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



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

## Introduction

Belgium takes up the reins of the EU Council Presidency in a **decisive 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**, including 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 justice, peace and the integrity of creation**.

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 globally and in Europe.

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

### I. Europe's strategic agenda - democracy and unity in the European Union, addressing fundamentalism and polarisation in society, equipping Europe for the future.

Joint efforts for justice, peace, and respectful cooperation among countries, as well as different societal groups and religions in Europe, are more important than ever in the current situation. Recently outbroken wars and military conflicts in Europe and Europe's neighbourhood have strengthened efforts to demonstrate the importance of key EU values such as unity and solidarity and the importance of achieving joint action within the EU. CEC and COMECE have been consistent in expressing their support for this approach over the years, while **highlighting value-based policies and efforts for unity within the EU** in spite of the difficulties along the way.

Together with these external challenges, the European project is facing new dynamics and a growing number of internal challenges. In view of Europe's strategic agenda, it is more important than ever to safeguard and strengthen the Union through the **protection of democracy and the strengthening of common values and fundamental**

**rights, and the fostering of an active stand against fundamentalism and polarisation in society.** CEC and COMECE repeatedly embraced such an approach, and they are ready to support the Presidency of the EU Council in carrying forward the impulse provided by the **Defence of Democracy package.**

Response to new challenges has to go hand in hand with the remembrance of the positive vision on which the European Union is built, by **honoring common values of the Union,** as well as by highlighting its achievements, especially in this period of commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the big EU enlargement.

CEC and COMECE are also concerned about **the misuse and instrumentalisation of religion** and the spread of disinformation that are often associated with societal polarisation, populism and extremism. Civil society, as well as Churches and religious communities, play a significant role in European societies and in countering these dangerous phenomena. Following up on previous initiatives, CEC and COMECE wish to re-confirm their 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 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.

Finally, CEC and COMECE want to express the need **to strengthen efforts to address violence on religious grounds,** encouraging institutions to take advantage of a dialogue with religious actors.

## **II. Peace and stability on the European Continent and in our neighbourhood**

In recent days, a dangerous arc of instability has emerged around the European Union, both to the East as well as to the South. For almost 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 it is, above all, the source of horrific human suffering and widespread destruction. The October 7 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 and the terrorist attack by Hamas. At the same time, 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 proposals for a just peace, in **respect for international law**. We thus ask the Belgian 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 not be 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.

With the ongoing war on European soil, the **EU accession process** regains strategic importance for stability, prosperity and peace in Europe. In response to the **European aspirations of Ukraine**, a **credible EU accession perspective** now needs to be implemented, along with other European countries that have made similar requests in the past, notably in the **Western Balkans**. In this regard, the EU also needs to reflect on its own **reforms** in the follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe

**In this regard, we encourage the Belgian EU Council Presidency:**

- To maintain **European unity in the solidarity efforts** (including humanitarian, financial, judicial, political, necessary and adequate defence support, as well as reconstruction of damaged public infrastructure, civilian buildings and religious and cultural sites) **for Ukraine and its people**, while intensifying multilateral and multistakeholder diplomatic efforts towards a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the war, in line with international law and the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and accountability, and to guarantee a free, secure, and independent Ukraine in its internationally-recognised borders. Together with EU Member States, **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 act as a **united, trustful and integrating force and credible peace broker** amid violent conflicts and tensions in the Middle East, the Caucasus region and other parts of the world.

In this regard:

- To launch a multi-stakeholder consultation on the elaboration of a ‘**European Peace Strategy**’, consolidating the concept of ‘peace’ at EU level and strengthening an integral approach to peacebuilding; in the context of EU defence (spending) initiatives, to reinforce adequate **control mechanisms**, ensuring their strict compliance with legal, ethical and security norms and standards.
- To advance a **citizen-centred EU enlargement** process in a **credible, coherent and fair** manner with the candidate countries, while initiating steps towards **necessary EU reforms** in political, institutional, administrative and budgetary terms; to launch a reflection on **rediscovering the common fundament of values and special bonds** uniting an enlarged and more diverse Union, with contributions from Churches and other stakeholders from the candidate countries.

### III. Just transition and preparing for a sustainable future

CEC and COMECE welcome the attention that is given to areas concerning the pursuit of a just transition and sustainable future in the Presidency programme. The EU has been doing a lot on these issues and, in many areas, has been showing the way forward for others to follow. At the same time, in many Member States, **unease and fear in front of existing and future potential social costs of the green transition have been growing rapidly in past years**. It seems likely that the European Green Deal will become one of the electoral issues at the upcoming European elections in June. The urgent necessity to make progress on managing the climate and economic crises, while not risking more social division, makes it thus clear that **a wide political and social consensus will be important to avoid a potential stalemate on legislative work for a sustainable future**. A focus therefore on a truly integral vision of the transition that goes beyond a “merely” ecological approach is urgently needed to ensure that it becomes a just transition.

We welcome the various promises in the Presidency programme to “leave no one behind.” At the same time, this should not remain a slogan but become reality for all citizens within the EU. **Poverty is on the rise in Europe** and some of the most affected areas are those closely linked with the transition, such as transport and housing. The housing situation throughout the EU is already precarious in many Member States. There are worries that the proposed Social Climate Fund will, firstly, not be adequate, and, secondly, might create a system in which more and more people will depend upon social assistance instead of being able to shoulder their lives and costs on their own. The principle of incentive rather than force often seems more adequate.

