



Romania's Presidency of the Council of the European Union

A CATHOLIC CHURCH REFLECTION ON THE PRESIDENCY PRIORITIES

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“Romania, bridge between East and West, crossroads between Central and Eastern Europe. [...] With Christ's help you will play a leading role in a new season of enthusiasm and courage. You will be a prosperous nation, a fertile land of goodness, a united people and peacemakers.”

(Saint John Paul II, in Bucharest 1999)

ROMANIAN EU PRESIDENCY IN TIMES OF TRANSITIONS

The Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union comes at a **time of significant changes**. For the first time in its history, the European Union will shrink in its size. The coming months will be decisive for the difficult process of **separation and redefining the relationship** with the **United Kingdom** which will still remain a part of Europe and one of EU's closest partners.

The time of the Romanian EU Presidency will also fall into a period when politicians will strive to gain the **confidence of citizens** in the **European elections**, followed by a **renewal of EU institutions¹ and structures**. It will also be a time of **redefining the priorities** and setting **common goals** for the **future direction** of the European integration project in (geo-) political, financial and institutional terms.

The challenges currently faced by European citizens are diverse, and the failure to address them adequately might further decrease **trust in traditional political actors and institutions**, while reinforcing **polarising** and **divisive** voices. Many European citizens, especially **young people**, have the **feeling** of being **socio-economically left behind**. Changes in our way of life attributable to **environmental degradation**, changes in our **cultural and anthropological self-understanding**, not least through an **increased mobility and pluralisation** of our societies, have left people with **fears and uncertainties** as well as with **expectations and hopes**: *How to shape economic and financial policies to better serve citizens, families, and, especially, the marginalised and the poor? How to manage our borders without violating the dignity of persons in need of a refuge? How to ensure security and defend ourselves without undermining the rule of law and fundamental freedoms?*

The message spread by the Catholic Church is one of **hope** and of a **confident look into the future**, and thus, also the current **challenges** might be **transformed into opportunities**. Indeed, the present situation offers an invitation to **re-think Europe**: to foster our common European foundation on principles and virtues; but also to take courageous decisions for our future development.

In his speech at the last year's **“(Re)Thinking Europe”** Dialogue organised by COMECE in the Vatican², **Pope Francis recalled** that *“Europe is not a mass of statistics or institutions, but it is made up of people”*. Therefore, when defining the priorities for the further development of the European Union, it is crucial to **rediscover the focus on the human person, family and on the community**. This is all the more important as we are witnessing today a **demographic winter** which is caused not only by low birthrates but also by people leaving their country due to **lacking perspectives**.

Under the motto *“Cohesion, a common European value”*, the Romanian EU Presidency will take charge of the European steering wheel for the next six months. If European **unity and cohesion** is to receive a new impetus, a **clear long-term vision** is needed. This vision must be generated

¹ In particular, regarding the leadership of the European Council, the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank.

² COMECE organised in November 2017 in cooperation with the Holy See a Dialogue with 350 Church and EU political representatives to contribute to a constructive reflection on the fundamental challenges faced by the European project and on the way forward. More information on this Dialogue and the contributions of the participants can be found under: <http://bit.ly/2xOgHHl>.

through an **inclusive European-wide dialogue** which goes **across different sectors**, and **effectively engages all stakeholders**, including Churches and the civil society, at all levels of the consultation, decision-making and implementation processes. The engagement for the **common good** strongly rooted in **solidarity**, the respect for the **rule of law** and the search for **people-centered** and **prudent solutions** are essential ingredients of this process³.

Churches and religious communities are not only **universal networks of faith** but they are also **deeply rooted in local realities** and **share the concern** for the common good of our societies. It has become a **fruitful practice supported by Article 17 TFEU** for the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU ([COMECE](#)), together with its local member Bishops' Conference, and in ecumenical cooperation, to meet with the EU Presidency at the beginning of its term. It is our hope to assist the responsible policy-makers with their challenging task during the EU Presidency and provide them with some reflections for orientation and recommendations for action.

A REFLECTION ON SELECTED PRIORITIES

The [declared priorities of the Romanian EU Presidency](#) aim to make Europe more **social** and **innovative**, **safer** and **stronger at the global stage**, while based on the respect for **human dignity**, **fundamental rights** and **democracy**.

COMECE and the Romanian Bishops' Conference wish to share the following considerations and policy proposals regarding **selected priorities** of the Romanian EU Presidency and on other issues, which are in the focus of the Catholic Church.

1. A MORE SOCIAL EUROPE IN A DIGITAL AGE

a) Future of work

CONTEXT | The world of work faces transformative changes. Accelerating globalisation, technological evolutions, in particular digitalisation and artificial intelligence, as well as the necessary ecological transition of our economy affect the labour conditions and our basic understanding of work. Together these changes have triggered innovation and helped to create employment throughout the EU, but have also come with challenges: creative and high-skilled employment have been created in particular in Europe's cities and urban centres, **while routine-task jobs of the middle class are shrinking**, notably in rural areas. Moreover, many **young people** have escaped unemployment, but **cope with unsustainable working conditions**, including short-term contracts, bogus self-employment and other new work forms. Finally, due to the increasing use of mobile devices, people in the EU can work today anytime, anywhere, which has led to an **intensification of work and shrinking space for family life, volunteering and rest periods**.

³ These considerations could be particularly taken into account in the preparations for the [Sibiu Summit](#) on 9 May 2019.

