



July 2020



Contribution of COMECE and CEC to the German EU Presidency Programme

Together for Europe's Recovery

Introduction

COMECE (*Commission of the Episcopates of the European Union*) and **CEC** (*Conference of European Churches*) welcome the ambitious and forward-looking programme of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union *Together for Europe's Recovery* and the commitment of the German Presidency to developing a strong, innovative, just and sustainable European Union, based

on and acting in line with its common values and principles, thus promoting the common good.

The fundamental values of the European Union—respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law—have common roots with the ecumenical ideals of justice, peace, and the

integrity of creation. These common values have, however, been put under increasing pressure in recent years. We need to reclaim and reaffirm our European values in order to renew confidence in and strengthen commitment to the vision of a European Union as a true community of common values and ethical principles that contribute to working together for the shared and sustainable future of the world.

Together COMECE and CEC represent churches in which around 380 million European citizens in all EU Member States are members. We are strongly committed to developing the European project, our joint aim being a peaceful and prosperous, just, inclusive and sustainable Europe for all. In this respect, we monitor EU policies and legal developments in topics of interest for Churches, keeping regular contacts with all EU institutions, in the framework of the open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU and Churches enshrined in Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty (TFEU). One significant form of this dialogue is the longstanding tradition of COMECE and CEC engaging with EU Presidencies.

The German Presidency truly comes at a crucial time for the future of the European Union, demonstrating the need for us all to stand together and for a joint, strong vision of Europe. The COVID 19-pandemic has undoubtedly affected us all, having a devastating impact on every aspect of our lives and putting a strain on every sector of society and the economy. The unsettling experience of the Coronavirus pandemic has shown to us Europeans that we are not isolated individuals, but persons that need both human relations and to live together with the awareness of interconnectedness. The Churches recall in this situation the precious gift of solidarity. It is necessary to revitalize our sense of solidarity by using and

strengthening the possible measures of the EU to fight against the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences for all societies and for every human person. Digital and technological changes are creating a huge range of new opportunities. Combined with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demographic decline and environmental degradation they will be key for a European approach of shaping societies for the common good.

EU and its Member States need – together with Churches and religious communities as well as civil society stakeholders – to collaborate in order to make Europe not only stronger but more innovative, more just and more sustainable. As Churches, we are committed to build bridges of peace and hospitality and promote a comprehensive vision of the common good, pursuing a humane, social and sustainable Europe at peace with itself and its neighbours, in which human rights and solidarity prevail.

CEC and COMECE support the ambitious aspirations of the German EU Presidency. The strong commitment to European common values, with special focus on rule of law, human rights and solidarity, are indeed needed in these challenging times.

As noted in the statement, dated 17 June 2020, by the chair of the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany on the German EU Presidency, Churches need to speak up so that we stand by one another with solidarity in Europe and do not lose sight of the most vulnerable in society or of stewardship of creation. As Europeans, we need to walk a common path into the future, tackling the current challenges in a spirit of European solidarity.

COMECE and CEC look forward to a constructive dialogue and interaction throughout the Presidency, including the

traditional EU Presidency meeting which will take place in Berlin in end of October. We would like to share, in a Christian ecumenical spirit, some thematic reflections and proposals that address the priorities of the German EU

Presidency Programme *Together for Europe's Recovery*. We wish the German Presidency plenty of success, courage and wisdom - and God's blessing for this important task.

Presidency Priority I: Europe's answer to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and its dire consequences have hit Europe and the entire world with full strength. Putting to the test every person, family and community, the present crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities and apparent uncertainties of our politics, economics and societies, showing the need to reinvent new forms of concrete solidarity. This is the time for all of us to demonstrate our joint commitment to the European project and to common European values of solidarity and unity, instead of capitulating to fear, extreme nationalism and shortsighted populist interests.

We welcome the commitment of the German EU Presidency to overcome the crisis together in a co-ordinated manner, focusing on European solidarity, sustainability and social cohesion. It is of particular importance to support both immediate economic recovery through the proposed EU Recovery Plan and the new recovery instrument "Next Generation EU" and a more long-term recovery through amending the current multiannual financial framework 2014 – 2020,

in order to cushion the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed recovery plan sets out a clear perspective for a Europe with the aim to grow united, on the basis of solidarity, and would complement the many immediate initiatives that the EU has taken in response to the crisis. Specific attention needs to be given to protecting the most vulnerable in our European societies. We need to promote the common good, strengthen the spirit of solidarity and promote a European recovery through ecological, social and contributive justice.

