



*Irish Presidency of the Council of the  
European Union  
July – December 2026*

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

## Introduction

Ireland assumes the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a time of significant challenges and uncertainty, both within the EU and globally. Calls for responses to emerging issues and for reforms of existing policies are growing stronger. In this context, we recognise the efforts of the Irish Presidency to advance key initiatives under its “*Strength with Unity*” agenda:

- to strengthen our shared values and social cohesion;
- to enhance external and internal security; and
- to promote prosperity and well-being through competitiveness.

As the EU institutions are engaged in discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Irish Presidency will also play an important role in fostering a forward-looking dialogue on the future of Europe.

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 finds its basis in **Article 17, paragraph 3 TFEU**, which asks for 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, freedom, and the integrity of creation**.

This commitment is grounded in the **biblical foundations of our faith**, in our understanding of the world as God's creation in which human beings are made in His image and likeness, and in our belief that the fulfilment of creation is revealed through the life and redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christian faith acknowledges the positive role of **freedom balanced with responsibility**, accepts God's mandate given to humanity to care for the created world. At the heart of the Christian faith is a fundamental belief in **reconciliation** where God initiates the repair of relationship between human and divine, through Jesus Christ who bore our faults. Embedded in this new community are the values of justice and respect for our neighbours. 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 concrete dialogue on policies, 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 each EU initiative both in Europe and globally.

In this context, COMECE and CEC wish to **accompany the Irish Presidency** of the EU Council in the **implementation of its priorities**, focusing on some of the most pressing challenges.

## I. Value-based policies and social cohesion

### 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. On-going 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.

We therefore encourage Europe's leadership to rediscover and reclaim the Union's founding values and principles in a spirit of remaining faithful to our Christian roots whilst continuing to offer adequate policy responses to the challenges of our times. Moreover, we encourage the Irish EU Presidency to increase efforts to strengthen the EU's capacity for consensus-building.

Consequently, the European Union should continue to be a space of **shared solidarity, respect and a common vision that includes but goes beyond the vision of prosperity and achieved economic aims**. 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 **honouring the shared values of the Union**, as well as by highlighting its achievements.

### **Strengthening social cohesion and addressing polarisation in society**

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. We encourage political decision makers to take appropriate actions aimed at supporting the provision of assistance to those suffering from different forms of poverty, while taking into consideration the need of avoiding social exclusion.

In this respect, the recently presented [EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#), the [strengthened European Child Guarantee](#) and the [enhanced Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities](#), as well as the [proposals on fighting housing exclusion](#) deserve a particular attention. We call on the Irish EU Presidency to carry these proposals forward and to ensure their effective implementation.

It is equally vital to safeguard and strengthen the Union through **fostering the cohesion** inside our societies and among European peoples and nations, by promoting **mutual respect**, strengthening **common values** and taking an **active stand against fundamentalism and polarisation** in society. Especially at a time of multiple and overlapping crises, it is crucial that the EU proves what it is capable of achieving for its citizens, particularly in the area of **social security, job security and a secure income**. Economic growth may be the engine, but it needs the steering wheel of sound social and distributive policies to ensure that prosperity serves the common good and benefits the many, especially those most at risk of poverty and exclusion.

### **Churches contributing to the well-being of a democratic society**

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. As faith communities, we can offer the ability to hold complex realities rather than acquiescing to simple slogans. We are committed to the importance of truth in the face of manipulative stories reinforcing adversarial tribal identities, and so we are concerned both about **the misuse and instrumentalisation of religion**, and about negative narratives portraying religion as a source of problems. By the same token, we are disturbed by 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 states guided by international law**, as well as between 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.

Respect for the **core fundamental right to freedom of religion in all its dimensions** (individual, collective, public, private and institutional) is a key part of this discourse. In this area, we also see the need to break the **majorities vs. minorities dynamic** that underpins the approach of some to freedom of religion and protection from discrimination.

In the context of the implementation of the recently launched ‘**European Democracy Shield**’, we believe that **countering disinformation** and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) requires a sound **coordination and joint effort** within the EU and among its Member States. At the same time, any policy in this regard should fully respect **freedom of expression** and information, as well as **freedom of thought, conscience and religion**. **Accountability and transparency of media**, including social media, and high quality, independent, **impartial** and accountable **fact-checkers** are all important elements. For the external dimension, we would emphasise the need for stronger **cooperation with EU delegations** in third countries. Strengthening societal resilience and preparedness is also paramount and for this we need **education** systems that equip young people with the ability for **critical thinking**, increase **media literacy** - including with regard to the functioning of algorithms - and offer civic education. The integrity of electoral processes would be greatly supported by strong **transparency rules for financial contributions to political parties**. In fostering **citizens’ participation** and engagement prudent respect for the **principle of subsidiarity** is crucial.

