



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

## WESTERN BALKANS' EUROPEAN INTEGRATION - "A PROMISE OF PEACE AND A SOURCE OF DEVELOPMENT"?

*A contribution of the COMECE Secretariat in view of the EU - Western Balkans Summit in Sofia*

### 1. Introduction

At the last major [EU – Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki](#) in 2003, the EU gave a firm **European perspective** to the entire region of the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, after Croatia joined the EU in 2013, a certain **enlargement fatigue** has manifested itself. This has been amplified by a variety of crisis challenging the EU internally and externally, and further deferred the prospects for EU enlargement towards this region. The recent developments – especially the prioritisation of the Western Balkans by the Bulgarian Council Presidency as well as the publication of a [new EU Strategy on a credible enlargement process](#) – are **encouraging signs** of a European perspective and commitment towards these countries of South-East Europe.

The region of the Western Balkans suffered from **atrocious wars and widespread violence** in the 1990s which reinforced divisions and severe conflicts among communities. Emerging from this context, **long-term challenges** still mark the current social and political situation in the **six Western Balkan countries**<sup>1</sup> that are aspiring to EU membership: the need to consolidate the slow, but ongoing progress regarding public administration and governance, the reinforcement of the rule of law and of the fundamental human rights; the importance to address the continuing inter-community tensions and ensure rights of ethnic and religious minorities; as well as the necessity to find effective solutions for tackling widespread poverty and inequality by giving perspectives especially to young people.

The next significant step in the Western Balkans' European integration process is hoped to be the upcoming **Sofia Summit**, the first of its kind in fifteen years, with political authorities of the EU Member States and their counterparts from the Western Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> Up until today, [accession negotiations](#) have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia. Albania and the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" have official candidate status. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and makes reference to UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence) are potential candidates.

In this context, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) wishes to present this **contribution** offering some reflections and recommendations, which are **based on insights from local Catholic Church authorities**.

## 2. Support for the European integration of the Western Balkans

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The Catholic Church has favoured and supported the project of European integration since its very beginnings. As the Apostolic Exhortation "[Ecclesia in Europa](#)" underlines, Europe is more than just a "geographical area", and the European Union cannot be reduced merely to its economic dimension. The EU is above all a **peace project** and a **community of principles and values**. Metaphorically spoken, the European integration process is supposed to be not only about "sharing the cake, but it very much implies baking the cake together". As Pope Francis [highlighted at the recent COMECE \(Re\)thinking Europe Dialogue](#): Europe has a vocation to be "*a promise of peace*" and "*a source of development for herself and for the whole world*"<sup>2</sup>.

Through their history and their rich cultural and religious heritage, the Western Balkans are an **integral part of the European family**. They are a **point of encounter** between the Orient and the Occident. Despite increasing engagement of various external actors, there seems to be **no credible alternative** for the Western Balkans **than the path of European integration**. As the experience shows, a **genuine European perspective** can contribute to **sustainable development** and **peace** on the European continent by stimulating necessary reforms and fostering the **resilience** of people, families, communities, societies and states. Overall, **citizens** in the Western Balkans tend to have [positive expectations](#) from a possible future EU membership. Caution, however, needs to be exercised **not to create false expectations** which might consequently lead to frustrations and fuel eurosceptic voices. In order to be **genuine and credible**, the EU enlargement process should **deliver on its promises** towards countries aspiring to EU membership. This implies **avoiding** any tendencies to set **double-standards** or to block EU accession merely due to unresolved bilateral problems. It should, however, be acknowledged that EU accession is a **two-way process** which also requires strong **political commitment to systemic reforms and transformation of practices** led by local authorities and endorsed by local societies.

Given the fact that state borders barely follow ethnic, national or family patterns, **regional realities have to be taken into account** in order to **avoid a fragmentation and new divisions in the region** which could potentially be caused by a stronger EU integration of only some Western Balkan countries. Having learnt the **lessons from past** EU accessions, the **entire region** needs to be **embedded in the European integration process** with **due consideration** of the **different levels** of industrial, technological, political and administrative **development** as well as of the respective historical background and national **identity**. While heading towards **the same goal**, a **comprehensive but differentiated and tailor-made approach** with regard to each country should be taken. Moreover, the EU accession process should not be seen as a way to impose dominant ideologies from abroad.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis has reaffirmed his attention for the Western Balkans in his [speech before the European Parliament](#) (2014) as well as during his [Apostolic Journeys](#) to the countries of the region.

