



# THE UFM VISION STATEMENT 2025: A DEFENSIVE TURN IN EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGIONALISM

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## Introduction

The adoption of the [Vision Statement 2025: Reconnecting the Mediterranean. Back to the Core, Forward with Ambition](#) by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Foreign Ministers at the [10th Regional Forum](#) in Barcelona on 28 November 2025 marked the culmination of a formal process of strategic reflection initiated by the UfM in 2023. This process unfolded at one of the most critical junctures for Euro-Mediterranean regionalism since the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995. Prolonged armed conflicts, increasing geopolitical fragmentation, weakening of multilateralism, an aggravated climate crisis, and persistent socioeconomic tensions have eroded the capacity of regional frameworks to foster effective cooperation that leads to stability and tangible benefits for both shores of the Mediterranean.

In this context, the *UfM Vision Statement* seeks to provide the UfM with a renewed orientation and mandate clarification, while bolstering its political and operational impact. Against this

background, as is often the case in consensus-based intergovernmental organisations, the approved text reflects a carefully negotiated balance among divergent national positions, asymmetric expectations between the UfM northern and southern member states, and structural disagreements over the appropriate degree of politicisation for the organisation.

Since its establishment in 2008, the UfM has operated in a fragile equilibrium of rhetorical ambition earmarked by a very limited annual budget of 8.6 million EUR, technocratic pragmatism, and institutional survival. Unlike previous times in Euro-Mediterranean regionalism, the *UfM Vision Statement* does not stem from a moment of conjunctural optimism or from an expansion of normative horizons, but rather from a defensive logic. The implicit goal of such a document is not necessarily to relaunch a transformative project comparable to the Barcelona Process of 1995, but to preserve the political and functional relevance of the UfM as the only inclusive regional framework in a context increasingly dominated by bilateral dynamics, securitised approaches, and fragmented responses to specific multiple crises.

This article aims to critically analyse the *UfM Vision Statement* 2025 through a comparison with internal preparatory documents – including non-papers and other written contributions by UfM member states – released during the discussions on the reform process. The article assesses the extent to which the adopted document responds to the structural crisis of Euro-Mediterranean regionalism, while identifying the concrete progress it introduces, and highlighting the ambitions that have been reformulated, diluted, or excluded from the final consensus.

## **Weak regionalism, intergovernmental governance and crisis management**

From a theoretical perspective, the UfM can be conceived as a unique case of institutionalised weak regionalism. Unlike other examples of comprehensive regional integration processes, Euro-Mediterranean regionalism has been historically characterised by the absence of supranational mechanisms, by the primacy of intergovernmental consensus, and a strong dependence on exogenous political dynamics, in particular from the European Union (EU) (Bicchi, 2014; Del Sarto, 2016). This type of regionalism has not pursued the transfer of sovereignty from member states to the UfM nor has it devised the formation of a regional demo, but instead, the management of interdependence in contexts of high political heterogeneity.

In this vein, the UfM can be conceptualised as an intermediate institution: sufficiently structured to foster political agendas, sectoral platforms and concrete projects, but insufficiently empowered to act as an autonomous political body with concrete agency to intervene in political conflicts or security crises (Albinyana, 2023). This intermediate position illustrates both the institutional resilience of the UfM and its structural limitations. The organisation survives precisely because there is no alternative institutional framework, and because it avoids openly confronting the political divisions among its members states. Nevertheless, the latter limits its transformative capacity.

Furthermore, from an intergovernmental institutionalist perspective, the UfM can be interpreted as an organisation of political containment, whose added value resides more in the capacity to establish spaces for regular dialogue and interaction among state and non-state actors rather than in the process of binding decision-making (Börzel and Risse, 2019). In contexts characterised by fragmentation and conflict, these functions acquire intrinsic value, even if their impact is difficult to measure. It has to be noted that, in spite of the persistently harsh environment in the Middle East, Israel was again represented, after two years of absence, at the ministerial meeting of the 10th UfM Regional Forum in November 2025 that endorsed the *UfM Vision Statement*, a development that holds intrinsic value.

Therefore, the *UfM Vision Statement* has to be interpreted not as an attempt to overcome this structural condition of weak regionalism, but as a deliberate effort to improve and optimise the institution: improve the internal coherence, clarify priorities, enhance administrative capacities, and lever the potential impact of the organisation within a constrained political framework. This interpretation is essential to avoid conclusions that assess the document against criteria that were never fully on the table.

## **The crisis of Euro-Mediterranean regionalism as a point of departure**

The UfM reform process has been embedded in a broader crisis of Euro-Mediterranean regionalism. The impetus that the Barcelona Process triggered in 1995 has been progressively eroded by multiple concurrent factors, sometimes exogenous, such as the EU's enlargement process towards Eastern Europe, which shifted the political centre of gravity of the European foreign action, the increasing bilateralisation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the securitisation of the Mediterranean agenda after 2011, and, more recently, the reconfiguration of armed conflicts and rampant rivalries among global and regional powers in the region (Del Sarto, 2016).

