



# THE PACT FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN: A STIMULUS FOR ENHANCED SKILLS AND LABOUR MOBILITY?

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## Introduction

Across Europe, demographic decline and its consequences have become a pressing concern. By 2050, Europe's working-age population is expected to shrink by 27 million. Far from being a future concern only, European employers are already struggling to fill labour needs. A 2023 survey reported that up to 70% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) faced difficulties finding workers with the right skills (European Commission, 2023a). All this underlines the need to fill skills and labour shortages, essential for boosting innovation and competitiveness in Europe (European Commission, 2024). Further challenges stem from the complexity of skills development and matching in rapidly changing labour markets. While re- and upskilling measures as well as enhanced labour market participation of underrepresented segments of the population will help to some extent, they alone will not suffice to produce the needed skills and expertise. Proactive immigration policies that enable foreigners to come for educational and work purposes will be key in this regard.

While countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are, by contrast, expected to experience population growth in the coming decades (Majorano et al., 2025), they likewise face a combination of political, economic and social pressures. With relatively young populations, tackling youth unemployment is a key factor for sustained economic growth and

stability, as do increasing educational attainment rates and addressing the impacts of climate change on livelihoods.

Growing efforts have gone into understanding how the European Union (EU) and partner countries in the MENA region could work together to address these challenges, and what role enhanced migration and mobility could play. In recent years, the EU has invested in a series of legislative and practical measures to strengthen legal migration pathways and skills development opportunities, also as part of a bid to boost the bloc's competitive edge vis-à-vis countries like the United States and China. Yet analyses also point to untapped potential from Southern Mediterranean countries, with rates of migration for study or employment having steadily grown in the past 10 years, particularly from North Africa (Majorano et al., 2025, p. 18). At the same time, widespread support among EU member states for a largely restrictive immigration agenda could complicate efforts to square the EU's own policy goals and further to align EU and partner country interests.

Heralding a “paradigm shift” for cooperation within the Mediterranean region, the Pact for the Mediterranean (hereinafter “the Pact”), released on 16 October 2025, offers a new occasion to assess the potential for enhanced skills and labour mobility between the EU and partner countries (European Commission, 2025a). This policy brief will first outline core elements of the Pact before delving into opportunities and challenges for skills and labour mobility and concluding with a set of recommendations to inform the implementation of the Pact as of 2026.

## **From an Agenda to the Pact for the Mediterranean**

Released just four years after the Agenda for the Mediterranean and the accompanying Economic and Investment Plan, the Pact represents an effort to reinvigorate cooperation in the Mediterranean region amid a changed geopolitical situation, marked by conflicts and political instability, as well as economic pressures. The mention of a “paradigm shift” and “strategic ambition” strikes a high-reaching political tone. Yet, the added value of the Pact is intended to lie in practical joint actions rather than launching any sort of new political process. Accordingly, it also does not supplant but rather complements existing cooperation frameworks. While the Pact strongly emphasises co-ownership and notions like the “triple win” for development, there is an open question around how this practical development tool will deliver on its political ambitions.

The Pact rests on three pillars: (1) investment in people through education and skills development; (2) economic growth and integration; and (3) security, preparedness and migration management. Under each of these, EU member states and partner countries are invited to join forces on issues of shared interest. Importantly, while complementarity with the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe funding and the EU Global Gateway is sought, it will be up to individual countries to mobilise financial resources for implementation. This will likely prove a challenge amid fiscal pressures and reprioritisation or even slashing of development aid, a trend in several European countries (Chase-Lubitz, 2025). As of 2028, new resources from the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) may become available for this purpose, depending on the outcome of the ongoing

negotiations.<sup>1</sup> The intention to expand the geographic scope of the Pact<sup>2</sup> to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Türkiye, and others that fall under the remit of the Commission's DG MENA can therefore also be understood as an attempt to secure additional financing for Pact implementation in the long run, beyond a broader effort to reassert the EU's role as a development partner vis-à-vis China and Russia.