### Recommendation:

CEC and COMECE encourages the Irish Presidency to defend **an enabling environment for civil society** in Europe and in EU external action. This includes resisting narratives that treat civil society advocacy as suspect, ensuring that transparency measures do not stigmatise legitimate civic engagement, and recognising the specific contribution of local and faith-based actors in humanitarian response, development cooperation and peacebuilding.

## II. Peace, security and defence

### **Towards a just and lasting peace in Ukraine and in our neighbourhood**

For more than four years now, Ukraine and its people have stood firmly in defence – not only of their own territorial integrity and freedom but also of shared European values – against Russia’s full-scale war of aggression. COMECE and CEC have consistently voiced deep concern over the immense human suffering, expressing solidarity with the victims and advocating for sustained European support to Ukraine and its people. Amid growing geopolitical instability, we urge **continued European unity and concerted action to achieve a just and lasting peace for Ukraine**, grounded in respect for international law. Any credible and sincere dialogue effort should be underpinned by continued strong transatlantic and global solidarity and it must involve the victim of the aggression, Ukraine. Moreover, joint efforts are needed **to assist with Ukraine’s material reconstruction and long-term reconciliation efforts** – endeavours in which Churches play an active role and require adequate support from policymakers.

We are concerned as well about other violent conflicts and instabilities in Europe’s neighbourhood, in particular in the **Middle East**. We plead for **diplomatic efforts** leading to a peaceful and sustainable resolution of this particular conflict having far reaching implications also for Europe.

### European security and defence policy serving the goal of human security and peace

Growing security challenges—from armed conflicts in neighbouring regions to hybrid and cyber threats—have propelled the EU and its Member States to invest more in their security and defence capabilities, as recently outlined in the [White Paper for European Defence “Readiness 2030”](#). In the context of the on-going discussions on a **new European Security Strategy** and on the **future EU’s long-term budget**, we would like to reiterate that the EU is and should remain a **unique global actor** capable of **promoting lasting peace** through a **holistic and integrated approach**. Cherishing the EU’s deep-rooted **moral responsibility** and **legal commitment** (cf. [Art 3\(1\) TEU](#)) to work towards the objectives of **human security and peace**, we call on the Irish EU Presidency to promote “*creative efforts for peace proportionate to the dangers which threaten it*” (cf. [the Schuman Declaration](#)). Even in the face of war, we must **resist the normalisation of conflict and instead foster a new architecture of peace** - both within Europe and globally. The growing international polarisation calls for **preserving longstanding partnerships and alliances**, including with the United Kingdom and the United States, while seeking to open up new processes of dialogue and cooperation.

**Reconciliation** is a long-term project involving the building up of trust, political will and working in harmony towards a common good and future. For the Christian faith, **reconciliation** in contrast to negative peace is the ongoing process of creating positive relationships between individuals, groups, states. It also means reacting against past, present or preventing future inhibitors to peace such as war, forced displacement, enslavement, control, oppression, colonialism and other human rights violations and injustices. The Christian concept of reconciliation involves the complementary dynamics of repenting and forgiving: the first is a way of dealing with having done wrong, the second is with having suffered wrong. Moral maturity requires the implementation of both, otherwise there can be a tendency to skew towards forgiveness which puts the burden on the victim without exploring the need for repentance.

With regard to increased investments towards European security and defence, we would like to reiterate: While acknowledging the need for responsible and cooperative engagement in this area, including the development of **effective European defence tools** within a **broader strategic framework**, we urge the Irish EU Presidency to equally prioritise the **putting in place of robust oversight mechanisms to make sure that respective measures are consistent with the promotion of human security and peace**. **Control mechanisms** should ensure that all actions in the area of security and defence adhere to the principles of *necessity*, *proportionality* and *adequacy*, while also upholding human rights, the rule of law, and ethical norms. In EU-supported defence investments, including those under the European Defence Fund and the SAFE financial instrument, a particular scrutiny should be applied to automated defence technologies, such as uncrewed armed systems. They should only be developed and used following thorough legal and ethical evaluations.

### Support for humanitarian and development assistance

In view of the negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework, we share the **concerns of numerous civil society organisations, including faith-based actors, that the area of humanitarian action and development assistance may experience serious reductions** due to shifting strategic priorities and an approach that prioritises economic or geopolitical interests over solidarity. Particularly in fragile and conflict-affected countries a merely investment-oriented approach falls short of effectively addressing the **basic needs of the grassroots communities** and of supporting their **integral and sustainable development**.

We welcome that the recent [Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid](#) strongly reaffirms humanitarian principles, civil society, local organisations and community voices. We encourage the EU and Member States to **explicitly recognise faith-based actors as part of the humanitarian and development ecosystem**. In many contexts, churches and faith-based organisations are trusted, locally rooted, present before, during and after crises, and able to reach communities that others may struggle to reach. Recognising the role of churches and

faith-based actors contributes to the EU honouring the real diversity of civil society actors involved in principled and needs-based humanitarian response.

