

Thursday, 23/4/2026

Address by the Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Cyprus, Dr Vasiliki Kassianidou, at the Plenary Assembly of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), in Lefkosia

Your Beatitude the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (Cardinal Pierbattista Card. Pizzaballa)

Eminence Archbishop Mariano Crociata,

Your Excellency Monsignor Selim Jean Sfeir,

Distinguished Members of COMECE,

Esteemed representatives of Churches and European institutions,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, at the outset, to convey the warm greetings of the President of the Republic of Cyprus who could not be with you here today and to welcome you to our island. It is indeed a great honour that I have been given the task to address this Plenary Assembly on behalf of President Christodoulides.

I wish to thank and congratulate all those who have contributed to this important gathering: COMECE, under the leadership of Archbishop Crociata, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus Monsignor Selim Sfeir and all partners who have worked together to bring this Assembly to Lefkosia.

It is particularly meaningful that this meeting takes place within the context of the Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Cyprus may lie at the eastern most edge of the Europe Union and yet it is and has always been an integral part of Europe. For centuries, our island has been a meeting point of cultures, religions and civilizations. Today, it continues to embody the European principles of dialogue, coexistence and respect for diversity.

Dear Participants,

The role of the Churches in Europe, and particularly within the European project, is invaluable. The work carried out by COMECE and the Conference of European Churches contributes decisively to promoting human dignity, solidarity, justice, peace and respect. These values are deeply embedded both in the European Union and in the Christian tradition.

In Cyprus, the Church has historically been a cornerstone of society. Beyond its spiritual mission, it has contributed significantly to education, social welfare, the preservation of our cultural heritage and identity, and national resilience. It continues to support vulnerable groups, promote social cohesion and uphold values that are essential for the stability and development of our society.

At a time when Europe faces multiple crises – geopolitical, social

and environmental – the moral voice of the Churches remains essential. It reminds us that the European project is not only economic or political; it is fundamentally a project rooted in values and in the dignity of every human being.

Cyprus has assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a critical juncture. Our programme is guided by a central vision: a stronger, more autonomous European Union, which is open to the world and grounded in its values.

Our priorities can be summarised along several key axes:

First, to strengthen European autonomy in security, defence, energy and the economy, ensuring that the Union is capable of acting independently when necessary while remaining a reliable global partner.

Second, to enhance competitiveness and resilience through innovation, digital transformation, and the green transition, while safeguarding social cohesion.

Third, to promote an open and outward-looking Europe by strengthening partnerships with neighbouring regions, advancing enlargement, and reinforcing multilateralism and international law.

Fourth, to place citizens at the centre of our policies. This includes addressing poverty, promoting affordable housing,

investing in education and skills, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Particular emphasis is placed on youth, education and culture. We believe that investing in young people, fostering creativity, and promoting cultural dialogue are essential for Europe's future. During the Presidency, the Republic of Cyprus seeks to strengthen the bonds of the Union, using culture as an essential tool for political cohesion and recognizing the fact that it is the most important expression of our common European identity and the thread that holds member states together.

Finally, the Cyprus Presidency is committed to strengthening democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, which remain the foundation of the European Union.

In examining the contribution of the Conference of European Churches, it is evident that there is a strong convergence between these priorities and the perspectives put forward by the Cypriot Presidency.

Both the Cyprus Presidency and the CEC emphasize the centrality of human dignity, solidarity and social cohesion. The CEC highlights the need to support the most vulnerable and combat poverty and exclusion; objectives that are fully aligned with our commitment to social policies and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In the field of education and youth, both approaches recognize the importance of empowering young people, strengthening participation and investing in skills and lifelong learning. The Presidency's focus on youth-friendly policies and inclusive education resonates strongly with the Churches' emphasis on human development and societal cohesion.

In the area of culture, the protection of cultural and religious heritage is a shared priority. The CEC underlines the importance of safeguarding places of worship and cultural heritage, while the Cyprus Presidency promotes intercultural and interfaith dialogue as a means of fostering mutual understanding and stability.

Moreover, in the domain of social welfare, both the Presidency and the CEC stress the need for inclusive societies that leave no one behind. The emphasis on combating inequality, supporting vulnerable groups, and strengthening community resilience reflects a common vision of Europe as a space of solidarity and shared responsibility.

Finally, there is a shared commitment to peace, dialogue and international law. The CEC calls for sustained efforts towards peace and reconciliation, while the Cyprus Presidency places strong emphasis on multilateralism, humanitarian support and the promotion of stability in Europe and beyond.

Allow me also to refer to the Cyprus problem, which remains an

open wound at the heart of our country and of Europe. For decades, the continued division of Cyprus, resulting from the illegal occupation of a part of our country by the Turkish army, has led to serious violations of fundamental human rights, including displacement, loss of property and restricted access to cultural and religious heritage. Greek Cypriots are not allowed to live in their homes or use freely the more than 550 religious monuments which are located in the occupied part of the island. Some of the churches have been demolished and others vandalized while the cemeteries have been pillaged, looted and intentionally destroyed. In addition, over 20,000 icons, numerous sacred vessels, vestments and manuscripts from the churches in the occupied part of the island have been stolen. Scores of wall paintings and mosaics have been forcibly removed from the walls of churches and sold abroad, while others have been entirely destroyed. Cultural objects are still being traced to illegal antiquities trade markets and in auctions around the world and thanks to the efforts of the Department of Antiquities and other governmental authorities are being repatriated. It is precisely for this reason that combating illicit trafficking of cultural property has been identified as one of Cyprus's key priorities during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2026.

Let me reiterate that our commitment remains unwavering: we work tirelessly towards a just, viable and lasting solution, in line with international law and under the auspices of the United

Nations. In this effort, the values upon which the European Union is founded—respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy and the rule of law—serve as our guiding principles. We call upon all relevant stakeholders to actively support this noble cause, so that Cyprus may be reunited and become a model of peaceful coexistence and reconciliation.

Dear participants,

The European institutions and the Churches can work together – each within their respective roles – to promote a more humane, inclusive and resilient Europe. We firmly believe that cooperation with Churches and civil society enriches policymaking and strengthens the legitimacy of the European project.

Allow me to conclude by reaffirming our shared responsibility: to build a Europe that is not only strong and competitive, but also just, compassionate and faithful to its founding values.

I wish you all a fruitful meeting and stay in Cyprus.