During the last months it became apparent that the health sector is in the frontline in the fight against the virus, from hospitals, health systems and workers, to research laboratories and pharmaceutical companies. It is most important to strengthen the cooperation between EU Member States and the EU institutions to ensure affordability, sustainability and security of medical and pharmaceutical supply and to build a strategic resilience for a Europe of health.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support a political agreement on 'Next Generation EU' and the overall EU budget for 2021 – 2027 by focusing on the third pillar of this recovery instrument – addressing the lessons of the crisis - underlining European solidarity and supporting Europe's global partners.
- Focus on developing European research and innovation activities relating to health and research policies within the scope of the new recovery instrument 'Next Generation EU'.

Presidency Priority II: A stronger and more innovative Europe

We welcome the commitment of the German EU Presidency to develop a common European response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European politics, economies and societies, agreeing that the necessary measures might also be an opportunity for an accelerated, sustainable and digital transformation that is both forward-looking and based on common values. European values, principles and fundamental rights form the foundation in the digital age for which we stand worldwide, with special focus on human-centered development and use of AI in the EU, including strengthening digital participation and digital skills of citizens.

Digitalization in innovation, research and education will be key factors regarding European competitiveness and the ability to lead in the transition to a recovered and socially just post-corona digital age which is rooted in a deep ethical responsibility. It is a necessary investment in the future to equip people with the knowledge and the ethical responsibility they need to shape the necessary transition processes for a more sustainable community life. AI centered on persons, families and communities brings many benefits to our societies and economy. It can support pandemic preparedness, the healthcare sector, a more sustainable transport system and the necessary transition to a more sustainable community life. Churches support the development of AI rooted in strong legal and ethical principles by establishing rules for it to protect and to serve the human person. While creating a strong digital connectivity to AI systems may provide a positive contribution to community-building, it is also important to include the possibility and the right to be disconnected.

COMECE and CEC call for a human, ethical and values-based approach to digitalization and AI, noting that the ever-increasing digitalisation of all areas of life also poses great challenges for churches and religious communities, which go beyond the technical skills of new technologies. Special attention needs to be drawn to the concept of human dignity, trust and to the issue of protecting privacy, including data relating to religious beliefs.

Progressive digitalization also poses challenges in terms of social justice in Europe. Algorithms are not impartial. They have to be limited by the principles of non-discrimination and justice, including the fact that justice is also evolving through and with deeply human qualities such as empathy and emotional intelligence.

In order to implement justice to a human, ethical and value-based approach, a comprehensive and multidisciplinary dialogue is essential. We therefore plead for churches and religious communities to be substantially involved in the dialogue in those areas where fundamental anthropological issues are at stake and support a holistic approach, including a high involvement of civil society, when it comes to the development, promotion and development of legal framework conditions.

In line with a more innovative Europe we welcome the proposal of the Recovery Plan to increase the budget of the EU research framework Horizon Europe for funding vital research in health, resilience and the green and digital transitions.

Policy Recommendations:

- Work for adopting the EU research framework Horizon Europe with the increased budget proposed by the recovery instrument Next Generation EU.
- Monitor the outcomes of the Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence of the European Commission and reflect on the extension of the Coordinated Plan to prevent fragmentations of the development of AI in the EU Member States.
- Monitor the legal regulation process of the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence in order to ensure that an appropriate ethical and legal framework is promoted within the principle of the centrality of the human person. The human oversight of processes initiated by AI is central. The rights of transparency and privacy also have to include the possibility to be disconnected from the digital connectivity
- The benefits of an extensive digitalization of all aspects of daily life need to be set off against the potential social and environmental consequences, addressing the concerns, anxiety and discomfort of a growing part of the population that fear being excluded from the ever-faster digital changes in the future.

Presidency Priority III: A fair Europe

COMECE and CEC support the determined approach of the German Presidency to promote social cohesion, social security and solidarity, these being central pillars of a fair Europe. We strongly support strengthening the social dimension and social cohesion by grounding the suggested recovery instrument 'Next Generation Europe' on the pillar of justice. Social justice, ecological justice and contributive justice will be the key for the implementation of this instrument.

As regards social justice, the EU should care about and respect the needs of the most vulnerable in order to ensure social cohesion in Europe, combating poverty and inequalities. This requires an overall budget that is aligned to the political priorities and values of the EU, so that new hope for Europe can be found in a joint recovery, expressing both a renewed spirit of solidarity as well as an ambition to work for a just future.

