



*Contribution of COMECE and CEC
to the Slovenian EU Council Presidency
Programme*

Together. Resilient. Europe.

Introduction

The Republic of Slovenia takes the rotating **Presidency of the Council of the European Union** at a challenging moment for the EU, in a context characterised by the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to affect all EU Member States and all Europeans.

The key priorities of the Slovenian Presidency are framed in such challenging and complex context, with the topical motto “Together. Resilient. Europe” highlighting the current needs of the EU. The Union will have to become more resilient and recover from the pandemic, while maintaining strategic autonomy, security and stability in its neighbourhood, promoting its values and strengthening its democracies. The Conference on the Future of Europe will be the forum to debate and engage with all citizens on the current challenges and on the vision of a European project capable of responding to citizens’ needs and aspirations.

COMECE (Commission of the Episcopates of the European Union) and CEC (Conference of European Churches) have a longstanding tradition of engaging in dialogue with EU Presidencies. Together, we represent the membership of around 380 million citizens throughout EU Member States and we are strongly committed to develop the European project on the basis of the Christian ideals of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. We are committed to work towards a more peaceful, prosperous, socially just, inclusive and sustainable Union, by monitoring and contributing to specific EU policies and legal developments, in dialogue with the EU institutions.

The work of COMECE and CEC is enshrined in **Article 17** of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which foresees an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU and Churches. We are committed to this dialogue and we work to ensure that the respect for human dignity, democracy, solidarity, freedom, equality and the rule of law are at the forefront of EU actions and policies in the Union and on the global stage.

In light of this, we welcome the ambitious and forward-looking Programme of the Slovenian EU Council Presidency and express our willingness to contribute to it. We look forward to a constructive dialogue and interaction throughout the tenure and wish the Slovenian Presidency success, courage, wisdom and God’s blessing for this important task.

As a first step in our cooperation and dialogue and in a Christian ecumenical spirit, we would like to share our **joint reflections and proposals** addressing the four priorities of the Slovenian EU Presidency Programme.

I. Recovery from the pandemic and Resilience in view of future crises

Presidency Priorities: The resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy of the European Union

A **resilient and healthy Europe** must be established in response to the COVID-19 emergency. The complexity of the current crisis calls for a fight against the pandemic based on an integral human development enabled by an effective health policy. Thus, a prudent view of the further developments of the pandemic and the overall EU health policy will be necessary: the proposed EU Health Package opens the possibility of a more structured legal framework for this and the EU Green Digital Certificate will ensure further normalization of the European citizens' free movement. The evidential effect of this certificate must not curtail the rights of individual Member States to respond to each pandemic situation according to their national competence.

In the next months, the situation of **vaccine production and distribution** for Europe and the world will remain a major challenge. The COVAX facility is an important tool for more distributive justice of the vaccines in the world, but the pandemic also requires a new holistic global approach with a strong involvement of trade policy. We welcome the approach of the EU to develop with the WTO an activity based on three pillars: open supply chains, expand production and reflecting the question of intellectual property. The EU has to underline that their acting principles are valued over profit.

The pandemic has also shown a great strain on the mental health of EU citizens. The report presented by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addicts painfully demonstrated devastating effects of an economic and social crisis on mental health.

Besides addressing the health crisis, the recovery from the pandemic and its consequences will have to focus on social, economic, digital and green transition processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed Europe to **significant shifts in our work, education, economy, welfare systems and social lives**. COMECE and CEC welcome the Action Plan on the Social Pillar and its three headline targets, including the reduction of the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030. Following the Porto Social Summit, further work is needed to fully implement the measures outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, supporting people in need and acknowledging the multi-dimensional approach to poverty.

