



*Polish Presidency  
of the Council of the European Union  
January – June 2025*

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

## I. Introduction

Poland takes up the reins of the EU Council Presidency in an important **year for the European Union** and its future. The new legislative period of the European institutions and a number of challenges inside the EU, as well as in the world, will define the approach of the Union and its global role in the years to come. Requests for **reforms** are intensifying. In this context, we acknowledge the efforts of the Polish EU Presidency to lead initiatives in crucial areas, including external and internal security, economy, energy, agriculture and health.

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 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, and our understanding of fulfilment of this creation offered through 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 and upholds 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 Polish Presidency** of the EU Council in the **implementation of its priorities**, focusing on some of the most pressing challenges.

## II. Equipping Europe for the future - EU strategic agenda: democracy and values-based policies

### 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. Recently erupted 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 encourage 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 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 common 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 and paying particular attention to the need of avoiding social exclusion.

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. Especially in 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**.

## Churches contributing to 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. At the same time, we are concerned about **the misuse and instrumentalization of religion**, negative narratives portraying religion as a source of problems, as well as undue restrictions to freedom of conscience and religion. We also see the need to counter **religious illiteracy**, including within public authorities: this is also essential to implement sound and well-grounded policies. 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 different societal groups and religions in Europe.

While rejecting any form of instrumentalization 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. Obviously, 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.

## Protecting cultural heritage

**Religious and cultural 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. CEC and COMECE encourage Polish Presidency to support efforts of the EU Council expert group on cultural heritage, build up on work of previous Presidencies in this field and pay due attention to continuity of this work beyond the time span of the six months Presidency.

### III. Migration and Asylum

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. Asylum seekers and their families coming to the EU should have access to shelter and basic human needs, as well as to an individual, fast and fair asylum procedure under EU responsibility. Limitations in the access to the EU territory to apply for asylum should be justified according to international law.

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 compliance with EU legislation. We call on the Polish EU Presidency to take action in this regard, and work 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.

At the same time, we encourage the EU Presidency to intensify the efforts in order 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. It is disappointing that efforts of protection of displaced in the region, like the UN Sudan donor conference in April 2024, fall dramatically short of achieving necessary funding for that purpose.

We also call on the EU to provide **more space for protective safe legal passages into Europe** – through resettlement, humanitarian visas, family reunification or visa exception. Given the complexities of mixed migration, these measures should also be complemented by meaningful routes for regular labour migration, matching the needs of labour market with skills and aspirations of labour migrants while mitigating brain drain.

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. 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** not criminalizing humanitarian assistance. 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.

**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. Smugglers also benefit from the needs and desire of migrants and asylum seekers to reach the EU territory. The EU should incentivize with all its means the cooperation of countries of origin or transit that tolerate this criminal activity, and push for dismantling this illegal activity.

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, while respecting the specificities of each Member state.

#### **Our recommendations:**

- ⇒ To provide **more space for protective safe and legal passages into Europe, matching the needs of labour market of EU Member states.**
- ⇒ To guarantee **equal access and treatment of all individuals genuinely 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 (see EU action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-27).
- ⇒ To provide protection for those having fled Ukraine as much as it is needed.

## **IV. Security & Peace on the European continent and beyond**

### **A just and lasting peace in Ukraine and in Europe's neighbourhood**

For more than three years now, **Ukraine** and its citizens have been bravely defending themselves and also European values against Russia's full-scale war of aggression. COMECE and CEC have constantly shared their deep concern over the horrific human suffering, expressing their solidarity with the victims of the Russian aggression and calling for continued European support for Ukraine. In these difficult and uncertain times, especially as the geopolitical landscape remains fraught with instability, we wish to appeal for **continued European unity and coordinated efforts** towards a **just and lasting peace** in Ukraine, in full **respect of international law**. This also applies to the efforts in the material **reconstruction** and the long-term process of **reconciliation**, in which also Churches are strongly engaged and require adequate support of the policy-makers.

Also with regard to the other violent conflicts and instabilities in Europe's neighbourhood, in particular in the **Middle East** and in the **South Caucasus**, which

are of great concern to us, we plead for **intensified diplomatic efforts** for a peaceful and sustainable resolution of these crises.

### European security & defence policy at the service of peace

The violent conflicts in our neighbourhood as well as direct threats in the hybrid and cyber sphere have prompted the EU and its Member States to focus much more on their security and defence capabilities. While recognising the need for a **responsible and collaborative engagement on security** by developing adequate means of European defence as part of a **comprehensive approach**, we call on the Polish EU Presidency to equally prioritise the strengthening of pertinent **control mechanisms** to ensure compliance with the principles of *necessity, proportionality* and *adequacy*, as well as the respect for human rights, the rule of law and ethical standards. Particular caution is called for automated defence technologies, such as uncrewed armed systems, whose development and deployment should only be conducted following a strict legal and ethical assessment. In addition, more effective, coherent and accountable regulatory frameworks for **arms exports** should be developed and implemented at the European level. At the same time, 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.