We fully agree that an active participation of civil society, as well as of Churches and other religious communities – is perhaps needed

today more than ever in order to develop the European project, strengthen our European democratic societies, build trust and bring EU closer to its citizens. Thus, we welcome the upcoming *Conference on the Future of Europe* as an important democratic tool for discussing the future of Europe, which is truly needed in these challenging times. We share the hope of the German Presidency that the EU institutions will soon be able to agree on the scope, structure and mandate of the Conference.

Indirectly representing, through our Member Churches, millions of European citizens in all EU Member States and being rooted and having networks from local and regional to national and European levels, COMECE and CEC look forward to actively and constructively contributing to and participating in the Conference on the Future of Europe, sharing the hope of the German Presidency that it will be brought to a successful conclusion. In this respect, we would appreciate a strong commitment by the German Presidency to explicitly integrate

Churches as specific and distinct stakeholders in the Conference on the Future of Europe in line with Article 17 (TFEU).

Policy Recommendations:

- Work to adopt the recovery instrument 'Next Generation Europe' as a tool to establish a lasting and prosperous recovery based on social, ecological and contributive justice.
- Continue developing a world of work that is guided by the building blocks of human dignity, sustainable working conditions, social dialogue and full employment. Churches encourage the EU to translate the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights into concrete policy initiatives, focusing in particular on child and in-work poverty by means of common European approaches.
- Coordinating and launching the Conference on the Future of Europe, the aim being as inclusive and transparent a process as possible, involving Churches and religious communities as Article 17 (TFEU) stakeholders.

Presidency Priority IV: A sustainable Europe

We welcome the aim of the German EU Presidency to overcome the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic sustainably and inclusively and to help shape a socially just transition to a sustainable economy.

We support the European Green Deal as a comprehensive and ambitious strategy and the commitment of the Presidency to ensure that EU and its Member States continue to fulfil their role internationally as ambitious and active players in the arena of climate diplomacy, sustainability and European values.

COMECE and CEC are committed to combating climate change and caring for God's creation. Promoting a sustainable Europe and protection our common basis of life take on new meaning with the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic consequences, and the measures taken since the outbreak of the crisis to mitigate these consequences. The necessary restoration measures also present an opportunity for the future: as the substantial costs of these

measures can be used to ensure that the restoration is both ecologically and economically sustainable as well as socially just. This political decision of principle would be a first step towards an *«integral ecology» encompassing environment, climate, economy, society and culture* as proposed by the encyclical *«Laudato Si'»* of Pope Francis as well as advocated by CEC and other ecumenical organizations.

We believe that the European Green Deal presented by the European Commission is a major step ahead in efforts in order to protect environment, reduce GHG pollution and in order to achieve a sustainable future. At the same time we are convinced that efforts to overcome impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic must not be shaped along the guidelines aiming to return to previous environment damaging production habits and overconsumption levels. The lessons learned from the pandemic need to be taken as an opportunity for correcting mistakes of the past as much as possible.

Policy Recommendations:

- The European Green Deal needs to be a real chance to find a balance between the ecological urgency to change our way of production and consumption, and the need to alleviate the social consequences. Such a change will inevitably have an impact on the lives of many people. Economic, social justice and ecological justice need to be integral parts of any strategy for sustainable development. Ambitions presented in the European Green Deal need to be further strengthened, translated into real policies and implemented.
- Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemics regarding dramatically reduced carbon emissions from transport as a consequence of reduced traveling and new ways of remote working and on-line meetings need to be analyzed.

Presidency Priority V: A Europe of security and common values

Strengthening fundamental values and fundamental rights

We welcome the strong focus of the German Presidency a European community of law and values., the rule of law being the fundamental prerequisite for the protection of other values. The commitment of the Presidency that *'Europe must remain a place where all people, regardless of their background, convictions and world view, can feel free and safe'* should indeed be the guiding principle for all EU policies.

In this respect, both the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy and the European Commission's first annual report on the rule of law in each Member State are excellent initiatives. The public consultation on rule of law, launched by the European Commission this year, should also turn into a report as a compilation of both positive and negative developments in the Member States, to be discussed on both national and European level. We also support the principle of linking EU budget funds to compliance with the rule of law in Member States. Special attention also needs to be drawn to combating disinformation on the internet and counter-acting polarization of social debates.

