



## **Guiding principles for European Union policy**

### **A statement of the Episcopal Working Group on Europe of the German Bishops' Conference**

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## **Background and objectives of the statement**

Following the election of the new European Parliament, the course of the European Union has to be determined for the next five years. The Christian faith obliges us to make a responsible and constructive contribution to shaping society. For this reason, we, the Episcopal Working Group on Europe, are sharing our view on the challenges facing the EU. Our statement is primarily directed at the Members of the European Parliament, the new European Commission, the Council and at all those responsible for European policy in the EU and the Member States. It further develops the ideas from the expert text [Europe is worth it](#)<sup>1</sup> (2021) and joins the Christian election appeal<sup>2</sup> of 7 May 2024.

### **1 Three guiding principles for reflection on the situation in the European Union**

The EU must find answers to existential geopolitical challenges that require new approaches and courageous decisions. Russia's attack on Ukraine in violation of international law and its consequences show the reality of military threats and existential economic dependencies in Europe. The war in Ukraine also symbolises a systemic conflict between democracies on the one hand and autocracies and dictatorships on the other. Awareness of the need for a common European response to these challenges has grown as a result. The EU should continue to place the dignity of all people and the principles of liberal democracy at the centre of its policies.

#### **For a democratic EU: Defence of open society against extremism**

The EU is a globally unique supranational peace and democracy project based on the common foundation of democracy, the rule of law and the application of human rights. It is on this basis that law and economic standards are set jointly. As a highly integrated association of states, the EU “depends on the foundation of democratic morality of all participants”<sup>3</sup>.

Democracy requires and enables freedom and this freedom must not be abused. We strongly oppose all those who propagate the abolition of the EU or who pursue an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): [Europe is worth it. Stimuli from the Episcopal Working Group on Europe](#). The German Bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs No. 52, Bonn 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The appeal for the European elections entitled [Für unsere gemeinsame Zukunft in einem starken Europa](#) (For our common future in a strong Europe) was published on 7 May 2024 by the President of the German Bishops' Conference, the acting Chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Chairman of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK).

<sup>3</sup> „[Demokratie] ist auf das Fundament einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit aller Beteiligten angewiesen.“; Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference / EKD Church Office (publishers) (2019): [Vertrauen in die Demokratie stärken. Ein Gemeinsames Wort der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz und des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland](#), (Strengthening Trust in Democracy. A joint statement of the German Bishops Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany) *Gemeinsame Texte*, No. 26, Bonn/Hanover, p. 7; cf. on “the virtues of democracy” (die “guten Sitten der Demokratie”) p. 26.

democratic agenda. We oppose all forms of populism, extremism and nationalism.<sup>4</sup> In view of the strengthening of nationalist and extremist forces in many EU countries, we recall our shared responsibility for democracy and the recognition of the equal dignity of all people.

### **For an EU in solidarity: Commitment to the common good and to justice**

The principle of solidarity is essential for the EU's success. By providing financial support, for example, the EU contributes to the economic development of its Member States. By protecting the climate and environment the EU helps to preserve our natural resources and it makes a contribution to the common good in the sense of global, intergenerational and ecological justice.<sup>5</sup> With regard to migration and asylum, the Schengen Area requires all Member States to act in solidarity.

### **For a capable EU: Commitment to prosperity and security**

Since the war in Ukraine at the latest, the question of a "geopolitical union" has taken on a new urgency. Russia's attack in violation of international law has revealed, firstly, the dependence of the EU on imported resources and, secondly, the fragility of our societies. In terms of security policy, there is a need for the EU to diversify its development of resources and to ensure its defence capability. In addition to the necessary strengthening of European defence capabilities, the question of enlarging the EU to include further liberal democratic states is on the agenda. As an explicit peace project, the EU can make a peaceful contribution to traditional geopolitics, which is often more orientated towards the military.<sup>6</sup> This is linked to questions of prosperity, security of supply and global supply chains.

## **2 Our guiding principles using the example of selected topics**

The above-mentioned guiding principles illustrate that the EU derives its strength and attractiveness from the values and principles it has defined for itself and to which it aspires. Therefore, they have to play an essential part in shaping the answers to the major challenges of our time. These include, firstly, the realisation and defence of democracy, secondly, the strengthening of cohesion in society and between Member States and, thirdly, the promotion of peace and justice in Europe and in the world. We are convinced that a credible EU, to achieve its objectives and to defend its principles, requires a policy that is orientated towards the guiding principles expressed in this statement.

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<sup>4</sup> cf. the declaration of the German Bishops *Völkischer Nationalismus und Christentum sind unvereinbar* (Ethnic (*völkisch*) nationalism and Christianity are incompatible) of 22 February 2024, which is available in [English](#) and [Italian](#).