As the Pact demonstrates, enhanced mobility for the region's youth especially and greater regional integration from an education and skills perspective constitute a core priority for the EU and partner countries. Among others, it foresees the establishment of a Mediterranean University and greater mobility under the Erasmus+ programme, the EU's longstanding initiative supporting personal and professional development. Moreover, it seeks to expand Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes in agriculture, food processing and the digital sectors, in line with labour market needs. The MED Skills Tracker and the T-MED Skills Agenda aim to expand skills intelligence and alignment of training programmes with industry and employers' needs. Ambitious in their undertaking, the success of actions under the Pact will depend on the ability to strike the right balance between political prerogatives and delivering local impact.

## **Making the EU legal migration framework more fit for purpose**

With its focus on skills and mobility, the Pact complements growing efforts to promote and facilitate access to education, skills development, and legal labour migration. Several EU initiatives speak to this: proposed as part of the 2023 Skills and Talent Mobility package, a provisional political agreement on the Talent Pool was reached in November 2025. Its aim will be to facilitate job matching across skills levels between European employers and third-country nationals through an online platform (European Commission, 2025b). Acknowledging the hurdles posed by cumbersome administrative processes for foreigners, the European Commission also put forward recommendations to simplify and expedite the recognition of skills and qualifications of non-EU nationals, important for both talent attraction and filling shortage occupations in the EU. Moreover, since launching the European Year of Skills in 2023, there has been a sustained effort to tackle issues related to skills and labour gaps through education and training. The Union of Skills plan accordingly focuses on improving quality TVET programmes, enhancing skills portability, and expanding opportunities to migrate for study or work purposes, among others. The Choose Europe initiative launched in spring 2025 aims to present the EU as an attractive destination for international researchers with the goal of strengthening Europe's role as a driver of innovation. While addressing issues facing employers and third-country nationals alike, the overarching emphasis of these recent initiatives lies in attracting and retaining foreigners to study and work in Europe in line with competitiveness goals.

<sup>1</sup> Note: During the launch of the Pact, European Commissioner for the Mediterranean Dubravka Šuica mentioned the intention of doubling the budget for the region in the next programming period to €42 billion. See: Knapp, F. (2025, October 16). EU plans to expand Erasmus program to southern Mediterranean countries. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-expand-erasmus-program-southern-mediterranean-africa-middle-east/>

<sup>2</sup> Currently limited to Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya as well as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

The Talent Partnerships, meanwhile, launched as part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, are primarily a tool for EU migration management. So far, they remain exclusively targeted at countries where concerns around irregular migration loom large, including Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. Their development potential – through emphasising mutual benefits and addressing issues such as brain drain, for example – thus stands in tension with security concerns. What is more, the prospect of negative conditionality, experts have argued, could limit their positive impacts (Tsourdi et al., 2023).

Amid this plethora of initiatives, the Pact's implementation will nevertheless depend on EU member states' willingness to ensure an enabling environment that maximises the reforms' and initiatives' positive impact for partner countries. Amid a stronger push by the Commission to tackle this issue, member states have, however, often been accused of lagging behind with implementing legal and practical reforms that would help tackle informational gaps, high costs, and integration issues. This creates a fragmented landscape that can be difficult to navigate. Nevertheless, depending on the actions pursued under the Pact, it could act as a "testing ground" for the rollout of some of the legislative and non-legislative actions put forward in recent years.

## Prospects for new migration pathways under the Pact

Data shows that residence permits have increased for nationals of Pact partner countries over the past decade. But while education-related permits even quadrupled to nearly 80,000, the share of employment permits is smaller and limited to certain economic sectors compared to other cohorts (Majorano et al., 2025, p. 18, 21).<sup>3</sup> With the increase likely to continue, could the Pact serve as an incentive for new targeted visas or migration pathways?

Slated for early 2026, the EU Visa Strategy is expected to outline ways to simplify and streamline visa processes, including with a view to attracting top researchers, start-up founders, and high-skilled workers (Ionta, 2025). In past years, fast-track procedures were introduced in Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden, aimed either at shortage occupations or specific sectors such as ICT and digital services or healthcare and pharmaceuticals (DG HOME, 2025; MPF, 2024). Further efforts have targeted start-up founders specifically, with the Commission underlining their importance in the recent EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy.

This focus on high-skilled professionals, however, does not reflect the growing need to fill gaps and shortages also in low- to medium-skilled professions (MPF, 2020, p. 13). Aimed at achieving a "triple win" for destination and origin countries and beneficiaries themselves, recent years have seen a proliferation of mobility schemes, notably for North African countries. The Pact suggests interest in further targeting low to medium skills levels. Despite many projects ongoing, evidence on relevant metrics such as successful job placement in either destination or origin country remains limited. Not only is this kind of data important to prevent brain waste, it is also an important element to secure political support and sustainability of programmes.