ASSESSMENT | While the political discourse is often focused on the question of how people can adapt to the changes in the world of work, it is our shared responsibility to shape the current shift towards the **benefit of the people**. The speed and direction of the technological progress and the accompanying political decisions are in our hands. [In Europe, which has been the cradle of the humanism and human rights](#), the progress should always be directed by the basic principle of **human dignity** and the conviction that technology should **serve the human being**, not vice-versa. This is why [COMECE](#) encourages the EU and its Member States in [its recent publication](#)⁴ to work towards a European **vision of decent, sustainable and participative work for all** as to ensure that everybody, as well as the society as a whole, will benefit from current shift. The necessary fundament for such a vision is an economy that is geared towards its ultimate goal of serving the people. Ten years after the outbreak of the financial crisis, [“priority still tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain”](#). COMECE recalls the necessity of a more holistic approach that combines the principles of **solidarity, care for creation and respects for workers’ rights** with the idea of a **free, competitive and innovation-driven market economy**. [Inspired by the words of Pope Francis](#), it therefore encourages the EU institutions to **rediscover the concept of the social market economy**⁵ as enshrined in the European Treaties. COMECE welcomes the **recent initiatives** of the European Commission that aim to improve the protection of workers and curb anxiety in an ever-accelerating labour world, **notably the European Pillar of Social Rights and the proposed Work-life Balance Directive**. In this context, COMECE suggests to the Romanian Presidency to swiftly reach an agreement in the Council and with its EU partner institutions in the Trilogue on the following open key initiatives:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Developing a more social Europe:** We encourage the EU and its Members to base their policies towards the EU Treaty objective of a social market economy. Towards this aim, the EU should continue to translate the European Pillar of Social Rights into concrete policy initiatives using all instruments, including legislations, the European Semester, EU cohesion policy and the European social dialogue. We expect that this high-level commitment will shape EU policies also beyond the European elections.
- **Adopt a strong work-life balance Directive:** In rearing and caring for our children and the elderly as well as dependent members of our society, families vitally contribute to the common good and the functioning of our economy and societies. While COMECE welcomes the Commission proposal for a Work-Life Balance Directive, it strongly recommends to reach an agreement that will give families and parents access to adequate resources during parental leave, carer’s leave and paternity leave.
- **Ensure decent working conditions in all forms of employment:** In a single European market and against the background of new employment forms, every person should have the right to fair and equal treatment regarding working conditions, social protection and training. COMECE therefore calls to reach a swift agreement on the [Directive for Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions](#) and encourages Member States to implement the [proposed Council Recommendations on Access to Social Protection for Workers and Self-Employed](#). We also welcome the Commission proposal for a [European Labour Authority](#) and propose to equip

⁴ Cf. COMECE, “*Shaping The Future of Work*”, <https://bit.ly/2U869LS>.

⁵ Cf. COMECE, “*A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility*”, <https://bit.ly/2cFWwRE>.

this new institution with sufficient competences and financial resources as to enforce the rights of the 17 million citizens working in another EU Member State.

- **Support workers in transition:** We recommend enhancing the support for workers affected by the digital and ecological transformation and strongly support the [Commission proposal to widen the scope of the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund](#) to cover also the key current trends, including digitalisation, decarbonisation and automatisisation. Against the background of new priorities in related EU policy fields and the departure of the UK, this will require an increase of Members States' contribution to the [next Multiannual Financial Framework](#) and/or introduction of new own resources linked to policies, including the [proposed EU-wide Financial Transaction Tax](#).
- **Make sustainability a guiding principle of private investment:** Conditions for investment directed towards the common good are a prerequisite for creation of sustainable labour. While COMECE welcomes the fact that sustainable infrastructure is one of the four focal areas of the proposed [InvestEU Fund](#), it encourages the EU to fully implement the [EU Action Plan on Sustainable Finance](#) with the view to unlock the potential for the creation of sustainable jobs. COMECE also proposes to increase public and private investment in digital infrastructure in rural areas and to make better use of digitalisation as a vector for balanced and hence sustainable development in Europe.

b) Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps

CONTEXT | Young people play a critical role in our societies. *“They are not the future of our peoples, they are the present [...] with their dreams and their lives they are forging the spirit of Europe”*, [stressed Pope Francis when receiving the Charlemagne Prize in 2016](#). It was therefore unacceptable that young people were sharing the burdens of the financial crisis that was triggered by loose regulation, structural irresponsibility and greed. [They are the catalyst of change and transformation, but had to start their lives in unemployment, uncertainty and frustration](#). After its peak in 2013, youth unemployment has decreased on average in the EU, also thanks to the [Youth Employment Initiative](#) and the [Youth Guarantee](#), **but remains considerably high in those countries most affected by the crisis**. Meanwhile EU youth exchange programmes, have allowed young people to contribute to the **Europe of encounter, dialogue and peace**: thanks to [Erasmus+](#), students, apprentice and pupils are able to spend a year abroad to discover Europe in its diversity. Moreover, the [European Voluntary Service \(EVS\)](#) enables young people since 1996 to show their commitment for the common good and to volunteer in another EU Member State.

ASSESSMENT | [Erasmus+](#), the [European Voluntary Service](#) as well as its successor programme, the [European Solidarity Corps](#), are cornerstones of the European project. They are essential tools of dialogue in Europe: they facilitate intercultural learning, strengthen personal development and help to forge the spirit of the European idea among the youth. This **shared experience** is the indispensable condition for peace and solidarity in Europe. COMECE therefore welcomes the [proposal of the European Commission to double the total budget of the Erasmus programme to 30 billion euros for 2021-2027](#). With a view to the Commission's objective to triple the number of participants, COMECE, however, **encourages the EU institutions to be more ambitious and triple the total budget** in order to maintain the high standards of the programme. Moreover, COMECE noticed that compared to the current programme, the notion of **intercultural dialogue** is

