ALF4THEPACT

Putting the People-To-People and the Cultural Dimension at the Heart of Euro-Mediterranean Relations

Mobility, Youth, Culture

Anna Lindh Foundation
EUROMED

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"You will create a common and people-centered agenda and develop partnerships based on common values and dialogue […] reads the mission letter Commissioner for the Mediterranean Šuica received from the President of the European Commission in 2024. In that same letter, the Commissioner was asked to work on a new Pact for the Mediterranean.

This document presents the consolidated contribution of the ALF Secretariat to the New Pact, offering operational proposals to **reinforce the people-to-people and cultural dimensions** as core elements of this initiative. Strengthening this dimension is not only highly strategic but also instrumental in generating multiplier and cross-cutting effects across all the Pact's pillars, ultimately advancing the EU's key interests in the region: prosperity, stability, and security.

The Barcelona process, launched in 1995, included a dedicated pillar on the development of "Partnerships in social, cultural and human affairs: developing human resources, promoting understanding between cultures and interactions between civil societies". This reflected a visionary approach to Euro-Mediterranean relations, one rooted in intercultural dialogue, grassroots networks, inclusive participation, and people-to-people cooperation as key drivers of societal transformation.

While the concept of human development has gained traction, most notably in the 2021 Renewed Agenda for the Mediterranean, **the intercultural and people-to-people dimensions have gradually lost prominence.** These aspects have proven more challenging to promote in an era where Euro-Mediterranean relations have grown increasingly transactional.

This contribution rests on a core conviction: **valuing and leveraging the unique people-to-people dimension and cultural ties EU shares with its Southern neighbours is not at odds with the EU's so-called hard interests in the region; rather, it is essential to achieving them.**

It significantly **enhances the EU's strategic capacity to project its fundamental values and policies which underpin its role in the international community, as powerful instruments of attraction and influence** -a unique form of soft power that remains unmatched and is sought to be emulated by other global actors-.

Reinforcing and revitalising these distinctive assets is not only essential but also **the most effective countermeasure to the increasing tide of mistrust, polarising and divisive narratives, as well as anti-EU sentiment across the region,** and a vital contribution to reinvigorating the Euro-Mediterranean project.

As the EU marks the 30th anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership at a time when the U.S. is dismantling much of its civil society support in the region and when foundational pillars of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation are being challenged, it is more strategic than ever for the EU to breathe new life into this often-overlooked pillar.

The **ALF Secretariat** will not shy away from its responsibilities and **is prepared to serve as a trusted partner in turning this renewed vision into concrete action and reinvigorating the people-to-people and cultural dimension of the partnership in an unprecedented way.** The EU can count on the ALF as a committed and experienced implementing partner, with an established framework to support the realisation of its initiatives.

Indeed, ALF was established in 2005 to promote intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding across Euro-Mediterranean societies. Since its inception, ALF has successfully mobilised a vast network of civil society actors, the largest in the Euro-Med region, while benefiting from the strong support of its Board of Governors **and EU Institutions**, which brings together representatives from 42 Member States and the European Commission.

The vision outlined in this contribution is deeply aligned with ALF's two decades of experience in empowering civil society, especially youth -women and men- and reflects its evolving role as a key actor with solid organizational and methodological foundations developed in recent years.

In the months leading up to this document, ALF organised a series of dedicated events, including the ALForum 2025 held in Tirana, that fostered collective and intergenerational reflection on the Pact's priorities[1].

Consequently, **the focus of this contribution will be on mobility, youth, culture and dialogue.** For each dimension, specific, targeted, and operational recommendations will be provided, both for framing the Pact itself and for tangible actions to be taken beyond the Pact. This contribution will culminate in highlighting ALF's unique strategic value as the ideal partner to bring these recommendations to life.

[1] The *ALF4thePact* sessions were held in key cities across the Mediterranean, including Brussels, Málaga, and Granada together with the ALForum 2025, which featured more than 800 participants and around 90 panel sessions. These gatherings brought together policymakers, civil society actors, and youth representatives to generate concrete ideas and proposals aimed at informing the European Commission's work on the New Pact.

