

14 January 2014

Press statement of COMECE & CEC following on the meeting with the
Greek EU Presidency in Athens on 10 January 2014

On 10 January 2014, three days after the official start of the Greek EU Presidency, the Greek Deputy Foreign Minister with specific responsibility for European Affairs, Dimitris KOURKOULAS, received a delegation of senior Greek and European Church representatives in Athens. Also in attendance were senior officials from the Foreign Ministry. The aim of this meeting, one in a long-standing series of high-level encounters between Church representatives and the in-coming presidencies of the EU, was to discuss the principal issues the Greek EU Presidency hopes to address in the first six months of 2014. Top of the agenda were the questions of social cohesion and migration in the EU.

Right at the beginning of the meeting, Minister Kourkoulas underlined how important he viewed the encounter. It was his view that the Churches could draw on their pastoral experience, with projects on the ground, and their wealth of social teaching to assist in working toward solutions to the challenges on which the Greek Presidency is keen to focus. Precisely for this reason, the minister pleaded to the Churches to keep in touch with the presidency team so that today's meeting would have follow-up.

The meeting with the Presidency in Athens was organised by the Vice-President of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), H. E Metropolitan Emanuel of France, and by the Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), together with the Churches in Greece.

Social Cohesion in Europe

The Churches support the Greek Presidency in its resolve to strengthen social cohesion in Europe and in developing the social dimension of the EU. The Church delegation voiced its concern about high levels of youth unemployment, particularly – although not exclusively – in the countries of southern Europe. Here there is a risk of the emergence of a lost generation, with little concrete hope of an improvement in their economic prospects or of social inclusion.

Comprehensive and sustainable economic growth and the creation of employment in Europe are key aims in any realistic policy which sets to overcome the current crisis. It is essential to avoid precarious employment and the creation of a new class of “working poor”. In any creation of new jobs, attention must be paid to the quality of work. The Church were keen to draw attention to the fact, highlighted in the maritime sector on which the Greek Presidency wants particularly to focus, that social dumping and exploitation must be avoided.

A review of the Europe 2020 Strategy is set to take place during the Greek Presidency. In this context, the initial objective of a ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ should be reinforced. Following this approach, Churches indicated that Social services shouldn’t be considered primarily as a cost factor, but rather as an instrument to sustain Economy and Employment.

The Churches pleaded that the work-free Sunday be a visible sign of a commitment to maintaining the family-work balance, where personal, family and professional fulfilment receive the regard they deserve.

European Migration Policy

The Church delegation was particularly emphatic in the plea it made to the Greek Presidency to address the complex issue of migration into Europe and the social effects of freedom of movement within the EU. All were agreed that demographic trends within Europe made migration essential. Nonetheless, the EU lacks a migration policy such as that in the USA or Australia. The following points were raised in the discussion on the subject of migration:

- The flow of migrants to the EU has been dramatically increased by the humanitarian crisis in Syria; the political developments in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as continuing conflict in Africa and Afghanistan have increased the influx of migrants to Europe. The South European countries, at the Schengen borders, are particularly affected by these developments and, due to the on-going economic crisis, their reception capacity of new migrants is affected. The Churches support the Greek Presidency in promoting greater solidarity between the EU Member States in receiving migrants and asylum seekers.
- The Church delegation, fully aware of the difficulties in the point-of-entry countries, pleaded for a more humane treatment of arriving migrants and asylum seekers: their human dignity and their internationally acknowledged rights had to be safeguarded at all costs.
- Deserving particular attention is the fight against organised human trafficking in all its guises – prostitution, forced labour, organ trafficking. The COMECE representative referred back to the last Plenary of the Bishops where a scheme of practical co-operation between

police and Church organisations in rescuing victims of trafficking and facilitating their rehabilitation was presented.

- The situation in countries of origin and countries of transit was also highlighted. A plea was made that people be helped to stay in their home countries. The upcoming Summit meeting between the EU and heads of government from Africa, scheduled for April 2014, offers an opportunity to work on concrete solutions. Among the solutions, the Churches keep remembering the EU Member States of their commitment in terms of development goals .

At the conclusion of the meeting, Minister Kourkoulas indicated that the Greek Presidency was more than happy to attend and participate in two up-coming conferences being organised by the Churches, that on the “Work-free Sunday” (organised by the European Sunday Alliance next 21 January) and the CEC conference on “Youth Unemployment” taking place from 24 – 26 March.

Before the meeting at the Greek Foreign Ministry, the Church delegation paid a courtesy visit to His Beatitude Ieronymos II, Archbishop of Athens and Primate of the Orthodox Church of Greece, so as to be briefed on the current situation in Greece and on the initiatives undertaken by the Church to meet the needs which result from the continuing economic crisis.

The Delegation was made up of:

- His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Vice-President of CEC;
- His Excellency Mgr. Nikolaos Foskolos, Archbishop of Athens (Catholic);
- Reverend Dimitri Boukis, General Secretary of the Greek Evangelical Church;
- Archimandrite Ignatios Sotiriadis, Secretary of the Commission of inter-Orthodox and inter-Church Dialogue of the Orthodox Church of Greece;
- Reverend Guy Liagre, General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches (CEC)
- Reverend Frank-Dieter Fischbach, Executive Secretary of the Church & Society Commission of CEC;
- Father Patrick H. Daly, General Secretary of COMECE;
- Michael Kuhn, Assistant General Secretary of COMECE.