The negative impacts of teleworking (e.g. blurring of professional and private life), which became more common during the pandemic, have also been felt by many, affecting workers' **work-life balance** and health. More than ever, Churches believe that the need for a common day of rest should be strengthened in this debate. Platform work also offered a glimmer of hope for some local economic activities, but it was characterized by numerous cases of misclassification of platform workers. It is high time for an EU initiative that allows decent working conditions for platform workers, since a flexible work should not mean precarious working conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed **hidden vulnerabilities in our societies**, especially for the elderly. The EU should recognise the crucial role of elderly people, protecting,

promoting and including them, while ensuring their full participation in our society and communities and tackling regional disparities in access to affordable and quality social and healthcare services.

Besides addressing the health crisis, the **economic recovery of the EU** will also be paramount for the next years. COMECE and CEC welcome that the Slovenian Presidency will look at fully implementing the EU recovery instrument, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility. We urge the Commission and the EU Council to review, evaluate and approve the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRP) on time to allow first payments to be issued between July and September 2021, in order to bolster a just social, ecological and contributive recovery. The distribution of the recovery fund will have to be accompanied by proper monitoring of the funded projects.

COMECE and CEC also welcome the commitment of the Slovenian Presidency to the renewed sustainable finance strategy as part of the European Green Deal and on the way to climate neutrality. In this context, the EU Taxonomy is key to help businesses and investors to redirect capital flows in sustainable activities.

In a rapidly evolving **digital market**, accelerated by the pandemic, new ways to communicate, shop or access information have emerged. In this context, Churches acknowledge a number of positive provisions

under the Digital Services Acts Package to ensure that vulnerable children and people are protected against illegal content, and that smaller actors such as SMEs enjoy fair rules on the market. For the recently proposed Artificial Intelligence Act, Churches welcome the EU human-centric approach to AI, although references to ethical standards are decidedly weak. With respect to remote biometric identification, a deep analysis will also be necessary, especially in situations and conditions where the use should be prohibited.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only highlighted Europe's own vulnerabilities in the socio-economic and health sphere, but it has also aggravated **global challenges**: rising inequalities, conflicts and geopolitical competition. Against this background, Churches commend the ambition of the Presidency to develop Europe's strategic autonomy further. Nevertheless, we urge the EU to refrain from isolationism and protectionism and develop instead a *relational* strategic autonomy, open to multilateral cooperation in the spirit of fraternity, solidarity and interdependence, while being firmly rooted in EU's founding values and principles.

II. Values guiding the Future of Europe

Presidency Priorities: The Conference on the Future of Europe and A union of the European way of life, the rule of law and equal criteria for all

COMECE and CEC welcome the focus of the Slovenian EU Presidency on strengthening

our common European values and principles within all policy areas. The *Conference on the*

Future of Europe – one of the key priorities of the Slovenian EU Presidency – is of great interest and importance also for COMECE and CEC. We are strongly committed to the Conference, looking forward to being actively involved at European level. We are also encouraging our Member Churches to actively take part in the Conference at local, regional and national level, by attending, organizing or co-organizing events as well as by actively using the interactive multilingual Digital Platform in order to share their ideas, expectations, visions and concerns relating to the future of Europe. We especially invite **young people** – the true future of Europe – to take part in the debate and encourage the Slovenian Presidency to consider young people's dream for Europe to shape their future. In this context, COMECE organized a Youth Convention consisting of a series of three webinars for young people, to give them the opportunity to elaborate concrete proposals on topical EU policy areas that will feed in the Conference proceedings.

Churches – being present at all levels of European societies, from grass-root, local and regional to national, European and global – have a lot to offer and value to add to the discussion about the future of Europe. Thus, the **voice of Churches** needs to be heard in the Conference. As credible Article 17 (TFEU) dialogue partners and key stakeholders, representing – through our members – more than 380 million citizens in all EU Member States, COMECE and CEC would suggest to be actively involved in the Conference, for example by being invited to the Conference Plenary in order to discuss about the impact of our European common values in developing the European project. We respectfully ask the Slovenian Presidency to advocate for a constructive participation of COMECE and CEC in the Conference.

COMECE and CEC also commend the Slovenian Presidency for focusing on **European values and principles** and the need to implement these in all policy areas, as well as promoting the European way of life, the rule of law and equal criteria for all. In this respect, we would like to emphasize the need to combat all forms of hate crimes and hate speech, intolerance and discrimination, while ensuring sound definitions and provisions that safeguard freedom of expression and other fundamental rights.