missing from the proposed regulation and calls for reintegrating this objective together with a strong provision on **interreligious dialogue**. With regard to the **European Solidarity Corps (ESC)**, COMECE welcomes the general idea and objective of the new proposal for the next programme period 2021-2027. Together with the youth organisations in Europe, it recalls that the ESC should focus on the clear objective of **promoting European solidarity** through volunteering in Europe. Putting too much emphasis on jobs and traineeship part would only create a double structure with the European Youth Employment Initiatives. Built on the successful example of [its previous programme](#), the Solidarity Corps should therefore keep its focus and continue to enable young people to show their commitment for society in Europe.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Clarify the objective of the Solidarity Corps:** Voluntary services, including the EVS have promoted solidarity among the youth for several decades and forged the spirit of Europe. The European Solidarity Corps should be built on the good experience of the EVS and focus in particular on the objective to **promote solidarity through volunteering**.
- **Promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue among the youth:** [While the regulation on the current programme period of Erasmus+ \(2013\)](#) includes intercultural dialogue as one of the specific objectives, this important pillar of dialogue is absent from the [Commission proposal](#) and the [Council's general approach](#). In the current political and social context and taking into account [the various encouraging good practices of dialogue among Christian, Muslim and Jewish youth organisations](#), we call to include intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the proposal for the next Erasmus programme. As longstanding and reliable partner in youth exchange in Europe and contributor to the social cohesion of our societies, Churches and religious organisations or communities as well as faith-based organisations should continue to be allowed to run their projects under the Erasmus and other related EU programmes, including the European Solidarity Corps.
- **Adopt an ambitious and well-funded Erasmus programme:** [Based on the draft report of the European Parliament's rapporteur on Erasmus](#), COMECE encourages the Council to triple the funding of the new Erasmus programme in order to ensure the Commission's objective of tripling the number of participants while maintaining the high quality as well as the inclusiveness of the programme.
- **Reach an agreement before the elections:** Young people in Europe and the participating organisations need legal certainty towards the new programme period 2021-2027 in order to continue their various exchange, training, education and sport programmes. To allow a smooth transition, COMECE strongly recommends to adopt both regulations, for Erasmus as well as for the Solidarity Corps, by the end of the Romanian Presidency.

c) Innovation: Artificial Intelligence

CONTEXT | The European Commission **established an approach on Artificial Intelligence (AI)** and related areas like robotics which should boost the European Union's competitiveness. The approach of the Commission's Coordinated Plan on the development of AI and the Communication ["Artificial Intelligence for Europe"](#) is based on three pillars: 1) Being ahead of technological developments and encouraging **uptake by the public and private sector**. 2) Prepare for **socio-economic changes** brought about by AI. 3) Ensure an appropriate **ethical and legal framework**.

The Commission **invested already significant amounts** in AI, cognitive systems, robotics, big data and future and emerging technologies. Under the current research framework “[Horizon 2020](#)”, **700 € million** were invested into robotics and 2,1 € billion came from private investment. Into AI related areas around 2,6 € Billion were invested over the duration of Horizon 2020.

The European Commission established in June 2018 a [High-level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence](#) which will help to implement the Communication on “Artificial Intelligence for Europe” by drafting AI ethics guidelines.

ASSESSMENT | Artificial intelligence can **improve people’s lives**. It can bring benefits to our society and economy, for example through better healthcare, safer transport or a more sustainable farming. Innovation within the context of AI can be seen as a radical questioning of the identity and true reality of the human person. COMECE supports the development of innovation by artificial intelligence, whose purpose must be to **serve the human persons**, respecting their limits protected by a legal and ethical framework.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Monitor the implementation process** of the Communication “Artificial Intelligence for Europe”. The third pillar of “ensuring an appropriate ethical and legal framework” has to be promoted with the principle of the centrality of the human persons and respect their limits.
- The first draft of the AI ethical guidelines published by the [High-level Expert Group](#) in December 2018 was **open for recommendations by the stakeholders** of the [European AI Alliance](#). The final version of the ethical guidelines is supposed to be published in March 2019. It is a necessary step for clarifying the frame of the ethical challenges by monitoring this process.
- **Article 15 (Ethics)** of the proposal of the European Commission for a regulation for the framework for research and innovation “[Horizon Europe](#)” must be interpreted restrictively. An **ethical assessment** for each project has to be standard with an **ex-ante screening** and an assessment for the implementation process.

2. SOLIDARITY, FREEDOM & SECURITY

a) Migration & Asylum

CONTEXT | The EU has moved from a “crisis mode” in dealing with migratory pressures to a **reinforcement of the external dimension of its migration and asylum policies**. The reform of the “[Common European Asylum System](#)” and its vertebral column ([the Dublin mechanism](#)) shall privilege a spirit of **responsibility and solidarity**. The security dimension of migration includes ensuring that Member States' authorities know who is crossing the EU common external borders and the interoperability of EU information systems for border, migration and settlement management.

ASSESSMENT | The Church promotes a [people-centred approach to migration](#) with full **respect of fundamental rights** of persons in a **holistic** understanding. This should include the need to address the root causes of migration to make effective the **primary right to remain in**

one's homeland and to have sufficient resources for a dignified life for oneself and one's family. Crossing the border may, however, also allow people to develop new projects bringing their social, economic and demographic contributions to societies of arrival. At the same time, States are entitled to control their borders in a humane way, respecting the fundamental rights. In this area, policies should focus on **human security**. People arriving must respect the rules and traditions of the hosting societies. There is a legitimate public interest in making the **legal distinction between an asylum seeker looking for international protection and other migrants**. In this respect, international and EU legal frameworks are different for both categories of persons moving to another country. Irregular migrants are human beings fully entitled to have their fundamental rights respected at all stages, including when they are returned to their home countries. **International cooperation must be intensified** to address the needs of the persons who either look for a dignified life or for international protection. **Solidarity should be always in harmony with the responsibility** towards people concerned, either in countries of destination, transit or origin.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Intensify the partnerships with third countries, in particular in Africa, in order to **make real the right of individuals and their families to remain in their home countries** and live in a dignified and sustainable way.
- Secure legal channels **also for low skill workers**, matching the needs of destination countries, through **facilitating circular migration**.
- Fully respect the **right to family reunification** without procedural overburdening or unduly extending the time for the reunification of family members. Attention should be paid to those **relatives who are dependent of the sponsor**.
- **Avoid criminalizing irregular migrants**, fully respect their **fundamental rights** and ensure **humane treatment in return procedures**; adopt **re-integration measures for returnees**.
- Make sure that guidelines **addressing persons seeking asylum on religious grounds** are avoiding misleading questionnaires and other similar inappropriate procedures, especially regarding converts.
- Promote **partnerships with Churches and religious organisations** as well as other grass rooted entities to set up diverse forms of **resettlement schemes**.
- Make clear the distinction between **genuine humanitarian aid by non-state actors and smuggling irregular migrants**, avoiding that the [Facilitation Directive](#) could bring the criminalization of genuine humanitarian aid to irregular migrants.
- Provide a new impetus in the **fight against trafficking in human beings, focusing on preventive measures**, and recognise the role of Churches and religious communities, in assisting in particular women and children victims of trafficking.
- Support **European humanitarian visas** as a complementary way to protect asylum seekers, avoiding dangerous trips.

