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Public Issues Committee Statements

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The Conference of European Churches came into life as a fellowship of churches after the violent devastation and division of people and nations in WWII. Called by Christ to be bridge-builders, the European churches undertake an important ecumenical and political witness for reconciliation and peace in the name of the reconciling power of God's love.

We gathered in Novi Sad, Serbia because of these historic reasons, at a place where bridges were destroyed by weapons only two decades ago and reconciliation is still needed. We reconnect to our mission in Europe to bridging the divisions that somehow still are not healed: between East and West, EU and non-EU, north and south, cultures and nations, majorities and minorities and affirm our commitment for justice and peace, as we committed ourselves in the Charta Oecumenica.

We are convinced that the World Council of Churches' Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is an inspiring image of the ecumenical movement.¹ In its programmes, CEC is the most comprehensive European expression of this ecumenical vision and action.²

We have heard the youth and their challenge to commit to sustainable and just policies. We echo their emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its integration into the life and work of the Conference of European Churches.

We especially focus on the following challenges for our faithful witness in today's Europe.

Economic and Climate Justice

Increased emission of carbon dioxide from the industrialisation of the richest countries of the world has resulted in environmental degradation and global warming. Everyone is affected by climate change, a result of global warming. Today, it is the poorest who suffer the most to adapt, including to extreme weather, lack of food, and loss of land. It is unjust that those who have contributed the least to climate change suffer the most.

Today, we continue to overuse resources and contribute to climate change. We need to change our consumption and production system to combat climate change, as well as drastically reduce the emissions of greenhouse gasses by increasing the use of green energy and significantly lessen the use of fossil fuels.

The 'trickle-down' effect of economic policy that many have argued justifies the current economic system, that is supposed to lift people out of poverty, has in fact resulted in a 'flood-up' as the rich get richer, and in a general increase social inequality.

As writer Jonathan Raban notes, "abundance is not the Biblical alternative to poverty, sufficiency is."³ One of the most pressing needs of our present time is to develop a public

¹ The World Council of Churches, an expression of the worldwide Christian fellowship, calls on churches everywhere to walk together, to view their common life, their journey of faith, as a part of the pilgrimage of justice and peace, and to join together with others in celebrating life and in concrete steps toward transforming injustices and violence. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>

² CEC, From Budapest to Novi Sad, Report of the General Secretary, p.23

⁴ Raban Jonathan, Counterblast, a response to Margret Thatcher's 'Sermon on the Mount', 1988

theology of sufficiency, that takes seriously the voices of those marginalised and made poor by climate change. We need to learn when enough is enough. We have built and continue to collude in an economic system that enslaves people, fails to dismantle unjust systems, and is steadily degrading the environment upon which we all depend.

Jesus teaches, we must care for “the least of these,” but our industrial activity has the greatest negative impact on the poorest and those least able to insulate themselves from the impacts of damaging human activity.

We need to face up to the reality that our economic activity may end viable human life on the earth unless we choose an alternative path. It is widely believed that up to 50% of all species and their habitats could be permanently lost to the planet within the lifetime of people alive today.

Key Points

- Use the SDGs to enhance efforts in the areas of economic and ecological justice, with the hope of creating sustainable futures where no one is left behind.
- Listen to the voices from the margins, and hear from those who have firsthand experience of the effects of our over consumption that puts such strain on resources, people, and the environment. We might say, “blessed is the spirit of the poor,” and the wisdom of those who have experienced hardship must inform and transform our habits.
- Support churches in the fight against climate change on a local level. This can be done through a range of approaches including ensuring the vitality of the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) where they can be inspired by each other, undertaking initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, using fair banks, and developing worship resources about our responsibility to protect our earth.
- Advocate and be a strong voice on national and regional levels regarding questions about climate change, by working toward the European level and advocating together with other actors, including the World Council of Churches (WCC).
- Support and put pressure on European countries to live up to the 2015 Paris Agreement, which will foster more just policies regarding climate change.
- Work for intergenerational justice. This inclusion reflects richness in the churches, and that balanced age groups with competence shapes the work of CEC."
- Advocate at the European level for a change of the economic system, towards an alternative and sustainable economy, as already done in the past together with the WCC.

Security, Arms, and Non-violence

Security and EU Policies

“And they shall live secure” (Micah 5:4). Security is a basic human need. Everyone longs for and needs security, personally, socially and politically. The international community has developed an understanding of security that embraces both individual and common local and global security as they are dependent on one another. This includes recognising and understanding one’s vulnerability and that of others as a prerequisite for an ever-deepening understanding of security.

