



*Hungarian Presidency
of the Council of the European Union
July – December 2024*

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

Introduction

Hungary takes up the reins of the EU Council Presidency in an important **year for the European Union** and its future. **European elections** will define the approach of the Union and its role in the years to come, including on the global stage. Requests for **reforms**, with some proposing changes to the current Treaties, are intensifying.

It has become a consolidated and fruitful practice for COMECE (Commission of the Episcopates of the European Union) and CEC (Conference of European Churches) to **engage in dialogue with EU Presidencies**. This long-standing practice is supported by **Article 17, paragraph 3 TFEU**, which requires an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU on the one hand and Churches, religious associations or communities on the other.

Together, CEC and COMECE represent a membership of around 380 million citizens throughout EU Member States, and they are strongly committed to the further development of the European project on the basis of the **Christian ideals of human dignity, mutual respect, justice, peace and the integrity of creation**.

This commitment is based on **the biblical foundation of our faith**, our understanding of the world as creation in which human beings are created in God's image and likeness (*Gen 1:26*), and our understanding of fulfilment of this creation offered through life and redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ (*Col 1:15-17*). Christian faith acknowledges the positive role of **freedom balanced with responsibility**, accepts God's mandate given to humanity to care for the created world and upholds justice and respect for our neighbours (*Mt 22:39-40*). Our faith prompts us to be active in the public space and to bring forward our values in dialogue with our partners and with politics.

Churches in the EU are committed to dialogue, and they work jointly to ensure that respect for the **values of human dignity, democracy, solidarity, freedom, equality, and the rule of law** are at the forefront of EU actions and policies both in Europe and globally. In this context, COMECE and CEC wish to **accompany the Hungarian Presidency** of the EU Council in the **implementation of its priorities**, focusing on some of the most pressing challenges.

I. Equipping Europe for the future - EU strategic agenda: democracy, values, unity and solidarity

Europe and the world are facing multiple challenges. Joint efforts for justice, peace, and respectful cooperation among countries, as well as different societal groups and religions in Europe, are in the current situation more important than ever. Recent wars and military conflicts in Europe and Europe's neighbourhood have underscored the

necessity of re-committing to key EU values, notably **unity and solidarity**, as guiding principles for effective joint actions within the EU and beyond its borders. CEC and COMECE have been consistent in expressing their support for this approach over the years, while **highlighting the need for value-based policies and efforts for unity within the EU** in spite of the difficulties along the way.

In the period following soon after the elections to the European Parliament 2024 and at the start of the new legislative period, we invite Europe's leadership to work on reshaping the narratives based on the long-term trends that characterise the European integration process. The European Union has to be a space of **shared solidarity, respect and a common vision that goes beyond the vision of prosperity and achieved economic aims** (*Lk 16: 19-31, Act 17:29*). Christian values, shared by a majority of European citizens, can provide orientation and a guarantee of a safe approach to the changes we face, as well as contribute to overcoming societal gaps and strengthening the cohesion on the continent. Responses to new challenges have to go hand in hand with the remembrance of the positive vision on which the European Union was built, by **honoring the common values of the Union**, as well as by highlighting its achievements, especially in this period of commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the big EU enlargement.

Strengthening social cohesion

To the core concerns of churches belong the **protection and care for the most vulnerable**, and assisting those who suffer from different forms of poverty and exclusion (*Lk 9:1-3*). We encourage political decision makers to take appropriate actions aimed at supporting the provision of assistance to those suffering from different forms of poverty and paying particular attention to the need of avoiding social exclusion. An effective implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** is key to building a fairer and more inclusive European Union, with high standards in decent working conditions, as well as broad social protection and safety nets.

Addressing polarisation in society

In view of Europe's strategic agenda for the next years, it is vital to safeguard and strengthen the Union through **fostering the cohesion** inside our societies and among European peoples and nations, promoting **mutual respect**, strengthening **common values** and taking an **active stand against fundamentalism and polarisation** in society (*Lk 4:3-8*).

Civil society, as well as **Churches and religious communities**, play a significantly **positive role in European societies** and in countering dangerous phenomena that divide our societies, such as the spread of reductive ideologies, disinformation, societal polarisation, populism, xenophobia, or even radicalisation and violent extremism. At the same time, we are concerned about **the misuse and**

instrumentalisation of religion, negative narratives portraying religion as a source of problems, as well as undue restrictions to freedom of conscience and religion. Following up on previous initiatives, CEC and COMECE wish to re-confirm their joint **efforts for truth, justice, peace, protection of democracy and respectful cooperation among countries guided by international law**, as well as different societal groups and religions in Europe.

While rejecting any form of instrumentalisation of religion and any violence based on religious grounds, CEC and COMECE reiterate their willingness to work together with policymakers in view of **contributing to a cultivated discussion about the role of religion in a democratic society**, respectful of recognised fundamental rights of every human being (*Mt 5:37, Col 4:4*).