<sup>5</sup> On this complex of topics, cf. in principle: Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publishers) (2007): *Der Klimawandel: Brennpunkt globaler, intergenerationeller und ökologischer Gerechtigkeit*, Die deutschen Bischöfe - Kommission für gesellschaftliche und soziale Fragen/Kommission Weltkirche, No. 29, updated edition. Bonn.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. The German Bishops' *Word of peace "Peace to this household"* of 21 February 2024 (also available in [Italian](#)), esp. Chapter 3.2.3. on the European Union, specifically No. 141, p. 80.

## **2.1 Democracy as a foundation for cohesion and enlargement**

The EU is founded on democracy, which is based on an image of the human person and society that is strongly formed and influenced by the Christian faith. All people are endowed with inviolable, equal and inalienable dignity, from which their rights and duties are derived: People must not become mere objects of state action, but they can and have to be active themselves. At the same time, people have a responsibility towards their fellow human beings and the community. In contrast to autocratic and dictatorial systems, European-style democracy places the idea of the individual with their fundamental rights and opportunities for personal development at the centre. Democracy, the rule of law and the guarantee of human and fundamental rights are interdependent.

Given this background, we present the following suggestions and expectations:

- The models of democratic order vary in the Member States. This diversity has to be respected, but at the same time the rule of law and European-style democracy, which are essentially characterised by the guarantee of fundamental rights and thus respect for minorities, must be preserved and defended. The EU should consistently demand compliance with the principles of the rule of law in all Member States, for example by withholding funding from Member States that violate the rule of law. At the same time, we encourage the EU to focus funding on projects that strengthen democracy.
- The independence and diversity of the media are essential for democracy. The agreement on the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) is to be welcomed in principle. At the same time, strengthening media freedom in all Member States remains important and right in the face of economic pressure, technological developments and challenges in the political environment.
- Citizens often perceive the complex institutional structure of the EU as lacking in transparency and consider the democratic possibilities for exerting influence as limited. We do not share this view, but it is problematic if people turn away from the EU as a result and adopt eurosceptic and anti-EU slogans across the board. For the newly-elected European Parliament and the European Commission the task remains to visibly communicate the democratic legitimisation and processes in the EU.
- The principles of the internal democratic constitution of the EU and its Member States must also be reflected in its neighbourhood, enlargement and foreign policy, including its foreign economic policy. The requirements for candidate countries to guarantee the rule of law, democracy and human rights can only be plausibly represented in accession negotiations, if the EU and its member states themselves are measured against these standards.
- We welcome the fact that the process of EU enlargement to include Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkan states is developing new dynamics. We encourage the EU to negotiate purposefully and bindingly. At the same time, institutional and policy reforms need to be implemented, for example with regard to foreign policy

decisions or agricultural and structural policy provisions. Similarly, we advocate closely cooperating with the United Kingdom.

- We consider intensified cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe, which celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2024 and is geared towards realising the triad of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, to be helpful and sensible. The EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is a desirable step.

## **2.2 Sustainability as a cross-cutting social principle – ecologically and economically**

The principle of sustainability must not only be applied to the environmental sector, but to all policy fields as a cross-cutting principle.

### **Ecological sustainability**

In the Christian faith, responsibility for Creation is a mandate for all people. From an ethical perspective, it requires a holistic approach to climate and environmental protection. The preservation of our natural resources within planetary boundaries is a priority for a social and just world, otherwise economic gains and social measures will not be of any use. In view of the conflicting objectives of the 17 UN sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda, we need the courage to prioritise and to pay more attention to synergies and interdependencies when defining measures.

Given this background, we present the following suggestions and expectations:

- We welcome the fact that the EU is a pioneer in the field of climate and environmental policy. However, things are still moving far too slowly and the European states are repeatedly failing to meet the climate targets they have set themselves to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 55 per cent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. We therefore encourage the EU to continue resolutely on this pioneering path. The “European Green Deal” and the measures adopted for it, such as the “Fit for 55” package and the Nature Restoration Law, are steps in the right direction.
- Support under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should focus more specifically on promoting sustainable agriculture. This includes requirements for animal husbandry, the reduction of climate-damaging emissions, the protection of soils, the preservation of natural habitats and a stronger focus on the effectiveness of measures rather than the acreage of farms. In view of the central role of agriculture in providing for the population and preserving our natural resources, the economic and social situation of agricultural businesses must be carefully monitored and support should be provided where necessary.
- Global justice presupposes that emerging and developing countries are enabled to achieve prosperity and are guaranteed the implementation of “a right to develop economically”<sup>7</sup>. They must be supported so that they do not repeat the mistakes of the industrialised nations

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<sup>7</sup> German Bishops' Conference (2011): [\*Committed to God's Creation – Suggestions for a Sustainable Approach to Energy\*](#), Working Papers No. 245, Bonn, p. 28.

and can advance their own ecologically sustainable development. The preservation of Creation and global and local social balance must not be played off against each other.

