

## Opening Address

9th Edition of Circle the Med - The Mediterranean Forum

*Piraeus*

Dear Mr. President of the Hellenic Republic,  
Dear Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean,  
Dear President of the European Committee of the Regions,  
Dear Mayor of Athens,  
Ambassadors, Ministers, Envoys,  
Representatives from across the Mediterranean region,

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is a great honor to welcome you to the 9th Edition of Circle the Med, here in Piraeus.

A port that, for centuries, has connected peoples, cultures, economies, and civilizations across our shared sea.

From these shores, Odysseus began his journey.

His was a transition.

Through his travels, he found wisdom. He grew resilient. And he came home.

That spirit still defines us.

For we too, gathered here, find ourselves on a journey - through uncertainty, across crises without precedent.

The task of our generation is clear.

To turn this moment of uncertainty into a moment of possibility.

To take the helm, and chart our own course.

Not to be carried by the storms of our times, but to navigate them with purpose.

Not to be shipwrecked on the rocks of conflict, but to find safe harbour together.

We face war and division. We must build peace and understanding.

We face climate disruption. We must build ecological resilience.

We face water scarcity. We must build shared stewardship.

We face energy insecurity. We must build a just and sovereign energy transition.

We face deepening inequality. We must create shared prosperity.

We face migration pressures. We must forge mobility with dignity, opportunity, and legal pathways.

And beneath them all, a quieter crisis.

The erosion of trust between citizens and their states.

This too is a transition we must make - from disillusionment, to a renewed democratic bond.

Our histories have been inseparable. Our economies, always intertwined. Our seas and our cultures have crossed and recrossed these waters for thousands of years.

Yet today, more than at any moment in living memory, the decisions we make **now** are crucial to which **future** we share.

A future of cooperation, or of conflict.

A future of shared dignity, or of shared humiliation.

A future shaped by us, or imposed upon us by forces we have failed to govern or confront.

That is why honest dialogue across the Mediterranean is no longer optional. It is essential.

Not grand designs that sound visionary in conference halls while reality pulls in the opposite direction.

We need partnership that delivers.

Practical. Visible. Human.

Problem by problem. Community by community.

Clean energy. Water security. Sustainable growth. Digital rights. Education. Democratic resilience.

The Mediterranean was never meant to divide us. It was meant to connect us.

It is a place of amazing beauty, exchange, and learning. Our ports, our islands, tell that story every day - of movement, of exchange, of learning.

But it is also a story of pain.

### **Migration: confronting what drives it**

This sea carries the weight of migration and displacement. Women, men, and children crossing not for adventure, but for survival. For dignity. For a future worth living.

Migration is not a passing crisis. It is woven into the fabric of our interconnected world.

If we are serious, we must confront what drives it: war, inequality, exclusion, climate disruption, and closed doors where opportunity should be.

Let us therefore discuss concrete instruments:

- **A Mediterranean Mobility Compact.** Legal labour pathways tied to real needs - in agriculture, construction, healthcare, care work. Circular migration in both directions. Mutual recognition of qualifications, so that a Tunisian engineer is not a kitchen porter in Marseille, and a Lebanese physician is not a waiter in Athens.
- **A regional Search and Rescue framework.** The saving of life lifted from NGO heroism into shared regional responsibility - with rescue separated from asylum processing, because a sea that lets people drown has lost its soul.
- **Investment where people live.** A reconstruction and development window for high-migration regions: empowering governance, education, jobs, and climate adaptation.

- **Deeper integration, not mere tolerance.** A more systematic integration of migrants and refugees into the economic, political, and educational life of Europe - pathways to work that match skills, to participation that includes a political voice, to schooling and language that open real futures. Integration is not a favour we grant; it is an investment we make. Societies that integrate well grow stronger, more innovative, and more cohesive; those that leave people at the margins pay the price in division and decline.
- **Refugees and migrants as future architects of their home societies.** We should see today's refugees - and migrants too - not only as people in need, but as the diasporas of tomorrow: catalysts and architects of their home societies. With the skills, capital, networks, and democratic experience they acquire, they can become partners in reconstruction, in sustainable development, and in the building of accountable, well-governed institutions when conditions allow return or engagement. A diaspora well integrated here is a bridge of renewal there.

