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



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Czech Presidency of the Council
of the European Union

“Europe as a task: rethink, rebuild, repower”

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

Introduction

The Czech Republic takes the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a challenging moment for the EU, in a context characterised by the war in Ukraine and its far-reaching consequences. COMECE (Commission of the Episcopates of the European Union) and CEC (Conference of European Churches) have a longstanding tradition of **engaging in dialogue with EU Presidencies**. Together, we represent the membership of around 380 million citizens throughout EU member states and we are strongly committed to further developing the European project on the basis of the **Christian ideals of justice, peace and the integrity of creation**. The work of COMECE and CEC is also related to **Article 17 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union** (TFEU), which foresees an open, transparent, and regular dialogue between the EU and churches. We are committed to this dialogue, and we work to ensure that the respect for the **values of human dignity, democracy, solidarity, freedom, equality, and the rule of law** is at the forefront of EU actions and policies in the Union and on the global stage. In this regard, we have been accompanying and actively contributing to the Conference on the Future of Europe and other EU initiatives aiming at promoting European values, as well as in view of strengthening social cohesion through youth participation and inter-religious dialogue and giving response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees to our countries.

I. The future of Ukraine and the future of Europe: stability, prosperity, and peace on the European Continent

Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine with its multiple consequences also for the European Union and its member states is an ever-growing concern. Response to the impacts of the war is not only a question of immediate reactions but also of consequences in the longer-term. This includes political discussions at the top EU level, as well as informed discussions in wider society.

For churches in CEC and COMECE, this discussion is also a **follow up to the Conference on the Future of Europe** since the future of Ukraine will also very much shape the future prospects for peace, stability and prosperity on the whole European Continent. The war has shattered many of previous convictions about a firm grounding of a **culture of peace and reconciliation** in Europe. Efforts for peace have to be constantly renewed and they have to be based on the principles of **truth and justice**. Peacebuilding requires a comprehensive approach in **avoiding societal polarization** through populism and extremism, **addressing disinformation** in the cyberspace, while protecting freedom of expression. Civil society, as well as churches and religious communities play in these efforts a significant role. Important in these

efforts are voices arguing against the **misuse of religion** and **violence based on religious grounds** and preventing attacks against faithful and their places of worship.

In this regard, we encourage the Czech EU Council Presidency in particular to:

- Contribute to a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the war with a free, secure, and independent Ukraine in its internationally recognised borders.
- Respond to the European aspirations of Ukraine by implementing a credible EU accession perspective, along with other European countries that have made a similar request in the past
- Substantially support the material reconstruction of damaged public infrastructure, civilian buildings as well as religious and cultural sites in Ukraine, and promote multilateral and multistakeholder efforts aimed at peacebuilding and reconciliation, which will be a long-term process.
- Contribute to ensuring accountability for all war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law committed during the violent conflict.
- Engage responsibly on European security and defence, while not losing sight of the overarching objectives of human security and lasting peace, which go beyond state security considerations and require an integral approach.

Following up on previous initiatives, notably a joint letter of Presidents of CEC and COMECE addressing the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine in view of an agreement on a ceasefire in Ukraine, CEC and COMECE want to confirm their **joint efforts for truth, justice, peace, and respectful cooperation** among countries, as well as different societal groups and religions in Europe. We reject any form of instrumentalization of religion and any violence based on religious grounds and are ready to contribute to a cultivated discussion about the **role of religion in a democratic society, respectful of recognized fundamental rights of every human being**. We encourage the Czech EU Presidency to strengthen efforts leading to addressing violence on religious grounds and in this effort to take advantage from a dialogue with religious actors.

II. Humanitarian dimension of the war in Ukraine, assistance to refugees

With a rapidly rising number of refugees fleeing Ukraine due to the war inflicted by the Russian regime's aggression, Europe is facing the greatest refugee movement since World War II. CEC and COMECE are deeply committed to the **protection of the dignity of every human person**, as well as to the **common good, solidarity** and the promotion of a society that **welcomes strangers** and values **freedom, security and justice** in policy and practice.

Since the first day of the attacks, **many churches have responded** to the exodus from Ukraine, setting up both small and large-scale support structures, opening the doors of parishes, private houses or church institutions across Europe, and transferring large scale support to border countries and, where still possible, into Ukraine.

We are moved by the immediate generous support and solidarity rendered to Ukrainians by the overwhelming majority of Europeans, including our member churches, and EU member states. However, we are concerned that the activities of volunteers and civil society organisations might be considered a replacement for the much-needed support and coordination, which is and must remain a **state responsibility**.

We are in strong support of the Council decision to activate the **Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)** and to introduce operational guidelines for external border management to facilitate border crossings at the EU-Ukraine borders. We **welcome the mobilization and flexibility of EU funding** to be allocated towards the needs of Ukrainian refugees. It is also encouraging that EU member states have taken a pragmatic approach to help the persons concerned, for example, by allowing people to choose which EU member state to go to.