Churches follow with interest discussions on the future EU Mechanisms on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. The ever-

growing EU attention for upholding fundamental rights and the rule of law in the Member States should include monitoring respect for the fundamental right to freedom of religion, in current and post-Covid-19 public policies.

COMECE and CEC also support any action to ensure that temporary erosions of protection of personal data and privacy standards, linked with this exceptional situation, be eliminated at the earliest possible stage; and to promote the highest possible protection even in the current phase.

COMECE and CEC support the commitment of the Presidency to combat hate crime and racism. We strongly welcome to take a decisive stand against all forms of antisemitism. A structured dialogue at European level, establishing strategies and structures to combat and record antisemitic incidents, is an important step to oppose antisemitism with all our strength. As well it is most important to tackle anti-Gypsyism and further to develop the EU framework for national strategies. However we urge the EU to combat all forms of discrimination because of religion or belief, as well as other forms of discrimination. We encourage the Presidency to respond to the

current discussions on racism by recognizing and addressing racism as a problem of societies and institutions in the EU. Given the setup of competences in the EU, we would in particular support the Presidency in taking forward the full implementation and further development of the EU's anti-discrimination legal framework in the area of racism. We applaud Commission President von der

Updating European migration and asylum policy

COMECE and CEC strongly support a fundamental renewal of European migration and asylum policies. We agree that Europe needs sustainable and durable solutions, based on European values. We connect the German Presidency with great hope in the area of asylum and migration. The presidency will be dealing with the first reactions and discussions on the upcoming Pact on Migration and Asylum.

COMECE and CEC agree that the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) needs to be ambitiously reformed in order to create a fair, functional,, efficient and crisis-proof system, updating regulations on responsibility, solidarity and rule of law, complying with humanitarian standards and avoiding overburdening individual Member States. We reiterate the call for high quality and fast procedures, with independent legal advice and right to appeal, full implementation of the reception conditions directive and an approximation of recognition standards. Ensuring the unity of migrant families, in particular of children and their respective parents, is of utmost importance. Churches also support the notion included in recent inputs on the Pact that a "binding mechanism" be used for asylum applicant distribution, that accommodates, as much as possible the diverse situation of each Member State. While such a mechanism is still under negotiation, taking forward voluntary relocation – by pledging more places is highly

Leyen's commitment to monitor and improve ethnic diversity in EU institutions and hope for the Presidency's support on this.

Churches and religious communities have an important role in building bridges and promoting a dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding, which also enhances social cohesion and fosters peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

desirable, in particular of unaccompanied minors.

We also strongly support the commitment of the Presidency to strengthen and expand the resettlement capacities of the EU and would wish to see more generous safe passages for those seeking protection, i.e. instruments to safely access protection as well as legal labour migration policies. Christian Churches in particular hope that many of those 30.000 which should have been resettled to the EU in 2020 (pledge made at the Global Refugee Forum December 2019) will still arrive in EU member states in the second half of 2020. At the same time, preventing loss of lives in the Mediterranean should remain a priority. We also support the commitment to combat smuggling of migrants and underline the need to assure that smuggling is clearly distinguished from humanitarian assistance – which under no condition should be criminalized or punished.

Human-rights-based mechanisms for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of those who cannot be granted protection in the EU should be developed. A humane return policy, respecting the dignity of every person, and assisting him or her to return and reintegrate into their home society, should be implemented by EU Member States.

Religious persecution, for example due to religious conversion, should be seriously addressed, as it is an increasing reality that is

not always properly processed by EU member states in their asylum procedures.

As the COVID 19-pandemic particularly affects refugees and migrants and other people in vulnerable situation and fragile regions outside Europe, it is important to develop EU partnerships with countries of origin, reception and transit, the aim being to meet their needs and to stabilize these regions.

A more robust framework - and dedicated resources - to fight against the root causes of forced migration is needed, recognizing the primary right of persons and families to remain in their home country in safety and dignity. Direct assistance to communities in countries of origin, in particular to groups in vulnerable situations, such as religious minorities, should be reinforced. In this respect, collaboration between EU and Churches, being strongly rooted in local communities, could well be instrumental.

Refreshing the EU anti-trafficking legislation and political instruments to combat all forms of trafficking in human beings is advised.