b) Cybersecurity

CONTEXT | The **increased sophistication** and **expansion of new technologies** is not only creating a number of **opportunities**, but it also opens up **new vulnerabilities** and security

challenges. About 87 per cent of **European citizens**⁶ perceive a **high risk of becoming a victim** of cybercrime, and about 80 per cent of **European companies** experience at least one cybersecurity incident per year.⁷ Moreover, spreading digitalisation and modern technologies may lead to **new conflict environments** as they are becoming part of **hybrid warfare** strategies. **Attacks on critical infrastructures** in the telecommunications, transport or energy domains, often perpetrated by **criminal individuals** or **terrorist groups** may also pose a significant **threat to the security of citizens** or even to the **democratic order**. The run up to the **European elections** next May constitutes a good **opportunity** to step up efforts in the cyber realm.

The **European Union** has recently [proposed a number of initiatives](#) aiming at supporting the development of **Member States' cyber defence capabilities**, filling the gaps between **different levels of cyber protection** across Europe and enhancing the **security of the digital single market**. These measures will have to be carried further and put in practice during the Romanian EU Presidency.

ASSESSMENT | By responding to the **legitimate concerns of European citizens**, the reinforcement of cybersecurity at EU level should **primarily focus on human security**.⁸ This implies that beyond the criminal law principles, cyber security measures should be intrinsically bound with the respect for **the rule of law** and **citizens' fundamental freedoms**. The Catholic Church is a strong promoter of a **rights-based approach**, allowing a **fair administration of justice** and keeping respect for the **hierarchy of norms**. In this regard, security provisions or measures which are detached from **human rights**, may become a new source of instability or even lead to a new conflict.

In order to ensure **security and resilience**⁹ of citizens against cyber-attacks, while keeping **democratic principles** and allowing an **effective implementation**, a proper **assessment** process needs to be applied which is in accordance with the principles of **proportionality, adequacy and necessity**. In line with EU's **integrated approach**¹⁰, **balanced and sound** cybersecurity measures require the **effective cross-sectoral and cross-level involvement of various types of actors** (civilian, military, state, non-state, civil society, economic actors, academia etc..) in the respective **consultation and implementation** processes, while respecting **accountability and transparency** standards. The academic and practical experience as well as the specific grassroots reality of **Churches and religious communities** could offer relevant inputs in this regard.

The [European Defence Fund](#) – expected to be adopted during the Romanian EU Council Presidency – could provide an important contribution to **human security** if **prioritising** means addressing new security challenges, especially in the **cyber realm**, while **fully respecting the rule of law**¹¹ and **ethical principles**¹².

⁶ Cf. Eurobarometer 464 on “Europeans’ attitudes towards cyber security”, <https://bit.ly/2wPpskW>.

⁷ Cf. PWC Study, “Biggest Increase in Cyberattacks in Over 10 Years”, <https://bit.ly/2P2IsRp>.

⁸ Cf. COMECE, “Whose Security? Whose Defence?”, <https://bit.ly/2Au0syG>.

⁹ Cf. COMECE, Justice and Peace Europe, Pax Christi International: “Fostering resilience for sustainable peace”, <https://bit.ly/2r5i67B>.

¹⁰ Cf. EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (2016): “The EU will foster human security through an integrated approach”, <https://bit.ly/2FCsYDZ>.

¹¹ In particular international legal obligations of both the EU and its Member States, including international human rights law, international humanitarian law as well as arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation norms.

¹² Cf. COMECE, COMECE (2018), “Contribution in view of the next MFF in the area of security and defence”, <https://bit.ly/2pWA5Ni>.

Since cyber-attacks and threats do not know territorial boundaries and transcend existing international legal frameworks, an intensified **multi-stakeholder cooperation** is required not only at **European** but also at the **global level**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Promote a **balanced, proportionate** and **multi-stakeholder** approach to cybersecurity across Europe, focusing on **human security** and fully respecting the **rule of law** and **fundamental rights**.
- Ensure that the **European Defence Fund** – while **focusing on** projects aiming to enhance the **cybersecurity of citizens** - is **effectively articulated** with other EU **non-military peace-building** policies. For the [assessment of the defence research initiatives](#) to be supported by the Fund, a **common ethical and anthropological reference framework** should be elaborated. Technologies assessed as **legally or ethically unacceptable** shall be **banned** from EU funding.
- Encourage and lead **international efforts** towards a **global Digital Convention** providing a **comprehensive legal framework** for **addressing** cyber-attacks, ensuring **accountability**, while reinforcing the link to **international human rights standards**.

3. EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

a) Human Security & Sustainable Peace

CONTEXT | Security is perceived today as a **key concern for citizens** in Europe and worldwide. Violent conflicts and the repeated terror attacks, including in Europe and its neighbourhood, contribute to **feelings of insecurity** in public opinions. These are moreover fuelled by growing **socio-economic inequalities**, lacking **future prospects**, as well as **environmental degradation**. On the international scene, **changes in geopolitical balance** can be observed, marked by an **erosion of the international legal framework**, as well as by **decreasing trust** in **international institutions** and **multilateral practices**.