### **Economic sustainability**

The concept of the social market economy already contains many requirements for a sustainable development. The socio-ecological transformation requires a strong economy and sustainable investments. The model of social market economy is based on the realisation that functioning markets with the right framework for sustainable economic activity promote prosperity. However, it also cushions the social risks of a market economy by making corrections to distribution, for example through a progressive tax system, transfers to people in need and comprehensive promotion of equal opportunities and inclusion. In connection with the domestic market the EU declared “a highly competitive social market economy” to be one of its objectives.

Given this background, we present the following suggestions and expectations:

- A market economy requires freedom and competition. However, free competition can – paradoxically – undermine itself if there is market failure, for example, and in turn restrict freedom. This danger is greater than ever in the era of digitalisation. Digital business models with their global networking effects can restrict competition if, for example, the market power of large digital companies is not limited by the legislator. Today more than ever, this makes competition control an indispensable pillar of a social market economy. A market economy geared towards sustainability requires an effective regulatory policy aimed at ensuring fair competitive conditions.
- The EU should further develop and strengthen the domestic market. Economic, competition and antitrust law should not unnecessarily slow down digital and global business models, but at the same it should prevent the abuse of market power by digital companies or other providers of goods and services. In international tax law, further efforts should be made to ensure that companies operating across borders make fair contributions to the common good in all countries in which they operate. The domestic market can also contribute to environmental sustainability, for example through instruments such as climate protection tariffs.
- Safeguarding a competitive and efficient economy is essential for ensuring Europe's financial and economic foundations. Increasingly detailed regulations and high tax burdens can run the risk of hampering economic dynamism in Europe. Balanced regulatory approaches and more consistent control of the use of public funds are required, also at European level.
- Dealing with the global competition of systems – primarily between the USA and China – Europe should play an independent part. To this end, it should diversify its economic relations and expand its cooperation in rules-based multilateral trade. This goes hand in hand with a commitment to ecologically and socially sustainable economic activity. The EU should engage with emerging and developing countries, especially in Africa, by

offering support in trade and investment, for example in developing and improving the economy or the education sector.

### 2.3 Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence

The EU has recognised the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to redefine the relationship between humans and technology. With the [European approach to AI](#) and measures such as the regulation on artificial intelligence (AI Act), the EU has begun to set legal standards. However, autonomous technology must not only be legally defined, it must also be designed and utilised according to ethical principles. The concerns of the AI Act must be consistently pursued and adapted or further developed as required.

We have formulated five fundamental aspects for politically shaping the digitalised society and for dealing with AI:<sup>8</sup>

- Autonomy: To ensure that people are able to decide and act autonomously, the regulation of “autonomous” AI systems must distinguish between technical automation and human autonomy.
- Responsibility: Responsibility cannot be delegated to machines. Only the human being remains liable: who programmes the AI with what goal and what content? Who ultimately makes the decision? This raises the risk of a one-sided distribution of economic gains and liability risks.
- Transparency and truth: When algorithms are used, data subjects must be informed about the use of their data and the use of AI and must give their prior consent. The EU should strengthen its measures to ensure that AI does not influence the general perception of facts and truth, for example through deliberate *disinformation* or *deep fakes*.
- No-harm principle and non-discrimination: Unavoidable harm must be minimised as far as possible. No one should be discriminated against by AI. Instead, the focus should be on detecting discrimination with the help of AI. When training AI, this includes preventing causally discriminatory human behaviour from manifesting itself in an algorithm.
- Participation and (social) justice: The use of algorithms must enable participation in public life for everyone. The EU should endeavour to ensure that inequalities and disadvantages are not reproduced or even exacerbated by AI.

Given this background, we present the following suggestions and expectations:

- It is important that final decisions on life and death continue to be made by human judgement and decisions. They may be accompanied or supported by AI, but must never be automated by machines. In this context, we welcome the fact that the high-risk area has been extended in the AI Act, for example to include triage decisions.

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<sup>8</sup> For the ethical framing of AI, we are guided by the [Rome Call for AI Ethics](#), which was signed in 2020 by the Pontifical Academy for Life, Microsoft, IBM, FAO and the Italian government and which was joined by Jewish and Muslim religious leaders at the beginning of 2023. The call identifies the three areas of (1) ethics, (2) education and (3) rights and formulates six ethical principles: (1) transparency, (2) inclusion, (3) accountability, (4) impartiality, (5) reliability and (6) security and privacy.

- Digitalisation and AI can facilitate work in many areas, but in many fields they must not and cannot replace humans. In line with the German Ethics Council's opinion on [\*Humans and Machines – Challenges of Artificial Intelligence\*](#) of 20 March 2023, we reaffirm that the EU should support this within the scope of its competencies, especially in sensitive fields in which interaction between people plays a prominent role.
- The EU should accompany the further development of ethical standards of digitalisation and the handling of and research into AI at a global level with a specifically European approach based on its ethical and democratic values and principles. The EU should strengthen shared knowledge in Europe in order to be a leading human-centred force in the world.

