



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Contribution of the COMECE Secretariat to the EU public consultation on the Eastern partnership

1. How to boost economic and human capital development and prosperity?

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) should above all be understood as a partnership for **sustainable and integral development of persons, families and local communities**.

A particular focus needs to be set on **youth**. Within the future EaP, young people should be empowered at all levels of social, economic and political life. Tangible and sustainable local perspectives should be created to **counter “brain drain”**. In order to address youth unemployment and job-skill mismatch, projects for **education, formation, vocational training** as well as study **exchanges** should be developed, while taking into account **digital skills** in the context of new digital technologies. In this regard, a future **Digital Package** could particularly support professional training initiatives and contribute to the creation of new jobs in the digital market.

In the follow up to the EaP 20 Deliverables, it would also be necessary to pay a **special attention to vulnerable communities**, including Roma people, as well as refugees and internally displaced persons from areas experiencing violent conflict such as Eastern Ukraine, since they are often subject to poverty and social exclusion. In this regard, the future EaP should **reinforce initiatives on their socio-economic empowerment** and on improving their **access to education, healthcare and decent housing**.

The **rural-urban divide** should also be addressed. In order to bridge the gap, **financial and technical incentives to small-scale farmers and family enterprises** should be made available, as well as to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in rural and suburban areas, while **involving them in consultations and policy-making**. Moreover, the **improvement of human connectivity and infrastructure** between cities and countryside could **foster social cohesion**.

The economic dimension of the partnership should always be reflected upon in relation to its social and ecological component. A specific focus in the **impact assessment of economic measures on society and on the environment** would be a way to promote **sustainable and inclusive growth** that is ecological and propels

the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Investments should thus not merely consist in a calculation of economic profits, but **create decent employment opportunities for local communities and strengthen the local economic systems in the longer-term**, while respecting the environment.

2. How to strengthen good governance, the rule of law and the security dimension of the Eastern Partnership?

The EaP should be a **partnership for lasting peace** in Europe and its neighbourhood. **True security can only exist in sustainable peace.** In the understanding of the Church, peace is “more than the absence of war and violence”, as it requires “the establishment of an order which is based on **justice, integral human development, respect for fundamental human rights and the care of creation**” (cf. COMECE, ["Whose security? Whose defence?"](#))

Following an **integral approach**, the future EaP should thus focus on the promotion of human security by stepping up its efforts in **pre-emptive peacebuilding** (cf. COMECE, [Europe's vocation to promote peace in the world](#), [EU Global Strategy](#) p. 29). **Forward-looking and multi-sectoral actions** need to be taken at an early stage, where the premises of a possibly violent conflict can be transformed and managed in a sustainable way. In this regard, the EU and the EaP countries should above all work together on a solid **framework of preventive diplomacy and mediation** through, for instance, the establishment of an **EU Special Envoy** in the context of protracted and frozen conflicts affecting the EaP region and the wider neighbourhood.

A reinforced focus should also be placed on processes of **trust-building and reconciliation among nations as well as communities.** In order to “*heal the memories of the past*” (Saint Pope John Paul II) and foster good neighbourly relations, the EU could support the establishment of **platforms and programmes to facilitate an inclusive encounter and dialogue** involving relevant local and regional actors, including policy-makers, civil society, Churches as well as all ethnic and religious communities.

With the support from the EU, the EaP partners should also prioritise the fostering of **resilience of persons, families, local communities** in order to enable their recovery from past crises and prepare them for possible future challenges and risks (cf. COMECE, [Fostering resilience for sustainable peace](#)). Following a **bottom-up approach**, efforts should also be undertaken to foster the **resilience of societies and state institutions**, including **measures addressing cyber threats, disinformation and external dependencies** – e.g. in the sectors of energy and technological advancement.

An essential element of a resilient state and society is the **respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms**.¹ If detached from human rights and from the rule of law, security measures can lose their positive value and become a threat in themselves. **Closer cooperation** in areas, such as **fight against corruption and organised crime**, as well as enhancing **transparency** of public finances and **effectiveness of public administration**, and strengthening the **independence of the judiciary**, should be envisaged in the future EaP framework. On the other hand, however, the EU actions should avoid promoting concepts and practices that contradict the identity, traditions, values and life of local communities in partner countries.

In order to develop a sense of community and allow a “consolidated commitment of all sectors of society, so as to create conditions for stability, justice and respect for the rule of law” – as [highlighted by Pope Francis during several of his travels to the EaP region](#) – the future partnership should **reinforce support for initiatives** that aim to **foster an enabling democratic environment and inclusive civic space**.

Moreover, the EU should also work together with the six partners, in order to **ensure the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief** by protecting and promoting the **rights of all ethnic and religious components** present in the region, whether they are majorities or minorities, on the basis of the concept of **common citizenship**.

3. How to enhance cooperation between Eastern partners, whilst ensuring inclusiveness and differentiation in their relations with the EU?

The EaP should be a **fair partnership**, a two-way process **based on reciprocity** and the strive for mutual benefits in the short- as well as long-term. The approach of the EU in its cooperation with the Eastern neighbours should reflect and **respect the diversity of economic interests and (geo)political choices** of the partner countries. For those aspiring for closer political and economic ties with the EU, an “EaP plus” framework could be envisaged.² Besides an enhanced access to the EU

¹ In this regard, it should be highlighted that the Catholic Church encourages all efforts directed towards the abolition of the death penalty. According to Pope Francis, the death penalty is “always inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”.