Freedom of religion or belief needs to be promoted and protected in our European societies. While in principle a matter for national authorities, freedom of religion comes into play in a number of EU policies. We encourage the EU Presidency to look at EU initiatives also through the lens of their possible impact on this fundamental right. As an example, Churches express great concern on recent EU developments concerning restrictions on ritual slaughter of animals. Furthermore, Covid-19 recovery and reopening policies should also take into account the situation and needs of Churches (e.g. both as actors that can facilitate recovery through their social actions, and as actors in need of recovery support; re-expansion of freedom of worship to pre-pandemic standards).

We would also like to draw the Presidency's attention to two EU-funded projects concerning protection of places of worship in the EU that are supported by Churches and feature an inter-religious cooperation among different faiths: the SASCE project (Safer and Stronger Communities in Europe) and the ProSPeReS Consortium (Protection System for large gatherings of People in Religious Sites).

In order to foster social cohesion, solidarity and fraternity in Europe, special attention

should be paid to **educational and cultural policies**. In respect of the principle of subsidiarity and by means of support and coordination, the EU should ensure that Member States' education systems become more resilient and inclusive, addressing social inequalities and marginalisation, exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. In view of consolidating the European Education Area, formal, non-formal, informal and vocational education should be promoted, with an integral approach that fosters

learners' interpersonal and intercultural competences, adaptability and personal growth through sound practices of formation and training. Culture and cultural heritage – a further powerful means of social cohesion – should be boosted in the EU, with a specific focus on promoting and safeguarding the working conditions of artists and cultural heritage, especially after the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage and in light of the recent launch of the *Creative Europe* Programme.

III. [A leading humanitarian, development and peace actor in the world](#)

Presidency Priorities: A credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood

Churches welcome the ambition of the Presidency to contribute to strengthening the **EU's role in the world** to be a leading global humanitarian, development, economic and peace actor. We encourage further work to foster partnerships with the United Kingdom, the United States of America, as well as with Africa, Latin America and the Indo-Pacific region. Such cooperation would serve a people-centered and just recovery from the pandemic and its consequences, promote a more peaceful world and strengthen the commitment to a better care for our common home. In this respect, we urge the Slovenian Presidency to work towards an ambitious European mandatory due diligence legislation holding all businesses liable for human rights violations and environmental harm throughout their supply chains, and contribute constructively to international negotiations on a UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights.

The region of **South-East Europe**, commonly referred to as the "Western Balkans", is an integral part of the European family through

its history and its rich cultural and religious heritage. While saluting the Presidency's priority to host a Western Balkans Summit and reaffirm a credible European perspective for the countries of this region, Churches find it important that the EU delivers on its promises and continues pursuing a comprehensive and citizen-focused European integration process with the entire region of the Western Balkans, while duly taking into account regional, national and local realities.

In light of the manifold socio-economic, human rights and security **challenges at both our Eastern and Southern borders**, we ask the Slovenian EU Presidency to promote peaceful ways to address these instabilities through an integral approach, while providing people-centred support to partner countries and finding new ways of dialogue and engagement with all actors in the EU's neighbourhood. In particular, we ask the EU to support the Lebanese population in their struggle for the preservation of Lebanon's

identity and social fabric in the face of the ongoing multi-faced crisis.

Moreover, many vulnerable religious communities worldwide are experiencing discrimination, intolerance and, in some cases, persecution as victims of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The EU Guidelines on **Freedom of Religion or Belief** need to be updated and implemented more consistently, and the Union needs to pay particular attention to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief in the world – not only as a human right, but also as a strategic dimension of democratic freedom, conflict prevention, and a way to foster social peace, justice and reconciliation. It should also foresee putting in place a mechanism to reinforce these guidelines outside the EU, as well as actively advocating for full respect of religious freedom in international fora.

