

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Spanish Evangelical Church will hold from 17-19 of October 2019 at the Ecumenical Center Los Rubios in Malaga a conference on:
Alternative to Populism from a Human Rights perspective

“Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”

Article 20 (2) of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

Populism has been present on the global political scene for more than just a few decades. However, in the past few years, this way of political thinking and messaging has become more visible, both throughout the world and in Europe. One of its main features is an alleged distinction between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” Populist leaders claim to represent a unified “will of the people” against the current political system and its protagonists and institutions. This ideology draws upon, among others, notions of tribalism, nationalism, antiestablishment, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-globalism, identity politics. Populist leaders attack liberal democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and pluralist constitutions to create new oligarchy. Many want to weaken parliaments and limit their power, limit opposition rights, weaken the courts and civil society, control the constitutional courts, install followers as judges. They usually blame foreign entities and “globalisation” for unemployment and fuel hyperpolarization within their societies.

When it comes to Freedom of Religion or Belief, a dual strategy is apparent: on the one hand, many populists appeal to religious sentiment and tradition. At the same time, many populist politicians call for laws limiting religious freedom by – inter alia – controlling foreign funding of churches and religious communities, controlling the recognition of theological diplomas for religious staff, limiting the work of missionaries, surveilling religious buildings and their staff in the name of security, limiting the role of religion in the public sphere. Regarding Freedom of Expression, populists try to control media also via legislation, but also through friendly tycoons, the intimidation of critical journalists, and by limiting activities of labour unions and other critical civil society actors.

Many people within our European churches are deeply concerned especially with the dehumanization and stigmatization of minorities: religious, ethnics, migrants, refugees and other vulnerable groups. During the 2019 CEC Summer School on Human Rights, the question how populism affects churches from the parish level upwards, and what clergy could and should do about it, was very relevant in the



discussions. Participants in the Summer School and before at the CEC General Assembly requested that CEC reflect deeper on these issues. The Thematic Reference Group on Human Rights suggests that churches create guidance which would be alternative to populism. The conference **Alternative to Populism from Human Rights perspective** will aim to provide guidance on this matter for the Conference of European Churches. Particular focus will be on democracy and rule of law perspective.