Protecting the cultural heritage, worship places and holy sites

Religious heritage, tangible and intangible, can make a difference in promoting social cohesion, as it represents a common patrimony of all citizens, is a source of territorial development and a privileged educational space for younger generations.

Preservation of the cultural heritage sites can help in promoting mutual understanding between different religions and societal groups, while promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue, aiming to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation among Europe's diverse populations.

Churches, as primary stakeholders in the protection of places of worship and cultural heritage, have a vested interest in ensuring that these sites are preserved, cared for and protected. Due to ongoing challenges in the field of protection of the worship places and cultural heritage, CEC and COMECE encourage the Hungarian EU Presidency to **develop and enforce more robust legal frameworks at the EU level to protect heritage and religious sites** from vandalism and terrorism inside and outside of the EU, making it also a condition within trade agreements with third countries. Due to collapse, deterioration of the worship places and cultural heritage there is a need that the EU provides **support aimed at improving security measures** in places of worship.

We call on the Hungarian EU Presidency to undertake steps towards **setting up a documentation centre of current conditions and historical significance of cultural and religious sites**, creating a comprehensive database for future preservation efforts which would serve as a base for the cross-border initiatives that promote sharing best practices, resources, and expertise in the preservation of cultural heritage across different EU countries. Security protection of the cultural heritage and worship places requires **tailored training programmes** for local community and religious members on preventive measures and emergency response.

II. Peace and stability on the European continent and in our neighbourhood

In the recent period, a dangerous arc of instability has emerged around the European Union, both to the East as well as to the South. For over two years now, Europe has been facing a tragic war in the heart of the continent. Russia's brutal aggression and full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only poses a principal challenge to the international rules-based order, but also it is, above all, the source of horrific human suffering and widespread destruction. The 7 October 2023 ruthless attack perpetrated by Hamas on the Israeli people provoked a strong Israeli military response in Gaza with dire humanitarian consequences for the Palestinian population. COMECE and CEC deplore both the Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the terrorist attack and the hostage-taking by Hamas, and the subsequent devastating violence unfolding in Gaza. The situation in both regions is a source of great concern to us. We also share the pain of the Armenian people suffering from tensions in the Caucasus region.

In the context of these violent conflicts, as well as increasing international polarisation and regional instabilities, CEC and COMECE have repeatedly issued **calls for de-escalation**, putting an end to the hostilities, and encouraging the conflict parties, with the help of the international community, to open themselves up to negotiations of serious proposals for a **just peace**, in full **respect of international law** (*Is 9:6*). We, thus, ask the Hungarian EU Council Presidency to **redouble diplomatic efforts** for a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the violent conflicts unfolding in Europe and in our neighbourhood.

As peace in Europe can no longer be taken for granted, **peacebuilding efforts** have to be constantly renewed based on the principles of truth and justice. While acknowledging the need to develop necessary, adequate and proportionate means of defence against threats of a military nature, including in the hybrid and cyber sphere, we plead that sight be not lost of the **overarching strategic objective of peace**, as enshrined in the Treaties (cf. Art 3 (1) TEU). The promotion of **human security and peace** is deeply inscribed in the Union's DNA, and the wide range of policies and instruments make the EU a unique actor on the world stage, capable of building lasting peace through **an integral and comprehensive approach**. Even – and especially – in times of war, we should not give in to the logic of war, but rather **promote a culture of peace and reconciliation** in Europe and globally.

In this regard, we encourage the Hungarian EU Council Presidency:

➤ **To act as a united, trustful and integrating force and credible peace broker** amid violent conflicts and tensions in EU's neighbourhood, the Middle East, the Caucasus region and other parts of the world.

➤ **To support the solidarity efforts of the voluntary sector (including Churches) and individuals** (in areas such as humanitarian aid, psycho-social assistance, reconstruction and others) both financially and with capacity-building – as more and more difficulties are being reported.

➤ To work towards the **launch of a multi-stakeholder consultation** on a future **‘European Peace Strategy’** that would consolidate a comprehensive understanding of peace and provide a strategic framework for putting into practice more effectively the EU’s integrated approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

III. A citizen-centred, credible and fair EU enlargement process

With Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine fought in the heart of Europe for more than two years and with the geopolitical developments in EU’s neighbourhood, the EU accession process has regained **strategic importance for stability, wellbeing and peace** on the European continent . CEC and COMECE welcome the inclusion of EU enlargement in the Hungarian EU Council Presidency’s priorities and encourage European leaders to **act in unity for achieving concrete progress** in the process of EU accession, based on the reports and recommendations of the European Commission. The EU integration process of the Western Balkan as well as the Eastern European countries aspiring to a future EU membership, should, however, not only be seen as a geopolitical necessity or an economic investment, but also **above all as a strong message of hope for both, the citizens** of these countries, who have often had to endure hardships and sacrifices along the way, as well as for citizens of already existing EU Member States.