### 3. Considerations and recommendations in view of the Sofia Summit

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#### a) Fair relationship between partners for a renewed European project

An essential ingredient of the European integration process is a **fair, responsible and people-centered partnership** based on **solidarity and subsidiarity**. A partnership approach requires a **long-term strategic vision** along with **concrete short-term actions**. It implies identifying **common goals** on the basis of a **shared analysis** of challenges and opportunities. In order to make this process as effective and people-oriented as possible, the climate of an open and constructive **dialogue** is needed which allows a **broad and inclusive participation** of all stakeholders **at and across different levels**. This process should involve local, national and regional players as well as state and non-state actors, including civil society, Churches and religious communities. The **active participation and involvement of all citizens** – both in the Western Balkans and in the EU Member States - requires their **full and accurate information**. Besides political representatives, also **media** bear a crucial [responsibility for enhancing the quality and objectivity of reporting](#) in the context of the European integration process.

Another essential element of a partnership is **trust** rooted in **mutual accountability** and **respect for local traditions and cultures**. Fostering **personal contacts** within the region and **exchanges** between the region and the countries of the European Union **across different sectors** (involving policy-makers, professionals, entrepreneurs, academics, scientists, students, etc.) can make an important contribution to this end. Moreover, **links with diaspora communities** living abroad could be intensified. An **enhanced connectivity** in terms of infrastructure, telecommunications and transport could further reinforce **cross-border personal and community contacts**.

**Closer cooperation** in areas of mutual interest (such as public administration, the rule of law, security, migration & mobility, trade, investment and energy) should underpin the partnership. An increased engagement of the EU with the region might be particularly beneficial to the citizens by focusing on the fight against **corruption** and **organised crime**, enhancing the **independence of the judiciary**, more **transparency** of public finances as well as improvement of **medical services** and of the access to **modern technologies**. The [six flagship initiatives](#) announced in the recent [EU Strategy for the Western Balkans](#) constitute a good basis in this regard.

On the other hand, drawing on the uniqueness and specificity of each country of the Western Balkans, there should also be a reflection on **what the EU can learn** from them and in which ways they can better contribute to the European project. Rich cultural and religious heritage, new markets, strengthened social and regional cohesion as well as prospects for lasting peace and stability on the European continent can be some of the assets of the Western Balkans to the European project. Moreover, as implied in the [EU Western Balkans Strategy](#), the **EU itself needs to be ready** to welcome new members, including from an institutional and financial perspective.

## **b) Development of young people, families and communities**

The European integration process should above all **benefit the citizens**. People-centered policies imply the prioritisation of **sustainable and inclusive development of persons, families and local communities**. Fostering the [resilience of persons and communities](#) will consequently strengthen the resilience of societies and states. Thus, in the light of the [demographic situation in most of the countries of the Western Balkans](#) due to low birth rates and high emigration, a particular focus should be placed on policies favouring **young people and families**. Giving **young people perspectives** in their communities is key in order to avoid the **brain drain** that is strongly affecting the Western Balkans region. The [challenges for the labour market](#), such as high **youth unemployment** and **job-skill mismatch**, should be addressed comprehensively through adequate **education, formation and local employment** opportunities. In order to eradicate widespread poverty and inequality, a **particular attention** needs to be given to the **empowerment** of citizens with fewer opportunities, such as women or Roma, who are often **socially marginalised**. Investments should not merely consist in a cold calculation of profit with low cost employees, but create **decent employment opportunities** for the **local population** and **strengthen the local economic systems** in the longer-term.

For allowing the citizens to fully **participate at all levels of economic, social and political** life, an **empowered civil society** is essential. This implies the creation of conditions for an **enabling environment** which is characterised by **good governance** as well as the respect for the **rule of law** and **fundamental human rights**. Pertinent **monitoring and accountability mechanisms** that allow effective sanctions in case of non-compliance as well as positive incentives encouraging further progress should be strengthened in this regard.

