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*Programme of the Swedish Presidency
of the Council of the European Union*



**CEC and COMECE expressing
Churches' concerns and perspectives**

Introduction

Sweden takes up the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a challenging moment for the EU, in a context characterised by the war in Ukraine and its far-reaching consequences.

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 the further development of the European project on the basis of the **Christian ideals of justice, peace and the integrity of creation**.

The work of COMECE and CEC is closely related to Article 17 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which requires 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 the **values of human dignity, democracy, solidarity, freedom, equality, and the rule of law** is at the forefront of EU actions and policies in the Union and on the global stage.

In this regard, we have been accompanying and actively contributing to the Conference on the Future of Europe and other EU initiatives aimed at the promotion of European values and of democratic participation, as well as in view of strengthening social cohesion, especially through youth participation and of effectively responding to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees to our countries.

I. The future of Ukraine and the future of Europe: peace and stability on the European Continent

Churches in Europe share the deep concern over Russia's brutal military aggression against Ukraine and sadness over horrific human suffering. We express appreciation for the political, humanitarian, financial as well as defence support that the EU and its Member States have been providing to Ukraine and urge for maintaining European unity.

Our Churches have repeatedly issued calls for de-escalation, on the aggressor to immediately stop the hostilities and on all parties, with the help of the international community, to open themselves up to negotiations of proposals for a just peace; we hope for a dialogue-based sustainable solution to the conflict in full respect of international law and the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Churches are equally concerned about the instrumentalisation of religion in the context of the war in Ukraine and the spread of disinformation and societal

polarisation through populism and extremism. Civil society, as well as Churches and religious communities play a significant role in countering these dangerous phenomena. Following up on previous initiatives we want to re-confirm our joint efforts for truth, justice, peace, and respectful cooperation among countries, as well as different societal groups and religions in Europe. While rejecting any form of instrumentalization of religion and any violence based on religious grounds, we reiterate our willingness to work together with policy-makers in view of contributing to a cultivated discussion about the role of religion in a democratic society, respectful of recognized fundamental rights of every human being. We encourage the Swedish EU Presidency to strengthen efforts leading to addressing violence on religious grounds and in this effort to take advantage from a dialogue with religious actors.

The war in Ukraine has shattered many of previous convictions about a firm grounding of a culture of peace and reconciliation in Europe. Efforts for peace have to be constantly renewed and they have to be based on the principles of truth and justice. While acknowledging the need to develop and possess adequate means of defence against threats of military nature, including in the hybrid and cyber sphere, we believe that peacebuilding requires a comprehensive approach centred on promoting human security and peace, which goes beyond mere state security considerations. We therefore plead for a 'European Peace Strategy' that would offer a comprehensive definition of peace and provide a framework for putting into practice the EU's integrated approach to peacebuilding. Moreover, we ask that the intensified cooperation and investment in defence is accompanied by pertinent control mechanisms ensuring the compliance of the respective initiatives with the principles of necessity and proportionality, as well as with legal and ethical standards.

Based on the experience of Churches, we want to encourage the Swedish government:

- To continue and further strengthen contribution to a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the war with a free, secure, and independent Ukraine in its internationally recognised borders.
- To continue and further strengthen deployment of instruments of continuing EU's solidarity to a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the war with a free, secure, and independent Ukraine in its internationally recognised borders.
- To deploy instruments of continuing EU's solidarity with Ukraine, incl. support for the material reconstruction of damaged public infrastructure, civilian buildings as well as religious and cultural sites in Ukraine, and promote multilateral and multistakeholder efforts aimed at peacebuilding and reconciliation.
- together with EU Member States, to support the solidarity efforts for Ukraine of the voluntary sector (including Churches) and individuals both financially and with expertise – as more and more difficulties are being reported.

- To contribute to ensuring accountability for all war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law committed during the violent conflict.
- To launch a multi-stakeholder consultation on a 'European Peace Strategy' and to strengthen adequate control mechanisms with regard to pertinent defence (spending) initiatives.
- To seek ways to strengthen the voices for peace and democracy within Russia.

II. A sustainable future

Russia's war in Ukraine with its consequences has had dramatic effects on energy supply and the cost of energy in Europe. The destruction of major parts of the energy infrastructure signifies a very tough winter for millions of Ukrainians, in addition to the overall horrible situation. The crisis also had a tremendous effect on the rest of Europe, increasing the hardship of energy poverty that has already existed before the start of the war. The increases in the price of electricity and heating have brought millions of European households and companies in serious financial troubles. Far too many Europeans do not know how to shoulder the costs.

The energy crisis has brought to light the vulnerability of an economic system built on an overdependence on energy on one supplier, the danger of the 'weaponisation' of energy as well as discussions about the suitability of the current electricity market.

The Swedish EU Council Presidency stands before the difficult task of not only managing the current crisis in terms of supply and prices, but also of providing energy security for winters to come as well as re-building Europe's energy system in a way that guarantees energy supply, affordable access to energy, needed to fully participate as citizens in our societies, and helps us achieving the long-term goal of decoupling our energy systems from fossil fuels. Acknowledging the continuous effort of the EU and the member states CEC and COMECE welcome that the Swedish EU Council Presidency has declared the issue of Energy a priority. Concerns regarding energy security need to go hand in hand with overall concerns about a sustainable future.

