



Intervention of H.E. Mgr. Theodorus Cornelis Maria Hoogenboom  
at the Art 17 TFEU High-level Religious Leaders meeting dedicated  
to the theme

*“The European way of life in times of instability”*

Brussels, 18 January 2024

## 1. Introduction

Dear Vice-President Schinas, Dear Special Envoy van Daele, Dear Participants,  
It is an honour for me to represent COMECE - together with its President - as  
the Delegate of the Dutch Bishops' Conference at this event.

I will refer to three areas in which the Commission strived to concretise the  
concept of '**European Way of Life**'; The EU's response to the COVID-19  
pandemic; and Migration and Asylum policies.

## 2. EU's response to the wars in our neighbourhood

Over the recent period, **a dangerous arc of instability** has emerged around the  
European Union, both to the East as well as to the South. These crises, along  
with an increasing **international polarisation** and **eroding multilateral  
frameworks**, but also their **repercussions for European societies**, stirring up  
fears, weakening dialogue and threatening social cohesion, are posing a grave  
challenge to the EU. When trying to provide a brief analysis of the EU's response  
to these worrying developments, I cannot ignore the fact that the international  
community, including the EU, have been **unable to prevent the outbreak of  
these violent conflicts**. The reasons for not always being able to find the  
necessary unity to take decisive action at an early stage may be manifold, but  
we should learn from them and **become much more effective in the conflict  
prevention in the future**.

Nevertheless, I dare to say that not least Russia's brutal military invasion of Ukraine may have prompted the European Union to realise how crucial its role is to offer a **renewed strategic vision for stability, justice and peace** to the European continent and to the world. **As Bishops of COMECE, we have repeatedly expressed our gratitude** to European decision-makers for their tireless efforts in showing solidarity and providing **unprecedented assistance to Ukraine and its population**. Also today, we wish to reiterate our strong encouragement to European leaders to **maintain this unity** and to **remain committed to the European project**. At the same time, however, we cannot cease to call for **intensifying multilateral diplomatic efforts** towards a sustainable resolution of the war in view of a **just peace**, in line with international law as well as the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and accountability.

On the other hand, the **impact of EU's response** to the other conflicts in our neighbourhood, notably **in the Middle East**, seems for the moment **less perceivable**. Building upon the on-going dialogue efforts of European officials with the major regional actors, we encourage the EU to **continue working for a humanitarian cease-fire** on every front and the **immediate liberation of all the hostages** held in Gaza. At the same time, the EU should play a more active role in **international efforts for the 'two state solution'**, allowing Israelis and Palestinians to finally live in dignity and peace.

We perceive that the wars in our neighbourhood have provided a further impetus for **strengthening the security and defence cooperation** among the EU Member States. While acknowledging the need to develop necessary, adequate and proportionate means of defence against threats of military nature under a strict legal and ethical scrutiny, we plead for not losing sight of the **overarching strategic objective of peace**, as also enshrined in the Treaties (cf. Art 3(1) TEU). In this regard, we propose that the EU could launch the elaboration of a **"European Peace Strategy"** that would **consolidate the concept of 'peace'** at the EU level, help to **further strengthen an integral approach** to peacebuilding and provide the basis for ***"creative efforts [for peace], proportionate to the dangers which threaten it"***.

### 3. EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The **Covid-19 pandemic** challenged our societies in apparently competing ways.

We saw a lot of fear and distrust and a visible clash between public safety and individual rights and freedom.

**It was important to strengthen the cooperation between EU Member States and the EU institutions** to ensure affordability, sustainability and security of medical and pharmaceutical supply, motivated by the desire to build a **strategic resilience for a Europe of health**.

The **European Vaccination Strategy of the year 2020** was a helpful step towards containing the pandemic.

But the aspect of **global solidarity regarding the fair distribution of vaccines** benefitting people living in least developed countries has unfortunately not been sufficiently implemented. It is still necessary to work for **global public health as a public good and** to ensure vaccine access for all as a **global moral urgency**.

The years of the Covid – 19 pandemics have made it clear that religious communities and churches make an indispensable contribution in times of crisis:

They are an **admonishing voice for the observance of human rights**, they are based on a **view of solidarity**, they have a trained eye for **the need for multi-lateralism** and they form a **strong, global network** for the health care sector.

#### **4. Migration and Asylum policies of the EU**

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, on which an agreement was reached last 20 December, represents a **milestone on the road to solidarity and responsibility** for EU countries. The fact of reaching an agreement on such a sensitive issue for states and citizens is a **positive sign**, as are many of the aspects it regulates, from the recognition of the right to asylum, to the existence of a solidarity mechanism with the states that receive the most asylum seekers. But there are **aspects that could be improved**. Thus, for example: the **potential abuse of detention**, which should always be a last resort; the lack of means to **minimise the suffering** of those who are in a more vulnerable situation, including early aged minors, pregnant women, elderly, people with disabilities or mental health disorders; the reception conditions at the border; or the absence of an **effective right to appeal** a negative decision at the border. **Possible return to unsafe countries** or areas should also be avoided.

As Pope Francis highlighted in his last Message for the Word Day of Migrants and Refugees the decision to leave one's native land should be free, and

**nobody should be forced to leave one's home country.** But, at the same time, we must *"be a community ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate everyone"*, opening **new safe and legal channels to regular migration.**

The respect of **human dignity and the promotion of the common good**, that includes solidarity and responsibility, must be the **guiding principles** of migration and asylum policies.

## **5. Conclusion**

Concluding my intervention, we can appreciate the work done in these three sensitive areas, while hoping that the next Commission will **keep building on them and find creative ways to enrich the relevant policies.** It is also important to make sure coherence and a close link is ensured between internal and external EU policies, especially when it comes to key values and principles. I am sure this dialogue will continue fruitfully during the next mandate and also express the wish that **Article 17 TFEU dialogue may improve and be strengthened** during the next five years.