



*January 2021*



*Contribution of COMECE and CEC  
to the Portuguese EU Presidency Programme*

*“Time to deliver:  
for a fair, green and digital recovery”*

## Introduction

The Portuguese Presidency comes at a challenging time with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting all EU Member States, all sectors of societies and all Europeans. The key priorities of the Portuguese Presidency are to promote European recovery enhanced by the green and digital transitions, to deliver the EU's Social Pillar as a key element to ensure a fair, inclusive, green and digital transition and strengthen the strategic autonomy of a Europe that is open to the world. The Presidency will promote dialogue and the unity of the EU Member States in order to reinvigorate hope, trust and credibility.

**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 COMECE and CEC represent Churches which have a combined membership of around 380 million citizens throughout EU Member States. We are strongly committed to developing the European project on the basis of the Christian ideals of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Our joint aim is for a peaceful, prosperous, free, just, inclusive and sustainable Europe for all. In this respect, we monitor and contribute to EU policies and legal developments to promote the common good, keeping regular contacts with all the EU institutions in the framework of an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU and Churches, enshrined in Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

Our key message is that our common European values – respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, solidarity, equality and the rule of law – need to be continuously strengthened in order to reaffirm our commitment to the vision of the European Union as a true community of values that contributes to the shared and sustainable future of the world. As Churches, we are committed to building bridges of peace and hospitality, promoting a comprehensive vision of the common good and pursuing a humane, free, social, sustainable and healthy Europe at peace with itself and its neighbours, where human rights and solidarity prevail.

COMECE and CEC welcome the ambitious, forward-looking and value-oriented Programme of the Portuguese EU Presidency and the commitment to strengthen Europe's resilience and people's confidence in the European social model by promoting a Union based on solidarity, convergence and cohesion. We especially welcome the coordinated approach towards climate change, digital transition and social welfare designed to promote a free, environmentally responsible, socially strong, sustainable and healthy way of life in the context of the recovery.

COMECE and CEC look forward to a constructive dialogue and interaction throughout the tenure. We wish the Portuguese Presidency success, courage, wisdom and God's blessing for this important task.

In a Christian ecumenical spirit COMECE and CEC, would like to share our conjoint reflections and proposals that address the five priorities of the Portuguese EU Presidency Programme :

## Presidency Priority I: Resilient Europe

COMECE and CEC agree that the new MFF and the NextGenerationEU instrument and its Recovery and Resilience Facility must be implemented in order for the EU to recover from the COVID-19 crisis and also to provide a basis for sustainable growth and job creation. We need to promote the common good, strengthen the spirit of solidarity and promote recovery in Europe through ecological, social and contributive justice.

We agree that the resilience of the EU must be based on upholding fundamental European values, such as solidarity, equality, democracy and the rule of law. Churches follow with interest discussions on the future EU Mechanisms on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. However, any decision restricting EU budget funds due to a deficit or lack of compliance with the rule of law in Member States should be applied in a non-discriminatory way and consider the social, economic and ecological impact for the society in question. The ever-growing attention the EU gives to upholding fundamental rights and the rule of law in Member States should include monitoring respect for the fundamental right to freedom of religion, in current and post-COVID-19 public policies, including restrictions on community worship and religious services and ceremonies.

COMECE and CEC look forward to participating actively in and contributing to the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe. We indirectly represent -through our Member Churches- hundreds of millions of citizens in all EU Member States. We are rooted and have networks at all levels - local, regional, national and European. Today, maybe more than ever, we need a broad discussion about what kind of Europe and EU we want and, in order to strengthen our democratic societies, build trust and bring the EU closer to its citizens. We would appreciate a strong commitment by the Portuguese Presidency to explicitly integrate Churches as specific and distinct stakeholders in the Conference on the Future of Europe in line with Article 17.3 TFEU.

A resilient and healthy Europe has to be established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The current pandemic has shown that the EU's mechanisms for managing health threats need a more structured Union-level approach. Cross-border threats to health, call for a new limited legal framework. The exchange of health-related data needs a better and consistent approach.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum is a true test for protecting and promoting fundamental rights and ethical principles such as solidarity and responsibility and the protection and respect of the human rights and dignity of everyone. COMECE and CEC strongly support a comprehensive, durable, fair and sustainable framework in the area of asylum, migration and related issues (such as combatting human trafficking), in compliance with accepted international standards, so as to mitigate the excessive burden on individual Member States or third countries. We reiterate the call for high quality, fair and fast procedures based on the assessment of the individual asylum applications, including legal advice and the right to appeal, full implementation of the Reception Conditions Directive and an approximation of recognition standards. The implementation of the proposed mandatory border procedures should not lead to a violation of fundamental rights. Ensuring the unity of families in search of international protection, in particular of children and parents, during and after an asylum procedure is of utmost importance. We therefore applaud and further encourage the relevant measures foreseen in the proposed EU Pact intended to replace the Dublin Regulation.