In the context of the on-going reflection on a new *EU Strategic Compass*, Churches encourage the Slovenian Presidency to promote a new **European strategic culture of peace**, oriented towards the objectives of *human security* and *sustainable peace* and based on a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, avoiding an “overmilitarisation” of EU policies. With regard to new and emerging security challenges linked to digital technologies, we welcome the Presidency’s focus on strengthening EU’s cyberresilience, and call for developing adequate and proportionate capabilities for cyberdefence and cybersecurity on the basis of a human-centric approach, which respects ethical principles and the rule of law.

In view of enhancing the EU’s role in managing **migration**, including its external dimension, COMECE and CEC ask the Slovenian Presidency to actively work for a truly humane EU migration policy based on

the principles of solidarity and responsibility, and respect for the human rights rooted in human dignity of everyone, including the principle of non refoulement. The necessary initiatives for protection in the countries of origin and transit must go hand in hand with the much needed protection in the EU: the recent UNHCR global trend report underlines that all the major situations of forced movement on the globe are outside Europe and the vast majority of people forced to leave their home place are hosted in less developed countries outside Europe.

COMECE and CEC therefore appeal to the EU and its Member States to accept and strengthen its indispensable **role in international protection**, by granting quick access to a full and fair asylum procedure in the EU to those arriving at EU borders and territory. In order to avoid crisis moments in the reception of asylum seekers, particularly at the EU external border, all EU Member States should fairly contribute to the functionality of the reception system in humane conditions.

We also call on the EU to provide more space for safe passages into protection into Europe – through resettlement, humanitarian visa, generous family reunification or visa exception, which should, in view of mixed migration, be complemented by meaningful routes into regular labour migration. We consider unacceptable that people are dying at sea when they try to cross unsafely to EU territory looking for international protection, and therefore, we call on Member States to run State sponsored search and rescue activities or, in their absence, to support and not criminalise humanitarian search and rescue activities by civil society actors, including Churches.

Specific Policy Recommendations

I. Recovery from the pandemic and Resilience in view of future crises

- Implement a better and more **consistent approach of the proposed legal regulation on serious cross-border threats to health** as proposed by the European Commission in the *“EU Health Package”*
- Strengthen the production and global distribution of the **COVID-19 vaccines** by a new **holistic approach** involving necessary instruments of **trade policy** and supporting the **COVAX facility**
- Work on a **comprehensive analysis of the health consequences of the pandemic** –including the **mental health** perspective – and develop possible solutions from a European perspective
- **Promote intergenerational solidarity and fairness** in the burden distribution, in view of repaying the borrowed money in the context of the recovery, ensuring a long-lasting and just social, ecological and economic impact of the EU recovery fund
- **Fight against poverty “for” and “with” the poor**, while acknowledging the **multi-dimensional** approach to poverty to leave no one behind and ensuring that the EU recovery fund will end up in the hands of the most vulnerable (e.g. **children, youth and students, single parents and families in poverty, people suffering from material and social deprivation**) to avoid a two-speeds recovery
- **Improve platform workers’ working conditions towards dignified work**, ensuring the development of **more socially responsible platforms** in which workers enjoy fair working conditions, enabling them to have a dignified life.
- In the context of the current debate on the right to disconnect and the recent Council conclusions on teleworking, **raise awareness on the need for a weekly common day of rest** for all EU citizens.
- **Invest in new structures of solidarity and boost intergenerational solidarity**, promoting equal opportunities for all people, and in particular the elderly living in **rural areas**, and a **balanced approach between the different EU care models** to address different needs of dependent elderly people.
- In view of the upcoming legislative proposal on a *‘digital levy’*, **find the right balance** not to hamper efforts made at OECD-level towards a **fairer and effective taxation model** to make everyone, including multinational companies, contribute to the recovery, while promoting increased **tax transparency**
- **Make full use of the EU Taxonomy to meet the climate objectives**, aligning public and private investments to meet the highly ambitious climate objectives, while recovering from COVID-19; ensure that Member States start **complying with the first two environmental objectives** of the Taxonomy Regulation by the end of 2021 and that the **‘do no significant harm’** principle be applied within this regulation, as well as when using EU funds
- **Find a common position to bring about the Digital Services Act Package**, while making sure that fundamental rights of all people are respected as part of the process. Member States should particularly look at preventing misuses linked with the use of online platforms
- **Promote the implementation of the Artificial Intelligence Act focusing on adaptations** improving a strong human-centric approach and ethical standards.
- **Ensure support to Member States’ Education and Training systems** in the aftermath of the pandemic, with strong actions on integral and quality education for all, especially in the domains of formal, informal, vocational and non-formal education