Towards a "Mobility with Purpose" Agenda in the Mediterranean

Mobility is a core element of intercultural dialogue and regional integration. However, current frameworks and priorities within the Euro-Mediterranean partnership often treat mobility through a narrow lens, focusing primarily on the security dimension of migration control and the economic utility of the labour force. This overlooks the broader, transformative potential of people-to-people connectivity.

While these are entirely legitimate aims, mobility also **plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural understanding, regional cohesion, innovative approaches, and the empowerment of civil society.** In particular, the movement of youth, cultural entrepreneurs, and civil society actors is essential to building mutual trust and breaking down prejudices.

Enhanced opportunities for mobility among these groups can **help strengthen regional ties, foster social cohesion, address misunderstandings and nurture a genuine sense of shared identity and ownership across the Euro-Mediterranean space.** Interconnectivity, a paradigm of renewed significance in the Pact and more generally in Euro-Mediterranean relations, cannot exist without human connection.

Sustainable regional integration requires more than investments; it depends on the active and inclusive participation of people who identify with a shared Euro-Mediterranean space. Mobility - through learning from one another and sharing experiences across borders- is more than a means of connection; it is the essential first step in weaving the social fabric needed for proper integration. Only by fostering these human ties can the Euro-Mediterranean partnership build a genuine sense of belonging and fully realise its potential.

Youth insights during the ALForum and beyond confirm that mobility is not a luxury but a fundamental right and an essential form of communication and connection in the Mediterranean. As highlighted by multiple ALF youth delegates, **mobility facilitates learning, fosters a sense of ownership, and contributes to the formation of regional identity.** It is how young people *"express interest in one another, learn, collaborate, question, innovate, and grow together"*.

Yet, the EU's approach to mobility remains fragmented, with parallel programmes lacking coordination and reducing overall impact. While innovative initiatives such as Erasmus+ virtual exchanges (to which the ALF contributed directly) offer new and inclusive avenues for connection, they remain complementary tools. They cannot replicate the **depth of understanding, trust-building, and shared experience that emerge through physical, face-to-face mobility,** which remains essential for fostering genuine dialogue and long-term cooperation across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Mobility programmes are often skewed towards established institutions with the capacity to navigate EU funding mechanisms, **leaving grassroots organisations with limited access to financial support.** As a result, civil society agents, particularly those operating at local and regional levels and **having a direct impact in their immediate communities,** too often struggle to participate in cross-border exchanges, despite the fact that it is by far the most sought-after by civil society entities on both shores of the Mediterranean.

Youth -women and men- are especially subject to closed doors, visa denials, lack of funding, and exclusion from decision-making spaces, **leading to a profound sense of frustration that fuels distrust in EU funding and, by extension, in EU Institutions.** This is particularly serious if we take into account that **these entities are the ones that share values and believe in the creation of a truly shared Euro-Mediterranean space.**

The imbalance in mobility flows and the inaccessibility of exchange opportunities undermine the spirit of reciprocity and shared ownership. As one youth delegate at the ALForum put it, ***"mobility is not about escaping, it's about connecting. It's about shaping regional narratives from within"***. Their testimonies reaffirm that a "mobility with purpose" agenda must prioritise equity, dignity, and mutual investment, transforming mobility into a strategic pillar of intercultural dialogue, not merely a side effect of economic or border control policy.

Investing in the mobility of civil society actors across the Mediterranean is more than a tool for sharing local practices and enriching grassroots action; it is a catalyst for building trust, fostering mutual understanding, and driving innovation. By connecting changemakers across borders, such mobility unlocks the broader economic and social potential of the region -while providing safe and enabling spaces for civil society to strengthen shared values and shape collective solutions-.

IN THE PACT

- Recognise the importance of mobility of civil society agents and young professionals - women and men- as agents of transformation beyond simply filling employment gaps or promoting economic opportunities

OPERATIONALISING THE PACT

- Develop and coordinate a dedicated mobility scheme for civil society, an "Erasmus for Euro-Med Entities (EEE)" with concrete purposes, building on and expanding current ALF in Motion Programme carried out over the last three years, in line with the ROM recommendations of ALF EU Grant Phase VI.

