



## Significance of European Elections: Addressing Contemporary Common Challenges and Encouraging Voter Engagement

Ms. Drs. Hillie J. van de Streek | Brussels, 13 February 2024

Conference of European Churches (CEC, <https://ceceurope.org/who-we-are>)

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### 1. Introduction

Dear Mr. Bilcik, dear other members of the European Commission and the European Parliament present here in this meeting.

I am ms. Hillie van de Streek, present here on behalf of the Conference of European Churches. My contribution to this dialogue on the Significance of the European Elections will be based on my experiences in the protestant and reformed churches of The Netherlands, as well as in protestant churches in neighboring countries in Western-Europe, like Germany, France, and Belgium. To be explicit: I am actively involved in the EPP, as you read in my biography. However, I have set aside this in this contribution.

In my presentation I focus on the main contemporary challenge as perceived by our churches, which is populism. We consider the rise of populism and (rightist) extremism in many EU-countries as the main challenge for the upcoming European Elections.

### 2. Biblical message

As a reformed protestant, I would like to introduce my presentation with a guiding principle for Christians from the Bible, coming from the Apostle Paul.

In Ephesians chapter 6, the Apostle Paul calls upon the Ephesians to be strong in the Lord and stand firm against all strategies of the devil. To do this, they have to put on all of God's armor. And where does this armor consist of? Not of weapons! On the contrary. He writes: (verse 13) "Put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. (14) Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. (15) For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. (16) In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. (17) Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

### 3. Analysis based on experiences in reformed and protestant churches

Confronting these words with developments in our European societies nowadays, I perceive trends that go into a contrary direction. Instead of truth, there is mistruth and distrust, fake-news, personal opinions that people express as the one and only truth. Instead of righteousness and justice we see trends of discriminating against religious communities (in particular Islam) and minorities (LGHBTQ+) and contesting rule of law and democratic values. Instead of peace we see polarization, people standing in front of each other instead of being able to have dialogue and find consensus. Instead of faith in our European future we see people bashing not only our governments, our politicians, or the 'EU' but also the church and church leaders and others who use or used to have authority.

We perceive trends as secularization, materialism, individualism, and loss of social cohesion. This is what I heard recently from reformed pastors from The Netherlands, Italy and Austria and that we discussed in an intense dialogue. A quote from one of them: "The people have left their faith in God behind them. They have become their own Gods, proclaiming their own truth, living in a bubble of their own truth, and in growing numbers voting for parties that proclaim to strive to impose these 'truths' upon society".

We see these trends not only outside, but also within our churches. Also faithful believers in our Dutch churches at our last national elections have voted for the PVV of Geert Wilders, the party that won the elections with an overwhelming majority. Why did they do so? This is a question that at this moment is being in depth discussed in circles of the protestant churches in The Netherlands, and as far as I see also in Germany (EKD) and France. We do not have an answer yet, but tentatively I notice the following:

- \* People feel threatened in their existence. Climate change, the war in Ukraine, energy shortage and rising prices, lack of affordable housing, AI: these all lead to uncertainty towards the future.
- \* As one of many signals there are the protests of the farmers, in The Netherlands, Belgium, France and Germany.
- \* Another signal is that people have less confidence in governments and politics. In their opinion, politicians don't take responsibility, they don't deliver. Consider the migration topic as well as the nitrogen crisis in my country, where politicians shy away from taking decisions for over already more than a year. Meanwhile, the forming of a new rightist government in The Netherlands has ended up in a deadlock.
- \* I am not acquainted with theoretical literature on this issue, but it might be that people when they feel threatened in their existence start blaming others, looking for a scapegoat. With the result polarization, personal attacks on the social media on politicians, and blaming religious or other groups (migrants, LGBTQ+, the 'elite') in society, and - non the least - voting for populist parties.
- \* What it makes even worse is individualism. There are few communities to fall back on. Two thirds of all marriages end in divorce, children grow up in single parent families and there is lack of social

cohesion as our Minister on Health, Welfare and Sport stated a few weeks ago.

#### **4. The danger of populist parties from our protestant and reformed viewpoint**

With populist parties possible winning a majority of votes, according to me, is a danger for our societies, our democracies, our European values, the rule of law in our countries, the EU as a political entity and peace on our continent. From our churches' viewpoint the foremost danger is that our European values as stated in Article 2 TEU will be contested:

Article 2 states that the EU is "founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". The member states share a "society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

I do not need to mention what populist parties aim at:

AfD: deportation of migrants that once were welcomed in Germany to outside the country.

PVV: forbidding schools based on the Islamic faith and forbidding the Koran.

PiS, Poland: Contesting the rights of gay and lesbian people and women's reproductive rights.

In short, freedom of religion, fundamental values and human dignity are at stake. For our churches these are Christian values that are the core of our faith, the heart of the Gospel. Ephesians 6!

Here I also need to know the risk of religious instrumentalization, meaning that religion becomes an instrument of these parties. Our 'Judeo-Christian heritage' is used as a political argument by amongst others the PVV in The Netherlands. Also, PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary use (or better misuse) this argument for their policies. In addition, Russia is using its Russian-orthodox religious values as a political argument, thus rectifying the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the ongoing war and threatening peace in Europe.

#### **5. The role of churches in society**

Reflection on these societal and political developments in our churches raised many questions: What can we do as churches? What did we already do? Or what should we have done but neglected to do? And, in a more more general sense: what is our role in society?

To answer these questions, I make a distinction between the role of local congregations and their pastors and the role of churches on national and international level.