Based on the experience of churches, we want to raise in this regard the following:

- The EU needs to continue supporting solidarity within the Union with the member states hosting most of those seeking protection; both financially and through relocation where needed.
- The need for the EU and member states to support the efforts of the voluntary sector (including churches) and individuals both financially and with expertise – as more and more difficulties are being reported.
- To guarantee equal treatment of all individuals seeking international protection whether fleeing from Ukraine or other conflicts.
- To prevent trafficking in human beings, in particular women and children fleeing the war in Ukraine.

III. Energy poverty and energy security

The **European Green Deal** continues to be one of the main commitments shared by the EU and its member states. Achieving a sustainable future is to be done through modernization of the EU economy. This should be achieved through transforming the current economy into a more **circular economy**, and COMECE and CEC welcome that this dimension is integrated in the Czech EU Presidency programme. Impacts of the

war added to this commitment new dimensions, including energy security and energy poverty.

Thirty million Europeans were unable to adequately heat their homes already in 2019. The problem has become more pressing in the light of the pandemic, and the rapid increase in the price of oil and gas in consequence of the war in Ukraine. **Energy poverty** concerns today not only the most vulnerable people and families but affects also middle-income people. In this context, and in view of the upcoming winter, churches join those expecting that the EU along with its member states develop a political strategy for **energy security** that gives equal attention to energy poverty in view of lifting millions of Europeans out of this situation. Such an endeavour requires resolute action in its broadest sense, from the EU, to the national and the local levels. Concerns regarding energy security need to go hand in hand with overall concerns about a sustainable future.

This also requires greater transparency, participation, joint decision-making, and public awareness. **In this regard, we encourage the Czech EU Council Presidency to contribute, in particular, to efforts aimed at:**

- Ensuring access for everyone to affordable heating, especially in times of crisis and high fuel costs.
- Encourage EU member states to support local energy communities, which are a particularly effective tool for promoting a coherent culture and practice of integral ecology, and strengthening community ties, while supporting the most vulnerable people with the energy surplus created.
- Decoupling from fossil energies in view of strengthening our independence from authoritarian regimes and meeting our obligations to future generations.
- Accelerating the transition towards decarbonisation through the implementation of the European Green Deal and related policies.

IV. A relational strategic autonomy & social economy

The interconnectedness of today's world, along with multiple crises of global dimensions, demonstrate the need for the EU to pursue a “**relational strategic autonomy**” by deepening alliances with like-minded partners in our neighbourhood and beyond. The changing geopolitical realities, marked by divisions and distrust, however, also underline the importance of reflecting on new ways of constructive and value-based engagement that can **foster mutual trust** within the international community, while **reducing our dependence on non-democratic regimes**.

Internally, while the EU should ensure the availability of raw materials to enable companies to carry out their activities, churches stress the necessity to **reflect on the purpose of the enterprise**, in order to move away from a mere profit-driven approach and allow enterprises to become actors of the common good in society. Churches stress the role of the **social economy** to facilitate a fair digital transition that works for people and the planet. In addition, one cannot talk about enterprise without mentioning the working conditions of workers to ensure their human dignity.

In this respect, we encourage the Czech EU Presidency, in particular, to:

- Promote efforts aimed at reducing our dependence on non-democratic regimes by diversifying supply chain and ensuring their sustainability and ethicality, including by addressing forced labour and other practices that suppress freedom and do not respect human dignity.
- Foster value-based multilateral and multi-stakeholder partnerships to adequately address regional and global challenges, notably a people-centred and just recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, a more peaceful and welcoming world, a better care of our common home as well as countering the looming food and energy crisis.
- Foster the green and digital transition by promoting public and private investment in the social economy. This can be done by encouraging member states to mobilise some of the *NextGenerationEU* funds in the social economy in the framework of the upcoming Council Recommendation, and by encouraging public procurement to give preference to this type of enterprise for the common good through adequate training, rather than looking merely at the lowest price.
- Reach an agreement on the EU directive on working conditions for workers on digital platforms by the end of 2022. This seems imperative to establish fair and equal conditions within the internal market, while the number of such workers is estimated to double within three years, moving from 18 million in 2022 to 40 million by 2025.

V. Promoting European values in offline and online environments

Churches welcome the Czech EU Presidency's priority on promoting the **values of democracy, citizens' participation and the rule of law** in the EU. The **European Year of Youth** should be considered a key engine to propel further exchange for and with young people, prompting good and structured practices of intergenerational dialogue, which reinforce EU democracies and make them more respectful, open and resilient. In order to ensure that **fundamental rights and freedoms** are equally respected in the

digital environment, we share the understanding of promoting a human-centric approach to digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence.

In this respect, we encourage the Czech EU Presidency, in particular, to:

- In the context of the European Education Area and EU cultural policies, strengthen the link between education and culture, fostering EU-wide frameworks for teaching about cultural heritage, cultural practices and languages in the EU, contributing to a culture of dialogue and the making of peaceful, respectful and solidary societies, both among the member states and with EU neighbours.
- Concerning the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024), adopt a more systematic approach to the implementation of its provision 1.3.i: “[...] *reach out to religious and faith-based actors and assess how they can be involved in the protection and promotion of human rights, in delivering the sustainable development goals, and in peace making, conflict prevention, reconciliation and mediation [...]*”.