



Making the Mediterranean again a place of peaceful encounters

A contribution of the COMECE Secretariat in view of the upcoming renewal of EU's partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of [the Union for the Mediterranean](#), the [European Commission announced](#) its intention to propose a [renewed partnership with its Southern Neighbours](#)¹. In this context, the European Council called in its [December 2020 conclusions](#) for a **new Agenda for the Mediterranean** with a particular focus on a joint response to the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening the resilience of economies and societies, fostering security, addressing challenges linked to mobility and migration and offering prospects to young people, while reinforcing cooperation on environment, connectivity, education and culture.

Making the Mediterranean region again a **place of peaceful encounter of persons of different cultures and religions** has also been a great **concern to the Catholic Church**. In February 2020, more than 50 bishops from 19 Mediterranean nations [came together in Bari](#) to discuss the manifold socio-economic, human rights, peace and ecological challenges the region is facing. In his address to the participants, [Pope Francis recalled](#) the role of the Mediterranean “*as a crossroads of interests and important social, political, religious and economic currents*” and encouraged decision-makers to promote “*the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence*”.

The EU's partnership with its Southern Neighbours has also been **closely followed by the Secretariat of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)**, in dialogue with Bishops' Conferences and Church authorities from the Mediterranean region. Based on these regular exchanges, the COMECE Secretariat wishes to offer some policy reflections and recommendations on EU's external policies in view of a **people-centred and fair Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood**.

2. Policy reflections & recommendations

a) Migration & Mobility

Europe must find, on the basis of the centrality of the human person and the promotion of the common good, “*the **right balance** between its twofold moral responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens and to assure assistance and acceptance to migrants*”.² Although, ideally, **forced or unnecessary migration should be avoided**, it entails creating in countries of origin the conditions that are needed for a dignified life and integral human development for individuals and families. Therefore, until substantial progress is made in achieving this goal, we are obliged to respect the fundamental **right of all individuals to find a place that meets their basic needs** and those of their families, and where they can find personal fulfilment.³

In this regard, it is imperative to work for making real and effective the **primary right of everyone to remain in one's own homeland**, enjoying a dignified life with his family, and therefore, to address the

¹ EU cooperation with the Southern Neighbourhood takes place in the framework of the [European Neighbourhood Policy \(ENP\)](#) and includes ten partner countries: [Algeria](#), [Egypt](#), [Israel](#), [Jordan](#), [Lebanon](#), [Libya](#), [Morocco](#), [Palestine](#), [Syria](#) and [Tunisia](#).

² Pope Francis, [Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps](#), 11 January 2016.

³ Pope Francis, [Fratelli Tutti](#), 129.

root causes of forced or unnecessary migration. Refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs are also entitled to return to their home place as soon as the minimum conditions of safety and dignity are met. In this context, the EU should be instrumental to make **effective their right to return to their homes** in a humane and smooth way. On the other hand, it is of great importance to protect unaccompanied migrant minors reaching the EU, and to ensure that these **children are reunited with their parents or legal guardians**.