### Peace, and the credibility we cannot do without

We cannot gather with partners from across the Mediterranean, the Arab world, and North Africa - and pretend Gaza is not in this room. We are also witnesses to the destruction of civilian life in Lebanon.

The deliberate taking of civilian life - whether of residents of Israeli kibbutzim and young people at the Nova music festival, of Palestinian families in Gaza and the West Bank, or of civilians in Lebanon - is not only a profound human tragedy. It deeply erodes and ultimately destroys the very trust on which any genuine partnership must rest.

To acknowledge this is not an ideological act. It is the minimum threshold for credibility.

So are we, the Mediterranean peoples and nations, helpless? Or can we contribute to a future peace?

Can we consider:

- **A Track-Two Diplomacy Platform.** So that when official channels close, unofficial ones remain open. Building constant people's diplomacy.
- **Consistent respect for international law.** The same law for everyone. Applied without selectivity. Because a regional order that protects some lives and ignores others is not an order. It is a hierarchy of power - and hierarchies of human worth are precisely what has poisoned this sea for too long.
- **A Mediterranean Peace and Reconstruction Facility.** Ready to build for peace. For Gaza. For Lebanon. For Syria. For Libya. Governed not by donor logic, but by partnership and purpose - connecting with Arab and North African states as equals.

**Yet even in the darkest moments, this sea reminds us of what endures.**

As we welcome Egypt as this year's Guest Country of Honour, I am reminded of Constantine Cavafy, the great Alexandrian poet of the Mediterranean, and his Ithaka:

*"May you visit many Egyptian cities to learn and go on learning from their scholars."*

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the Mediterranean itself.

A journey of civilisation, dialogue, and discovery.

Such journeys require something our Greek ancestors understood well: ekecheiria, the Olympic Truce. The ancient wisdom reminding us that, even in times of conflict, humanity must preserve spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and common purpose.

That is the purpose of our gathering here today.

## **A new political moment, and its test**

We meet at a moment when this need for partnership has found new institutional expression.

The European Pact for the Mediterranean, launched last November and now moving into implementation with its first Action Plan, marks thirty years since the Barcelona Declaration.

It is the most ambitious attempt in a generation to revitalise Euro-Mediterranean partnership. It deserves to be welcomed.

But let us be honest. The history of Euro-Mediterranean initiatives often looks like a Sisyphean struggle for cooperation - where declarations abound and action lags behind. To name only a few:

- Global Mediterranean Policy (1972) - the EEC's first comprehensive approach.
- Helsinki Mediterranean Chapter (1975) - Malta's insertion of the Mediterranean into European security architecture.
- Arab Maghreb Union (1989) - a Maghreb vision for regional integration.
- 5+5 Dialogue (1990) - the Western Mediterranean forum.
- NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (1994) - a security cooperation framework.
- Barcelona Process (1995) - the landmark Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.
- Anna Lindh Foundation (2005) - cultural dialogue across 42 countries.
- Union for the Mediterranean (2008) - the Paris relaunch.
- Mediterranean Climate Change Initiative (2010) - a 22-country climate framework, which I spearheaded here in Athens.
- East Mediterranean Gas Forum (2018) - Greece, Egypt, and Cyprus energy cooperation.

Each ambitious, each celebrated, each too often thwarted by forces within and without that sought domination over cooperation.

And now, the Pact for the Mediterranean of 2025 - the latest ambitious attempt.

It will not be judged by the elegance of its pillars, but by its courage. By whether it is truly co-owned. By whether financing matches ambition. By whether it confronts the real structural questions: debt, policy space, fair trade, legal pathways for migration, and peace-building. And by whether our societies, parliaments, and civil society on both shores are truly part of shaping it - not merely consulted after decisions are made.