In this respect too, we must emphasise our Christian view that care of the earth is not optional (Laudato Si, 217), and that we must respond in solidarity with those who suffer injustice due to climate change. We need a metanoia of hearts and policies to tackle **climate justice**. The global energy crisis highlights again our continent's vulnerability. We call on the European Union to be faithful to its founding values on human dignity, solidarity and human rights, and set courageous goals to safeguard the present and the future.

### **Recommendations:**

- Maintain European unity in concrete **solidarity with Ukraine and its people**, while intensifying global efforts towards a sustainable and just peace for Ukraine, one that fully respects international law and is underpinned by effective security guarantees, allowing Ukrainian families to reunite and live a life in dignity, security and freedom in their sovereign and independent homeland.
- **Initiate a multi-stakeholder consultation process to develop a 'European Peace Strategy'** – a guiding framework to consolidate the concept of 'peace' and strengthen the EU's integrated approach to peacebuilding, conflict prevention and peace diplomacy, with the inclusion of the Church's voice, while ensuring that efforts in the area of security and defence are coherent with these objectives. For the Christian, peace is understood not simply as the end of enmity but the restoration of full relationships and creation flourishing. The call to be good neighbours, is a call to promote the common good, to protect the vulnerable and to seek the good of the city (Jeremiah 29:7).
- Make sure that the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework foresees **adequate resources for the areas of humanitarian action and development cooperation**, granting access to financial and capacity-building support for the non-profit sector, including Churches and faith-based actors, who are often engaged in delivering humanitarian aid, psycho-social assistance and material reconstruction in conflict-affected areas where other actors are not present.
- Ensure that the next EU long-term budget also includes **support for vulnerable people** here in Europe through the funding of a socially just and sustainable transition from fossil fuels.

### **III. Fair and humane migration and asylum policies**

CEC and COMECE share the view that migration and asylum policies must protect the **inherent dignity of every person and the fundamental rights rooted in it**. Fair and truly humane EU migration and asylum policies need to be based on the principles of subsidiarity, solidarity and responsibility, and the protection of the common good.

Reception systems in EU Members States, especially those at the EU external borders, are frequently overcrowded and many times in precarious conditions that do not comply with EU legislation. We call on the Irish EU Presidency to use the overdue implementation of the "Pact" to work with the other Member States on **improving the situation of migrants and asylum seekers in deficient reception centres**. Exploring the possibility of **provisional alternative or additional private accommodation** for migrants and asylum seekers could also be a common ground for joint efforts by public authorities, civil society, and Churches.

We encourage the Irish EU Presidency to intensify the efforts to **address transversally the multidimensional root causes of 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 Irish EU Presidency to provide **more space for protective safe legal passages into Europe** – through resettlement, humanitarian visas, family reunification or visa exception - following reasonable security checks and considering the real labour market and state budget possibilities. In addition, meaningful routes for regular labour migration should be considered that match the needs of labour market with the skills and aspirations of labour migrants, while mitigating brain drain. Equally important are policies that support the **integration** of migrants into host societies, promoting their effective participation in social, economic and civic life, fostering social cohesion and mutual enrichment.

We cannot allow the Mediterranean Sea to become a vast cemetery, and we find it unacceptable that people continue to die at sea while attempting to cross unsafely into EU territory in search of international protection or better conditions of life. It is against this background that we call on Member States to **fulfil their international obligations regarding Search and Rescue (SAR) operations and not to criminalise** genuine humanitarian assistance or help to migrants in distress.

We note with concern that many Member States are not fully ready to implement the Asylum and Migration Pact – even as the deadline of 12th June 2026 has passed. This adds to the concern we had on various elements, such as border procedures or externalisation. We hope that Member States will **apply humanitarian principles** in this situation, which risks making those seeking protection in Europe more vulnerable.

The protection given to **persons displaced from Ukraine** under the **Temporary Protection Directive** has worked well, and it should continue as long as it is needed. In this regard, we would welcome a proposal by the European Commission and a Council decision to extend the temporary protection beyond 4 March 2027, and to coordinate the transition out of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine. This prolongation should provide the time for serious efforts of Member States for providing other forms of secure status to those displaced from Ukraine beyond the temporary status.

**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 recovery and social integration. Smugglers also benefit from the needs and desire of migrants and asylum seekers to reach the EU territory. The EU should incentivise with all its means the cooperation with countries of origin or transit to dismantle this illegal activity. The **use of new technologies, including AI**, to combat human trafficking should be explored.

The EU needs to **continue enhancing solidarity within the Union** with the Member States hosting those seeking protection, both financially and through relocation where needed, while respecting the specificities and ethos of each Member State.