Youth Representation in Euro-Mediterranean Policy-Making Processes

The Mediterranean region is home to a vibrant and dynamic youth population whose potential often remains untapped. ALF has consistently championed youth-led change by not only equipping young leaders with the tools and capacity to voice their aspirations but also by empowering them with meaningful opportunities to lead transformative change and influence policy at multiple levels. ALF views **young people not only as beneficiaries but also as partners in creating a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society.**

The current momentum created by **the New Pact presents a unique opportunity** to firmly integrate youth voices, particularly from the South, into the institutional framework of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and to **accelerate the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean dimension of the EU Youth Action Plan 2022–2027** across its three pillars -Engage, Empower, and Connect-.

Youth consultation mechanisms must be meaningful, well-structured, and genuinely inclusive, moving beyond tokenistic participation. They should enable young people to engage fully in decision-making at every stage, from design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. As a prominent civil society platform, ALF can serve as a valued partner in this regard.

The ALF has built on its longstanding legacy and expertise to empower Euro-Mediterranean youth as agents of social and policy change through its flagship regional programme, Mediterranean Youth in Action. This initiative is providing structured platforms for meaningful youth engagement in policy-making and civic dialogue across the region[2].

Committed to sustaining this impact, the ALF continues to invest in creating **enabling environments where young voices are not only heard but also valued and acted upon.** This includes delivering capacity-building programmes, facilitating cross-border exchanges, and supporting youth-led initiatives that drive change from the ground up[3].

Youth across the Mediterranean also play a fundamental role in countering polarising narratives and challenging disinformation. This is at the heart of the ALF's mission to promote intercultural dialogue as a foundation for trust and strengthening critical thinking, particularly among youth[4].

[2] In this regard, the process leading to the European Economic and Social Committee's adoption of REX/583, incorporating ALF youth delegates offer a source of inspiration and should set a precedent for future engagement. Strengthened cooperation is also continuing with the UfM.

[3] The ALF Euro-Med Youth Policy Dialogue, between youth representatives and Commissioner Šuica in April 2025, is an example of structured conversation that could be made systematic and expanded, and used to implement the South component of Youth Action Plan. Likewise, the ALF is ready to capitalise on the direct involvement of MYA youth representatives in the PA-UfM and EP DMED in Granada, Málaga and Strasbourg.

[4] The ALF is actively contributing to the development of more resilient, inclusive storytelling across the region, laying the groundwork for long-term peacebuilding and social cohesion, including through its new initiative, *The Road to Inclusive Narratives: Intercultural Literacy, Fighting Misinformation & Disinformation.*

It is essential to equip societies with the tools to question harmful narratives, resist manipulation, and foster a culture of openness and dialogue. This is just one of the channels through which youth can become powerful peace agents. In this context, the 10th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security offers further momentum for the EU and Euro-Mediterranean institutions to champion this agenda in the Mediterranean, empowering youth as actors of peace.

IN THE PACT

- Include the development of a specific Roadmap to achieve the objectives of the EU Youth Action Plan 2022-2027 in Euro-Mediterranean region and establish structured mechanisms to involve youth representatives in Euro-Mediterranean policy processes.

OPERATIONALISING THE PACT

- Establish a Euro-Med Youth Assembly lead by the ALF Secretariat that brings together intergenerational elected representatives from national parliaments alongside selected delegates from youth-led and youth-oriented organisations and networks across the region, building on its experience in cooperating with the PA-UfM and EP DMED
- Promote further synergies between the ALF and the UfM with regards to youth participation in Ministerial meetings in different fields of common interest.

Untap the Full Potential of International Cultural Relations in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

The importance of culture in the EU's external relations, i.e. international cultural relations (ICR), has been recognised in several EU policy documents, including the **2016 Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations,** the **2018 New Agenda for Culture,** and the **Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026.** ICR will likely play a significant role in the Cultural Compass, which is currently being defined, and will strategically frame EU cultural policy.

This policy framework highlights the power and potential of intercultural dialogue and advanced cultural cooperation with partner countries in fostering socio-economic development, building people-to-people connections, nurturing peaceful inter-community relations, and addressing cultural, political, and religious tensions to generate trust and mutual understanding.

Although this, when culture is mentioned nowadays, it is usually in connection with economic goals, such as digitalisation, competitiveness, and employability. While acknowledging culture's economic potential, the ALF warns that this narrow framing undermines the broader and **intrinsic value of intercultural dialogue in addressing challenges in Euro-Mediterranean relations.**

Here, a crucial distinction must be made between Cultural Diplomacy (CD) and International Cultural Relations (ICR), both of which are often conflated in EU external action. Cultural diplomacy is an interest-driven governmental practice that seeks to mobilise culture as a soft power tool to advance strategic objectives, often as part of broader public diplomacy efforts. Unfortunately, despite the best of intentions, this has been the dynamic followed mainly in the Euro-Med region.

