



## Europe facing the challenges of organized crime

### Joint resolution of the Commissions for Justice and Peace from

**Albania, Belgium Flanders, Belgium Francophone, Croatia, France, Germany,  
Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine**

### Summary

Organised crime is a growing security policy problem in Europe. The diverse methods used by the various organisational forms of organised crime, as well as the extensive threat and destructive potential of their activities, are not only criminological challenges, but also pose enormous challenges for European societies and states. In this declaration, an association of European Justice and Peace Commissions therefore calls for the containment and combating of organised crime to be seen as a challenge for society and politics as a whole.

## Catalogue of demands

We as European Justice and Peace Commissions are calling for broad national and European alliances against organised crime from politics, law enforcement agencies, civil society and churches. From our perspective, the following measures are urgently needed to effectively combat organised crime in Europe:

1. Initiate a process within Europe to create a binding definition of organised crime on an interdisciplinary basis and regularly review its effectiveness.
2. Strengthen international collaboration to combat organised crime, including shared intelligence, harmonised laws, and joint operations to dismantle cross-border criminal networks.
3. Emphasise the importance of addressing systemic institutional vulnerabilities.
4. Establish a multilateral and cross-cutting European strategy that harmonises, integrates and bundles local, national and international efforts, since organized crime networks do not recognize national borders, which is a particularly sensitive issue at the EU's external borders. The existing or newly created exchange platforms must be put in a position to record the dynamically changing forms of organised crime in order to be able to adapt political, police, etc. reactions.
5. Improve the legal framework and increase Europol's capabilities to combat the transnational nature of organised crime. This should include enhanced data-sharing frameworks and technological tools to track and address evolving criminal networks – for example with Interpol.
6. Mainstream the fight against organised crime as a cross-cutting issue in national and European policy. This means that this issue should be systematically taken into account in the conceptual considerations on the orientation of development, economic, social, educational and integration policies, for example.
7. Establish regular round tables that should bring together various groups and institutions at the relevant European and national policy levels that are familiar with or affected by the problem in order to exchange information and experiences, discuss necessary or helpful measures and initiatives and draw up appropriate recommendations for society, policy-makers and authorities.
8. Improve prevention through information, education and awareness-raising. To this end, we need to fund and promote projects and institutions that are committed to this goal. In this context, we also need to promote or create organisations that carry out personal development measures in order to build resilience in society as a whole in the medium and long term.
9. Fight this struggle with the victims of organized crimes, including migrants and other persons who have been trafficked, or coerced into illegal activities. They must be protected. Well cared for, they could provide unvaluable insider information on criminal organisations, thus supporting the fight against organized crime.
10. Explore comprehensive integration programmes to facilitate the access of migrants – primarily non-European – to education, language training, and the labour market to

significantly reduce economic marginalisation and promote inclusion. Even if the often more than precarious situation of migrants frequently makes them very vulnerable to organised crime, it is important to resist the simple temptation to automatically stigmatise them as perpetrators.

11. Examine whether and how advertising and propaganda for harmful practices such as drug use, gambling, pornography and forced prostitution can be banned from the media, as these and many other practices often contribute significantly to the development and financing of criminal organisations.
12. Encourage reflection around restorative justice and rehabilitation as part of the justice process. Prioritise society's resilience and solidarity, healing and reconciliation alongside accountability, ensuring victims, offenders, and affected communities are integral to the process.
13. We call on the churches and their organisations to make use of all opportunities, e.g. to raise awareness of the socially destructive significance of white-collar crime. Bishops and priests should publicly highlight the incompatibility of organised crime with Christian values, using excommunication as a moral and spiritual tool to emphasise the Church's opposition to criminal organisations.
14. In their own structures, the Churches must stand at all levels as allies on the side of those persons, initiatives or organisations that oppose organised crime. They must be informed about where they are vulnerable in their activities and take precautions against criminal influence. Any economic activities of the churches must neither promote or enable organised crime nor have criminal characteristics themselves, as they are part of the manifestations of the structure of sin. Church related institutions, including aid organisations and financial institutions, should adhere to strict ethical standards in order to avoid complicity with or indirect support of organised crime. To promote transparency and integrity, we call for regular audits to be carried out.

## **Background**

Europe is currently facing many threats to its security, integrity and cohesion, both from within and from outside. In the wake of these threats, many of which are visible to everyone, a partially hidden danger is operating and growing: organised crime.

In the absence of a generally applicable definition, it is very difficult to define exactly what is meant by organised crime. Based on a description by Europol, it is at least possible to illustrate what organised crime can encompass: It is primarily about criminal networks or groups that are active in many areas. Just like the fields of activity, the methods are extremely diverse. As a rule, however, they include corruption and forms of exercising power and violence.

The social and political perception of the potential threat posed by organised crime varies greatly across Europe. While in some countries the problem is almost obvious and there are numerous governmental and social approaches to tackling the problem, in other countries, the fight against this phenomenon is very limited. One of the reasons for this is that awareness of the problem is often not sufficiently developed or there is a lack of political will. There may often be a prevailing feeling that organised crime is someone else's problem. However, this is a serious misjudgement. Organised crime is both a global and growing European problem and no state can absolve itself of the task of tackling the challenges it raises – especially as one of the outstanding characteristics of this form of crime is that it operates transnationally.