Migrants and asylum seekers from countries from EU Southern Neighborhood represent a substantial part of the total number of newcomers entering into the EU territory. Figures show that asylum applicants are mostly coming from Syria (66,880 over the last year)⁴; in addition, more than 12,500 Moroccans, 12,000 Tunisians and 10,200 Algerians, entered into the EU irregularly only from June to December 2020, in accordance with [FRONTEX data](#), many of them looking for better economic prospects. **Fighting the root causes of migration** should address this socio-economic situation, but also should include support for the **improvement of the rule of law in the EU Southern Neighborhood** (in accordance with internationally accepted standards, including the respect of fundamental rights of individuals and communities rooted in human dignity). Particular attention should be given to the situation of migrants and **asylum seekers in distress at the sea**: the EU should ensure that nobody dies at sea due to lack of aid, and that international law is respected with respect to *non-refoulement* and disembarkation. Migrants and **refugees stuck in transit countries** in the EU Southern Neighborhood that are suffering serious human rights violations should be supported to exit that country and return to their home country or to another safe country. The case of **Syrian refugees in the already overburdened Lebanon** is contributing to a social, political and economic situation of destabilisation, along with a number of other factors. In this regard, and as soon as the security situation would allow it, Syrian refugees should be able to return to their home country, with due support by the EU for their successful reintegration.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) More robust framework and dedicated resources **to fight against root causes of migration, making real the primary right of persons and families to remain in their home country** in safety and dignity. Direct assistance to communities in countries of origin, in particular vulnerable minorities such as religious minorities, should be reinforced as a more effective way to help them. EU-Churches partnerships could be instrumental to this aim as they are reliable partners strongly rooted in local communities.
- 2) Make **effective the right of refugees to return to their home country** as soon as the security conditions allow it, supporting their reintegration into their home societies. In this regard, it is of particular importance to support Syrian refugees in Lebanon and to provide the means for their return in a humane and smooth way.
- 3) Support the **training of border control officers** of EU Southern Neighbourhood countries in human rights standards, including the respect of the principle of *non-refoulement*, the fundamental right to apply to asylum and the right not to be tortured, or under inhuman or degrading treatment.
- 4) **Enhance asylum capabilities** of EU Southern Neighbourhood countries, including reception conditions and procedural staff, procedures and guarantees.
- 5) Launch a programme to **reunite unaccompanied migrant minors from EU Southern Neighbourhood countries reaching the EU, with their parents or legal guardians**, in cooperation with the authorities of their home countries, and respecting their *non-refoulement* in case of holding a genuine asylum claim.

⁴ Last 12 months (3Q 2019 – 3Q 2020) : <https://bit.ly/39vbdSY> .

- 6) Promote **circular and seasonal migration**, ensuring the protection of social rights of workers, including portability of pensions.
- 7) Support the **resettlement of asylum seekers and migrants suffering serious violations of their human rights, from transit countries** where they are stuck to their home country or to a third country where they may be accepted by the authorities.
- 8) The **return** of migrants to their countries of origin should be made in a **humane way, respecting** in all the stages of the process, their **fundamental rights**, and supporting their **reintegration** into their home societies.

b) Peace & Human Security

EU's Southern Neighbourhood is marked by on-going wars and **violent inter-and intra-state conflicts**, de-stabilising the entire region. In several countries, the power vacuum in the aftermath of the uprisings of a decade ago became exploited by extremist and terrorist groups whose criminal activities also pose a threat to European security. Moreover, along with failing state structures, political instability, repression, poverty and unemployment create a feeling of hopelessness and frustration in the population, generating security challenges in several parts of the Mediterranean region.

The Catholic Church promotes a **broad understanding of peace** - as not merely the absence of war and violence, but being built on justice, integral human development, respect for fundamental human rights and the care of Creation. With regard to peacebuilding efforts, the Church stresses the importance of **focusing on human security**, ensuring the security and safety of persons in their families and local communities.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) The EU should foster "**pre-emptive peacebuilding**"⁵ by reinforcing early warning mechanisms and mobilising peaceful multi-sectoral action aiming to prevent violent conflicts at an early stage.
 - In this respect, **local religious actors** could provide important insights from the ground; EU Delegations could be encouraged to involve them when making analyses of local contexts⁶.
- 2) Address the threat of **violent extremism** by also recognising its **socio-economic and political roots**: combine measures of acute prevention (incl. *stopping terrorist financing, weapon supply, enhance information-sharing*) with medium- and long-term measures (incl. *education, socio-economic empowerment of youth, helping citizens to assume their shared responsibility for the common good*).
 - Intensify **dialogue with religious leaders** in view of strengthening social cohesion and promoting a **culture of encounter and human fraternity**.
- 3) In view of strengthening **policy coherence**, the EU and its Member States should **stop fuelling conflicts** in the Southern Neighbourhood **through** their often **inconsistent, non-transparent and unaccountable arms exports** and they should adopt **effective measures against illicit arms trade**.
- 4) Foster processes of **trust-building, reconciliation and re-building of communities** by establishing platforms for inclusive encounter and cooperation (e.g. in reconstruction efforts), bringing together policy-makers, academia, businesses, civil society, Churches as well as **all ethnic and religious components** of societies; such initiatives could also contribute to fostering an **enabling democratic environment** and **participatory civic space**.
- 5) In the context of EU's **resilience-fostering** efforts, support the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood in prioritising **people-centred resilience** - of persons, families and local

⁵ Cf. [EU Global Strategy](#) (2016), p.29-30.