**Return of irregular migrants** should be made in a fair and humane manner, respectful of the fundamental rights of returnees, avoiding both the use of unjustified and prolonged detention and the separation of family members, while protecting the most vulnerable. Voluntary returns of irregular migrants should be prioritised, including reintegration measures. We regret that these positive principles have been weakened in the [Return Regulation](#). We hope that its provisions are correctly and effectively implemented, in compliance with EU and International Law. At the same time, we reiterate our concern for other provisions in the agreement, such as the possibility to detain potential returnees based on only the suspicion they might commit offences as well as provisions for offshoring of responsibility to “external hubs” – both provisions which in practice will be extremely difficult to align with fundamental rights standards.

## Recommendations:

- To provide **more space for protective safe and legal passages into Europe, matching the needs of EU labour market.**
- To guarantee **fair, speedy, and 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 smuggling, and supporting the victims in their recovery and reintegration, as part of long-term integration and inclusion efforts.
- To provide **protection for those having fled Ukraine** as much as it is needed, including secure status beyond March 2027.
- **Fair and humane return** of irregular migrants, prioritizing voluntary returns accompanied by reintegration measures, in compliance with EU and International Law.

## **IV. Prosperity, well-being and competitiveness**

As the EU is faced with enormous economic pressures, CEC and COMECE welcome the efforts of the Irish EU Presidency to secure the **economic well-being** of our Union and its citizens. We are aware of the fact that a strong economy is also necessary for keeping our **welfare systems**, one of Europe's shining examples of concrete solidarity. We recognise that in the current dominating global economic system this includes the necessary ability of **competitiveness**, and the attempt to fight the growing risk of industries leaving the EU and companies vanishing from our continent. Efforts for renewed competitiveness of the EU will be taken into account in the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, in preparation of which the Irish Presidency will play a decisive role. The MFF must reflect shared European values: **solidarity, inclusion, and human dignity**, especially in times of polarisation, conflicts and the global decline of democracy.

Competitiveness, defence and security are urgent priorities, especially when Europe faces serious challenges. But they cannot overshadow other essential pillars: **social cohesion**, climate action and rural development. These areas are interconnected. Social cohesion strengthens democracy and rural vitality, while climate protection links to the circular economy, energy efficiency and strategic independence. A forward-looking MFF must embrace these synergies. True resilience begins with social cohesion, the capacity of communities to withstand crises together, to care for one another, and to build trust across differences.

With regard to the efforts for improving competitiveness, it must be acknowledged that the concentration on production and profit of our economic system entails the risk of **exploitation of the poor and the earth's resources**, especially in the "Global South". While the on-going "**decarbonisation of the EU**" is to be supported, this must **not come at the expense of the ecosystems of other continents and the rights of local communities**. True **partnerships grounded in mutual dignity** and respect are urgently needed.

We very much support the development of an "**optimal framework for excellent research and innovation**". We also welcome the adoption of the EU AI Act in March 2024 as the first legislature in the world to pass a legally binding law on AI. The human genius has a vital role in the solution of the various crises surrounding us today and **critical technologies** can provide a significant contribution in this endeavour. However, it is important to insist on the **primacy of the human being in all ethical questions**. All **technological innovations**, including those to increase the competitiveness of the EU, must not put at risk the **dignity of every human being**.

As technology continues to bring extensive innovations which influence culture, the European AI innovation month in October, beginning with the AI Summit "Harnessing AI to

Revolutionise Europe's Competitiveness" brings an opportunity to ensure human agency, truth telling and human dignity provide safeguarding rails for technological competitiveness. We welcome policy that encourages innovation but prioritises the dignity and worth of every human being.

## V. The Future of our Union: a citizen-centred, credible and fair enlargement process and EU internal reforms

With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine fought in the heart of Europe and with the geopolitical developments in EU's neighbourhood, the EU accession process has regained **strategic importance for stability, prosperity and peace** on the European continent. CEC and COMECE encourage European leaders to **act in unity for achieving concrete progress** in the process of EU accession. 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 **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, and **for the citizens of already existing EU Member States**. It is important that our values are shared with **young people** and they are encouraged to fully participate in imaginatively shaping the future.

Accession to the EU is a **two-way 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 community, 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. CEC and COMECE stand ready to contribute to such a **participatory dialogue**, which we believe is important in view of **public opinion** in European societies, **turning against** the beneficial role of the EU enlargement both within the EU and in the candidate countries.

### Recommendations:

- To advance a **citizen-centred EU enlargement process** in a **credible** and **fair** manner with the candidate countries, while initiating steps towards necessary EU reforms in political, institutional, administrative and budgetary aspects.
- 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 Members States at different levels, allowing for a **dialogue of cultures and historical experiences and intergenerational engagement** in view of fostering personal contacts and social cohesion already during the accession negotiations phase; in this respect, also promote the **contribution of interreligious and intercultural dialogue**.