As much as the containment of organised crime requires a joint effort by the entire European family of states, it does not have just one face. There are considerable differences in its characteristics, as the criminal organisations operate in multiple ways and know how to exploit the different circumstances of their respective areas of activity (i.e. territorial layers such as national and regional, rural and urban, border and inland areas). This also explains their breadth and depth of penetration in the societies concerned. This complexity makes it very difficult to contain and combat organised crime because the criminal activities do not only take place in the so-called 'underworld'. Instead, perpetrators across society and all social classes are involved willingly or without their knowledge. For example, also from state and local political structures, and often in connection with remnants of intelligence networks from former regimes. Organised crime is often characterised by the fact that the boundary between the illegal and legal spheres, between the 'underworld' and the 'society', is blurred by creating dependencies or even forging alliances between the two areas. It is not a rare case, especially in transition countries, of joint criminal activity in so-called private-public partnerships. Here, money flows from public funds into private pockets in a non-transparent and criminal manner and public services are bribed. This interdependence often leads to the paradoxical situation that many societies suffer from the activities of organised crime on the one hand, while on the other, some players in organised crime are able to gain a certain degree of social toleration. Moreover, they can even hold high state offices and enjoy public approval or support by skilfully exploiting these official and unofficial alliances, presenting themselves as social benefactors. Not infrequently, such murky alliances take over original state duties such as security, health, waste disposal, protection and order among others, using public funds for private gain.

The Catholic Church, especially under the leadership of Pope Francis, has been unwavering in its condemnation of organised crime, denouncing it as a grave moral and social evil that undermines human dignity and the common good. Pope Francis has explicitly excommunicated members of the mafia, stating in 2014, "Those who in their lives follow this path of evil, as Mafiosi do, are not in communion with God. They are excommunicated." His strong stance frames organised crime not only as a legal issue but as a profound violation of divine justice and Christian values like the common good, solidarity and justice. He has called for global cooperation to combat these transnational networks, emphasising that such crimes exploit institutional dysfunction and societal vulnerabilities. Pope Francis has also highlighted the vast human cost of organised crime, describing it as a force that inflicts suffering on both visible and invisible victims, whose dignity and rights must be protected.

The massive social destructive potential of organised crime becomes particularly clear against the background of Christian social teaching: most forms of organised crime go hand in hand with gross violations of human dignity and the most serious human rights violations. Such phenomena should be considered blatant manifestations of invisible but active structures of sin. This is obvious in the case of killings and murders that violate the right to physical integrity or the fundamental right to life. This is a particularly delicate case in circumstances where criminal networks are encountered in the sensitive areas of health, education, culture and media. Drug trafficking, besides poisoning individuals and society and making them incapable of normal functioning, disregards the right to health. This is also recklessly jeopardised in the case of illegal toxic waste disposal, counterfeit medicines, deliberate non-compliance with safety regulations in the construction industry or the forced prostitution of women and men or the commercial abuse of children or adolescents. A particularly perfidious form of exploitation of children and women is forced surrogacy, which primarily serves commercial purposes, or child trafficking, especially from non-European countries, in order to offer them for adoption. We also explicitly mention organised financial crime, which is carried out by organised criminals on all continents and has become much more significant thanks to new technologies. The seriousness of financial crime has a socio-economic impact and is often linked to violent crime and even terrorism.

The common feature is that it is always accepted that people come to harm – physically or emotionally, in the short term or permanently – and in extreme cases die. People are instrumentalised in the pursuit of profit or addiction. Instrumentalization affects not only the victims, but also the perpetrators of crimes. In such criminal acts, everyone is a victim, because there is nothing acceptable or desirable in them. For this reason, organised crime is almost always directed against the very heart of human rights, namely human dignity.

All of this necessitates an expanded understanding of security, which should be extended to include the central aspects of human security and must integrate a new relationship between internal and external security. This is because it is not just about the threat to individual security posed by direct physical violence, but also about security risks such as health hazards, environmental destruction or social problems that threaten or destroy human lives and the peaceful coexistence of people. We should not ignore or minimise the damage caused by organised crime to the whole creation. The world around us is affected or even destroyed, for

example, by the trade in endangered animal and plant species, the illegal devastation of protected natural areas, the illegal or apparently legalised exploitation of natural resources through corruption, poaching, the discharge of toxic wastewater into bodies of water or the dumping of oil and toxic substances into them.

Containing and combating organised crime must be a cross-cutting political and wider social issue. It is insufficient to leave the fight against this form of crime to the police or the courts alone, whose actions in an atmosphere organized crime often do not correspond to the requirements of legal action, but rather to the expectations of interest groups. This is why any affected society must seriously confront questions about the ways in which it, consciously or unconsciously, benefits certain forms of organized crime. Tacit participation in such activities begins with falsifying profits and not declaring taxes, not declaring work in construction with poor working conditions and unclear working hours. This extends to buying cigarettes without a band and visiting prostitutes, then to illegally employing a housekeeper and foreign workers in general – which are usually forms of modern slavery –, to buying drugs for better efficiency and also for fun and parties, to stealing art and to giving bribes for employment or some other benefit. In addition, every form of non-transparent action and decision-making corresponds to the logic of the structures of sin. To all this, we must add the new scourge of gambling and betting addiction, which is not only a serious moral and family problem, but is also linked to various forms of crime, such as extortion, blackmail, theft and criminal conspiracy for the purpose of gaining profit. The social acceptance of tax evasion as a trivial offence differs only gradually from the massive tax fraud that is facilitated and sometimes orchestrated by high-profile financial institutions or their personnel. Insofar as organised crime largely functions according to the market principle, it can only thrive if there is also a social demand which is also favoured by social indifference towards these phenomena, which results in approval reflecting the mentality of the local community. In addition to the structural factors that favour organised crime, the social values and attitudes in society must therefore also be considered in the fight against it – since precisely those hold certain corrupt practices, if not morally, then at least socially acceptable, a fact that clearly shows the social characteristics of local culture and mentality. Because without a change in the mentality and culture of a society in which corruption and organized crime are active, society is doomed to decline.