⁶ Cf. [Council conclusions](#) of 22 January 2018 on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises, p.5.

communities - in order to enable their recovery from past crises and prepare them for possible future security and health risks by way of **education, capacity-building and training**.

- 6) Ensure the **respect for internationally recognised human rights and freedoms** as an essential ingredient of a resilient state and society, and intensify cooperation in areas such as **good governance** and **public administration** as well as **fight against corruption** and **organised crime**.

c) Religious Freedom & Partnerships with Churches

A general problem in most of the countries in the EU Southern Neighborhood is the **discriminatory legal and social status of members of religious minorities** and the obstacles that these Churches, individuals and communities face, either in terms of persecution, or intolerance and discrimination. The EU should make **visible these situations in international fora** and should be instrumental for supporting the victims and use its power and influence to stop (and prevent) these religious freedom violations, including through the use of international criminal law. In this regard, the promotion of the concept of a **common citizenship** is key to overcome perceptions or positions of religious and civil superiority in those societies, and must be sponsored in all aspects of life, in particular in schools and education and mass media.

The EU is equipped with **legal instruments that allow imposing sanctions** upon individuals and entities that violate human rights, including religious freedom. Article 1 of the [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2020/1998 of 7 December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses](#)⁷ applies to: a) to genocide or crimes against humanity, including those motivated on religious grounds; b) other serious religious freedom violations or abuses (e.g., inhuman treatment due to belonging to a particular religion); and c) other religious freedom violations or abuses *“in so far as those violations or abuses are widespread, systematic or are otherwise of serious concern as regards the objectives of the common foreign and security policy set out in Article 21 TEU”* (Art. 1.d).

Christian communities are perceived in some countries in the EU Southern Neighbourhood as a **bridge among rival** (or even, sectarian) religious groups, play a prominent role in promoting the **respect of individual fundamental rights**, including health and education rights of most vulnerable, and are well equipped for **promoting peace and reconciliation**. To rely on their expertise, reputation and knowledge of the dynamics on the ground would be helpful for the EU in order to improve the general situation of the population and create more stable and safe environments.

The [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#) (2015) expressed *“its support, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution”*.⁸ After years of a war that has devastated the country, members of religious minorities suffer a disproportionate burden due to their social and legal vulnerable position. It is of utmost importance to exit the current *status quo*, starting with the **draft of a new Constitution that would allow all religious minorities to be respected through the notion of a common citizenship** beyond religious affiliation.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) Promote an **inclusive, common, equal and full citizenship** in the EU Southern Neighbourhood’s countries, in particular in the field education (including curricula and textbooks), avoiding any negative or pejorative reference to other religions and faithful as

⁷ See also: [Council Decision \(CFSP\) 2020/1999 of 7 December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses](#).

⁸ 18 December 2015. See also the [letter dated 26 September 2019 from the UN Secretary-General](#) addressed to the President of the Security Council.

inferior, hate speech or denial of their historical existence in the country. Particular attention should be given to EU funds provided in these areas.

- 2) **Act and make visible in international fora the attacks, intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities, including Christians**, in the EU Southern Neighbourhood, and to use existing tools in EU and International Law to face intolerance and discrimination, and to prevent and punish atrocity crimes.
- 3) **Use trade policies and mechanisms** to guarantee the respect of religious freedom by EU Southern Neighbourhood's countries.
- 4) Implement **responsible & targeted sanctions, including those foreseen in Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998**, against Religious Freedom violators, that do not put in danger humanitarian assistance by Churches and other development actors.
- 5) Promote **partnerships of the EU with Churches, religious communities and associations** in its Southern Neighborhood as reliable institutions that promote humanitarian activities as well as others aiming at integral human development, fulfilling the principles of impartiality and neutrality.
- 6) **Enhance the dialogue with Churches, religious communities and associations as well as CSOs** in the EU and the countries of the EU Southern Neighbourhood, to improve the understanding of the situation of religious freedom on the ground.
- 7) Intensify the contact with the EEAS in order to have a consistent approach with respect to Religious Freedom in Human Rights Dialogues with EU Southern Neighbourhood's countries.
- 8) **Support the on-going Syrian owned constitutional process** facilitated by the UN in order to achieve a peaceful solution, that respects religious minorities in the country.