² In this regard, we may recall the [European Parliament Resolution of 9 July 2015 on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (2015/2002(INI), which “stresses that enlargement policy and neighbourhood policy are separate policies with different objectives; reiterates, however, that European countries within the ENP, like any European country, can apply for EU membership if they satisfy the criteria and conditions of eligibility and admission under Article 49 TEU; considers, whilst recognising that reform and transition must come first and not wishing to raise unrealistic expectations, that a membership perspective must be sustained as an incentive to all countries which are eligible and have expressed evident European aspirations and ambitions”.

internal market, this framework could include **initiatives fostering people-to-people contacts**, such as, for example, by further facilitating the application procedures and reducing the bureaucratic burden of applying organisations and institutions in the Erasmus+ Programme. In addition, willing EaP partner countries could be **more strongly involved in EU projects like the Energy Union and the Horizon Europe programme**, as well as in initiatives supporting **learning mobility, volunteering, youth work and the promotion of cultural and religious heritage**.

To be a genuine partnership, it is essential that the future EaP is not merely based on project funding, but rather promotes **reciprocal forms of cooperation** by focusing on **qualitative benchmarks and deliverables tailored to the needs** of individual countries and their citizens. An intensified partnership with some EaP countries, however, should **not lead to new divisions and fragmentations** in the region. Before designing and implementing new ways of cooperation, their potential impact on the cohesion of the EaP region and the broader neighbouring area should be properly assessed in dialogue with local stakeholders.

In view of **fostering stability and peace** in the region, the Eastern partnership should **not exclude participation to other forms of cooperation**. Therefore, the future policy framework needs to better take into account the EaP countries' relations with their respective neighbours and partners, and foresee **new ways of dialogue** with them. In this regard, for example, a closer cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union could be considered.

In order to **enhance the complementarity between multilateral and bilateral agendas**, and to **strengthen the flexibility** of the future EaP framework, **ad-hoc forms of intensified cooperation** in areas of mutual concern between the Eastern partners and groups of EU Member States (like the Visegrad group or the Baltic States) could be set up, such as in the fight against human trafficking or in the field of energy interconnectivity.

4. How to enhance Eastern Partnership and EU visibility?

The EaP should be a **people-centred partnership**, based on **solidarity and subsidiarity**, characterised by an inclusive participation of citizens in processes of **open and constructive dialogue and cooperation**. The future EaP framework should thus prioritise initiatives facilitating personal contacts within the region, as well as between the partner countries and the EU. Such **platforms of dialogue and cooperation** could bring together **stakeholders across different sectors** (e.g. policymakers, non-state actors, professionals, entrepreneurs, academics, scientists, students, diaspora communities, Churches and religious communities, etc.) and **across different levels** (local, national, regional, etc).

An **inclusive and participatory partnership** also implies finding ways to **give a voice to citizens with fewer opportunities**. Failure to include all parts of society in

political, social and economic processes might fuel support for polarising voices and provide breeding ground for extremisms.

In fostering an **active and informed participation** of all citizens and enhancing the EaP's and EU's visibility, the **media** also play an important role. The future EaP should thus **promote the responsibility of political and media representatives**, with a view to enhancing the quality, accuracy and objectivity of citizens' information. Through appropriate education, formation and training initiatives **critical thinking** should be promoted and **capacities to resist disinformation** be developed.

In order to increase the visibility and strengthen the co-ownership of the EaP, proposals such as the **creation of a permanent EaP Secretariat** or a **rotating Presidency** between EaP countries could be further explored.

5. Other proposals and reflections on the future of the Eastern Partnership

Throughout the EaP region, religious belongings are deeply rooted in local realities and they are one of the key determinants of societal structures and personal bonds. The future EaP should **ensure that the existing religious and cultural diversity be respected, preserved and promoted**. **Religious heritage** is one of the pillars of culture and identity. The new EaP framework could thus better recognise the spiritual, historical, artistic, economic as well as **social contribution of religious heritage** and reinforce policies aiming at its promotion and protection, particularly in conflict areas. Such initiatives might not only enhance the respective religious and cultural literacy but they could also reinforce a **spirit of encounter, dialogue and better mutual knowledge and understanding**.

As [recently recognised by the European Parliament](#), **Churches and religious actors** are among the frontline and long-standing **promoters of sustainable human development and peace**. In line with the European Parliament's recommendations, the future EaP could foresee ways of **strengthening partnerships with religious actors** in areas, such as education, healthcare, basic social services or humanitarian action, through a **better integration of their efforts within the specific policies**, as well as a fair and non-discriminatory access to respective EU funding instruments.

Moreover, the future EaP could also **better integrate the efforts of religious actors within local conflict analysis and prevention mechanisms**, as well as in **reconciliation and peacebuilding** (cf. [Council Conclusions on the EU's integrated approach to external conflicts and crisis](#) p.5).

In view of the capacity of **inter-cultural** and **inter-religious dialogue** to build bridges and to foster social cohesion, the future EaP could encompass policies contributing to a favourable environment and supporting inclusive inter-religious encounters and actions. **Initiatives promoting inter-religious dialogue** could, for instance, be linked to the **EU platform on "Global Exchange on Religion in**

Society”, recently launched by HR/VP Federica Mogherini. This EU initiative aims to “to connect and empower civil society actors working on faith and social inclusion” in order to enhance the participation of women and lay people in the religious context. Moreover, in preparation of future EU-Eastern Partnership Summits, **regular dialogue meetings between political and religious authorities** could be set up. Such encounters could allow Church and religious actors to **contribute to policy-makers’ efforts for a fair and people-centred Eastern partnership**, promoting **sustainable and integral human development and lasting peace**.

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***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.*

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