To confront our worries and precarious security we must deepen our spiritual roots, better understand the needs of others, and appreciate the fragility of human life and ecosystems.

We are invited to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who lived in continually insecure conditions but remained rooted in faith in God that he is secure and sheltered, through life and death. We are invited to trust in the proclamation that the Reign of God is ‘now and not yet’ present, and we are called to actively participate in justice, peace, and reconciliation.

We observe with concern developments on the European and international levels. Violent conflicts, terror, and devastation of infrastructure and culture is increasing, and with it the legitimisation of further arms research and development, production, export, and military intervention. Security is often the language through which these issues are discussed and

debated, especially relating to terrorism, national defense and the protection of European borders.

The proposal for a Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 – 2027, which is currently being presented by the European Commission, will extend these developments, as it includes the proposal to build a single “external instrument” instead of twelve separate dedicated instruments, including for development, neighborhood policies, human rights and democracy, and conflict prevention and peace building. The new single instrument should have “a strong focus on Migration.”⁴ In addition, the proposal for the new Asylum and Migration Funding puts an even stronger focus on security at the EU’s external borders. This risks subverting the objectives of EU external action and reorienting them to internal priorities like border management and migration control. With the new single instrument, there is the risk that the EU’s visibility and capacity on peacebuilding, civilian conflict prevention and reconciliation disappears.

Key Points

- Carefully watch, together with our Member Churches, decision-making in the area of security policies and approach governments as well as the European Institutions to advocate against plans that shift EU funds in this way.
- Strengthen the CEC voice against the increasing militarisation of the EU, and argue for an understanding and praxis of justice and peace on all levels – national security, European security, and security worldwide.
- Develop bridge-building strategies, facing the dangerous rise of stereotypes between ‘West’ (EU, US) and ‘East’ (Russia, Iran)
- Make efforts to advance a Christian perspective on security that emphasises human vulnerability and interdependency.
- Monitor for civilian, grass-roots based approaches to sustainable security like peacebuilding, civilian conflict prevention, dialogue, mediation and reconciliation and strong visibility of the EU as civilian power.

Arms production and export

Arms development, production, and export - carried out regardless of national, European and international rules and legislation - is a central reason for the outbreak, perpetuation, and continuation of armed conflict and war, including forced migration. Arms industries, exporting countries, and many others personally profit from this trade.

Global priorities are clear. Arms expenditure is higher than any time since World War II, and consumes 35 times the total cost of the entire United Nations system. Vast sums are being spent conducting and maintaining tensions and wars in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, which generate humanitarian tragedies and largescale forced movements of peoples. In 2017, worldwide military expenditure rose to 1739 billion USD, with 700 billionUSD spent by the United States and a trillion by NATO member states. This leaves a ration of military expenditure to expenditure for conflict prevention of 50,000:1.⁵ To this the European Commission plans to contribute with military expenditure for defence research, development, military mobility and military capacity building with more than 19 Billion EUR for 2021-2027.

Key Points

- Advocate against any further research and production of nuclear weapons.⁶
- Raise our voice in light of this draining of financial resources from vital services that could establish security through meeting basic needs including education, child care, public housing, hospitals, public transportation, municipal infrastructure, retirement pensions, climate justice, and international aid for empowerment and capacity building.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/eu-budget-future-2018-may-02_en

⁵ <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/yb17-summary-eng.pdf>

⁶ The World Council of Churches (WCC) as part of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) successfully did for the signing of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

- Encourage and support churches, congregations, and initiatives in their struggle against the increase of arms production and trade in their own countries and worldwide.
- Warn against the further development of autonomous weapons, which transfers agency (and thus in principle) responsibility for lethal force from human to machine, which is unethical and unacceptable.

Just Peace – Non-Violence

In ecumenical fellowship with the WCC we deepen our understanding of the challenging dimensions of ‘just peace’ for every aspect of our personal and political life.⁷ In the 2001 Charta Oecumenica, European churches stated, “We commit ourselves to work for structures of peace, based on the nonviolent resolution of conflicts. We condemn any form of violence against the human person, particularly against women and children.”⁸

We are aware, that even if violent means are held only in reserve for use as a last resort, this influences the planning of civil action during the earlier phases of conflict. Even in situations where no solution seems possible and where violence is so endemic that a call to counter it with further violence rises amongst victims and within us too, we persist in recommending the use of nonviolent means towards every human being, means which we as disciples of Christ have in abundance.