**Churches and religious communities** are **important societal actors**, especially in view of the promotion of a rights-based approach as well as in the provision of basic social services, education and healthcare. Their efforts contributing to human development could be better recognised and integrated within respective EU policies also in the Western Balkans context.

## **c) Promoting reconciliation and lasting peace in the region**

Facing present and future challenges requires learning how to **deal with the burden of past violences** and to explore appropriate **transitional justice** measures. Thus, within the framework of the European integration process, the EU should assume a much more **pro-active role** by seeking **creative approaches** to the promotion of long-term peace in the Western Balkans region. Without **justice, reconciliation** will not be possible; and without reconciliation, no **lasting peace** can exist. The long-term process of reconciliation may take several generations, but it has to start now as an integral part of transformation. **Just peace** and its perception are conditional upon the respect for **human dignity** and for the rights and liberties of all communities present in the region. This includes the need to protect and promote the **rights of all ethnic and religious components**, whether they are majorities or minorities, on the basis of the concept of **common citizenship**.

Political discourses often tend to **instrumentalise historical memory** and reopen the still persisting wounds of the past. While reflecting different historical perspectives and specific

identities of each country and community, the EU should encourage efforts towards a **common narrative** which does not ignore realities but nourishes reconciliation and peace. The similarities in the language and shared historical experiences might facilitate an **inclusive encounter and dialogue** with all relevant regional stakeholders, including civil society, Churches as well as all ethnic and religious communities. The EU could support the **establishment of relevant platforms and programmes** for this purpose. Moreover, intensified **intraregional cooperation** and **enhanced connectivity** could also bring the key regional actors closer together and foster **good neighbourly relations**. As several EU Member States have **strong historical and geographical linkages** with the Western Balkans, an increased involvement of their citizens and communities in these processes should also be promoted.

#### **d) Religious actors as partners for development and peace**

For centuries, the Western Balkans have been an example of interreligious coexistence, where religious belongings **deeply structure local societies**. Within the European integration process, the existing **religious** and **cultural diversity** needs to be preserved and promoted. The capacity of inter-religious dialogue to **build bridges** positively contributes to the long-term objectives of development and peace, as highlighted in the recent [joint declaration of Bishops of Austria and of Bosnia & Herzegovina](#). To this end, the EU could build a **favourable environment** and **support inclusive inter-religious encounters and actions**. Moreover, in the preparation of future EU-Western Balkans Summits, a dialogue between political and religious authorities could be set up.

Growing forces of **violent extremism**, often fuelled by external actors, are of great concern in some parts of the Western Balkans. **Religious actors** can also play a positive role in tackling the root causes of this phenomenon by **addressing socio-economic challenges**, contributing to **social cohesion** and promoting **dialogue** at the grassroots level, even in cases where political actors may lack legitimacy. Policy-makers are therefore encouraged to find ways to better integrate these efforts within the respective policies, including through ensuring a fair and non-discriminatory access to respective funding instruments.

## **4. Conclusion**

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The reaffirmed commitment of the European Union to the Western Balkans is a **positive sign** and it is to be hoped that the upcoming Sofia Summit will **further strengthen the credibility of the perspective for a European integration of this region**. We encourage the Summit participants to take into consideration in particular the following elements:

- promote a **fair, comprehensive, responsible and people-oriented partnership** with the entire Western Balkans region,
- implement policies favouring **person-, family- and community-centered development**,
- support efforts towards **reconciliation and lasting peace** in the region, and
- better integrate the roles and actions of **Churches and religious communities** within the processes of the European integration of the Western Balkans.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN VIEW OF THE SOFIA SUMMIT

