Future of Europe

A contribution to the public debate launched by the European Institutions

1. Introduction

The issue of Europe's future is of enormous importance for churches in Europe. The process of integration in Europe has been based on developing the community of nations and peoples; from its beginning the European Union has been a project promoting peace, reconciliation and cooperation. Values at the core of the churches' self-understanding have been a part of the European project since its inception.

The European Union and its predecessors have been a vehicle for promoting reconciliation and integration in both the post-World War II and the post-Cold War periods. The existence of the Union has proved itself as a significant contributor to the enhancement of life in the continent.

Churches in Europe have been contributing to the integration process in Europe for decades. The Conference of European Churches (CEC), together with its partners and many of its 120 member churches, have contributed through its Church and Society Commission (CSC/CEC) to the process of developing the EU Constitutional Treaty. CEC and most of its member churches have welcomed efforts aimed at developing the Treaty to provide a stable reference framework for further development in the Union. Along with this effort, the CSC/CEC has been a part of the discussions initiated by the European institutions in many policy areas that are within the churches' concerns, such as social and environmental policies, protection of human rights and bioethics, migration, responsibility for developing countries and others. The recently launched process leading to the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu (Romania) in 2007 is a substantial contribution of the churches to the discussion on the Future of Europe.

The Biblical tradition guides the consideration of churches in Europe. In our conviction, the substance of the current crisis is not a failure of particular policies or the consequence of some individual decisions. Over a decade ago, the then President of the European Commission stated, 'We won't succeed with Europe solely on the basis of legal expertise or economic know-how…. If in the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up.'

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The Union needs fresh thinking as well as a renewed and positive vision that would underline its meaning and identity; going beyond the scope given by the creation of a common market and a common currency. We have to seriously struggle with the consequences of the deep and prophetic statement from more than a decade ago.

2. European Identity

In recent years it can be argued that the EU has embarked on several overambitious projects. One such example is the attempt to be the world's most competitive economy by 2010. These were often projects in which geopolitical considerations and political ambitions took precedence over care for its ordinary citizens. Churches in Europe wish and expect the Union to be more responsive to the needs of people at the grassroots, more transparent and more understandable.

Europe and the European Union are not one and the same thing. Few citizens identify the EU as their "common home". The Union now urgently needs to find a satisfactory solution to the tension between two competing approaches: the EU as a community of national states or as a community of citizens. These concepts do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive. The Union does not need to be a common home in the sense of a "superstate". A concept of multiple identities is well documented in the biblical tradition and has been successfully implemented in a number of other aspects; this needs to find an appropriate shape in reflecting the current situation and needs. Against this background, a concept of unity in diversity has to be further developed and deepened.

Culture, identity and, indeed, religion are as much part of 'Europe's infrastructure' as transport, communication and energy. Though activities in policy areas such as culture and social inclusion do not need to be centrally governed and organised, proper attention needs to be given to them at all levels of the European construction. People cannot be reduced merely to the level of producers of goods. Proactive policy by European institutions in these areas is needed.

We are deeply convinced that churches and religions, together with a broad civil society, are a part of the public space. Churches and religions are significant parties of those processes that may not only lead to the expressions of religious fundamentalism, but through their everyday contacts with the communities at the grassroots level also may be actors contributing to addressing the issues of social inclusion, feelings of identity and the setting of values.

Ethics is the basic and necessary constituent needed for the health of society. Religion in its various forms has, through the long history of European civilisation, been instrumental in developing the cultural, spiritual and ethical dimensions of European society. Through their networks and in facing the challenges of this era, the member churches of the CEC are ready to play their part in the development of modern European society.

3. Vision and values

The EU must have meaningful aims and objectives that every citizen should be able to identify with. Even citizens in the most distant border regions of the Union should feel that the Union has relevance for him/her. The EU needs a vision and commitment. Cooperation and active contribution of the citizens to the developing of the vision are necessary elements

of the process that needs to have as its constitutive part the feeling of ownership shared by the Union's citizens.

A significant element in the process of elaborating a vision of Europe is the transparency of the Union's decisions and a consistency in its politics.

CEC is convinced that economic and legal values alone are not sufficient for creating stable foundations for the Union's construction. Values such as the protection of dignity of the human being, solidarity, justice, tolerance, respect towards past and future generations, and the value of the surrounding world beyond its economic benefits are essential. The intrinsic value of each individual human being is of fundamental importance for the churches. It reflects their understanding of the human being as a counterpart to God and the image of God (e.g. Genesis 1:27).

Efforts towards proper implementation of the mechanism of subsidiarity still have to be undertaken. Subsidiarity has to be understood and fully grasped in both its dimensions:

- The vertical dimension, namely the appropriate distribution of competencies between levels of political institutions (such as EU, Member State, region or municipality.) Here we propose to consider the existence of types of structure for monitoring the application of the principle in its vertical dimension.
- The horizontal dimension. In this respect, it has to be considered that there are structures, institutions, and organisations other than the political institutions that have a role to play in addressing issues in society. Articles I-47 and I-52 of the Constitutional Treaty are, in our conviction, the appropriate way to respond to this concern. We believe that these articles address one of the basic problems of the Union. One of the most challenging processes in the future of the Union will be the question of the implementation of these articles. For the future of Europe, the outcomes of this process will be essential in both scenarios: the adoption of the Treaty or a future without it.