Key Points

- Go forward to an understanding that non-violence should be the primary and always preferred response. This includes that any military option should always be the absolute last resort.
- Deepen the discussions with churches and institutions about the political rationale of non-violence to arrive at sustainable peace as research shows and urge for further exploration and communication of results of and alternatives to violent conflict solution.⁹
- Continue to explore the theological dimension of security, vulnerability, suffering, martyrria, active non-violence, together with our partners who have longstanding experience with a theology and praxis of active non-violence (Society of Friends, Church and Peace).
- Explore how European churches can promote non-violence, the theological discourse, including the historical peace churches, which should be deepened and continued.
- Establish the CEC Peace Task Force including a project for training of trainers, sharing the competences and experiences of Member Churches, developing actions and policies for non-violence,
- Prepare the 2019 Paris peace conference, cultivating a strong voice on EU policy and legislation in the area of (dis)armement and militarisation.

Refugees and Migration

The mass movement and displacement of people touches all CEC Member Churches and peoples in Europe today, albeit in very different ways. Economic conditions, climate change, youth unemployment, and so on, prompt many to leave their homes in search of better lives elsewhere. Persecution, conflict, and war force further millions around the world to flee and seek safety in neighbouring lands, often for lengthy periods in refugee camps, and countries willing to take them in. The large majority of refugees is hosted by poorer countries of this world.

⁷ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/the-way-of-just-peace>

⁸ Charta Oecumenica: Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe,

⁹ Erika Chenoweth /Maria Stephan, Why civil resistance works. 2001

A study of 323 “resistance campaigns”, both violent and nonviolent, between 1900 and 2006, 105 of which were non-violent, showing that, compared with violent campaigns, nonviolent campaigns were more than twice as likely to be successful. Only one in four of the nonviolent campaigns failed altogether, whereas barely more than one in four (26%) of the violent campaigns was successful.

70 years ago the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) formulated the right to asylum as part of international human rights. In the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 and the additional protocols, the rights of refugees are spelled out, including access to social rights equal to those of citizens of the country granting protection.

This issue pertains to the future of our continent. Crises happening outside Europe prompt an influx of refugees, thousands of lives lost in the sea around Lampedusa and other European external borders from the East to the West. The protection of the rights of people who have abandoned their homes due to war, and driven to Europe in hope of a better life forces Europe to look at itself and reflect on its future, but also its responsibility and place in the world.

The theology of holistic hospitality is based on the juxtaposition of the people of Chios, in that they see the refugee as a full and complete icon of Christ. It is through the lens of the Word of God that human existence is truly valued collectively and individually. It is a fact that the first true stranger is none other than Christ himself.

We need welcoming societies that are able to develop their intercultural integration of people with diverse backgrounds and traditions. Existing migratory policy, especially as envisaged by the Tampere Summit of 1999, stresses that integration is a reciprocal process and honours hospitality as a core value. This is currently being substituted by border control, forced return, and the securitisation and criminalisation of migrants and refugees. The balance of rights-based policies with control and restriction is at risk to be lost.

We need a human approach to our reality, and to change the crisis of solidarity through a human rights inspired migration policy and integration with intercultural basis.

Key Points

- Stand against the model of closing borders, which make crossing the Mediterranean Sea one of the most dangerous ways of migration in the world (more than 5,000 people lost their lives in 2016); we will continue to commemorate such loss of life.
- Call for safe and legal access to Europe, taking up the positive examples given by churches in Italy and other countries which have facilitated safe access to their countries.
- Lobby for fair and just asylum procedures, sufficient access to legal advice and appeal structures as well as for humane accommodation and social participation already during the asylum procedure.
- Support humanitarian initiatives for search and rescue at sea, and hold the governments and agencies in charge accountable; Rescue and saving lives has to be the priority!
- Speak out against the criminalization of solidarity with undocumented migrants, i.e. by helping them to access health care or housing.
- Conditions for receiving refugees need to be improved: lengthy periods in camps, or detention centers are detrimental to the well-being of persons. Churches are ready to assist. It is important that governments lower the hurdles for churches and NGOs to allow for decent reception.
- Asylum procedures have to be fair and efficient, and access to asylum procedures needs to be guaranteed and not prevented by impossible demands on asylum applicants. Churches in Europe hope that more solidarity and sharing can be achieved in Europe, both inside the EU and beyond.
- Urge Europe develop and implement a resettlement policy with clear, ambitious, and concrete realisation of engagements that provides for protection of more people and;
- Struggle for humane return policies, which consider the potential and problems of each person, and create opportunities for rebuilding society's; return into risk of life and safety and push backs at the borders are illegal under European law and must be stopped;
- Challenge the wider application of the criteria of safe third countries, both in asylum procedures and return policies. This concept leads wrongly to the belief that procedures can be shortened for countries which are defined or declared as "safe", yet the persons may still face persecution and risks. Difficulties with this

concept are underlined by the fact that EU Member States cannot agree on a common list;

- Call on EU Member States and Turkey to ensure the protection of refugees in Turkey and Europe. The respect of human rights for all persons needs to be upheld. Refugees should never be instrumentalised for bargaining or monetization.