This Forum can help make that possible. Not as a substitute for the Pact, but as a space where its ambitions are tested, strengthened, and held accountable to the people it is meant to serve.

## **What can we create together**

**An interconnected, green Mediterranean energy grid.** We have precedents to build upon: in 2010, we (Greece and Turkey) joined with leaders from twenty-two Mediterranean countries to

launch the Mediterranean Climate Change Initiative here in Athens. The Pact's Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy initiative is a welcome new step. The test will be whether it accelerates real projects and builds shared industrial capacity for renewables - or remains another coordination mechanism, keeping us dependent on fossil fuels.

**A common framework for water cooperation.** Water is becoming the quiet geopolitical fault line of our region. It should stand at the very centre of any serious cooperation agenda - yet it receives far too little attention in the frameworks before us. This must change.

**A Mediterranean digital agenda.** One that protects citizens' rights, asserts our technological sovereignty, and ensures that the AI transition does not become a new form of external dependency, or a tool used against each other.

**An economic model and planning** that generates decent work, supports small and medium enterprises, and strengthens local capacity rather than entrenching dependence.

**And a genuine University for the Mediterranean.** Here, I want to recognise a proposal long championed by Romano Prodi - and now, happily, embraced within the Pact itself. The challenge is to implement it with the ambition Prodi envisioned. Not an exchange programme, but joint institutions pairing universities on both shores. Athens with Cairo. Barcelona with Rabat. Naples with Tunis. Where students and faculty from North and South study together, in equal numbers.

The purpose is not only academic or economic. It is civilisational. To build, over a generation, networks of young people who have lived together, learned together, and who carry that shared experience into public life, business, and governance.

In the same spirit, the Pact's proposed Youth Parliamentary Assembly is a promising step - provided it becomes a genuine forum of co-decision. Resilience is built through trust, through knowledge, through democracy, through participation, and through human connection.

And let us not forget our **diaspora communities**. Greek, Lebanese, Egyptian, Maghrebi, Albanian, Turkish - and so many others. Is it a dream to imagine cooperation even of the Palestinian and Israeli diasporas? Such a genuine, peaceful partnership would bring huge potential in investment, knowledge, cultural creativity, and well-being across our region.

## **We have hard questions to answer**

- **Debt.** Countries across the southern Mediterranean carry debt burdens that consume the fiscal space needed for education, climate adaptation, and productive transformation. A Mediterranean Debt Initiative - coordinating positions in international financial institutions, supporting relief tied to climate and development, exploring debt-for-climate swaps - is not charity. It is the precondition for everything else.
- **Trade.** The asymmetries of existing Association Agreements have entrenched a pattern in which the south exports raw materials and labour, while the north exports finished goods and capital. This is not partnership. It is the continuation of an older arrangement under newer language. An honest trade review is overdue.
- **Industrial policy.** Southern Mediterranean states must retain the right to do what every successful developer in history has done - to protect strategic sectors, to require local content, to nurture domestic capacity. The lecture that they should not is, frankly, a lecture our own countries did not follow at the same stage of development.
- **Financing.** The Pact will not deliver without a financing mechanism equal to its ambition. A Mediterranean Public Goods Fund - pooling EU resources, Gulf sovereign wealth, multilateral co-financing, and private capital structured for public purpose - is the instrument the moment requires.

- **Taxation.** The quiet haemorrhage of our region's revenues - through transfer pricing, tax havens, and capital flight - drains resources that should fund schools, hospitals, and the green transition. Unfashionable to propose. Indispensable to address.

Cooperation that avoids these questions is simply a performance.

## **A Mediterranean of culture, a Mediterranean of meaning**

There is one more dimension we cannot leave unspoken.

The Mediterranean is, above all, a civilisational space. Three continents meet. Three of the world's great monotheisms were born here. Philosophy, democracy, law, poetry, and music have crossed and recrossed these waters for three thousand years.