II. Values guiding the Future of Europe

- Allow a **constructive participation of Churches** as active and committed EU dialogue partners under Article 17.3 TFEU in the Conference on the Future of Europe process, as specific and distinct stakeholders
- **Hear the voices of the next generation** when analysing the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe and shaping their future.
- **Combat all forms of hate speech**, intolerance and discrimination, while promoting freedom of religion or belief in European societies, by constantly looking at the impact of EU policies on this freedom

- **Promote and support the cultural sector and cultural heritage**, including religious heritage, with measures for better stability for artists and cultural SMEs, with a view to foster a diverse and pluralistic society with the participation of all

- Ensure **sufficient support to all dimensions of the European Education Area** and to an **integral approach to the human person in all types of education and formation** processes, making education systems more resilient and inclusive

III. A leading humanitarian, development and peace actor in the world

- Strengthen EU's global role as leading humanitarian, development, economic and peace actor by developing a **relational strategic autonomy**, fostering **people-centred partnerships** and contributing to a **reinvigoration of multilateralism** and a **rules-based international order**
- Work on an ambitious **European mandatory due diligence legislation** holding all businesses liable for human rights violations and environmental harm throughout their supply chains, and contribute constructively to international negotiations on a **UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights**.
- Reaffirm a **credible European perspective for the region of the "Western Balkans"**, and beyond necessary administrative requirements, prioritise **citizen-focused support** through enhancing **human connectivity** and **local socio-economic empowerment** of young people and families
- Orient the 'EU Strategic Compass' reflection towards the goals of **human security and sustainable peace** on the basis of a **multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach** (including through partnerships with religious actors), while strengthening EU's resilience against emerging threats posed by new technologies, in **full respect of ethical principles and the rule of law**.
- Promote **full, common and equal citizenship** in countries where members of vulnerable religious communities suffer legal and social discrimination and intolerance
- Support the creation of **independent international Commissions of Inquiry** to investigate alleged atrocities and human rights violations committed by Fulani militants in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, and by jihadists in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique)

- **Promote and actively cooperate for the prosecution of those responsible of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against vulnerable religious communities**, by the International Criminal Court, *ad hoc* international courts or through other possible institutional formula
- **Back the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Alliance**, a coalition of currently 32 States of the international community
- Fully **uphold the integral dimensions of religious freedom**, including the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their religious and ethical convictions without state or non-state interference, the right to conscientious objection, the right to protect the religious and ethical *ethos* of institutions and the right to freely transmit in public, their religious and ethical messages in matters of social common good
- Use **EU trade tools, including GSP+**, to exert pressure upon certain countries that are systematically and seriously violating religious freedom, as it is the case of the misuse of blasphemy legislation in Pakistan
- **Work for a truly humane migration policy** based on the principles of solidarity and responsibility, and respect for the human rights rooted in human dignity of everyone, including the principle of non refoulement. **Promote granting quick access to a full and fair asylum procedure in the EU** to those arriving at EU borders and territory
- **Provide more space for safe passages into protection into Europe** - through resettlement, humanitarian visa, generous family reunification or visa abolition, which should be complemented by meaningful routes into regular labour migration
- **Develop** - on the level of Member States - **State sponsored search and rescue activities** or, in their absence, support and not criminalise humanitarian search and rescue activities by civil society actors, including churches
- **Make the primary right to remain in one's own country a reality** by addressing the root causes of forced migration

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