In recent months, the European Union has launched a [number of initiatives](#) aiming to foster the **cooperation** between Member States in **developing [joint defence capabilities](#)** and enhancing their [operational readiness](#) in military as well as civilian areas, which will take further shape during the Romanian EU Presidency.

ASSESSMENT | In the Church's understanding, security is essential since it protects **human life and dignity**. True security can only exist in **sustainable peace** which is more than the absence of war and violence. It above all requires the establishment of an order which is based on **justice**, **integral human development**, respect for **fundamental human rights** and on the **care of creation**.

The evaluation of security and defence-related actions should primarily focus on enhancing the **security of people**, rather than the security of state borders or of short-term economic interests.

The **level of ambition** in the area of security and defence as [defined by the EU Council](#)¹³ in 2016, would thus need a specification through a **deeper strategic reflection** about its **long-term goals**, **harmonising** the different threat **perceptions** and **strategic cultures** among the EU Member States. From the perspective of COMECE,¹⁴ these goals should be oriented towards a **common long-standing human security** and **sustainable peace** in Europe and beyond.

Cross-border criminal actions, including **terrorism** and **violent extremism**, tend to **play on people's fears** and might provoke **counter-measures** that pose a **challenge to the rule of law** and **civil liberties**. True security must therefore go beyond the emotions of public opinions and fully adhere to the **fundamental rights of persons, families and communities**.

Due to the **multifaceted nature of today's security threats**, an **integrated approach** needs to be taken to address them **effectively** and **comprehensively**. Military security and defence measures should therefore be **better articulated with civilian** instruments in order to enhance **cross-sectoral coordination**¹⁵, involving **different types of actors**¹⁶ at and across **different levels**.¹⁷ **Churches and religious communities** as worldwide networks deeply rooted in local realities can provide important elements of local analysis in the context of early warning, conflict prevention, peace-building as well as post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Specify the [EU level of ambition in the area of security and defence](#) by launching **inclusive, multilevel and multi-sectoral dialogue processes** involving **different types of actors** (civil/military, state/non-state actors, including civil society and Churches, etc.) with a view to a **shared analysis** of security **challenges** and of **opportunities** for an effective common engagement for **sustainable peace** in Europe and worldwide.
- Effectively **link and integrate** initiatives, such as the [Permanent Structured Cooperation](#) and the [European Defence Fund](#), **with other external and internal policy instruments**, including in areas of humanitarian relief, diplomacy, development, trade, economic, social, energy and climate policies in order to foster **long-standing security of persons, families and communities**.
- In view of the [post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework](#), find an **adequate and proportionate balance** of allocated resources to “hard” security, while maintaining or even increasing the support for **civilian peace-building** initiatives, including those focusing on promoting **socio-economic, financial and ecological security**.
- Promote a shift from discredited global governance towards a **global community** based on **multilateral partnerships** and a **rules-based global order** through a **united and constructive engagement in international fora** in favour of **human development and lasting peace**.

¹³ In its [conclusions on 14 November 2016](#), the Council defined a threefold level of ambition in the area of security and defence: (1) *responding to external conflicts and crisis*; (2) *building the capacities of partners*; (3) *protecting the Union and its citizens. In doing this, the EU will pursue an integrated approach linking up different EU instruments in a coordinated way, building on the EU's Comprehensive Approach and promoting civil – military cooperation.*

¹⁴ Cf. COMECE, “Whose Security? Whose Defence?”, <http://bit.ly/2rYgPCg>, and COMECE, “Europe’s Vocation to Promote Peace in the World”, <http://bit.ly/2ccV4o9>.

¹⁵ Such as the link between internal and external security, as well as the nexus between humanitarian, development, trade, socio-economic, ecological and other relevant policies.

¹⁶ E.g. civilian, military, state, non-state, civil society, Churches, religious communities, economic actors, etc.

¹⁷ E.g. persons, families, local communities, society, state, regions, international community, etc.

b) EU's policy in its neighbourhood

CONTEXT | Romania has **particular historical and geographical connections** with countries in EU's neighbourhood. On the one hand, this is the region of the **so-called "Western Balkans"** which also has a **specific relationship** with the European Union in the framework of its Enlargement policy¹⁸. The initiatives of recent months have demonstrated a certain **new momentum** for the **European perspective** of this region of South East Europe following several years of an "*enlargement fatigue*". It will be one of the tasks of the Romanian EU Presidency to steer the **political and practical follow-up** to the recently adopted [EU-Western Balkans Strategy](#) as well as to the [Sofia Priority Agenda](#) and the [conclusions](#) of the June 2018 European Council¹⁹.

Moreover, the year 2019 also marks the **10th anniversary** of the [Eastern Partnership](#) – the platform for reinforced political association and economic integration of the EU's Eastern neighbours. Being faced with violent conflicts, political instabilities and persistent socio-economic challenges, this year can present an **opportunity to reinforce EU's commitment to this region**.

ASSESSMENT | The Catholic Church has favored and supported the **EU as a project of peace and a community of principles and virtues** since its very beginnings. The region of South-East Europe, commonly referred to as the "Western Balkans", is an **integral part of the European family** through its **history** and its **rich cultural and religious heritage**. It is thus important to **continue the momentum** of recent months in strengthening a **credible European perspectives** for the countries of this region²⁰.

In order to be **credible**, the EU must **deliver on its promises** and **embed the entire region** of the Western Balkans in a **comprehensive European integration process**, while duly taking into account **regional, national and local realities**. As EU accession is a **two-way process**, it also requires **strong political commitment** to systemic **reforms** led by local authorities and endorsed by local societies.