These are crucial for our common future. We need to expand and consolidate existing initiatives - building on the Anna Lindh Dialogue of Cultures, the Mediterranean Film Festivals, the Biennale of Young Artists, and the Mediterranean Games - and to imagine new ones: why not a Mediterranean Song Contest, and a Mediterranean Year of Cultural Capitals, with two cities each year, one from each shore?

A Mediterranean Generation who have danced together, sung together, watched the same films, read the same books, and played on the same teams is a generation of peace.

And in the end, our cooperation must strengthen the capacity of our societies. Not weaken them.

Strong regional partnerships can only be built upon strong, just, democratic, peaceful, and confident societies.

Cooperation must expand our capacity for national and local problem-solving. Not replace it. Empowering our nations, empowering our local governments, empowering our peoples, our youth, our women.

In this context allow me also to express our sincere appreciation to the Interreg Euro-MED Programme and the wider Euro-Mediterranean cooperation initiatives represented here today, for their important and practical contribution to regional collaboration, sustainability, and innovation.

## **The choices before us**

Dear friends,

Let us be honest about the choices before us.

Every crisis we face is a test of political will. Every challenge hides a crossroads.

We can make ambitious declarations. Or we can build cooperation that people feel in their lives.

We can patrol borders after despair has already won. Or we can confront the inequality, the conflict, the exclusion - building legal pathways, fair labour mobility, and investment in livelihoods both in our host societies and addressing migration where it begins.

We can stay silent about Gaza for the sake of diplomatic comfort. Or we can speak with honesty - and build the credibility on which our future peace and cooperation depends.

We can treat the Mediterranean as a line of division. Or we can reclaim it as a bridge of understanding and knowledge.

We can applaud and celebrate summits. Or we can demand delivery. Accountability. Measurable change.

We can speak the language of partnership while leaving debt, trade, inequality and tax injustice untouched. Or we can have the honest conversations on which any real partnership depends.

We can ask young people, civil society, and local communities to sit politely at the margins. Or we can trust them with real power. Real participation. Real co-decision.

We can pursue a green and digital transition that creates new inequities or dependencies on technologies owned by others. Or we can shape one that builds shared prosperity, productive capacity, and technological sovereignty on both shores.

We can treat culture as ornament. Or we can recognise it as the deepest reason we belong to one another.

We can let regional cooperation drift away from democratic life at home. Or we can make it the force that renews democratic life - at home, and across this sea.

These are not abstract dilemmas. They are political choices. Human choices. Moral choices.

Choices reflected in what we finance. In what we tolerate. In what we defend. And in what we are finally no longer willing to leave unsaid.

The Mediterranean has always been more than geography. It has been a meeting place of civilisations, of ideas, of trade, of memory, of hope.

And history will ask something very simple of our generation.

Did we choose the easier path - the path of passivity, of management and silence, of waiting for others to determine our fate?

Or did we choose the harder path - the path of courage, cooperation, democracy, and shared humanity?

That is the path that can renew this region.

A sea that has absorbed the sins of our growth - our plastics, our waste, our indifference - and yet it endures. It can be cleansed, be made beautiful again.

A sea restored becomes a sea that teaches.

And as so often before across three thousand years, the Mediterranean can offer the world a paradigm - that what humanity has broken, humanity can mend; that decline is never destiny; and that from these waters, renewal can rise once more.

## Closing

Dear friends,

We live in an age of immense power: technological, financial, and the vast new power of knowledge.

The ancients would ask us: Do we have the wisdom to use it wisely or will we be overcome with a hubris that invites nemesis?

Let us show we can use this power not against one another, not in a competition for domination, but as a unifying force - for our work toward the common good and shared prosperity.

That is our responsibility.

That is the spirit of Circle the Med.

And now, it is my great honour and privilege to invite to the podium the President of the Hellenic Republic, Mr. Constantine Tassoulas.

Welcome - and thank you.