

8th Summit of the Southern Countries of the European Union
Athens, 17.9.2021

The Athens Declaration
on climate change and the environment in the Mediterranean

The Southern Countries of the EU Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain, meeting on September 17th 2021 in Athens, at the level of Heads of State and Government, with the participation of the President of the European Commission, underline that they stand united in their strong conviction that urgent and ambitious global action – at national, regional and local levels, and involving all stakeholders, in particular, civil society and the private sector – is now, more than ever, necessary to tackle the escalating climate and environmental crisis and create a safe, secure prosperous, fair and sustainable future for our societies in the 21st century driven by circular economy patterns.

The Southern Countries of the EU:

Climate change

- Reiterate their firm commitment to the implementation of the Paris Agreement and to the target of limiting the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels as well as their commitment towards reaching climate neutrality by 2050, in line with the European Climate Law and the EU target of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. from 1990 levels.
- Take note, with concern, of the Report of the UN Inter-governmental Panel of Climate Change, published on the 9th of August 2021, which underlines that an urgent strengthened response to climate change is essential to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels
- Recall the UN Secretary General's Statement of 9th August 2021 about the planet being at imminent risk of hitting 1.5 degrees in the near term. The only way to prevent exceeding this threshold is by urgently stepping up our efforts and pursuing the most ambitious path by responding actively to his call to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.
- Express appreciation for the work done by the Italian Presidency of the G20 in raising the global ambition in that respect and welcome the outcome of the Ministerial meeting on Climate and Energy in Naples.
- Acknowledge that the Mediterranean is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, as it is prone to extreme weather events, and is already experiencing longer, more frequent and intensive heat waves, droughts, heavy precipitation, floods, and forest fires. As a result, the region is now suffering unprecedented ecological damage and response capabilities are being stretched to the limit.
- Underline that such vulnerability is going to increase due to the accelerating impacts from climate change in the region leading to losses in welfare in terms of economic impacts due to climate change, both at present and in the future. In this context, these impacts and climate cohesion need to be considered in the development and implementation of the climate and energy policies of the EU and be addressed and recognized appropriately to ensure that our countries are not at disadvantage in the context of a changing climate.
- Acknowledge the need for decisive adaptation and resilience policies in line with the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change and prevention measures in all sectors – including environmental and socio-economic – likely to be significantly affected by climate

change in the Mediterranean region, in a cross-sectoral manner, given that the impacts of climate change pose serious threats to the environment, society and the economy.

- Agree to intensify multilateral cooperation through the sharing of experiences and best practices in planning and implementing the necessary adaptation policies and prevention measures to minimize risks at national, regional, and local levels, involving all relevant stakeholders, including in the main public authorities, civil society, and businesses.
- Underline the need to engage in active dialogue and promote common initiatives and responses with all Mediterranean states, taking a regional approach to the climate crisis in alignment with EU action.
- Commit to the objectives of the European Green Deal and to progress on legislative proposals as part of the 'Fit for 55' package to this effect.
- Highlight the need to consider the following principles throughout the negotiations of this package: ensuring decarbonization, social fairness and technological neutrality, supporting innovation and industrial transitions, taking into account the efforts already made.
- Support the principle of a Carbon Border Adjustment mechanism, which serves as a climate measure that effectively mitigates carbon leakage risks while fully complying with WTO rules.
- Commit to work towards the protection of the Mediterranean's cultural and natural heritage, which is under threat from the impacts of climate change, by taking active action and supporting the Initiative "Addressing climate change impacts on cultural and natural heritage" launched by Greece at the 2019 Climate Action Summit and acknowledged by the UN Secretary General, in which UNESCO, WMO and UNFCCC are fully involved. In this framework, agree to participate in a pilot project for the protection of cultural and natural heritage, which is being currently prepared.
- Highlight the need to take the necessary actions for the swift and rapid alignment of public and private investment flows with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilient developments in order to accelerate the roll-out of low carbon and climate-proof infrastructures.
- Recognize the need for future coordinated actions to address the vulnerabilities resulting from limited connectivity between the Mediterranean and mainland Europe.
- Agree to work closely together to build synergies in advancing the necessary shift from fossil fuels to renewables and low carbon technologies, through meaningful public engagement in their planning and deployment with utmost care for the natural ecosystems.
- Agree to play an active role in communicating the particular climate vulnerability of the Mediterranean region, at the global level underscoring the importance of the Ocean-Climate nexus and the need to bring it to the forefront in the context of climate action.
- Agree to promote nature-based solutions to climate adaptation and to ensure adequate protection especially of ecosystems that are critical in the prevention of disasters, such as coastal zones, freshwater basins, wetlands, forests, and urban areas.
- Recognize the fundamental role of the ocean to sustain life on Earth and the significant stress which is experiencing, among other issues, due to climate change. Agree on the need to strengthen actions to preserve and protect the ocean and commit to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030, as well as to strengthen ocean-based adaptation.
- Recognize that with the impacts of climate change on the reduction in runoff and aquifer recharge together with a higher pressure of use, increased water scarcity is expected, especially in the southern and eastern regions which already experience low resource, with an increasing number of populations at risk of water stress.