4. What kind of Union do we want?

Adequate attention needs to be given to the social dimension of the Union. The European social model, based on social inclusion, coherence between economy, ecology and social issues, and solidarity in society, has to be protected and further developed.

The churches, on the basis of their ethical teaching, underline the preferential option for the poor. A properly functioning social model underpinned by the market economy has to be built on the basis of the same teaching. It must, however, be more than just an effort for the elimination of poverty. It is the creation of a framework for properly functioning social services as well as a framework that gives each of its citizens the assurance of decent living conditions – not the reduction of life to its economic dimension.

For Christians, individuality and community cannot be alternatives. On the basis of their social teaching, churches underline the impact of those policies that support the building of communities. The contribution of the family to the proper development of social systems must be emphasised in this respect.

The EU has to continue to develop and further strengthen its initial call and *raison d'être* as an instrument of peace and reconciliation. Though the Union is an area without open armed

conflicts, there is still the need for reconciliation efforts within the continent. Equally, the Union has to make clear its strong and committed mission in other parts of the globe.

The EU needs to be more inclusive and accountable not only to its own citizens but also to the world's poor. We acknowledge the importance of macroeconomic effects, but at the same time more attention needs to be given to the effects of EU policies on the lives of 'ordinary people'. We would like to see the Union extending the impact assessments of its policies beyond macro effects and to identify the effects that differ between groups, regions and sectors in society.

The EU is the world's largest aid donor; we welcome the Union's humanitarian and development work. We hope and expect that EU will continue to promote good governance and provide humanitarian and financial assistance for those who are in need all over the world. At the same time the EU needs to increase its efforts in developing fair partnerships with developing countries, e.g. trading relations. In this regard the major issue is the need to address questions of the reliability, trustworthiness and integrity of presented policies. Addressing the issue of incoherence in delivery needs to be a priority.

5. The present and future borders of the Union

The Union does not cover the entire continent and most probably never will. Despite this, the Union needs to define its own criteria not only in why it is a union but also why it is European. Next to the values underpinning the wish to live together as a community of peoples and nations, it must not be forgotten what is specific in our European context and what makes Europe specific next to other continents. Identity is a fruit of particularity. The roles of culture, tradition, heritage, religion and humanism must not be underestimated in this respect. Democracy, protection of human rights and sufficient economic performance are important and necessary, though not sufficient criteria for a sustainable Union.

The borders of the Union must not be borders of a fortress. Honest and fair procedures that balance the security of its borders with openness to neighbouring countries, individuals and communities need to be found. It is our wish to be a fair, open and welcoming community. Immigrant communities should not be expected to live in ghettos. Attention needs to be given to appropriate integration policies. Respect for social, cultural and religious traditions has to find a right place in the integration policies and be balanced with self-confidence of the Union about its own identity and traditions, including religious ones.

6. Gap between citizens and institutions - Trust towards the institutions

The institutions of the European Union face severe problems of credibility. In various places there is a popular antipathy (sometimes driven by or reflected in the media and national politics) towards the 'power of Brussels', which is perceived as remote and incomprehensible by many, notwithstanding other features such as bureaucracy and lack of transparency. A democratic deficit is part of the problem that the European institutions have to face up to in the coming period. Decreasing voter turnout in many Member States is not confined to elections to the European Parliament, yet this phenomenon should be a matter for concern and reflection.

We support the initiatives of the European Parliament and European Commission for developing closer relationships with national parliaments. The EU needs to find a meaningful role for national representations of its Member States. The political link between the national

and the European has to be strengthened. The EU must not be limited to institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg.

To overcome the gap between institutions and citizens, on both European and national levels, trust has to be developed. In this respect, however, we acknowledge that this is only a part of a broader problem. The gap between citizens and elites is in general a phenomenon that has to be faced also at the level of the Member States. From the side of the Union consequent implementation of the principle of subsidiarity in both vertical and horizontal dimensions is in our view a way to address the problem in the most effective way.

We welcome the attention devoted to the fundamental values in the Constitutional Treaty and other EU statements. There is, however, often a wide gap between such declarations and the realities of everyday life. Implementation of declared values has to be the priority. In this regard, attention needs to be given to the practice and process as well as to the instruments of implementation. Political institutions are neither the only nor always the best implementation agencies. The role of civil society, non-state and non-political actors, including churches and religions, have to be considered in this regard.

7. Communication

Communication is a key towards making progress in overcoming current difficult situations in the EU. Communication, however, must not be reduced to a technical/administrative instrument. Honest communication has to recognise in a fair way both sides of the communication line – the addressor and the recipient. It means that communication makes sense only if listening is a full and an equal part of the whole procedure. European institutions have not only an obligation to disseminate information but also to listen to communications from the citizens, national parliaments and civil society. All these actors have the right to know what happens to the messages they want to communicate to the institutions.

The content of communication is equally important as its form. It is unhelpful to put an emphasis on communication if the prevalent feeling is that the most important decisions are made behind the scenes.

8. Conclusion

The Conference of European Churches commits itself to contribute to the construction of a Europe in which we can feel at home and can be proud of. Churches together with their related organisations and agencies are ready to be the partners of the European political institutions in an effort to contribute to the developing of a Europe that is not only prosperous and democratic, but also sustainable, trustworthy for its partners and supported by its citizens. The identity of Europe and the Union should be based on values reaching beyond the economic sphere and rooted in our history and traditions.