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What the EU's new Commissioner for the Mediterranean means for the region

The new European Commission includes a dedicated Commissioner for the Mediterranean. Emanuele Errichiello examines what this change could mean for relations between the EU and states in the Mediterranean region.

On 1 December, the **newly approved European Commission** officially took office. A significant – and rather underappreciated – innovation in the new Commission is the creation of a dedicated **Directorate-General and a Commissioner portfolio exclusively focused on the Mediterranean**.

Historically, EU-Mediterranean relations have been shaped by ambitious but often underwhelming initiatives. The **1995 Barcelona Process**, for instance, envisioned a regional framework for shared prosperity, emphasising trade liberalisation, cultural dialogue and common political reform. However, the project struggled to deliver tangible outcomes due to geopolitical tensions, a lack of cohesive governance and diverging priorities among member states.

Similarly, the **European Neighbourhood Policy**, launched in 2003, sought to foster closer ties with neighbouring countries through financial aid and policy alignment, but has faced criticism for its limited impact and overly top-down approach. This recent change could thus reflect a recalibrated geostrategic focus for the EU after decades of waning interest in its southern neighbourhood. But how can we interpret this new initiative from what we know so far?

The death of region-building

The first Commissioner for the Mediterranean will be Croatian politician Dubravka Šuica, the former Vice-President for Democracy and Demography of the European Commission. This new position represents a structural departure from the previous arrangement, where Mediterranean cooperation

fell under the broader remit of the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. However, the specifics of this “renewed focus” warrant scrutiny.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s **mission letter** emphasises migration management as a key pillar of the new portfolio, which will be driven by a “**New Pact for the Mediterranean**”. Specific directives include operationalising the external aspects of EU migration policy, bolstering strict border controls, combatting human trafficking and establishing “ad-hoc” partnerships with transit countries to counter irregular migration.

References to human rights and democratic values remain sparse, signalling a shift in focus away from governance reform, the rule of law and civil society engagement – formerly central principles of the EU’s foreign policy in its southern neighbourhood. It should come as no surprise that this strategy has drawn criticism for prioritising EU security concerns over the broader developmental and humanitarian needs of countries in the region.

Other focal points of Šuica’s mandate include trade, investment and energy cooperation through what the new Commissioner called the “Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative” **in her keynote speech**. This upcoming initiative aligns with the EU’s broader agenda of securing energy diversification in light of geopolitical challenges – in particular the ongoing energy crisis spurred by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In this vein, North African countries like Algeria and Morocco are poised to play key roles as energy suppliers and as future sources of green energy.

Broadly speaking, von der Leyen’s letter to Šuica asks the latter to prioritise “comprehensive partnerships” aimed at fostering engagement in the aforementioned fields. When reading the document, it is evident that these partnerships are expected to be based on a bilateral, country-based framework, rather than regional initiatives.

This change, taken together with recent policy developments such as the latest reforms of the European Neighbourhood Policy, suggest a further move away from EU efforts to politically integrate the Mediterranean region. We may thus be seeing the end of any attempt to pursue region-building in the Mediterranean, as conceived in the Barcelona Process 30 years ago.

A shift to realpolitik

The new portfolio signals a shift toward a more transactional approach in the EU’s relations with North African countries. Rather than being included in a regional framework where they share “everything but institutions” with the EU – **as former Commission President Romano Prodi claimed in 2004** – these states are being sidelined and securitised as Europe’s “border”. They now appear relevant only to the EU’s interests, such as in relation to migration and energy.

The establishment of a separate Directorate-General for the Mediterranean also institutionalises the decoupling of the southern neighbourhood from the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the

South Caucasus – regions now overseen by the Directorate-General for Enlargement. This division signals a marked departure from the strategic vision of the 1990s and early 2000s, which sought to include all Mediterranean countries into a single regional framework.

Hence, the foundational principles of the Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy have gradually eroded, giving way to a narrower focus on security, migration control and economic interests. This realignment reflects a broader trend in EU foreign policy, where “pragmatic” considerations overshadow normative commitments, and immediate pressures outweigh long-term strategic goals. While this approach addresses short-term challenges, it falls short of offering a transformative vision for the Mediterranean.

What Mediterranean?

The EU’s renewed focus on the Mediterranean comes with significant challenges. The historical track record of Euro-Mediterranean initiatives is marked by unmet expectations and limited impact. This further shift toward bilateralism risks fragmenting regional cooperation efforts – both inside and outside the EU – and undermining collective solutions to transnational challenges such as climate change and terrorism.

The final directive in Šuica’s mission letter – developing a strategic communication plan to counter anti-EU narratives – also underscores a growing preoccupation with managing perceptions and sentiments in the southern neighbourhood countries, rather than addressing structural issues. Anti-European narratives have indeed grown in North Africa, especially following the 2011 uprisings. Yet making this a priority rather than promoting substantive policy change risks further undermining the trust and credibility of the EU in the eyes of North African partners.

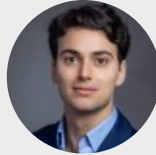
The newly established portfolio could thus undermine faith in the EU’s commitment to fostering a genuine partnership in the wider Mediterranean, potentially leading to greater political distance between North Africa and Europe. It also makes clear that the traditional model of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership is now defunct.

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