Given the importance of **Eastern Partnership** for **lasting peace and stability** on the European continent, the EU should maintain and reinforce a **real and fair partnership** with the Eastern neighbouring countries and their citizens, adequately **recognising the diversity** of their needs and aspirations. The [20 deliverables for 2020](#) focusing on **socio-economic development, governance, connectivity** and **mobility** constitute a good basis for dialogue and cooperation. The 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership could be an occasion to **launch a reflection about the future priorities** of the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours. These may reinforce the focus on **human connectivity** and on the **empowerment of young people, families and local communities** to take active part at all levels of economic, social and political life. Moreover, **Churches and religious communities** with their **deeply rooted local presence** and their **social, educational and health services** should be better integrated within respective policies.

¹⁸ Up until today, [accession negotiations](#) have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia. Albania and the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" have official candidate status. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and makes reference to UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence) are potential candidates.

¹⁹ The Council conclusions are granting Albania and the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" [a conditional perspective](#) to open accession negotiations in 2019.

²⁰ Cf. COMECE, "*Western Balkans' European integration: a promise of peace and a source of development?*", <https://bit.ly/2r91318>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Maintain the **momentum for a credible EU Enlargement perspective** by **implementing and following-up on the commitments** expressed towards the **Western Balkan countries**, notably in the [EU-Western Balkans Strategy](#) and the [Sofia Priority Agenda](#), with a particular emphasis on **reconciliation** and **intra-regional cooperation**.
- On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, launch a **cross-sectoral, cross-level** and **multi-stakeholder reflection** on the **future priorities** of **fair, comprehensive, responsible and people-centred partnerships**.
- In both policy frameworks – Enlargement as well as Neighbourhood – reinforce the focus on **human connectivity** and **socio-economic** as well as **political empowerment** of **young persons, families** and **local communities** in their countries.
- Promote **cultural and religious diversity** in Europe’s neighbourhood by recognising and supporting the **role of local Churches and religious communities** as important actors for **sustainable development, reconciliation** and **peace**.

c) Sustainable Human Development

CONTEXT | After the adoption of the [UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and of the [Paris Climate Agreement](#), the European Union and its Member States are called upon to show **global leadership** in the **implementation of their commitments**. In order to **better integrate the economic, social and ecological** aspects of **development**, the EU seems to be progressively **shifting from** an approach merely based on **financial aid in a donor-recipient relationship** towards **more symmetric forms of cooperation** with other countries. The proclaimed goals of the recently launched [European External Investment Plan](#) are to **create jobs** and generate **economic growth** in Africa and in the Neighbourhood by **supporting private investments**. This practice shall also be at the heart of the recently announced [new Africa-Europe Alliance](#) and it is forming an important part of the [on-going negotiations on a new framework](#) for the **EU’s relations with the Group of African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries (ACP)**.

ASSESSMENT | The Catholic Church, as a **universally networked and locally rooted actor**, has a particular concern for **integral human development** based on the **common good** of “*all the persons and of the whole person*”. From the perspective of COMECE,²¹ efforts towards **fair, comprehensive and responsible partnerships** between the EU and other regions are to be encouraged as long as they do not merely serve short-term economic or security self-interests, but above all **effectively address local needs** and **contribute** to the **socio-economic empowerment** of **young people, families** and **local communities** in partner countries. This very much implies the **creation of conditions** for enabling investments to support sustainable development through **fostering local capacities** and encouraging a **transition from an exploitation logic to an economic system dedicated to production**.

Moreover, a **partnership for sustainable development** must not be limited to the pursuit of mere economic benefits or competitive advantages, but it should include efforts promoting **the rule of law, human rights, social and labour standards, fair repartition of resources**, as well as **ecological justice**.

²¹ Cf. COMECE, “*Private Investment and Development*”, <https://bit.ly/2EZRb6E>.

In line with the commitment of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) to “*leaving no one behind*” and following the Church’s principle of the **preferential option for the poor**, it should be ensured that **even the most vulnerable members of societies** are not excluded but on the contrary, **prioritised** in the respective partnership schemes. These development cooperation frameworks would greatly benefit from integrating a **multi-stakeholder approach** by allowing all relevant actors, including the civil society and Churches, to **effectively participate** at all stages of consultation, decision-making and implementation processes.

Churches and religious communities are long-standing promoters of **people-centered sustainable development**. Their **grassroots actions** in areas, such as education, healthcare and social services should be effectively integrated within the respective development cooperation frameworks, including through a **non-discriminatory access** to respective **EU funding instruments**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- With regard to EU’s relations with other regions in the world, including the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, promote **fair, comprehensive, responsible** and **people-centred partnerships** going beyond mere economic or security self-interests, but **effectively addressing local needs** and **genuinely contributing** to the socio-economic and political empowerment of **young people, families** and **local communities** in their country.
- Within development cooperation frameworks **integrate a multi-stakeholder approach** by allowing all relevant actors, including civil society and Churches, to **effectively participate** at all stages of consultation, decision-making and implementation processes.
- In the context of negotiations on the [next Multiannual Financial Framework](#) ensure a bold budget line **reflecting and adequately supporting all the dimensions of sustainable development**, including its social, economic, ecological, human rights and peace dimension.

d) Religious freedom in third countries

CONTEXT | The EU has incorporated a **human rights’** dimension into its **external relations**, that generally includes clauses on the respect for fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of religion. [The EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief](#) are aimed at strengthening religious freedom in the EU external policies. The EU also finances human rights activities, including the promotion of the right to freedom of religion worldwide.

ASSESSMENT | Grounded in the **dignity of the human persons**, the exercise of their **fundamental and inalienable right to freedom of religion** can be « *subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others* »²². **All dimensions of this right** (individual and collective; private and public; and institutional, e.g., recognition of legal personality) should be properly and fully protected. It includes, amongst others, the right of people to freely hold meetings and to establish educational,

²² Art 9(2) European Convention on Human Rights.

cultural, charitable and social organisations, under the impulse of their own religious sense, as well as the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their religion.