We also advocate strengthening and expanding the resettlement capacities of the EU and creating more generous safe passages for those seeking protection or engaged in *bona fide* labour migration. Preventing loss of lives in the Mediterranean should remain a priority. We also support the commitment to combat human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. We underline the need to ensure that smuggling is clearly differentiated from

humanitarian assistance. We welcome the Commission statement that such help should under no circumstances be criminalized or punished under EU law<sup>1</sup>. Human-rights-based mechanisms for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of those who cannot be granted protection or are in an irregular situation in the EU should also be developed.

The COVID-19 pandemic particularly affects refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, victims of human trafficking and other people in vulnerable situations and fragile regions outside Europe. It is therefore important to develop EU partnerships with the countries of origin, reception and transit, in order to meet their needs and stabilize these regions. A more robust framework - and dedicated resources -

to fight the root causes of forced migration is needed. Thus, recognizing the primary right of persons and families to remain in their home country or region in safety and dignity. Given the focus of the Presidency on Africa, we would also like to underline the need to help asylum seekers in large parts of the region where food rations have been dramatically cut throughout 2020 and where the World Food Programme is warning of widespread hunger.<sup>2</sup>

As migration policies will only work if integration succeeds, we welcome the new Action plan on integration and its comprehensive approach of seeing integration, inclusion and equality as interconnected.

### Policy Recommendations:

- To link the new MFF and the NextGenerationEU instrument and its Recovery and Resilience Facility to protect the principle of Rule of Law in all Member States, its application should be non-discriminatory and consider the social, economic and ecological impact in the society.
- To implement a better and more consistent approach - especially in the exchange of health-related data - of the proposed legal regulation on serious cross-border threats to health as proposed by the European Commission in the "European Union Health Package".
- To involve Churches, that are active and committed EU dialogue partners under Article 17.3 TFEU, as specific and distinct stakeholders in the Conference on the Future of Europe process.
- To make the primary right to remain in one's own country a reality by addressing the root causes of forced migration.
- To promote sustainable migration and asylum policies based on intra-European solidarity and responsibility, fair partnerships with third countries and solidarity with those in the most vulnerable situations. These activities should be rooted in the respect for human rights and human dignity - whether within the EU, at its borders or in its relations with third countries EU'.

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<sup>1</sup> Commission guidance on the implementation of EU rules on definition and prevention of the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence (C (2020) 6470 final), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/news/unhcr-and-wfp-warn-refugees-africa-face-hunger-and-malnutrition-covid-19-worsens-food>

## Presidency Priority II: Green Europe

COMECE and CEC support the aspirations of the Portuguese Presidency that the EU should remain a global leader in climate action and promote the competitive advantages of a decarbonised and resilient economic model. The European Green Deal needs to be implemented so that Europe can become the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050.

From a Christian perspective, we are committed to combating climate change and caring for God's creation. Promoting a sustainable Europe is a key task for the long-term future of the continent and beyond. We believe that the European Green Deal is a major step forward in the effort to protect the environment, to reduce Greenhouse Gas pollution and achieve a sustainable future. Churches in Europe support these efforts of the EU. We highlight the broad and innovative approach that is underpinning the Green Deal

agenda with its emphasis on 'leaving no-one behind' and its consultation with experts and a broad section of civil society. Many Churches in Europe take these challenges seriously and are making their own contributions – taking into consideration the growing ethical challenges linked to the aim of achieving a sustainable future.

As for COVID-19 recovery measures, we are convinced that economic measures aimed at overcoming the impacts of the pandemic must not be shaped along the previous patterns of environmentally damaging production habits and overconsumption levels. The COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past and change the patterns of the future in order to ensure a restoration that is ecologically and economically sustainable as well as socially just.

### Policy Recommendations:

- To implement the European Green Deal, by translating its aspirations into concrete policies.
- To work towards making economic, social and ecological justice an integral part of any strategy for sustainable development.

## Presidency Priority III: Digital Europe

COMECE and CEC welcome the aims of the Portuguese Presidency to accelerate the digital transition as a driver of economic recovery to promote European leadership in innovation and the digital economy; to foster the universal development of digital skills and to develop new digital solutions and strategies in all areas. In addition, we welcome the overarching objective to develop technological solutions that work for people and a fair and competitive economy that fully respects the values of a democratic, open and sustainable society.

A comprehensive digital cooperation strategy aligned with the UN SDGs is indeed needed. Accelerating the Digital Agenda, introducing a Charter of Digital Rights and promoting the concept of 'Digital Democracy with a

Purpose', are all welcome initiatives. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised how much our life and work depend on digital services. While regulating online digital platforms is essential, we call on the Portuguese Presidency to make sure that the Digital Service Act will serve all workers in the digital economy, ensure their security and promote decent working conditions. This is now lacking. In a context of increased digitalization, improving digital services should go beyond improving the functioning of the single market and competition.

From a Christian perspective, European values and fundamental rights are the foundation for the worldwide digital age, with a special focus on human-centred development and use of AI in the EU,

including strengthening digital participation and the digital skills of citizens. Digitalization in innovation, research and education will be key factors for European competitiveness and its ability to provide a lead in the transition to a recovered and socially just post-COVID-19 digital age, rooted in a deep ethical responsibility. COMECE and CEC call for a human, ethical and values-based approach to digitalization.