Building Europe for all citizens requires that we set signs of hope rather than spreading fears. Policies and living together in Europe should not be determined by fears, but by making space for encounter available.

- Recommend and reiterate the statement “Have no fear” of the Lunteren conference of 2016 held by the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, Conference of European Churches, World Council of Churches, and Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

The integration of refugees and migrants into European society brings their faiths to the forefront, especially Islam. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that dialogue continues and that new visible religious communities be included in dialogue with the European Institutions.

For successful integration, it is necessary that integration takes place as a two-way process, that includes the local population and those who arrive as migrants and refugees. All should receive adequate information and education, and enter into intercultural and interreligious dialogue to know and subsequently love each other.

- Create inclusive societies, that acknowledge diverse linguistic, religious, and ethnic identities, and give everyone the opportunity for education and to work for a life for themselves irrespective of their background. Without this, we risk the growth of radicalisation.
- Work more to push Europe to recognise the dignity of each person in the very person of the refugee, and work towards the vision found in Ephesians 2:19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Human Rights

European societies are based on a framework of values and human rights. Freedom of religion or belief is one of these fundamental rights. For each and every human it is essential to be treated fair and equally, without distinction as to ethnicity, sex, language, or religion. One of the key aspect of this framework are the texts of international legal protection, today is evident the rights and freedom of individuals and communities are violated against.

Building a Europe for all citizens is an important task also for European churches. Recognition of political and civil rights as well as social and economic rights is the key principle for a sustainable Europe. Diversity and plurality in Europe is a richness.

Roma minorities across Europe have been the focus of churches over the past years, and in a number of countries they have been recognized as national ethnic minorities. While we applaud some improvement in European countries, churches recognize the strong antizyganism still prevalent in European societies.

Churches and religious communities are part of diversity, even if religious affairs are mostly regulated at national level. We have a European framework of living together and on the basis of established jurisprudence in favour of a more open and extended religious freedom. Charta Oecumenica also engages us in dialogue between majority and minority churches to work together for mutual recognition and support.

Our setting in Novi Sad shines light on particular cases relating to human rights and freedom of religion or belief. Kosovo and Metohia¹⁰ is a very complex problem which involves the control of arms trade, protection of cultural heritage by EU institutions, engagement of UN forces in preventing conflict, and opening of political dialogue between the authorities in Pristina and representatives of persecuted Serbian Orthodox numeric

¹⁰ UNSCR 1244

minority. We have also heard examples from other parts of Europe, which show that these are far-reaching concerns in .

Our churches support the Serbian Orthodox Church and other religious communities in Kosovo and Metohia, Cyprus, Turkey and elsewhere in their right of freedom of religion or belief, including their right to access to their holy places and places of worship, non-discrimination, and other civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, emphasising the unhampered disposal over their property.

Key Points

- Work to strengthen human rights and rule of law and to ensure there is protection
 - of equality, equity and justice for all;
 - of religious identity, for all living in Europe, respecting principle unity in diversity;
 - of religious and ethnic minorities;
 - of freedom of religion or belief as an important right for all.

We encourage churches to work together – cooperating in CEC, CCME and Eurodiaconia – to achieve justice and dignity for the Roma people in Europe.

Populism

CEC was established as a response to a war following extreme nationalism. People have a need to belong and be rooted, which should not lead us to be exclusive. Extreme ethno-nationalist movements are spreading all over Europe and the world. Political, cultural, and economic forces are the root to shrinking public space in different contexts. The term *populism* describes the range of reactionary and exclusionary movements.

Exclusionary populism can be understood as a symptom of the crisis of democracy and unjust economic systems, as well as a factor contributing to the crisis (i.e., a wheel spinning the wrong direction). This is what we see in Europe today, with populist parties rising, taking advantage of some democratic processes to gain power and recognition. This leads to a destruction of democratic states, where democratic foundations are questioned and torn apart. The method of populist movements is also to question one of the pillars of democracy—the media. By alleging fake news, the movement creates their own truth; post-truth.

The populist movement has certain claims on which they base their rhetoric. They claim the distribution of power and wealth to be unjust, and to be the voice of *the people*. By claiming to be the voice of the people, they can blame the “intellectual” and economic “elite” for “problems” in the society. The extreme ethno-nationalist movements can by this colonise the public discourse and exploit the polarisation of society.

