

Conference of European Churches
Governing Board

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<u>Topic:</u>	Freedom of Expression in the time of Raising Populism
<u>Agenda Item:</u>	15
Staff in Charge:	Elizabeta Kitanovic
<u>Recommendation:</u>	<i>For information</i>
<u>Annex:</u>	Not applicable
<u>Earlier docs:</u>	Not applicable

Conference of European Churches

Project Description

1. Title of Project (Working Title)

Freedom of Expression in the time of Raising Populism

2. Kind of Project

European Christian Forum on Human Rights

3. Responsible Staff

CEC Human Rights Executive Secretary Dr Elizabeta Kitanovic

4. Introduction

Since 2013 to 2017 CEC has carried out the project Summer School on Human Rights. This project aimed to help the church staff coming from CEC Member Churches to have a space for discussion for different theological reflections on human rights and to share updates on international human rights instruments and mechanisms. As the CEC publication, *European Churches Engagement on Human Rights; challenges and practice, so called Human Rights Training Manual for European Churches VOL I* – was implemented in the last five years (2013-2017), the Thematic Reference Group (TRG) on Human Rights reflected that due to the ongoing organisational challenges this project should be transformed into a form of *forum* and should have more workshop style, rather than lecture style.

In 2017, we celebrate 70th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Freedom of Expression is one of the fundamental human rights. Freedom of Opinion (Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion) and Freedom of Expression is fundamental human right. Freedom of expression for human beings helps them to use this right to influence governmental decisions. Without freedom of expression there is no real democracy. Why freedom of expression is important for churches? If there is no freedom of expression, church staff could not preach and spread the word of God, which would immediately affect the mission of the church.

Still nowadays in Europe, some states have strict laws related to the import of religious books and materials from foreign countries (we have seen that during the 2018 Novi

Sad General Assembly of CEC in Serbia) in order to control the mission of religious communities. Today if the church leadership and church staff wants to say something against regime as it is the case in the countries, where populists have power, their voice can be suffocated and the voice of “internal enemy” becomes very easily voiceless. In this way they cannot contribute to the development of the society and cannot strengthen diversity of opinions and democracy in society.

In today's Europe with the raise of populism freedom of media is also very much censored. On the other hand, one limit to which all forms of religious expression are subjected concerns hate speech. There is prohibition in the international human rights instruments for spreading racial, xenophobic opinion or propagating the war, expressing hate speech against certain groups, which leads to hate crimes. Article 20 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) imposes restriction on all activities related to “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” In paragraph 7 of UN General Comment 22, there is an absolute requirement on state to prohibit such activities by law.

Due to rise of left and right wing populism in the recent years in Europe, hate speech against certain groups in European society became unfortunately daily reality. Hate speech leads to hate crime and people lose their lives. “We” vs “them” is usual populist rhetoric that Europeans are exposed to daily while listening political debates in different corners in Europe. During the CEC Summer School (2017) CEC dealt with the theme Theology, Religious Freedom or Belief and Populism. The subject of hate speech was in focus the whole time of the program in various ways.

It was noticed that populists are using hate speech to steer one group against another, to prove the existence of permanent enemy as a tool to manipulate masses to vote for them. It was noticed that populists do have strong xenophobic attitudes and behaviours which leads to incitement of racial hatred and violence.

In their speeches they do have the tendency to target, stigmatize, stereotype or profile people on the basis of race, colour, religion, national and ethnic origin. It was noticed that in the public sphere certain religious groups are subjected to hatred and violence on religious grounds, which severely disturbs public order and calls for a person or a group of persons to be subjected to hatred, religious insults, discrimination and violence.

In Europe hate speech led to hate crimes like as killing of Jews in Brussels Museum in 2014¹, killing of the priest in a church in France² in 2016, killing of MP Jo Cox in UK³ in 2016 etc. From legal point of view, it is clear that the emphasis of freedom of political debate doesn't include freedom to express racist opinions, or opinions which are incitement to hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia and all

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Museum_of_Belgium_shooting 9.11.2018

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36892785> 9.11.2018

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Jo_Cox 9.11.2018

other forms of intolerance. In the recent past it was noticed that there is increase in availability of racist and xenophobic materials on internet, including public insult where we can see approval or justification of acts of genocide, crime against humanity as defined by the International law.

In CEC human rights network the need for elaboration of freedom of expression, its limitation and usage was expressed to be tackled during the next gathering in the form of forum.

The next forum in 2020 should be hosted by EKD in Germany and in 2021 somewhere in Northern Europe, probably Estonia.

5. Aim(s) of the Project

The Human Rights Forum will

- a) explore international legislation on the freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief in the time of raising populism
- b) take stock of the current challenges in the area of freedom of expression
- c) discuss what churches can do to do better advocacy on combating hate speech on the European, national, local /parish level

6. Objectives

The CEC Thematic Reference Group will develop a detailed program together with Law School in Coimbra, Portugal and Church of Scotland

7. Gender-Related Issues

There should be an equivalent number of male and female speakers.

8. Project Overview and timing

1st half 2019: One-day preparatory meeting with the group of church experts and academics from University of Coimbra and their partners.

2nd half 2019: 3 days of the Human Rights Forum

9. Potential Participants (Target Group)

The potential participants are representatives of well-established CEC human rights network and CCME Member Churches dealing with migration, asylum and refugees.

10. Timing and Venue(s)

July 2019, Portugal

11. (Potential) Organisations in Partnership

Ecumenical Council in Portugal, University of Coimbra and other partners (to be developed in the course of the preparation of the theme)

12. Press and Communication Aspects

The conference will be accompanied by press releases and video.

13. Follow-Up

Still to be discussed

14. Budget

25 000€

15. Workload

15 days for Executive Staff and 10 days for admin staff