The European Green Deal need to continue to be one of the main commitments shared by the EU and its member states. Achieving a sustainable future is to be done through modernization of the EU economy and transforming it into a more circular economy whilst simultaneously strengthening other criteria of development and welfare than economic growth. This requires greater transparency, participation, joint decision-making, and public awareness.

In this regard, we encourage the Swedish EU Council Presidency to:

- **Ensure access to affordable energy** through temporary mitigation measures and to work for a common approach by all member states. Yet, as mitigation measures can have a significant economic impact, e.g., on debts and inflation, we want to

remind that is important to find ways to target those who need such measures the most.

- Continue showing **solidarity to Ukraine** by supporting access to energy for the people of Ukraine and neighboring countries that are also affected, such as Moldova.
- Encourage EU member states to **support local energy communities**, which are a particularly effective tool for promoting a coherent culture and practice of integral ecology, and strengthening community ties, while supporting the most vulnerable people with the energy surplus created. **Prioritise energy efficiency and identify targets where responsible reduction of energy consumption is possible.**
- Meet our obligations to future generations by achieving the long-term goal of **decoupling from fossil fuels** and lessen Europe's vulnerability by diversifying our energy mix.
- Accelerate the transition towards **decarbonisation** through the implementation of the European Green Deal and related policies.
- While strengthening EU's own energy resilience, the **global dimension** must not be forgotten. The cost of ensuring energy supply should not be borne by developing countries. In recent months, severe infrastructural challenges in some third countries were due to the absence of LNG imports. In this context, we urge the EU to **pursue responsible and value-based bi- and multilateral energy partnerships and lay the foundations of a new global energy system** that is governed by the principles of justice, solidarity, inclusive participation, and sustainable development.

III. Migration and Asylum

In view of the ongoing negotiations for the adoption of the **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum**, COMECE and CEC ask the Swedish Presidency to actively work for a fair and truly humane EU migration and asylum policies based on the principles of solidarity and responsibility, the respect for international law obligations and the protection of the human rights rooted in the inherent dignity of every person, including the principle of *non refoulement*. At the same time, we encourage the Swedish Presidency to intensify the efforts in order to **address transversally the root causes of forced migration to the EU**, while supporting the countries of origin and transit in their efforts to improve the conditions of people leaving or crossing their territories.

COMECE and CEC appeal to the EU and its Member States to accept and strengthen its **leading role in international protection**, by granting quick access to an individual, full and fair asylum procedure in the EU to those arriving at EU borders and territory. On the other hand, the reception systems in EU member states, in particular those at the EU external borders, are frequently overloaded, and the conditions are many times precarious and not in accordance with the EU legislation. We call the Swedish Presidency to take action in this regard, and provide EU Member states with the

needed support, technical and financial, to **improve the situation of migrants and asylum seekers in deficient reception centers**. Exploring the possibility of **provisional alternative private accommodation** for migrants and asylum seekers could also be a common ground for joint efforts by public authorities, civil society and Churches.

We also call on the EU to provide **more space for protective safe passages 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 balancing labour market's demand, skills aspirations and rights of the labour migrants and the interest of the specific country of origin. We can't allow the Mediterranean Sea to become a vast cemetery, and we consider unacceptable that people keep on dying at sea when trying to cross unsafely to EU territory looking for international protection. It is against this background that we call on Member States to **fulfil their international obligations regarding Search and Rescue (SAR) operations**, as well as fully implementing the EU legislation protecting private vessels running SAR operations.

We commend the quick and decisive support of the EU and its member states, as well as civil society and Churches, to Ukrainian refugees crossing to the EU. The activation of the **Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)** and the introduction of several operational guidelines as well as the flexible mobilization of EU funding aimed at supporting Ukrainian refugees prove the readiness and capabilities of the EU, its member states and their people, to give a due response to the humanitarian consequences of a tragic war. We think that the experiences in and standards applied while protecting Ukrainian should set an example for the protection of other groups in need of protection.

Trafficking in human beings is a tragic reality that remains many times invisible to both, public authorities and society. A **broad alliance between public authorities, civil society and Churches** could be instrumental to make it more visible, and to prevent and combat this criminal phenomenon more efficiently, as well as to improve the support to the victims in their way to their recovery and social integration.

The EU needs to **continue enhancing solidarity within the Union** with the member states hosting those seeking protection to the extent that is possible, both financially and through relocation where needed.

Recommendations:

- To provide **more space for protective safe passages into Europe, including access to labour market to cover the demand gap**.
- To guarantee **equal access and treatment of all individuals seeking international protection** whether fleeing from Ukraine or other conflicts.

- To build up a **broad alliance between public authorities, civil society and Churches** that can improve the conditions of migrants and asylum seekers, as well as preventing human trafficking and supporting the victims in their recovery and reintegration.
- To guarantee **equal treatment of all individuals seeking international protection** whether fleeing from Ukraine or other conflicts.

IV. International aid

As Churches, we are part of a global community with members in both privileged and unprivileged contexts. Our perspective is rights-based, acknowledging that part of our privileged wealth is due to unjust (historical and present) structures, creating harsh living conditions for humans in less privileged countries. It's therefore a moral obligation to better share the global resources.

During 2021 **only four EU-member states reached the UN-agreed goal** of spending a minimum of 0.7% of their GNI on international aid. The average was 0.49%.

- We urge the Swedish presidency to continue raising the question and implementing mechanisms to ensure all member states live up to their promise regarding the 0.7%/GNI minimum.