

MANIFESTO

VOLUNTARY HUMANITARIAN REFUSAL: A CHOICE YOU CANNOT REFUSE. CAMPAIGN MANIFESTO TO STOP “VOLUNTARY” RETURN PROGRAMS FROM TRANSIT COUNTRIES

The signatory organizations denounce the instrumental and distorted use of voluntary assisted returns from transit countries, such as Libya and Tunisia, where the fundamental rights of migrants are systematically violated. In these contexts, so-called voluntary return is not a free choice but a last resort due to the absence of safe alternatives, effectively turning into a disguised expulsion. Instead of providing protection, the European Union and its Member States fund programs that return people to the countries they fled from, exposing them once again to violence and discrimination.

When can a return be truly voluntary?

According to United Nations bodies, such as the [Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants](#) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), for a return to be considered voluntary, it is crucial that:

- The decision is free and informed.
- There is no physical or psychological coercion.
- There are real alternatives to return, such as access to protection and regular migration channels.

However, in transit countries like Libya and Tunisia, these conditions are systematically absent. Migrants are forced to resort to returns to escape situations of violence, torture, and exploitation, not because of a free choice. They cannot access legal forms of protection or regular migration channels, and return thus becomes an imposed necessity, exposing them to even greater risks in their countries of origin.

The reality we are denouncing:

- **Protection on paper, migration control in practice:** These programs, increasingly funded by the EU and its Member States and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in transit countries, are often part of border externalization policies aimed at preventing people from reaching Europe rather than ensuring their protection.
- **Dramatic conditions in transit countries:** Libya and Tunisia are places where migrants are systematically subjected to violence, exploitation, abuse, and xenophobia. The authorities of these countries, funded by the EU, are directly responsible for serious human rights violations, yet the EU continues to financially support these governments.

- False voluntariness and violations of the principle of non-refoulement: In Libya and Tunisia, migrants are often forced to resort to return to escape persecution and violence, and due to the lack of legal migration and protection channels. Return is never truly a choice but a forced necessity dictated by circumstances. Moreover, returning to their countries of origin exposes migrants to violence and persecution, in violation of the non-refoulement principle.
- Lack of guarantees: Despite these risks being reported by numerous civil society organizations and the United Nations themselves, the EU and its Member States continue to finance these programs without requiring adequate guarantees of respect for the non-refoulement principle.
- Inadequacy of reintegration programs: Reintegration programs, when provided, are generally inadequate to protect individuals from the risks associated with return in contexts of systemic discrimination and violence. In such situations, the individual support, often limited to economic ones, is not sufficient to address the risks of violence and marginalization.

What we ask for:

1. **Stop funding voluntary returns from transit countries:** We call for the immediate cessation of funding for voluntary return programs from countries like Libya and Tunisia, where return becomes an imposed choice, violating the non-refoulement principle.
2. **Freedom of movement and protection policies, not externalization:** We ask for an end to cooperation based on deterrence and mobility-blocking policies, to allow free movement and the genuine exercise of the right to leave one's country in search of protection, in full respect of the right to asylum.
3. **Stop agreements and funding aimed at preventing migrants from reaching Europe:** We demand an immediate halt to agreements and funding aimed at blocking migration to Europe, restricting mobility in transit countries, or rerouting migration to countries of origin. We call for the adoption of active protection policies, ensuring the possibility of entering Europe for people fleeing violence and persecution in Libya, Tunisia, and their countries of origin.
4. **Greater transparency, guarantees, and human rights monitoring:** We demand greater transparency in projects funded with public funds, the establishment of independent monitoring mechanisms, and guarantees for human rights compliance, starting with the principle of free and informed consent.

Promoting organizations: ASGI, ActionAid, A Buon Diritto, Lucha y siesta, Differenza Donna, Spazi Circolari, Le Carbet.

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