- In view of the UNFCCC COP26, underline the need for all Parties to adopt ambitious targets in a coherent and balanced manner and commit to their implementation, and will engage within the EU and with external partners, with the aim of achieving the most ambitious outcome from COP26, in line with the EU's Fit for 55 package.
- Stress once more that the climate crisis is a global threat that requires concerted global action, thus, urge all countries to act collectively and without further delay as the UN SG stated on the 9th of August.
- In this respect, call upon all international partners, especially G20 countries, to ratify the Paris Agreement and increase their level of ambition, through the communication of ambitious NDCs.
- Recognize our commitment to rapidly scale-up technologies and policies that further accelerate the transition away from unabated coal capacity.
- Call on all countries to attend the UNFCCC COP26 at Head of State or Government level, and to commit to the objective of climate neutrality by 2050.

Biodiversity

- Acknowledge that the unique hotspot for marine biodiversity and endemism of the Mediterranean region is threatened by habitat' loss and degradation, further aggravated by the impacts of climate change.
- Stress the need for urgent action to address these long-term impacts on the region's biodiversity and ecosystems and, thus, the need for the necessary transformative changes to put biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030, in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.
- Commit to take actions to widen and better manage the EU network of protected areas, contributing to the objective of protecting 30% of the EU land and sea by 2030, one third of which under strict protection, through collective action by all countries participating in this joint effort, taking into account national conditions.
- Consider the mainstreaming of biodiversity in all sectoral policies as a necessary prerequisite for a green and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Commit to lead by example in tackling the global biodiversity crisis and, in view of the CBD COP 15, to work towards an ambitious and effective Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.
- Agree to collaborate in the development of strong and efficient implementation mechanisms and harmonized monitoring, reporting and review frameworks for biodiversity.
- Recognize the importance of the outcomes from the IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Marseille on September 2021, that recognize that the climate and biodiversity emergencies are not distinct, but two aspects of one crisis, that require mutually reinforcing responses and aims to put nature at the top of international priorities and lay the foundations for a global biodiversity strategy, which is imperative for the healthy function of ecosystems and for humanity.

Forests

- Acknowledge the adverse long-term impacts of forest fires on the biodiversity and ecosystems of the Mediterranean region by endangering species, changing the hydrological and geomorphological features of drainage basins and increasing land degradation, including severe soil erosion.