“By propagating a post-truth climate of distrust of the media and other critical voices, the bases of social cohesion are eroded, and power is consolidated into patriarchal, authoritarian systems.”

A fundamental fear of ambiguity and the complexity of diversity are the roots of the ethno-nationalist populist discourse. This leads to exclusionary politics, and exclusion shrinks the public space, which is a problem that CEC must take very seriously.

Decline in living standards and rising unemployment rates, especially amongst young people, undoubtedly goes in favor of strengthening extreme nationalism and increasing populism.

New technology, and social media, is a new way of communicating. We also see the misuse of social media by, for example, Cambridge Analytica using the data of millions of people to help populist parties and movements gain power.

Churches can, as all other institutions, be influenced by populist discourse but needs to be able to see beyond the wave of populism in society today and keep the eternal vision of the Church

Key Points

- Advocate that populism should be high on the agenda. Being church is a part of a global communion of churches, transcending boundaries of ethnicity and nation
- Look at ourselves from a critical point of view and understand how we are different from the society in which we act. Are we different from patriarchal, authoritarian, discriminatory or exclusionary structures? Are we a Church that encourage the full participation of every human being?
- Encourage the churches of Europe to be a uniting force in the local communities as well as in regions, by providing safe spaces with full and just participation for all, no matter of nationality, religion, gender, age or political opinion. Dialogue should always be the way of procedure when conflicts occur.
- Establish partnerships, together with the Member Churches, with other civil society actors with shared values and commitments, form networks and as part of this, ecumenical and interfaith encounter spaces should to build bridges as a strive against populism.
- Act especially for youth participation, since giving the right attention to youth today will no doubt benefit the future.
- Not in any way believe in the post-truth; that there is no truth. As churches we are on a continuous way to understand what truth means for our witness for justice and peace. As Jesus says: I am the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14.6)

Family

Each person possesses within themselves values and ethical convictions, very often received through their family roots. A Christian family should be a shelter where one learns to love, to support, to care about the other, to be compassionate, to offer hospitality, to be attentive to sufferings, as well as a certain lifestyle of profound connection with every human being and God's creation as a whole. Such an authentic Christian lifestyle has deep consequences, among other anticolonial and ecological. The everyday simple practices of love, which can be cultivated through positive experiences of family, may seem unimportant, but they have an impact on a global level. Christian faith can help families promote good citizenship. Children should grow up to be able to successfully participate in a community, who support European core values, and who fight for every good thing that promotes spiritual growth and progress.

The path for justice and peace can begin in the home and expand outward, reaching entire communities. Growing circles of nurture draw on the gifts and love of others and draw them into what we call 'family'. Or as Christ says in the Gospel of Luke, the Kingdom of Heaven is within.

We must not underestimate the importance of this understanding of family for the fate of our societies. Life as a family is essential for the wellbeing of any human. It is, therefore, unacceptable that this right of many among us—especially asylum seekers, refugees, and persons under subsidiary of protection, and minors who arrived unaccompanied and migrants—is often undermined or violated.

We see with great worry the efforts to limit the rights of family unity and reunification in many European countries. This happens, for example, by imposing extra waiting times for family members of persons enjoying international protection, by slowing down family unity of asylum seekers as foreseen in the Dublin Regulation beyond the time limits, or by demanding unrealistic levels of language proficiencies of those wanting to join family prior to family reunification. Such efforts are against Christian belief about the centrality of the family and the right to family life as enshrined in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

This prolonging of the separation of families has serious effects on the wellbeing of family members, especially the most vulnerable like unaccompanied minors, single mothers with children, and ill persons, as well as elderly depending on support by their families.

Key Points

- Start a dialogue on condition and attitude of family life today including gender justice in the member churches.

Conclusion

The Assembly commits the Conference of European Churches to explore and engage how these commitments can further be implemented in the life and witness of the Churches.

Facing these challenges we need one another as one strong community speaking with one voice, acting in solidarity and praying together:

We turn to you, our God, you who want to gather all of us under your Protective wings.

We pray

Make us willing to work for peace.

Help us to build peaceful and inclusive societies.

Prompt the leaders of this world to put an end to corruption, misuse of power,

Trafficking and torture.

Transform the leaders of the organised crime.

Put an end to rearmament and trade of weapons.

Show us how we as churches can promote a growing peace between humans

From different groups.

Praise be to you who bring the peace that we cannot create ourselves.

Yours is the power and the glory.

(Luke 13:34).¹¹

¹¹ SKR, Prayer related to the Sustainable Development Goals, no 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, translated from Swedish by Björn Cedersjö.