We welcome the approach of establishing new legal regulations of AI systems based on new compulsory requirements limited to high-risk applications. The establishment of a risk-adapted regulatory system for the use of AI could be foreseen in the application with a potential for harm. We agree with the idea expressed by the Commission that fragmentation should be curbed, and a

regulation would arguably be the preferable legal tool in this specific case.

While avoiding over-regulation, high legal certainty is to be valued and it will benefit both users and European businesses which need to operate in a clear legislative framework to be competitive. Predictability is key both for producers and consumers. Special attention needs to be drawn to the concepts of human dignity, liability, safety and the protection of personal data and privacy, including data relating to religious beliefs. The development of digital skills and distance learning tools can strengthen the resilience of Member States' education systems, yet the improvement of the quality of in-person learning should remain to be privileged.

### Policy Recommendations:

- To put people first when accelerating the digital transition.
- To ensure that the enhancement of digital services goes beyond only improving the functioning of the single market and competition. The Digital Service Act should serve all workers of the digital economy in order to ensure their security, promote decent working conditions, and put an end to precarious employment.
- The benefits of an extensive digitalization of all aspects of daily life need to be set vis-a-vis the potential social and environmental consequences. At the same time, it should address the concerns, anxieties and discomfort of an ever-growing part of the population that fears being excluded from the ever-faster digital changes in the near future.
- To fully integrate within the Charter of Digital Rights, an ambitious focus on the specific situation and needs of children, based on the rights and perspective of the child.

### Presidency Priority IV: Social Europe

COMECE and CEC welcome the aspirations of the Portuguese Presidency to work for a stronger, fairer and more inclusive Social Europe which is facing up to the climate and digital transformations, ensuring that no one is left behind.

The European social model must be at the heart of the EU's agenda together with the strengthening of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the response to the social dimension of the COVID-19 crisis. COMECE and CEC would like to emphasize the significance of social justice, ecological justice

and contributive justice. As regards to social justice, the EU should especially focus on the needs of the most vulnerable in order to ensure social cohesion in Europe, combat poverty and inequality, and reinforce inclusiveness.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major shock for the European and global economies. It has affected the lives of many workers who have lost their jobs or had their working hours reduced, resulting in an important loss of income. The crisis has not only affected the traditional economy, but also the platform



economy and unprotected workers in many sectors. The EU should show more solidarity within society and preserve the dignity of work and the rights of workers. EU stakeholders, in particular, should improve the working conditions of platform workers.

In order to ensure a bright future for all – and especially young – Europeans, EU policies should aim to address the present negative effects of the pandemic on education systems and ensure that they become more resilient, inclusive and accessible to all. Most

importantly, the EU ought to work on combining the development of green and digital skills with equally important transversal, intercultural and interpersonal competences, thus fostering an integral education in both formal and non-formal contexts. To achieve these objectives, the EU must ensure that the European Education Area and similar policies related to education and training can be thoroughly implemented and are able to increase the quality, resilience and inclusion of education in all Member States.

### Policy Recommendations:

- To work towards implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights in all Member States, with special focus on a just transition and Europe’s adaptation to climate, digital and demographic transitions.
- To apply an inclusive approach which respects each person’s human dignity. No one should be left behind when implementing the Social Pillar. The Council should strengthen cooperation with each EU Member State in the eradication of all forms of discrimination and in efficiently improving poverty reduction in the social welfare system, including through mutual learning, technical assistance and adequate funding.
- To preserve the dignity of work and the rights of workers and to improve platform workers’ labour conditions. EU labour law should be updated to ensure that people working under new and unpredictable forms of employment are sufficiently covered by labour regulations and social protection.
- To build up and implement EU policies that support the recovery of European societies and foster greater resilience, quality and inclusion in education and training.

### Presidency Priority V: Global Europe

In light of the changing geopolitical environment, Europe needs to take a leading role in promoting a rules-based multilateral order founded on trustful cooperation and fair partnerships within our neighbourhood and beyond. It should underline the importance of a people-centred approach and of common European values. Faced with growing instability and increasing socio-economic injustices being amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world needs a Europe that is actively engaged in working for integral human development and peace more than ever. The existing fraternal bonds between the

EU and the United Kingdom should prevail and underpin the future commitments in tackling together our common challenges in areas such as trade, climate and security.

At a global level, many religious communities 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 implemented more consistently, and the EU 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 as means to foster social peace, justice and reconciliation. It

should also foresee putting in place a mechanism to reinforce these guidelines outside the EU.

### Policy Recommendations:

- The role of the EU as a community based on values and as a leading humanitarian actor, should guide its policies on the multilateral agenda. In line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the EU should actively promote integral human development and lasting peace globally.
- The future EU-Africa relations should be based on inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues, leading to a fair, people-centred and mutually beneficial partnership with a particular emphasis on human security and on sustainable socio-economic empowerment of local youth, their families and communities.
- The renewal of the EU's partnership with our Southern Neighbours should focus on again making the Mediterranean region a place of peaceful encounter for people of different cultures and religions.
- In its External Action, the EU should actively promote internationally recognised human rights, with a special focus on strengthening the right to freedom of religion or belief, as a democratically strategic fundamental right.

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