to work better together, including through joint programming and mobilizing TAIEX and Twinning, and calls for a more strategic and inclusive approach in our development assistance efforts, including through joint strategic communication efforts. The Council calls upon Team Europe members to closely coordinate and jointly design, implement and monitor Team Europe initiatives in an inclusive manner. The implementation of these Council conclusions is a joint undertaking and a shared responsibility of the EU institutions and Member States. The Council invites the Commission to regularly report on achievements under the Economic and Investment Plan. It will carry out a review of the Agenda for the Mediterranean and of these Council conclusions in 2024. The Council proposes to report, jointly with the Commission and EEAS, on progress in the operationalisation of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean and its Economic and Investment Plan at December 2021 European Council.