#### **2.4 Schengen, migration, displacement and asylum**

The Schengen Area, which essentially ensures the removal of border controls and thus the free movement of goods, persons and services requires the effective protection of the EU's external borders. A free Schengen Area and a functioning European asylum and migration system are closely linked. At the same time, there is a competitive situation with other countries with regard to the demographically necessary influx of skilled labour. The issue of migration is therefore one of the EU's key issues for the future. In addition, the EU's ethical standards are particularly important when it comes to refugees and asylum. In terms of the Christian concept of the human person and the commandment to love one's neighbour, migration policy is of paramount importance to the Church.

We point out three challenges European migration policy has to face:

- A European asylum system based on solidarity: Common European answers and a resilient division of responsibilities are urgently needed in refugee policy. The concrete agreements reached between the Council, the Commission and the Parliament on the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) fall short of the expectations that the Churches had formulated in advance. The challenge now is to implement these resolutions in accordance with the law and in compliance with humanitarian standards.
- Better management of labour migration: The shortage of skilled labour in many Member States requires the coordination of legal migration at European level. This includes more effective coordination of EU policies in relation to third countries followed by close cooperation with these countries.
- Integration: The migration process needs the sustainable integration of people into the host society. There is a need for action here in many Member States. The EU should support the Member States within its competences, for example through common guidelines for the Schengen Area or financial support.

Given this background, we present the following suggestions and expectations:



- In order to comply with ethical standards and the values and principles codified in the EU treaties, the EU must organise its migration policy in a humane manner and counteract the causes of forced migration.<sup>9</sup>
- In view of the demographic developments in many Member States, legal immigration to the EU should be increasingly facilitated and coordinated. The EU has taken or proposed several initiatives to combat the shortage of skilled labour, including the Blue Card Directive for highly skilled workers, talent partnerships with key countries and an EU talent pool. Particularly in the area of education and training, cooperation with populous countries and countries with a high level of youth unemployment can benefit both the EU and these countries. In order to counter the risk of a “brain drain” in the countries of origin, the aim should be to promote education and training.
- There is a need for safe access routes for people seeking protection. The admission of refugees through resettlement, community sponsorship and other humanitarian admission programmes should be expanded. Special emergencies must be taken into account and the self-efficacy of refugees must be strengthened.
- EU policy must address the challenges outside the EU more strongly. An integrative and holistic approach to migration management, which takes into account demographic change, migration flows and the root causes of migration, should enable more targeted management of (financial) support for the countries of origin. This applies, among other things, to responsible climate and peace policies as well as the consideration of intra-African migration. We expect the EU to take targeted action against forced and child labour worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Finally, this includes more effective coordination of (development) policies within the EU institutions and between the EU and the Member States.

### **The EU as a peace and democracy project facing geopolitical challenges**

As an Episcopal Working Group, we confirm: “In the spirit of Jean Monnet, Europe should help create a better world.”<sup>11</sup> Especially in times of massive geopolitical change, the EU is indispensable for promoting the well-being of the people and pooling the political interests of its Member States. A world without the EU would be a worse world. European integration remains a permanent process of shaping. For this, we offer three guiding principles as points of orientation. We are thus committed to those values and principles which have largely been formed and influenced in the Christian faith and are codified in the European treaties.

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<sup>9</sup> On the causes of forced migration, cf. the comments on development cooperation in: Evangelical Church in Germany and Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publishers) (2021): [\*Shaping Migration in a Humane Manner. Joint statement by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the German Bishops' Conference in cooperation with the Council of Churches in Germany.\*](#) Joint texts No. 27, Hanover/Bonn, Chapter 3.2.3, p. 149–151.

<sup>10</sup> The Santa Marta Group is committed to combating human trafficking and labour exploitation within the universal Church and with the cooperation of the German Bishops' Conference. It is an alliance of high-ranking church representatives and law enforcement officials from over 30 countries as well as other governmental and non-governmental organisations. Its aim is to develop joint and effective strategies against human trafficking and exploitation. It met for the first time in 2014 at the invitation of Pope Francis. In 2022, the Santa Marta Group presented an action plan against human trafficking.

<sup>11</sup> The German Bishops' Conference: *Europe is worth it*, p. 56.

We are living in times of old and new rivalries of systems, of global economic interdependence and global challenges to political and economic security. We therefore consider a geopolitical orientation in the agenda of the next EU Commission to be indispensable for the EU as a peace and democracy project. The guiding principles, suggestions and expectations expressed in this statement are proposals for the agenda of the new legislative period and present a conceptual offer for European policy from a Christian perspective.

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