<sup>3</sup> Note: By comparison, according to one estimate from 2020, the share of European students in MENA countries was 3%. See: World Bank. (2020). *Internationalization of Tertiary Education in The Middle East and North Africa*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/cd99e53d-ad35-5253-bca1-771c64651df5>

Skills mobility under the Pact may be constrained by the existing legal frameworks, alongside knowledge gaps and practical challenges. To begin with, the Pact's goal of expanding the scope of Erasmus+ to also cover Pact partner countries – currently not fully associated to the programme – reflects a long-standing interest to expand mobility opportunities. At the same time, growing hurdles faced by international students and trainees also suggest a series of additional issues that need to be addressed for their sustained uptake that go beyond the Visa Strategy itself, such as fair working conditions or housing shortages (de Lange, 2025). Moreover, enhanced EU-wide TVET mobility currently is not a primary objective of the EU's main instrument for students and trainees, the Students and Researchers Directive (de Lange, 2025, p. 10). This constitutes a potential gap considering TVET's role in facilitating the transition from training to employment, especially in shortage occupations.

Moreover, significantly different levels of readiness by partner countries to deepen engagement on legal migration may be difficult to square with the Pact's regional vision. And with significant resources needed to move even just small cohorts of people, ideas like a “Euromed Visa” aimed at facilitating mobility within the region therefore seem unlikely in the near term. While the future could see openings for specialised sectors or needs, in the immediate term, member states' attention will likely focus on preventing visa abuse as well as the use of Article 25a of the Visa Code, which ties visa issuance to non-EU countries' cooperation on return and readmission. Even though the Pact foresees “awareness-raising campaigns on short-stay visas” to facilitate their issuance, changes in practice would ultimately rely on broader political and diplomatic efforts between EU and partner countries, considering their sensitive nature.

## **Building skills for a shared and green future**

Next to addressing visa issues, fulfilling the Pact's vision and EU competitiveness goals will also require more investment in skills anticipation and intelligence. This would help to align skills development and mobility schemes more closely with labour market needs across different skills levels.

Recognition of qualifications and skills is an important step in securing gainful employment but remains a significant hurdle for many third-country nationals. Within the EU, assessment criteria and processes differ among member states and are often complex and costly. For partner countries, challenges may lie in developing and aligning standards with those of the EU, as well as building the capacity for labour market-attuned skills development. The Commission's Pact for Skills saw the promotion of a “skills first” approach that would encourage an assessment of a person's skills and competences beyond traditional qualifications for better job matching and retention. This ethos is also reflected in the 2023 Recommendation to simplify and expedite recognition procedures (European Commission, 2023b). Skills mobility schemes, too, have tried to address this obstacle, for instance through the development of joint training modules and a recognised certificate as in the case of the Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa (THAMM) project (Center for Global Development, 2025).

The Pact builds on these efforts through its planned actions on scaling up TVET ecosystems, investment in quality apprenticeships, and creating a MED Skills Tracker. It is unclear, however, how these will be aligned with EU efforts to improve skills and qualifications recognition. In the case of the Tracker, questions arise on how the information collected might be used to inform the thinking around future facilitation of mobility to Europe or within the region. Moreover, while the sectoral TVET focus on agriculture, the digital sector and tourism should not read as exhaustive, it may be worth considering how the sectors identified could be aligned with other elements of the Pact, and broader policy objectives.

The green transition is a good example of this, considering efforts to establish greater coherence between migration, skills, climate and economic prerogatives. The increasing demand for people with “green skills” has only highlighted the difficulty of regulating an area amid rapidly changing labour markets as these skills risk becoming outdated after some time. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for its part, found that many skills assessment and anticipation exercises focus on employment projections and that the skills aspect is under-researched (OECD, 2023). Various entities have published green skills taxonomies, including the Commission, which also shed light on “green elements” that should be included in TVET (European Commission, 2022). The lack of knowledge of what green skills to focus on also probably explains why ideas such as “Green Skills Visas” so far have not gained much ground (Hahn, 2024).