### a) Fair, comprehensive, responsible and people-oriented partnership based on solidarity and subsidiarity

- reaffirm a **credible European perspective** for the countries of the Western Balkans without creating false expectations: the EU should **deliver on its promises**, **avoid double-standards** and **unjustified obstructions** to the EU accession process; the political authorities of the Western Balkan countries should demonstrate **firm commitment to systemic reforms and transformation of practices**, endorsed by local societies
- embed the **entire region in the European integration process** with **due consideration** of **regional realities**, of **different levels of development** as well as of the respective historical background and national **identity** of **each country and community**
- recognise and promote the **positive value and contribution** of each country of the Western Balkans to the European project, including the rich cultural and religious heritage
- promote processes of **dialogue and cooperation** allowing a **broad and inclusive participation** of all stakeholders **at and across different levels** (involving local, national and regional players as well as state and non-state actors, including civil society and Churches)
- foster **personal contacts** within the Western Balkans region and between the region and the countries of the European Union **across different sectors** (involving policy-makers, professionals, entrepreneurs, academics, scientists, students, etc.) through EU funding and exchange programmes; intensify **links with diaspora communities** living abroad
- organise **Summit meetings** between political representatives of the Western Balkans and their counterparts from the European Union on a **regular basis**
- strengthen **cooperation in areas of mutual interest** (such as public administration, the rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime, security, migration & mobility, connectivity, digitalisation, transport, trade, investment, socio-economic development, healthcare, research, energy, etc.), including through a consequent implementation of the flagship initiatives proposed in the recent EU Strategy for the Western Balkans
- promote the **responsibility of political and media representatives** with a view to enhancing the **quality, accuracy and objectivity of citizens' information** about the European integration process
- underpin the commitments made in the Western Balkans Strategy through an **adequate budget line** in the next Multiannual Financial Framework

## b) Development of young people, families and communities

- focus on **person-, family- and community-centered measures** by promoting the creation of opportunities to **empower** especially **young people**, families and local communities to take active part at all levels of **economic, social and political** life
- comprehensively address the challenges for the labour market, such as high **youth unemployment** and **job-skill mismatch**, through adequate **education, formation and local employment** opportunities; dedicate a **particular attention** to the **empowerment** of **citizens with fewer opportunities**, such as women or Roma
- promote the development of **conditions for a business and investment environment** that can contribute to the creation of **decent employment opportunities** for the **local population** and **strengthen the local economic systems** in the longer-term
- support the formation of an **enabling environment for an empowered and organised civil society**, which is characterised by **good governance**, the respect for the **rule of law and fundamental human rights**; reinforce pertinent **monitoring and accountability mechanisms** that allow effective sanctions in case of non-compliance as well as positive incentives encouraging further progress

## c) Promoting reconciliation and lasting peace in the region

- pro-actively support reconciliation and peace-building efforts through **creative people-centered initiatives** and the implementation of appropriate **transitional justice** measures
- ensure respect for **human dignity** and for the rights and liberties of all communities present in the region, including the **rights of all ethnic and religious components**, whether they are majorities or minorities, on the basis of the concept of **common citizenship**
- avoid tendencies to **instrumentalise historical memory** by working towards a **common narrative** which does not ignore realities but nourishes reconciliation and peace, by reflecting different historical perspectives and specific identities of each country and community
- facilitate an **inclusive encounter and dialogue** with all relevant regional and EU stakeholders, including civil society, Churches as well as all ethnic and religious minorities through the **establishment of relevant platforms and programmes**
- foster **good neighbourly relations** by intensifying **intraregional cooperation** and **enhancing regional connectivity**

#### d) Religious actors as partners for development and peace

- protect and **promote cultural and religious diversity** by recognising the **key role of locally rooted religious communities** for sustainable development and peace
- promote a **favourable environment** and **support inclusive inter-religious encounters and actions**
- set up a **dialogue between political and religious authorities** in the **preparation of future EU-Western Balkans Summits**
- **better integrate** into respective policies and programmes the **actions of Churches and religious communities** in areas, such as human rights promotion, conflict prevention, reconciliation, charity, humanitarian action, education and healthcare, including through ensuring a **fair and non-discriminatory access to respective EU funding instruments**

*The Secretariat of COMECE, 25 April 2018*

The **Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union** (COMECE) brings together the Bishop delegates from Bishops' Conferences of the 28 Member States. For more than thirty years now, COMECE has been closely involved in the process of European integration and sharing its reflections with EU institutions. COMECE is the Catholic Church partner of EU institutions in the Dialogue foreseen by Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Its permanent General Secretariat, based in Brussels, analyses EU policies on a day-by-day basis, striving to bring the specific contribution of the Catholic Church into the European debate. It maintains regular contact with Bishops' Conferences from the countries of the Western Balkans within the structures of the Catholic Church.

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