- Agree that forest management should be based on the diversification of species and provenances, adapted to future climatic conditions and on the diversification of forestry and stand structures.
- Recall the importance of placing primary and old growth forests under strict protection.
- Acknowledge the overall importance and major role of ecosystem services and green infrastructures and the key role of forests in water and carbon cycle regulation and climate change mitigation.
- Stress the need to further promote sustainable forest management, strengthening the multifunctional role of forest ecosystems and ensuring their protection and restoration by creating effective mechanisms towards this end. Moreover, stress the need to implement appropriate reforestation projects and, in this regard, commit to take actions to increase the quantity, quality and resilience of forests, including by contributing to the pledge of planting at least 3 billion additional trees in the EU by 2030 in full respect of ecological principles.
- Agree that urgent, coordinated, comprehensive and coherent policy responses are necessary towards the adaptation of forests to climate change.
- In this respect, reckons that the renewed EU forestry strategy adopted by the Commission in July 2021 can support regional and national actions.
- Commit to invest the necessary resources, make use of the best available science, and mobilize societies in order to plan forest cleanups, create firebreaks, and deploy all effective national and local forest fire prevention measures, using IT and digital economy tools.
- Agree to initiate community-based planning and implement disaster risk management, based on scientific knowledge regarding ecosystems, to prevent the dangers from climate hazards, share experiences, and cooperate on risk reduction measures.
- Encourage the sharing of technologies and experiences for ecosystem recovery and restoration of degraded areas, within and outside of protected areas, and to formulate initiatives that contribute to ecosystem connectivity.
- Support the strategic role of forests and the forestry sector in finding solutions to increase the sustainable use of wood products to replace other intensive emission materials.
- Agree to promote nature-based solutions to climate adaptation and mitigation and to ensure benefits for biodiversity and adequate protection especially of ecosystems that are critical in the prevention of disasters, such as coastal zones, freshwater basins, wetlands, and forests.
- Beyond Mediterranean forests, stress the need to tackle imported deforestation and global forest degradation at EU level through a new legislative initiative.

Marine environment / Blue economy

- Acknowledge the role of a sustainable Blue Economy in achieving the goals of the European Green Deal in the Mediterranean, inter alia through investment in innovative green technologies and further promotion of the principles of the circular economy.
- Agree to promote the EU Blue economy patterns with the view to making them circular and reducing the environmental, climate and energy footprint of all the related offshore and onshore/coastal activities with special attention to reducing plastic pollution.
- Underlines the need to promote a strong EU policy framework to support Blue economy development and a more integrated maritime policy.

- Underline that a key component of a sustainable Blue Economy is Maritime Spatial Planning, as an important policy and legal tool for the coherent management of the marine space, facilitating synergies of the economic sectors of the blue economy, while ensuring environmental protection and sustainable use of marine resources.
- Recognize the added value and complementarity with existing institutional frameworks on the protection and sustainable development of the Mediterranean of the Coalition for an Exemplary Mediterranean by 2030 and its Action Plan with ambitious actions envisaged.
- Call on all countries to actively participate, at the highest level possible, at the 2nd UN Ocean Conference to be held in Lisbon in 2022 (27th June – 1st July), in order to ensure scaling up of political commitment and concrete action, at the global level, towards the achievement of SDG 14.
- Strongly support the designation of the Mediterranean Sea as a Sulphur Emission Control Area (SECA) taking effect 1 March 2024.

Civil Protection, prevention, and preparedness

- Acknowledge that the EU Civil Protection Mechanism provides a framework of cooperation and assistance in cases of large-scale emergencies, which overwhelm the capacities of the affected member-states and stresses the importance of safeguarding and supporting further the Mechanism institutionally, financially, and operationally.
- Call for the full implementation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and a substantial strengthening of the RescEU resources in the Mediterranean, also taking into account the existing capacities and facilities in Member States, in order to provide a European Reserve. Call for stepping up the development of a substantive fleet of firefighting or other planes and helicopters, Medevac capacities to better protect European citizens and the natural environment against increasingly severe and complex disasters, such as fires, floods, earthquakes, epidemics, as well as for investing in capacity for disaster prevention and preparedness.
- Stress the urgency of strengthening and deepening cooperation among Mediterranean partners, considering that the challenges related to natural disasters share a common profile, are often transboundary and call for initiatives related to the exchange of experts, lessons learned, best practices, resources and expertise.
- In light of the above, while maintaining existing regional agreements, we agree to further extend the work of the Southern Countries of the EU group by organising sectoral meetings, , at all levels as necessary in a flexible and informal context, with the aim of facilitating the effective coordination and exchanges among the nine Partners.