Despite these challenges, skills and labour mobility to support the green transition remain an area worth investing in. Several EU-funded legal migration pilot projects were partly developed with this in mind, such as the MOBILISE project (MPF, 2023). While the Pact makes no explicit reference to green skills mobility, priority areas under pillar II, such as renewable energy and clean tech, sustainable transport, or water resilience, provide ample ground for aligning skills development and decarbonisation and energy transition goals. With all initial funds under the EU Global Gateway committed at this stage, additional resources would be needed. While not among its primary target areas, the European Investment Bank (EIB) could play an important role in this effort through its work on education, training, and climate and sustainability.

Difficulties in identifying and using green skills for employment purposes also highlight the challenge of skills portability, beyond mere recognition at different skills levels and sectors. This issue applies to EU citizens and non-EU nationals alike and is compounded by insufficient alignment between member states. In its proposal for a Talent Pool, the Commission had originally proposed the establishment of an EU Talent Partnership Pass, common to all participants in the migration schemes that would provide proof of skills gained in that context for employers using the platform and ease the bureaucratic process (Gargano, 2025, p. 2). The provisional agreement suggests this was not retained, with a default to existing national certification frameworks remaining (European Commission, 2025b).

In light of this, it is questionable whether the Pact would increase the appetite to create a Mediterranean Skills Passport to facilitate recognition, also in the context of enhancing TVET ecosystems. The foreseen Med Skills Tracker could help to improve skills intelligence, but questions remain as to how and by whom this knowledge would be used and how participants in skills



development and mobility schemes could personally benefit from their experiences. Further opportunities to maximise acquired skills intelligence could arise with the Skills Portability initiative, expected in 2026, given its aim to strengthen portability of skills and qualifications across the EU.

## Recommendations for the implementation of the new Pact

Amid growing attention to the importance of skills development and mobility for economies and societies, the Pact for the Mediterranean offers a framework to test and expand measures aimed at both these areas. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the contentious geopolitical climate, a largely restrictive EU migration agenda, and other factors key for the implementation of the Pact, such as funding, this policy brief puts forward the following recommendations:

- **Develop mobility schemes with a “triple win” approach in mind.** The Pact reflects the interest and need to also strengthen skills development in partner countries. Insofar as these also entail mobility, they should aim at triple wins to maximise the development potential and to reduce the risk of brain drain from partner countries, with priority given to quality training and labour market integration rather than scale. To that end, monitoring and evaluation of key metrics, such as completion rates or job placement, should also be ensured.
- **Expand mobility opportunities for the low- to medium-skilled.** The EU's legal migration framework largely focuses on low-skilled (seasonal) workers and attracting highly skilled workers. Data shows that nationals from the Pact partner countries make an important contribution to the EU economy but remain concentrated in certain sectors and often work in low-skilled jobs. Greater attention should also be given to expanding opportunities for the medium-skilled. These could be tailored to EU shortage occupations but should also be developed with future labour market needs in mind, including those needed for the green transition.
- **Improve the validation and recognition of skills and qualifications.** Given their essential role in enabling mobility, greater efforts should be invested into streamlining and harmonising validation procedures. In the absence of common frameworks, the focus could be on sectors of mutual priority and shortage occupations in the more immediate term.
- **Build capacity for skills anticipation and intelligence.** To align skills development with labour market needs in the EU and partner countries, national authorities together with educational and training institutions, Public Employment Services (PES) and the private sector should focus on building capacity for more streamlined skills assessments and anticipation with due attention to demographic needs. Input from employers especially can help to ensure compatibility with job opportunities.
- **Strengthen alignment between skills development and Global Gateway projects, where appropriate.** With an extensive focus on areas such as renewable energy and clean tech as well as water resilience, there is ample ground to foster green skills development. Given the Global Gateway's focus on some of these areas from Morocco to Jordan, there is scope for aligning Pact-related investments into infrastructure as well as skills.
- **Enhance usability of the Med Skills Tracker by aligning it with other tools.** While details on the Med Skills Tracker are yet to be defined, additional value could be derived from exploring alignment on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) also with partner countries. Moreover, while limited to the EU, the upcoming Skills Portability initiative could be used to foster further thinking around the portability of developed skills to support the implementation of the Pact's vision, especially in the case of EU-funded schemes.

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