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I am feeling increasingly optimistic when debating the future of the Mediterranean. Against all odds, I am firmly convinced that the region is finally taking steps in order to reach out and live up to its potential. There are moments in history when we feel more optimistic, even when we are fully aware that not everything is possible and that nothing can be accomplished in the mere blink of an eye.

That was the case 25 years ago, when the Euro-Mediterranean region underwent a period of particularly high expectations. The Oslo Accords opened new perspectives for the resolution of the most dramatic stalemate in our region. The European Union was building a new neighbourhood policy that was far more comprehensive than the exclusively economic agreements that had prevailed through its Global Mediterranean Policy and Renewed Mediterranean Policy of the previous decades. There was a shared understanding that the entire region should come together and work on: (1) the definition of a common area of peace and stability at the Euro-Mediterranean level, through the reinforcement of political and security dialogue; (2) the construction of a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free-trade area; (3) and the rapprochement between peoples through a social, cultural and human partnership aimed at encouraging understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies.

These were the objectives of the Barcelona Process, the most comprehensive effort of regional cooperation ever launched by the EU and its Mediterranean

neighbours, which established the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and laid the foundations upon which the European Neighbourhood Policy would come to be edified.

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The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is very proud to be the natural evolution of these inspirational moments, and we maintain our commitment to live up to the principles and objectives of Barcelona: building a common area of peace and stability, constructing a zone of shared prosperity and promoting a real social, cultural and human partnership.

Next year, coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process, the UfM Secretariat will also celebrate the 10th anniversary of its establishment; a decade in which we believe we have contributed to the relaunching of Euro-Mediterranean dialogue and cooperation.

Today we have consolidated the UfM as the platform for defining common agendas, for promoting regional dialogue processes and for supporting concrete cooperation projects that can have a positive impact on the lives of our citizens. Most importantly, we feel a renewed commitment on the part of our Member States, which are increasingly engaged in the organization's activities and give a new impulse to its dialogue and cooperation. This allowed us, for instance, to launch the UfM Regional Forum, which has gathered our Member States' Ministers of Foreign Affairs on an annual basis since 2015. Or to organize a successful UfM Trade Ministerial Meeting in March 2018, after an eight-year hiatus.

The number and comprehensive scope of UfM Ministerial meetings in recent years – over 25 in sectors as diverse as Employment and Labour, Women Empowerment, Trade, Energy, Water, Environment or Blue Economy – is yet further proof of Euro-Mediterranean countries' commitment to dialogue as a way to promote a regional approach to their common challenges.

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Since we are increasingly ambitious in our objectives, we focus on guaranteeing that these meetings agree on concrete roadmaps or on common agendas that allow us to move forward on regional cooperation and integration. That was the case, for instance, of the Euro-Mediterranean Water Agenda, an essential framework for the collective management of one of our most precious assets and an instrument to advance our efforts in the protection of the environment in one of the regions most affected by the damaging effects of climate change. These are thematic areas that are at the core of the work developed by the UfM.

Moreover, the UfM maintains a special focus on human development, particularly engaging in the promotion of Women and Youth. In gender issues, the well-established UfM Regional Dialogue on Women has been pushing for the full inclusion of young women in all political, social and economic spheres, feeding the debate on a number of pivotal issues and establishing a regional peer-review mechanism through the definition of clear indicators common to all Member States. Likewise, the UfM is currently preparing an ambitious Strategy on Youth and has

been supporting youth activism in the region, namely through the empowerment of networks like the Mediterranean Youth Climate Network or the Mediterranean Youth for Water Network.

The reinforcement of regional integration, particularly through the promotion of trade and further economic cooperation, is an essential element for the socio-economic growth of the region. The UfM Business Fora and Conferences on Digital Economy or Creative Industries, to give recent examples, bolster the private sector's important contribution to the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue. Simultaneously, the UfM launched a comprehensive and multi-layered approach to tackle one of the most important challenges in the region, which is unemployment. The Med4Jobs initiative already supports 13 different projects in areas ranging from education and vocational training to job creation and support to small and medium-sized enterprises, which have proved an effective instrument in the improvement of our citizens' socio-economic perspectives, particularly in the South.

These initiatives have only been developed thanks to the growing engagement of the UfM Member States, and particularly to the full commitment of the UfM Co-Presidency, led by Jordan and the European Commission. In the case of the latter, the active engagement of the Commission has been pivotal to deepening cooperation and increasing the synergies and coherence between the UfM agenda and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The way I see it, perspectives for the years to come are even more positive. We are seeing a new commitment on the part of our members to reinforcing cooperation ties and dialogue, as the region is facing a number of challenges that can only be tackled effectively at a regional level. That has motivated UfM Member States to further engage in regional dialogue, as clearly stated in the Roadmap for Action endorsed by Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 2017.

Furthermore, sub-regional cooperation initiatives, whose efforts concur to the objectives of the UfM and have always enjoyed our full support, have also been relaunched and reinforced.

The Agadir Agreement, a comprehensive free trade agreement between Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, seems to be back on track, with new members Lebanon and Palestine in the final stages of accession. Given the regional interest of this ambitious

and important project, the UfM will be launching a series of technical training sessions and capacity building measures for signatory countries, which will be implemented in collaboration with the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ).

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The Western Mediterranean Forum (5+5 Dialogue) is also stepping up its efforts, particularly after the recent Summit of the Two Shores in Marseille (23 and 24 June 2019), to boost cooperation between western Mediterranean countries by implementing projects that support human, economic and sustainable development in the region. The UfM, which already supported the activities of the 5+5 Dialogue in many of its thematic meetings, thereby guaranteeing the follow-up and implementation of its projects, has also been associated with this summit since an early stage. Given the positive impact that this process may have for the region, the UfM has not only participated in the different fora in the lead up to the summit and helped prepare and choose the projects submitted, but it has also organized a comprehensive conference under the title *Shared views on key issues in the Mediterranean* (Barcelona, 22 and 23 May 2019), where representatives from all UfM Member States could bring

their worries and aspirations to the table in preparation for the summit. The UfM is also a member of the 5+5 Steering Committee and, as such, engages in the follow-up of the summit.

In the eastern part of the Mediterranean, we see the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) consolidating its efforts to promote regional cooperation, as the first ever High-Level Conference on BSEC-EU Cooperation (Brussels, 18 June 2019) clearly demonstrated. In their latest Ministerial meeting, with which the UfM Secretariat had the honour of being associated, BSEC welcomed a new member, North Macedonia, in a strong sign of its renewed vitality.

Also in the eastern Mediterranean, new efforts to cooperate in the joint management of gas reserves have led to the launching of a new cooperation mechanism between Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan and Palestine: the East Mediterranean Gas Forum. The objective is to evolve into a full international organization to promote sub-regional cooperation, which hopefully will not remain focused on gas or markets, but will also include other sectors.

The pattern is clear. And the nomination of the Spanish Minister Josep Borrell for the post of High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will also concur to these positive dynamics. His new post will put him at the helm of the Union for the Mediterranean, as its Co-President from the North. I am fully convinced that his experience and long-time engagement with Mediterranean issues make him the most suitable person to steer the UfM to new heights, where our contribution to regional stability, socio-economic growth and economic integration can be even more efficient, achieve bigger and better results and further contribute to our common objectives of peace and prosperity.