The Church “intends to promote the unity of Christians and a fruitful cooperation with believers of other religions. Differences of **religion must not be a cause of conflict**; the shared quest for peace on the part of all believers is a vital source of unity among peoples” (Compendium, 516). The Church “exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” ([Nostra Aetate, Vatican Council II, 1965](#)). This fair treatment of different denominations has to be seen as a positive step in building **unity** and **social cohesion** in Europe.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Support EU mechanism** for the protection and promotion of freedom of religion, including an EU Special Representative for the protection and promotion of freedom of religion outside the EU, and dedicated focal points in EU delegations in third countries.
- Taking into consideration the specific situation of **religious minorities**, assess and take necessary steps to **prevent them from being negatively affected** by political or economic **sanctions**.
- Promote the effective **right to return** of members of religious minorities, especially in Iraq and Syria, fully including the role of **Churches and religious organisations** in humanitarian work, reconciliation and rebuilding the countries, by granting them **equal access to EU funding**.

4. HUMAN DIGNITY, FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY

a) Future "Rights and Values" Programme

CONTEXT | The instruments for the 2021-2027 EU funding period will impact on various important and sensitive areas. One of the key Programmes, especially in a polarised and challenging European context, will be the one devoted to "[Rights and Values](#)". In this regard, [COMECE contributed](#)²³ *inter alia* to the European Commission consultation on the new [Multiannual Financial Framework](#).

ASSESSMENT | Reflecting the legal obligations of the EU and its Member States under international standards, COMECE would rather advocate for a **Union of "principles" and of "rights"** than refer to the term "*values*", which implies a lack of objectivity and varying relevance in time depending on context and circumstances. **Simplification of EU funding** should be a priority, including for the "Rights and Values" Programme, as this is crucial to facilitate access to EU funds for all stakeholders, including local ones.

Churches and religious associations or communities shall enjoy **fair and equal access** to funding and relevant **applications** should be processed **without** further requirements that may

²³ COMECE contributed to five public consultations concerning [Values and Mobility, Cohesion, Security, Migration](#) and [Investment, Research & Innovation, SMEs and Single Market](#).

give rise to **discrimination**. The Church recalls the idea that human rights are **universal, indivisible, interdependent, interrelated and non-hierarchised**. This reference framework, rooted in binding international norms²⁴, has to be enforced in the Union's practices and inform this EU funding instrument.

Work on the different aspects of the prohibition of discrimination is to be supported. An **increased attention** should be devoted to **discrimination on grounds of religion**, focusing not on discrimination "between religions", but on **mapping cases where a person is targeted in an EU Member State because of belonging to a religion or because that person wants to practice his/her religion**.

As the **principle of non-discrimination** entails that discriminating means not only to **treat differently similar situations**, but also to **treat in the same way different situations**, EU funding possibilities should be established accordingly. Funding devoted to combatting discrimination on grounds of religion should **equally cover persons belonging to majority or minority denominations**, as EU institutions and agencies - as well as national authorities - have an obligation to fully apply the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion with regard to all citizens, whether affiliated to so-called "majority" or "minority".

Increasing plurality and global migration movements raise the **importance of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue** in our society. [The Catholic Church fully supports](#) inter-religious dialogue as a part of social harmony in Europe and a key element to solving some tensions beyond our borders. References to funding for **intercultural dialogue** initiatives should **explicitly include the inter-religious element**. [COMECE also supports](#) the **continuation of the possibilities** previously offered by the ['Europe for Citizens' Programme](#), bringing citizens, communities and countries closer to each other in the EU; and valuing **remembrance and the diversity of historical memories in Europe**. Religious illiteracy is setting the stage for the misuse of religious feelings among the population. EU funding should thus also be available for projects and initiatives promoting **religious literacy**. Moreover, the **specificity of the area of disability** should be fully taken into account in all the EU processes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Romanian EU Presidency is invited to integrate the elements proposed by COMECE with regard to the ["Rights and Values" Programme](#) in the work at the EU Council and within the eventual inter-institutional negotiations, and in particular provisions on:

- **Fair and equal access** to funding for **Churches and religious associations or communities**
- Explicit inclusion of the **inter-religious element** in provisions on funding of initiatives on **intercultural dialogue**; and integration of provisions on funding to **foster religious literacy** (as proposed, in both regards, with Amendment 12 of the European Parliament's mandate as adopted on 17 January 2019)
- Providing for strong support and **funding opportunities** to initiatives concerning **remembrance and historical memories**.

²⁴ In particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which stipulates human dignity as the primary foundation of all fundamental human rights.

b) Fighting against the phenomenon of "fake news"

CONTEXT | The European Commission has been particularly active during 2018 on the topic of "fake news"/disinformation, in particular with a [Communication](#) (which also led to the elaboration of a Code of Conduct for the main operators) and an Action Plan. The theme will remain a priority topic, especially considering its link with the European elections. [COMECE contributed](#)²⁵ to the discussions with a detailed position issued on the occasion of the relevant European Commission consultation.

ASSESSMENT | In defining policies to counter "fake news" the main criterion should be **respect for fundamental rights, the principle of the rule of law and the hierarchy of norms**. COMECE strongly emphasised that relevant policy or legislative initiatives must not jeopardise the rights to **freedom of opinion and expression**; to **freedom of thought, conscience and religion**; or the **right of parents to educate their children** in conformity with their religion.

An **EU-wide definition** of "fake news" and more generally an excessively wide definition is considered as problematic. COMECE also cautioned against the **risks of empowering private actors** to assess and censor what can be posted online. **Education to the use of media**, especially although not exclusively for children and for their parents, is essential; but also, more generally education to **awareness of diversity**, so as to **build a critical spirit** for each human being.

Online platforms should be called upon to invest more in **user awareness**, whereas **self-regulation** can only be effective as a **complementary** element. **Criteria** should be **clear** in case of **mechanisms to display in prominent position** information representing different viewpoints and **authenticity of the author and trustability** are key.