Accession to the EU is a **two-fold process**. The countries aspiring to a future EU membership must continue pursuing the necessary structural reforms in crucial areas, especially the rule of law, strengthening of democratic institutions, fundamental rights, including religious freedom and freedom of the media, as well as fight against corruption, and tackling organised crime. At the same time, a citizen-centred, credible and fair EU enlargement process should encourage and, **in a timely, adequate and tangible manner, respond to these reform efforts**, while avoiding any double-standards in the treatment of the candidate countries, which, in turn, may lead to frustrations and anti-European sentiments in the population.

The credibility of the EU accession process also implies concrete steps on the side of the European Union to become ready to welcome new members. A larger and more diverse EU will have to **rethink political, institutional, administrative and budgetary questions** in order to allow its members and institutions to act in a timely and effective manner, while reaffirming the principles of **solidarity and subsidiarity**. We believe

that Europe has a future if it is truly a union, cherishing unity in diversity. Therefore, we feel the need for **a deeper reflection on the common value basis and the special bonds that unite us as a European family** of peoples and countries, different, and yet, linked by a common history and destiny (*Lk 6:41*). CEC and COMECE stand ready to contribute to such a **participatory dialogue**, which we believe is important in view of inclining **public opinion** in European societies towards the beneficial role of the EU enlargement within the EU, as well as in the candidate countries.

Our recommendations:

- To advance a **citizen-centred EU enlargement process** in a **credible** and **fair** manner with the (potential) candidate countries, while initiating steps toward necessary EU reforms in political, institutional, administrative and budgetary terms.
- To launch a **reflection on the common fundament of values and principles** in an enlarged and more diverse European Union, **with contributions from Churches** and other stakeholders from the candidate countries.
- To support **people-to-people cross-border exchanges** between the citizens of the candidate countries and of EU Member States at different levels, allowing for a **dialogue of cultures and historical experiences** in view of fostering personal contacts and social cohesion already during the accession negotiations phase.

IV. Addressing demographic challenges

Family is the vital cell of society. For several decades, the declining birth rate in the European Union has been a cause for concern, as it impacts on social and economic stability, intergenerational solidarity and even on our spiritual life.

COMECE and CEC encourage Hungarian Presidency in the EU Council, to promote policies that recognise the central role of the family in society.

In particular, this means combating important societal trends that privilege individualism and the pursuit of personal well-being at the expense of the common good and family solidarity. At the same time, some young people face the "*titanic effort*" of starting a family in a precarious environment. As the population ages, many young people find it hard to find stable full-time employment. For these reasons and others reasons we also need to encourage decent employment policies with fair wages that allow people to take care of their families. In the same way, the elderly must not be left to fend for themselves and must be cared for with dignity (*Ef 5:25-28, 33*).

Our recommendations:

- To **invest in parenthood: better-paid and extended parental leave; recognition of parental leave in pension calculations** (instead of recognizing it as a "career break", recognize this time as work at the service of society as a whole); **and affordable access**

to quality childcare to enable 100% of parents wishing to return to work to do so easily.

➤ To **promote a work-life balance** by encouraging flexible working, support for working parents, the establishment of a common European day of rest on Sunday, and the **promotion of a "European Year for Work-Life Balance" under the umbrella of the European Sunday Alliance**, of which COMECE and CEC are historic members, to address these issues with key European players.

➤ To **strengthen intergenerational solidarity** by encouraging intergenerational programs and actively supporting the elderly in society and by recognizing their crucial role in our communities and society. **Encourage the active participation in the labour market of retired people** who are willing to work longer. At the same time, this would help **ensuring a balanced management of the economic debt**, both at EU and Member State level, to avoid bequeathing a disproportionate burden to future generations.

➤ To **strengthen EU competitiveness and invest in family-friendly businesses**: Encourage businesses to invest in maternal health, early childhood and parenting. Support start-ups and innovative companies that contribute to economic growth while meeting the needs of families.

➤ To **promote an inclusive migration policy, easing procedures to facilitate faster migrants' access to the labour market** to foster their social and economic integration, in a spirit of solidarity and mutual respect, while providing an effective response to the ageing of population in Europe.

V. Migration and Asylum

CEC and COMECE believe that migration and asylum policies need to be rooted in protection of **inherent dignity of every person**, while respecting international law obligations and the human rights (*Gen 1:26*). Fair and truly humane EU migration and asylum policies need to be based on the principles of solidarity and responsibility (*Mt 22:39-40*). Asylum seekers coming to the EU need to have access to shelter and basic human needs, as well as an access to an individual, full, but fast and fair asylum procedure.

In reality, we observe that the reception systems in EU Members 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 on the Hungarian EU Presidency to take action in this regard, and work on **improving 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.

At the same time, we encourage the EU 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.

We also call on the EU to provide **more space for protective safe legal passages into Europe** – through resettlement, humanitarian visas, 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 their families and the interest of the specific country of origin, in particular avoiding brain drain. We can't allow the Mediterranean Sea to become a vast cemetery, and we consider it 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.

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.

Our recommendations:

- To provide **more space for protective safe and legal 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.**
- 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.