d) Human Development

According to [recent demographic statistics](#), the share of young people under 15 years of age in the countries of EU's Southern Neighbourhood averages to 32 per cent, as compared to 16 per cent in the countries of the EU. And yet, they often **lack adequate socio-economic prospects** in their countries due to formation gaps and lacking opportunities for dignified work. The on-going pandemic is further aggravating these persisting socio-economic challenges, while making it harder for vulnerable communities to access basic social services, including adequate healthcare, nutrition and housing.

The Catholic Church favours the concept of "[integral human development](#)", the development of every person and of the *whole* person, especially of the poorest, the excluded and the most vulnerable in the society. The Church also cherishes the value of **young people and women** as drivers of transformative processes, and it regards **families** as *the foundation of the social edifice*.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) Acknowledge the transformative potential of **young people and women**, and promote initiatives aiming at **their empowerment at all levels of economic, social and political life**; foster the **socio-economic conditions** for **families** and promote mechanisms of **inter-generational solidarity**.
- 2) Promote **sustainable trade & investment** initiatives as instruments to enable **human development** by creating **decent job opportunities and removing the persisting obstacles to an equitable access to basic social services** (including adequate healthcare, education, nutrition, clean water and sanitation, as well as decent housing).

- 3) Adopt a specific **youth initiative** to **bridge the gap between the labour market and the education & formation** sector, while supporting the **employability** and the **entrepreneurship** of young people by equipping them with modern technologies and **digital skills**.
- 4) Support the partner countries in the Southern Neighbourhood in their efforts for a **socially just and sustainable economic recovery** from the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in ensuring **for all access to a safe and effective vaccine** and **adequate healthcare**, even in remote areas.
- 5) Enhance the **connectivity between rural and urban areas**; support the establishment of educational and health institutions also in rural areas, adequately equipped with modern facilities and personnel.

e) Integral Ecology

The region of EU's Southern Neighbourhood faces **grave environmental challenges**, including desertification and loss of biodiversity. This is particularly due to increasing urbanisation of the Mediterranean coastline, but also due to an often unsustainable management of natural resources present in the region. Moreover, the Mediterranean Sea is particularly vulnerable to plastic pollution and it is [estimated](#) that it has, on average, the highest densities of plastics in the world.

In his [Encyclical Laudato Si'](#), Pope Francis develops the concept of "**integral ecology**", highlighting the link between the **protection of Creation** and the building of a truly **just and equitable social order**. At the policy as well as personal level, the Church [underlines the need](#) for an "**ecological conversion**" by moving towards a more sustainable and socially just economic system and caring for nature through a transformation of our lifestyles and consumption patterns.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) Counter desertification and biodiversity loss by promoting **sustainable patterns in the extraction and use of natural resources**.
- 2) Strengthen the potential of the **Blue Economy** in the Mediterranean region by fostering innovation and job creation, while managing the seas and coasts sustainably and cleaning up the marine environment.
- 3) Ensure that business companies are legally required to comply throughout the **entire supply chain** with internationally recognised **human and labour rights, as well as environmental standards**, and to provide **victims** of serious corporate abuses with **access to an effective remedy**.
- 4) Address the plastic pollution in the Mediterranean Sea by supporting measures to **tackle the gaps in plastic waste management**, to promote a **sustainable plastic use** and to **eliminate plastic discharge into the sea**.
- 5) Enhance **the climate resilience of local communities** by way of education, capacity-building and training.

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The Secretariat of COMECE

Contact:

The Secretariat of COMECE

Square de Meeûs 19 – B-1050 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 235 05 10 Email: comece@comece.eu Website: www.comece.eu