In contrast, **International Cultural Relations are grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual learning** and aim to foster long-term transnational cooperation between individuals, civil society actors, and cultural professionals. ICR adopts a participatory approach based on shared values and co-creation, rather than a unilateral projection of influence.

By mandate and through action, the ALF is a natural supporter and promoter of ICR as they offer a more sustainable and inclusive pathway to societies' cohesion. The EU must therefore resist the temptation to instrumentalise culture solely for geopolitical influence and instead embrace ICR as a relational practice rooted in equal footing dialogue. And yet, decreasing, rather than increasing attention has been devoted to coordinate, optimise, and ultimately, magnify the impact of intercultural cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The emphasis on culture that characterised the Euro-Med Partnership has been gradually replaced with a focus on "human development," a broader umbrella term that encompasses health, governance, and other related areas. The 2008 Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Culture, which called for a comprehensive cultural strategy for the region, has seen little follow-up. Cultural cooperation is often absent or underfunded in Association Agreements, partnership priorities, and multi-annual action plans (2024–2027). Accordingly, the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean does not reference the ICR framework and misses an opportunity to build on existing cultural initiatives and the work of organisations such as the ALF.

The ALF calls for a renewed cultural focus in Euro-Mediterranean relations, with a separate section on ICR that reconnects fragmented initiatives and leverages existing mechanisms[5].

To achieve this, the ALF advocates for **civil society to become an integral part of the "soft infrastructure"** necessary for sustainable Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. An inclusive, and participatory approach, that **enables and supports grassroots organisations, small structures, and locally rooted initatives that reflect local realities,** promote individual self-esteem and collective well-being allowing lasting changes, and promotes cultural mediation as a key instrument for strengthening intercultural dynamics.

The **Pact presents a unique opportunity to rebalance Euro-Mediterranean ICR, emphasising the importance of South-to-North engagement.** The Southern Mediterranean diaspora in Europe can play a crucial role. Moreover, despite ongoing regional tensions, South-South intercultural cooperation must also be supported to build inclusive cultural partnerships.

Finally, ICR are the best antidote to conflict. The EU will gain significantly by further positioning itself as a leader in promoting dialogue-based and cooperative approaches to security in the Mediterranean.

The new Pact presents a timely opportunity to showcase the **EU as a proactive advocate for inclusive, people-centred security, one that invests in societal bridges and mutual understanding,** utilising existing Euro-Mediterranean frameworks, notably the ALF, as key enablers.

IN THE PACT

- **Embrace the principles and provisions of the 2016 Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural and implement an Euro-Mediterranean dimension of the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 and the EU Cultural Compass.**
- **Acknowledge the potential of inter-cultural dialogue and cultural exchanges to counter polarizing narratives that threaten the foundational pillars of Euro-Mediterranean relations**

OPERATIONALISING THE PACT

- **Organise a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial meeting on culture and people-to-people approach in coordination with the ALF and UfM,as kick-off of the Euro-med dimension of the EU Cultural Compass.**
- **Design and coordinate an ad hoc programme to foster Euro-Mediterranean International Cultural Relations, capitalising on initiatives that have proved very fruitful, such as the Day of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue.**

[5] Building on the April 2025 ALF4ThePact Dialogue in Granada and on the five Cross-Network sessions organized by the ALF members from Belgium, France, Ireland, Morocco, Spain and Tunisia during the ALForum 2025 aimed at moving beyond the understanding International Cultural Relations as a mere tool of soft power and giving them a more creative and inclusive approach, centered on a renewed spirit of dialogue, mutual understanding and learning, joint capacity development and Mediterranean solidarity.

In the Pact, Operationalising the Pact
A Call to Further Capitalise on the ALF's Strengths

The role of the ALF, with its longstanding credibility and well-established civil society network across the Euro-Mediterranean region, has been acknowledged in many policy documents. By 2025, the ALF has become uniquely positioned to support the aspirations of a renewed Pact for the Mediterranean, serving as the partner of choice for implementing a new dynamic that strengthens civil society across the region and fosters meaningful people-to-people connections[6] .