Moreover, the UfM remains the only inclusive regional framework in an environment increasingly dominated by transactional bilateral strategic and comprehensive partnerships between the EU and southern partner countries (Albinyana, 2023), namely with Tunisia (July 2023), Egypt (March 2024) and Jordan (January 2025). Consequently, the UfM no longer competes with other regional projects of comparable ambition, but rather competes with its own potential irrelevance.

In this regard, the *UfM Vision Statement* implicitly responds to this diagnosis when it insists on the need to "return to the core" of the Euro-Mediterranean project. However, this return to the core does not entail a recovery of the original transformative ambition, but instead a pragmatic redefinition of what regionalism can mean in the contemporary Mediterranean. The document assumes, albeit without stating it explicitly, that regionalism is no longer a project of normative integration, but a tool for managing shared risks, interdependences, and negative externalities.

This conceptual shift becomes central to understand both the achievements and the limits of the approved text. The UfM does not seek to resolve regional conflicts, but to prevent the latter from destroying the existing channels of cooperation.

## Shared diagnosis but profound political divergences

The UfM reform process stemmed from a widely shared diagnosis among member states that the institution needed strategic clarity, a better internal governance, and a renewed narrative that could justify its added value vis-à-vis an increasingly competitive and fragmented regional environment. As internal documents show, however, there was deep disagreement regarding the political scope that such reform should entail.

Albinyana (2023) summarises this diagnosis in four structural deficits: (1) the persistent ambiguity of the UfM's political mandate, particularly in relation to conflicts and security; (2) institutional fragmentation vis-à-vis the ENP, which has reduced the role of its regional dimension overtime; (3) chronic insufficiency of financial and human resources in the UfM Secretariat in Barcelona; and (4) uneven political ownership by member states, particularly among the Southern Mediterranean.

These deficits appear, in a more explicit or implicit way, in most of the national contributions by member states to the UfM reform process. Nevertheless, while some member states upheld that the reform should translate into a stronger political role for the UfM as a platform for regional dialogue, others insisted on preserving its technical and non-politicised character as a condition for institutional survival. This structural tension explains the carefully balanced, and often ambiguous, nature of the final text.

A detailed analysis of national contributions reveals significant convergence around certain sectoral priorities. Member states from both shores coincided in highlighting youth employment, education, vocational training, gender equality, climate resilience, and water management as areas in which the UfM possesses a clear comparative advantage and can generate tangible results without entering politically divisive terrain (Albinyana, 2023).

These priorities respond to a shared logic as they are areas where regional cooperation is necessary, politically acceptable and relatively de-politicised, at least in the region. It is no coincidence that these themes centrally structure the *Connecting people* pillar of the *UfM Vision Statement*.

Against this backdrop, divergences emerge most clearly when addressing the political role of the organisation. Some member states emphasised the need to avoid any form of politicisation that could compromise the UfM's neutrality and its ability to operate even in contexts of high diplomatic tension. From this perspective, politicisation would constitute an existential risk for the institution. By contrast, other states advocated for a more ambitious interpretation of the UfM's role as a regional forum for political dialogue, stressing its unique potential to contribute,

at least indirectly, to processes of reconciliation, reconstruction, and stabilisation in “day-after” conflict scenarios. This position did not call for formal intervention, but for a more explicit recognition of the organisation’s political role.

From the southern member states, contributions tended to prioritise concrete and tangible socioeconomic demands, such as infrastructure, water, transport, and employment, while expressing a degree of scepticism toward approaches perceived as excessively discursive or normative. For many Southern Mediterranean countries, the legitimacy of the UfM fundamentally depends on its ability to deliver visible benefits to their populations.

## **The architecture of the UfM Vision Statement 2025: narrative consensus and implicit prioritisation**

The tripartite structure of the *UfM Vision Statement 2025*, composed of Connecting people, *Connecting countries* and *Connecting economies*, constitutes the main device for aggregating divergent national positions. Far from being a merely rhetorical choice, this architecture reflects a conscious exercise in implicit prioritisation and in managing the political dissent accumulated during the reform process. Moreover, this architecture is perfectly aligned with the key pillars of the new EU’s [Pact for the Mediterranean](#) – (1) People; (2) Stronger, more sustainable and integrated economies; and (3) Security, preparedness and migration management –, which was also launched at a meeting of Ministers from EU Member States and Southern Mediterranean partner countries in Barcelona on 28 November 2025.

The Connecting people pillar shows the highest degree of consensus and continuity with earlier phases of Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation. The centrality given to human capital, education, academic mobility, youth employment, gender equality and civil society participation consolidates a broadly shared and relatively de-politicised social agenda. As Albinyana (2023) notes, these areas serve as “safe zones” of cooperation, where structural political divergences can be suspended without going away. The *UfM Vision Statement* reinforces this approach by explicitly connecting these priorities to existing instruments, such as the UfM Youth Strategy 2030 or the Euro-Mediterranean universities, thus avoiding the opening of new normative debates that might have complicated consensus.

In contrast, the most politically sensitive part of the document is represented by the Connecting countries pillar. It contains references to regional stability, resilience, conflict prevention and post-crisis recovery. However, these references are carefully worded to avoid giving the UfM a clear political mandate. Notions such as “confidence-building”, “practical cooperation” or “dialogue through sectoral action” function as compromise formulas that recognise the political dimension of regional challenges without providing the organisation with intervention tools. This ambiguity is a direct result of member state differences during the reform process, not an accident.

A dual logic is addressed by the Connecting economies pillar. On the one hand, it clearly takes into account the needs of Southern Mediterranean countries regarding economic integration,

infrastructure, transport, energy, and employment. On the other, it explicitly aligns the UfM agenda with the EU's strategic priorities, especially with regards to initiatives like the Global Gateway and the green and digital transitions. The organisation's external coherence is strengthened by this alignment, but it also draws attention to its structural reliance on financial and political frameworks that are defined outside of its own institutional domain (Del Sarto, 2016).

### **Governance, functional politicisation and enhanced cooperation: progress and limits**

One of the most distinctive features of the *UfM Vision Statement* is the systematic use of a language eminently technical to face challenges that are intrinsically political. In this vein, the notion of "resilience" takes centre stage in this displacement. This term, which is presented as a cross-cutting category, allows the possibility to articulate responses to ongoing conflicts, the climate emergency, natural disasters, and socioeconomic fragility without pointing to structural causes or political obligations. Similarly, the focus on "connectivity" – human, economic, energy and digital – serves as a minimal normative framework that avoids political confrontation while legitimising an agenda of integration.

Hence, this approach brings clear advantages as it widens the UfM's room for manoeuvre, preserves its inclusivity, and reduces the risk of political stalemate. However, it also entails some risks for the organisation, given that by fragmenting politics into multiple technical sectors, it might also limit its capacity to tackle the root causes of regional instability, while becoming a manager of symptoms rather than an actor capable of influencing structural dynamics.

In this regard, one of the most significant omissions in the *UfM Vision Statement* involves the indirect, if not evasive, treatment of the growing bilateralisation of the EU policy towards the Southern Mediterranean. The EU's bilateral strategic and comprehensive partnerships, alongside the centrality of the migration and security agendas, have substantially reduced the political room for the regional approach.

The *UfM Vision Statement* attempts to counter this pattern by asserting the centrality of the regional framework, and thus present the UfM as a platform that brings coherence and coordination. However, it lacks the introduction of concrete mechanisms to better rebalance the dynamics between bilateralism and regionalism. Against this backdrop, the organisation thus emerges more as a layer for the discursive legitimisation of regional cooperation than as a central actor in the effective allocation of resources, priorities and political power. Such tension is particularly conspicuous in the economic field, whereby even if the document highlights the importance of regional integration, investment mobilisation and the development of cross-border infrastructure, the UfM's real capacity to influence these processes widely depends on decisions taken in bilateral frameworks or within international financial institutions. Therefore, the reform does not substantially alter this structural dependence.

In the domain of internal governance, the *UfM Vision Statement* introduces some tangible gains that respond to critics often formulated during the reform process. In this vein, the clarification of the 3Ps model (policy, platforms and projects), the reinforcement of implementation of ministerial declarations and regional platforms, the introduction of results-based management approaches, and the reorganisation of the Secretariat all contribute to improving internal coherence and operational capacity.

In this regard, particular attention should be given to the introduction of the concept of “enhanced cooperation” as a mechanism that would allow groups of member states to move at different speeds within the UfM framework. In theory, this instrument could offer a way to partially overcome the constraints of consensus. However, as formulated in the document, enhanced cooperation remains politically underdeveloped. It is portrayed as a voluntary instrument that is strictly limited and subject to protections meant to prevent any impression of hierarchy or exclusion among member states.

In this respect, although the reform improves the UfM’s institutional framework, the UfM’s institutional machinery that governs its operations remains unchanged. Consensus continues to be the guiding principle, while the incentives for political self-restraint and the creation of ambiguous compromises prevail.

## Conclusions

Since the adoption of the [UfM Roadmap for Action](#) in 2017, the organisation had not undergone such a process of reflection. The *UfM Vision Statement* is a document of deliberately limited ambition, conditioned by the crisis of Euro-Mediterranean regionalism and by structural tensions between politicisation and technocracy. It does not constitute a new foundation of the Euro-Mediterranean project, nor does it transform the UfM into a first-order regional political actor. However, it cannot be reduced to a merely rhetorical exercise.

The document consolidates real progress in terms of strategic coherence, internal governance, and social legitimacy, while simultaneously institutionalising the political constraints under which the organisation operates. Rather than resolving the tensions inherent in Mediterranean regionalism, the *UfM Vision Statement* manages and normalises them.

In an increasingly fragmented Mediterranean, the UfM remains an imperfect but indispensable framework. Its future will depend less on the adopted text than on the political will of its member states to move beyond minimal consensus and to provide this institution with the political, technical and human space necessary to respond to the challenges it faces.

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