Human intervention, submitted to the principles and mechanisms of the rule of law and with diverse assessing panels, is necessary in case of recourse to **robots/artificial intelligence**. **News media organisations** should be encouraged to clearly **establish and identify the original source** of news; showcase and promote diversity of expression; and promote the formation of professionals in fact-checking. **Advertisers** must operate **responsibly and proactively verify contents** they are associated with. The EU could promote **research/reflections with operators on devising "virtuous algorithms"** to counter automatic promotion of the most sensational information. **EU funds** (e.g. on research from technological and social angles, fundamental rights, media) should be used creatively.

COMECE did **not support** creating **new EU bodies/centralised authorities**, whereas a close **monitoring of EU legislation on liability of online intermediaries** is **opportune**. **Churches and religious organisations**, often targeted by "fake news", should be integrated in **multi-stakeholders' engagement** processes to counter the phenomenon. Concerning the **external dimension**, for COMECE the EU should raise the issue in **human rights dialogues** with foreign states and continue to support the work of the [East Stratcom Task Force](#).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the context of its actions on democracy, and especially considering that its semester will cover the period leading up to the European Elections, the EU Romanian Presidency is invited to prioritise work on the topic of "fake news", taking on board the [elements highlighted by COMECE](#) in its position, and in particular:

²⁵ Cf. COMECE, "Public consultation for legal entities on fake news and online disinformation", <https://bit.ly/2Qad0RZ>.

- **Respect for fundamental rights, the principle of the rule of law and the hierarchy of norms** in policies on 'fake news';
- **Effective EU funding**, to counter the 'fake news' phenomenon, for areas like research, fundamental rights, media;
- **Centrality of human intervention** when making recourse to **robots/artificial intelligence**;
- Fostering **education to the use of media**, as well as to **awareness of diversity** within the limits of EU competence.

c) Reform of the EU Transparency Register

CONTEXT | Inter-institutional negotiations have been held during 2018 with regard to the reform of the [EU Transparency Register](#). The COMECE Secretariat joined the instrument already in 2011 as a signal of the attention of the Catholic Church for the importance of transparency and accountability, including for the democratic process. COMECE has followed attentively the work done by the EU institutions on this instrument over the years.

ASSESSMENT | COMECE considers transparency by EU institutions an essential element in view of boosting/regaining trust of citizens in public institutions. With regard to the EU Transparency Register, COMECE considers as positive the balance contained in Article 4(2) of the [Proposed Inter-Institutional Agreement \(IIA\)](#) - as presented by the European Commission and confirmed in the Council negotiation mandate. On its basis, **Churches as such are exempt from registration**, while Church representations to the EU institutions are expected to register. This solution soundly reflects reality and practice. The preservation of this status quo is **necessary in order to ensure respect for fundamental rights**, including the one to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and consistency with [Article 17\(1\) TFEU](#) ("*The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States*"). **Activities carried out pursuant to Article 17(3) TFEU dialogue** between the institutions and churches, religious associations, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations should be excluded from the scope of the Register.

Furthermore, a **precise and clear distinction should be drawn in the relevant instruments and procedures²⁶ between lobbying actors/interest representatives** on one side, **and entities that cannot by legal status, nature and purpose be labeled as such** on the other. This is the case in particular for representations of Churches and religious communities, which cannot be associated with/considered as "pressure groups" working for particular interests, as they do advocacy and work for the common good. The above-said distinction is also **necessary** to ensure compliance with EU primary law (e.g. Article 17 TFEU).²⁷

²⁶ E.g. the treatment as « lobbyists » regarding access badges to EU institutions.

²⁷ Cf. COMECE, "General consideration on Article 17 TFEU, <https://bit.ly/2riaPBN>.

CONCLUSION

The European Union is entering into transition times. This period will certainly bring a number of **challenges and uncertainties**, and the Romanian Presidency will have to steer decisions and actions to address them. Transitions can, however, also constitute new **opportunities**. Putting the **focus** of political and economic actions back **on the human person, family and community**, and offering platforms for an **inclusive, cross-sectoral and cross-level multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation** could eventually enrich the EU with greater **unity and cohesion** among European nations and their citizens.

COMECE and the Romanian Bishops' Conference offer the reflections presented in this document in a **spirit of dialogue**. We stand ready to constructively contribute with our analysis in the major EU policy-fields²⁸ to this challenging task of European and national policy-makers.

We pray that the Lord may bless the efforts of the Romanian Government and of the responsible authorities so that their decisions and actions are oriented towards the **common good** and make **Europe a source of development and a promise of peace** for herself and for the whole world.

Brussels/Bucharest, January 2019

²⁸ The [Secretariat of COMECE](http://bit.ly/2wDEZj6) monitors the political processes of the European Union and the legal developments in all areas of concern to the Church. In particular, the following areas can be mentioned: Migration & Asylum, Ethics, Research & Health, Ecology & Sustainability, Justice & Fundamental Rights, Intercultural Dialogue & Education, Social & Economic Policies, External Action, Religious Freedom,...; <http://bit.ly/2wDEZj6>.

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PRAYER FOR EUROPE

*Father of mankind,
Lord of History.
Look upon this continent to which you sent
philosophers, lawgivers and people endowed with wisdom,
precursors of that faith in your Son, fallen and risen.
Look at these people evangelised by Peter and Paul,
by prophets, monks and saints.
Look at these regions drenched in the blood of martyrs,
moved by the voice of reformers.
Look at these people linked by so many bonds and ties,
yet divided by hatred and war.
Assist us in committing ourselves to a Europe of the Spirit,
founded not just on economic treaties,
but also on values which are human and eternal;
a Europe capable of ethnic and ecumenical reconciliation,
quick to welcome the stranger,
respectful of human dignity.
Give us confidence to see it as our duty
to encourage and promote understanding between peoples,
which provides for all continents justice and bread,
liberty and peace. AMEN*

26 May 2005

Carlo Maria Cardinal MARTINI (1927-2012)