The **Pact for the Mediterranean offers an opportunity to strategically integrate ALF's expertise into a broader EU framework for civil society cooperation.** As an intergovernmental institution structured as a Network of Networks of civil society and dedicated to dialogue between cultures and civilisations, the ALF plays a pivotal role in strengthening civil society functions.

Through its enhancing-capacities initiatives, funding instruments, and platforms for cross-regional collaboration, **ALF serves as a vital conduit between EU institutions and local CSOs.** Nevertheless, its full potential remains underleveraged.

By capitalising on its **decentralised structure, specific methodology to support grassroots entities and deep experience in civil society engagement, ALF has the capacity to act as a more agile and responsive intermediary.** This is particularly relevant for grassroots organisations that routinely face challenges navigating complex and rigid EU funding mechanisms. These organisations often lack the capacities to meet administrative requirements, which inhibits their access to necessary support.

One promising avenue for increased impact is through the expansion of **micro-support schemes with a purpose specifically tailored to grassroots entities.** With its outreach capabilities in its 43 target countries and ability to simplify application processes while offering multilingual support, the ALF is well-positioned to democratise access to EU resources. A renewed and empowered role for the ALF would also address persistent criticisms that smaller organisations struggle to navigate the fragmented and overly bureaucratic civil society programmes.

The ALF has been widely recognised as a key enabler and intermediary, **uniquely equipped to mediate between EU institutions and grassroots actors.** Its decentralised network, political neutrality, and flexibility in grant making make it a reliable partner for advancing people-to-people cooperation, particularly in sensitive or polarised contexts.

[6] During the panel "The Pact for the Mediterranean: An Opportunity to Rethink the EU's Approach to Civil Society Cooperation in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean," held at the ALF4ThePact Dialogue in Granada in April 2024 was advocated consistently to unlock the ALF's full potential at this pivotal moment -building on the institutional consolidation it has achieved in recent years-. Furthemore, at the PA-UfM Forum on the Future of the Mediterranean, also in Granada, Commissioner Šuica and King Felipe of Spain both underlined the critical role the ALF had to play as a bridge-builder, a promoter of inclusive dialogue, and a trusted intermediary between EU institutions and grassroots organisations across the Mediterranean.

Reinforcing this intermediary function—through for purpose funding and formal inclusion in EU programming—would greatly enhance both the legitimacy and reach of the EU's engagement with civil society in the region.

Furthermore, ALF's presence in countries with restrictive civic spaces gives it a unique operational advantage. ALF excels due to its ability to act with cultural sensitivity and local insight. This makes it a key player in contexts requiring discretion, adaptability, and deep local trust.

Becoming a partner of choice for the European Union on civil society also consists in capitalising on the considerable efforts the ALF has deployed over the previous few years to potentiate its capacity to manage, generate, and channel policy-oriented knowledge.

By leveraging insights gained through its extensive networks and Programmes, ALF is **well-placed to translate civil society perspectives into actionable policy recommendations.** In doing so, it can become a primary channel through which civil society priorities are integrated into EU civil society roadmaps and local EU Delegation strategies.

In line with the specific recommendations outlined in this contribution and building on its consolidation process and the methodologies developed in recent years, **the ALF is prepared to offer a more ambitious and large-scale contribution to Euro-Mediterranean relations.** Some examples of concrete areas of engagement in the short term include:

Mobility

- The ALF could develop a dedicated mobility scheme for civil society. This "Erasmus for Euro-Med Entities (EEE)" would build on and expand the current ALFinMotion Programme developed over the last three years, and develop mobility-for-purpose schemes.

Youth

- Building on its experience in cooperating with the PA-UfM and EP DMED, the ALF could work towards establishing a "Euro-Med Youth Assembly" that brings together elected representatives from national parliaments alongside selected delegates from youth-led and youth-oriented organisations and networks across the region.

Culture

- The ALF could coordinate, with the support of the UfM and the EU Institutions, a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial meeting on culture and people-to-people connections.
- The ALF could design and launch an ad hoc programme to foster Euro-Mediterranean International Cultural Relations, therefore reinforcing its capacities to implement and capitalise on initiatives that have proved very fruitful, such as the Day of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue.