



Union for the Mediterranean  
Union pour la Méditerranée  
الاتحاد من أجل المتوسط

## **Inaugural Ceremony**

### ***Matera as Mediterranean Capital of Culture and Dialogue 2026***

**Matera, 20 March 2026**

#### **Remarks by the UfM Deputy Secretary General**

**Petra Kežman**

***Check against delivery***

Excellencies,  
Distinguished partners,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be here today to mark this inaugural moment. Matera is a city that needs no introduction to those who know the Mediterranean, and yet never ceases to inspire wonder in all who encounter it for the first time.

I bring warm greetings from Secretary General Ambassador Nasser Kamel, who deeply regrets not being able to attend, and who asked me to convey his heartfelt congratulations to the city of Matera, its authorities and its people.

The Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue is an initiative very dear to the Union for the Mediterranean. Together with the Anna Lindh Foundation, we launched it out of the conviction that culture is the very fabric of our shared civilization, and an essential tool for peace, stability and development in our region.

We meet, however, at a moment of extraordinary difficulty for the Mediterranean. War once again devastates the Middle East. Societies are under strain. Trust between nations is fragile. Too often, political dialogue is shaped by the language of power – by competition, control over resources and the erosion of respect for international norms.



And yet, this must not blur our vision.

Alongside this harsh reality, another form of geopolitics is unfolding — quieter, less visible but essential for the future of our region. It is built by those who choose cooperation over confrontation, who work to strengthen shared values, and who see culture and nature not as something to exploit, but as something that connects us to our roots and to one another.

This is why being here today matters.

Matera and Tétouan are at the frontline of this narrative this year. They are not simply parallel holders of the title. They are co-architects of a common endeavour. Their collaboration exemplifies precisely the kind of people-to-people, city-to-city dialogue that the Union for the Mediterranean was established to foster and scale.

Our region abounds with experiences that show culture's unique impact on peace and stability. Protecting cultural heritage during conflicts in the Middle East is not only about monuments and traditions – it is about preserving identity and hope, even state-building. In many places, time and again has proven that support to creative economies opens opportunities for young people in fragile contexts, strengthens social cohesion and helps prevent radicalisation.

Cultural cooperation can open paths where traditional policy tools fall short. It speaks to dignity and memory. It triggers reflexes of solidarity and responsibility. It reminds us that protecting people also means protecting what gives meaning to their lives.

We thank Italy for its leadership in cultural relations, and for its efforts to make culture a true instrument of international cooperation. It is no coincidence that this land



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continues to host major cultural milestones, such as the first-ever Euro-Mediterranean Culture Ministerial and so many cultural capitals.

We also thank Matera for embracing the role of Mediterranean Capital of Culture and Dialogue and for preparing such an ambitious programme, anchored in our roots and our common belonging. Through it, it reminds the region that what endures is not what is imposed by force, but what is built patiently, through dialogue and coexistence.

For the Union for the Mediterranean, this approach is at the core of our mandate. In our Strategic Vision, just as in the Pact for the Mediterranean, human development is at the heart of regional cooperation. Without the people-to-people connection, there can be no lasting peace in the Mediterranean.

On behalf of the Union for the Mediterranean, I extend our full support, our deepest congratulations, and our confidence that this year will produce lasting legacies for Matera, for Tétouan and for the Mediterranean as a whole. It will remind us that even in difficult times, the Mediterranean remains capable of cooperation, renewal and shared humanity.

Thank you.