**In the agricultural sector tensions have been especially rising in the past months**, and they might provoke social unrest if sustainable solutions for the future of farming are not found. Several discussions and controversies around some of the most ambitious legislative projects of the European Commission have revealed that **many**

**of those most affected by adopted and prepared legislation often feel unheard in the political process.** CEC and COMECE plea for an open and transparent dialogue with all involved players, and for bigger participation of all those that will be affected by planned policies.

It is only through listening and honest face-to-face dialogue that we might grasp a better sense of the reality of farmers in the European Union, a greater recognition for their hard work, and an understanding of their concerns. In this regard, we welcome that President von der Leyen addressed an increased dialogue with farmers in her State of the Union speech and announced her intention to “launch a strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture in the EU.” **We hope that efforts will be made in this presidency toward this “strategic dialogue”** and that the dialogue will include a broad and true representation of the large diversity of farmers throughout the EU.

Although the worst of the energy crisis seems to have been over, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still ongoing and with it the uncertainty of potential future price shocks. We welcome the reform of the electricity market design, and the enormous efforts that have been made to decarbonise our energy system. At the same time, **we point out the global responsibilities the EU has in securing imports of energy and raw materials.** The first concerns various deals that the EU concluded with authoritative regimes that violate basic political standards and human rights, the second concerns the extractivism in developing countries and its connections to horrifying social and working conditions, and ecological damages. We share concerns with numerous local organisations in developing countries, particularly on the Critical Raw Materials Act. Climate crisis can ultimately only be solved together in honouring an eye-to-eye partnership between the countries of Global North and South. In addressing climate concerns, as well as in efforts towards its energy and raw material security, the EU has to seriously take into account its responsibility towards developing countries and avoid double standards in promoting its own values.

#### **We encourage the Belgian Presidency:**

- To undertake and support steps toward launching a strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture in the EU. Such dialogue should include a **broad and true representation of the large diversity of farmers** throughout the EU.
- **To support sustainable solutions in transport and housing sectors** that enable full access to social life and dignified housing for all people living in the EU, while simultaneously making progress on cleaner transport and energy efficiency.
- To ensure that, while the **decarbonisation of our energy system** is urgently necessary, the cost of change is not paid by either the most vulnerable in the EU, nor by the Global South through continued exploitation. **Affordable access to energy** must remain a priority.

## IV. Education, Culture and Youth policies for cohesive, just and inclusive societies

The “achievement and further development of the **European Education Area (EEA)**”, as one of the more comprehensive educational policies of the EU, is an essential element in the priorities of the Belgian Presidency. In order to achieve the EEA targets, CEC and COMECE encourage the Presidency to tap into the potential of **non-formal and informal Education**, ensuring further cooperation among Member States to foster holistic education and tackle underachievement in basic skills, in response to the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the **recent results of the PISA 2022 report**. While taking stock of the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, the Presidency should create the conditions for Member States to **facilitate affordable and quality learning mobility**, especially for students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds.

With regard to training and skills, the Belgian Presidency should continue working towards a successful **European Year of Skills**. The Year should not be solely framed through a narrative of competitiveness and employability; it needs to **support training, upskilling and education in light of the integral development of the person**. To support lifelong learning, the Presidency’s OECD Skills Summit should highlight the precious contribution of **interpersonal, social and intercultural skills, cultural awareness, interreligious competences and critical thinking** and the needed inclusion of most disadvantaged NEETs in upskilling processes for the green and digital transition.

Considering the manifold **risks of excessive digitalisation** in young learners’ education, it is necessary to boost exchanges among Member States on best practices in digital education to **mitigate negative effects**, e.g. lower motivation and school performance and growing burnout rates. Churches in Europe urge the inclusion of these best practices in the 2024-2027 **Digital Education Action Plan**.

In the cultural area, COMECE and CEC applaud the Presidency for setting the focus on the role of heritage, culture and European identity. To this end, Member States’ efforts should address the **challenges undermining cultural heritage** and its **promotion** in their constituencies (e.g. underfunding, bureaucratic hurdles, etc), especially when it comes to the **preservation and reuse of religious buildings**, such as decommissioned churches. Moreover, the Belgian Presidency should ensure that the digital transition in the cultural domain is complemented by **support for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage at local and regional levels**.

In view of young people’s role in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the Presidency should take concrete steps to **address the challenges faced by young people** in Europe, engaging with them and ensuring that concrete proposals are the fruit of exchange with all young people, including the most marginalised. In light of

the demographic crisis experienced by Member States, COMECE and CEC call the Presidency to kickstart initiatives with young people to discuss proposals for **improved family-oriented policies** at European level, as a follow-up to the recent publication of the Commission's demographic toolbox. **Intergenerational solidarity** is key to promoting cohesive societies: as part of its work on the EU youth dialogue, the Belgian Presidency should promote policies favouring **solidarity and justice between generations**, at all levels and in areas beyond environmental sustainability.

**In this regard, we encourage the Belgian Presidency to:**

- Together with Member States, focus on the **prevention of brain drain of high-skilled workers in third countries and within Europe**, to avoid creating inequalities of development between European regions.
- Promote the **creation of political and financial partnerships between institutions, faith-based and civil society organisations**, to optimise the efforts and resources for teachers working in contact with vulnerable learners.
- Ensure that **dialogue with young people** becomes a **structural part of EU democratic processes**, embedded in consultation projects and policymaking resulting from the European Year of Youth, especially addressing the role of young people for democracy and values.
- Within the *New European Bauhaus* initiative, dedicate a specific strand of action to the **preservation of churches and religious buildings** and their role as **agents for social cohesion, prosperity** and a **culture of dialogue** in all EU regions.
- Foster **partnerships between private and public education providers**, especially when addressing the attractiveness of teachers' careers and the role of higher education institutions for research and innovation.