Policy Recommendations:

- The German Presidency should work for a public display of the EU Member States' report on rule of law, and keep all relevant stakeholders informed about consultations regarding the consolidated report, which should take place every year.
- Churches and religious communities need to be involved in the discussions and activities regarding combating hate crime, racism, antisemitism and anti-Gypsyism as well as all other forms of discrimination because of religion or belief and other forms of discrimination.
- Work for sustainable migration and asylum policies based on intra-European solidarity, and solidarity with those in most vulnerable situations, based on respect for human rights rooted in human dignity – in the EU, at its borders and in its relations with third countries.
- Increase legal pathways and safe passage for those seeking protection and those searching employment into the EU.
- Create an acceptable framework for Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean Sea, in particular for the disembarkation of asylum seekers and irregular migrants from private vessels.
- Intensify the fight against all forms of trafficking inside and outside the EU.

In view of recent and recurring discussions, we express high concern about the dramatic situation of asylum seekers and migrants in certain third countries. The EU should ensure, in partnership with UNHCR and IOM, that migrants and asylum seekers are treated properly and their fundamental rights are respected, using the appropriate instruments and tools, including human rights' dialogues and other diplomatic fora, financial support, promoting voluntary return, fair access to asylum procedures, etc.

COMECE and CEC also hope that the process of a fully-fledged consultation on the EU integration strategy can be launched under the German Presidency. This should include full stakeholder consultations and listening to refugees, migrants and victims of human trafficking themselves. It might also be useful to take on board recent measures aiming at better integration and inclusion, including access to the labour market, in several member states, developed during the COVID-19 period.

Presidency Priority VI: An effective European Union for a rules-based international order anchored in partnership

We welcome the aim of the German Presidency to support a more resilient, responsible and sustainable European trade policy and to strengthen partnerships with third countries, while promoting peace and sustainable development globally, based on our European values and principles.

COMECE and CEC especially support deepening the cooperation with Africa by adopting a people-centered European-African agenda.

In view of the 6th EU-Africa Summit to be held during the German EU Presidency, Churches in Europe encourage the political leaders on both sides to work towards a fair, solidary and responsible partnership that puts the people at its centre. At a time when our two continents are recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and its dire consequences, we share a special concern for the many persons, families and communities who are in a particularly vulnerable situation due to extreme poverty, violence or environmental degradation. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted even more that the promotion of integral human development should guide the future EU-Africa partnership, by allowing all people to have unhindered access to adequate healthcare, nutrition, clean water, sanitation,

quality education and decent housing. Sustainable investments can be a useful instrument, as long as they serve human empowerment by reflecting local needs, creating decent jobs and allowing a fair participation to stakeholders from both continents.

We also welcome the humanitarian Call for Action programme as a strong contribution by the EU to protect humanitarian space and compliance with international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles. As for development cooperation, we agree with the Presidency that EU must be able to react faster, more innovatively and more flexible. We also agree that the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda needs to be accelerated.

At a global level, many religious communities are experiencing distress, harassment and even persecution. The EU Guidelines on Freedom on Religion or Belief need to be implemented more consistently, and EU needs to put particular attention on promoting freedom of religion or belief in the world – not only as a human right, but also as a strategic dimension for democratic freedom and fostering social peace, justice and reconciliation, and foresee a mechanism to reinforce it outside EU.

Policy recommendations:

- The role of the EU as a community based on values and an important global and humanitarian actor should guide its policies in the international arena. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be at the heart of strengthening EU's global role.
- In view of fostering policy coherence, we encourage the German EU Presidency to carry forward European and international efforts for a binding due diligence legislation for businesses, ensuring compliance of their actions throughout the entire supply chain with human rights, social and environmental standards.
- In line with the African Union's *Silencing the Guns* initiative we also call for a reinforced EU-AU cooperation on effective measures against illicit trade in small arms and light weapons

and on a dialogue-centered conflict resolution by supporting the establishment of a Human Security Index to monitor progress in building sustainable peace.

- To set up a permanent EU mechanism that monitors and reports persecution and discrimination against religious groups outside the EU, and promotes freedom of thought, conscience and religion in third countries.

Contacts:

COMECE

Commission of the Episcopates of the EU
Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, *General Secretary*
19, Square de Meeûs - B-1050 Brussels
Phone: +32 2 235 05 12
Email: sg@comece.eu
Website: www.comece.eu

CEC

Conference of European Churches
Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen, *General Secretary*
Rue Joseph II, 174 - B-1000 Brussels
Phone: +32 2 234 68 34
Email: generalsecretary@cec-kek.be
Website: www.ceceurope.org