### Credible EU enlargement for well-being and peace in Europe and globally

In the current geopolitical context, the **EU accession process** regains strategic importance for stability, well-being and peace in Europe. 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, as well as for citizens of EU Member States. While pursuing a citizen-centred, credible, merit-based and fair EU enlargement process with the candidate countries, the EU should, under the leadership of the Polish Presidency, also initiate **internal reforms** that will ensure that it can also effectively function as an enlarged Union, cherishing unity in diversity. In this regard, 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. The contribution of a united European Union is indispensable also for a **reinvigoration of the multilateral global order**, while fostering cooperation with

traditional allies, including the United Kingdom and the transatlantic bond, as well as with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

#### **Our recommendations:**

- ⇒ To work towards the launch of a **multi-stakeholder consultation on a future ‘European Peace Strategy’** that would consolidate the understanding of peace and provide a strategic framework for putting into practice more effectively the EU’s integrated approach to peacebuilding, peace diplomacy and conflict prevention.
- ⇒ To **support the solidarity efforts of the voluntary sector**, including Churches, in humanitarian emergencies and conflict zones in areas, such as humanitarian assistance, psycho-social assistance and reconstruction, both financially and with capacity-building.
- ⇒ 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 EU and candidate countries.

## **V. Agriculture and a human-centred energy transition**

COMECE and CEC have so far supported the goals of the European Green Deal in principle, and we strongly believe in the necessity of guaranteeing a sustainable future and a healthy environment for the generations to come and the importance of protecting the environment and biodiversity, as well as possible. We understand that due to the current economic situation in the EU and geopolitical challenges the priorities will shift but we hope that the goal of a net-zero future will be pursued in a reasonable manner. The last year has shown that some of the legislative initiatives of the Green Deal have caused criticism, frustration and opposition, especially their consequences for the agricultural sector, housing and the cost of living. That criticism has to be taken seriously by the European Union, just as the solemn promise of “leaving no one behind”. This will only be possible if future legislation prioritises the common good and well-being of EU citizens by putting the human person in the centre of all ethical considerations, including ecological ones.

We therefore approve of and support the very clear emphasis that is laid on the human person in the programme of the Polish presidency concerning energy, agricultural, environmental and climate policies. Considering the farmers protests throughout the EU in the past year, specific attention has to be given to the agricultural sector. For us the biggest challenge seems to be how to guarantee the long-term sustainability of small- to medium-sized farms and thus how to preserve farming not only for exports, local and high-quality food production but also as an essential contribution to the preservation of vibrant rural areas, maintaining the ability of soils to produce yields,



which appears to be jeopardised under current intensive farming practices, the continuous cultivation of many of Europe's landscapes, the contribution to regional and local culture and traditions.

Five issues in this regard seem specifically noteworthy to us:

- ⇒ A structural reform of the CAP after 2027 that puts (beside the issues of food security) the sustainability of small- to mid-sized farms in the centre.
- ⇒ Resolving the issue of just incomes for farmers.
- ⇒ The cultivation of earnest eye-to-eye dialogues with farmers and enhanced participation in the legislative processes that concern agriculture.
- ⇒ A concrete and integral vision for truly revitalising rural areas.
- ⇒ The international dimension. With the conclusion of the MERCOSUR deal this latter dimension has become especially important. Holding our own farmers to very high standards in food quality and environmental standards while opening the market for less-regulated and thus cheaper agricultural products can only be viewed as an injustice that urgently needs to be resolved.

## VI. Issue of special concern at the national level: Religious education in public schools in Poland

Beyond the scope of the priorities of the Polish EU Council Presidency, COMECE and CEC also wish to express their **solidarity with the Churches in Poland** in light of attempts by state authorities to reduce the number of hours of **religious education** in public schools from two to one per week. Sharing the concerns of local Churches in Poland, we believe that this is not only a sign of disregard for the principle of the rule of law, but also for the right of believing parents to bring up their children by their own beliefs and the right of the pupils themselves to receive religious education in conditions that do not differ from the standards of teaching other subjects. Moreover, the application of pertinent provisions promulgated by state authorities would result in a sudden and involuntary loss of employment by numerous teachers of religious education, who have not been given sufficient time to adapt to the new norms. Together with the local Churches in Poland, we believe that such action would not only violate the constitutionally guaranteed rights but also be discriminatory and socially harmful. In line with the current model of state-church relations enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, a change in the system of teaching religion in public schools would require the state authorities to reach prior agreement with the authorities of the Catholic Church and the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church as well as other churches and religious associations teaching religion in the public educational system. It is thus our hope that the actions announced by state authorities

can be reversed and the teaching of religion in public schools in Poland be guaranteed, as is standard in the vast majority of democratic countries in Europe.