##### *1. Local congregations / the church as a 'field hospital':*

What pastors from several European countries recently told me is that they take the problems of their churchgoers and believers serious. They listen and try to encourage people to reflect on their personal situation or to keep courage. They also go into the streets, organizing meetings with churchgoers as

well as others, including local people, people of different religions and minority groups. Also, they reach out to form communities, being open to people of all walks of life, e.g.

<https://huisvanvrede.org/> in my hometown. Thus contributing to social cohesion in their city or village. Also, congregations provide diaconal assistance, including through food banks and alleviating financial needs. In doing so, we adhere to the metaphor of Pope Francis. In 2013 he introduced the image of the church as a field hospital. The Church is not only part of the pains and needs of the world, she wants to be close to the wounded world. She wants to be where pain is suffered, and she wants to offer comfort there.<sup>1</sup>

## *2. Church denominations on the national and international level: Called to raise a prophetic voice*

On the national level of the Council of Churches in The Netherlands we realize that our protestant churches are shrinking, nearly getting a minority in society. Modesty suits us in this position. The situation is the same in France, in Germany it is better.

In our Council we recently discussed the presence of churches in society, leading to two essential roles, which we distinguish in 'presence and prophecy'. With 'presence' we refer to the metaphor of Pope Francis. Prophecy is the other side of the coin.

With 'prophecy' we mean that the church should speak up, have her voice heard. The message of the gospel is one of peace, justice and wholeness of creation. These were the three key concepts of the Conciliar Process, which between 1983 and 1993 at the initiative of the World Council of Churches took place worldwide. They remain to this day the key words for the social action and speech of the Christian churches. We would become unfaithful to ourselves if we were to deny them. They commit us to social commitment, in word and deed. Christians must work from their faith for a peaceful world. They must bring warring parties together, establish relationships bring together, promote conversation instead of violence, overcome polarization through mutual understanding. This means that their speech and actions should not drive people apart drive people apart but bring them closer together. This is true worldwide in the global conflicts of violence, and also it is true on the European and national levels in the atmosphere of growing polarization. The church is called to raise a prophetic voice. The church must speak if silence is sinful in that such silence is "a renunciation of our task as Christians in the world", to quote a Dutch remonstrant theologian.<sup>2</sup>

## **6. How and when should churches raise their voice?**

Now, then the question is: How to speak? And when to speak? I give a few examples:

\* CEC: The CEC towards the EU institutions last years already has raised the fight against the instrumentalization of Christian values for political interests and in the perspective of ethno-racial

narratives. Which I repeat again here. With regard to the European Elections, the churches must again take a clear stance against religious instrumentalization. Our faith may not be misused by parties to rectify policies that go directly *against* our values!

\* After the PVV winning the Dutch parliamentary elections in November 2023, the Council of Churches wrote a letter to its leader, Geert Wilders. In this letter Wilders was invited to meet and speak with delegates of our churches. However, thus far he never replied.

\*In the Council we now discuss about sending an open letter to the party leaders that try to form a government, in which we a.o. make clear statements about human dignity, fundamental rights and religious freedom. The question is what the best moment is to send such a letter.

\* In Germany, the EKD took a clear stance towards populism. The church opened a specific website<sup>3</sup> on the issue, with the message that ‘Die EKD arbeitet gegen rechtspopulistische, rechtsextreme, rassistische, minderheitenfeindliche und völkisch-nationalistische Einstellungen. Grenzen zwischen Menschen verschiedener Herkunft zu überwinden, ist seit den ersten Anfängen Kennzeichen christlichen Glaubens und christlicher Kirche.’<sup>4</sup> And the EKD Bishop of Württemberg declared that Christians should not vote for the AfD.

\*In the UK, former EU Member, it is usual that popular church leaders like Rowan Williams are present in talk shows and other media to give their opinion or vision. In the Netherlands this is not usual. It might be a good idea to also try to follow this example.

## **6. Looking forward to the European elections**

At the European Elections our European values are at stake. In its campaign to encourage voter engagement, according to me the European Parliament and the governments in the EU Member States have an important role. They must stimulate people to go to the polls, making clear to them that they live on a continent where we all share common values, which are values that also shape their identity and that are worth living for. In these campaigns societal role models are important. On social media and in ads they can spread the message that Europe is worth voting for. Having many ‘followers’, with their testimonials they can encourage voter engagement: e.g. soccer players and other sports icons, as well as pop stars or influencers.

\* Something else is that politicians like you and the parties that you represent have to take the voters serious. Go into the streets, meet people, tell them what is at stake, don’t shy away from difficult topics like migration, climate change, etc. You must face these questions. Be authentic. Tell people why our European values for you are personally relevant. Take into account Christian values in your and your parties’ political program and pre-election campaign. Show your voters we only can deal with issues as migration and climate on a European level. (The Pact on Migration and Asylum is a good example of this.)

As European churches and religious and worldview associations we might consider encouraging voter engagement by taking a clear stance about what is at stake and call upon our church members and people of faith to vote for a party that defends our fundamental European values, as listed in Article 2 of the Treaty. We might involve Christian role models to get our message heard. We must speak, in a time that we renunciate our task as churches in Europe if we keep silent.

## **7. A last remark**

I sincerely hope this meeting is attended by MEP's of all groups in the European Parliament, whether it is the EPP, PES or Renew or the Identity and Democracy Group with representatives of the Dutch PVV, the French Rassemblement National and the German AfD. In particular I call upon the ID Group to respect our European values towards human dignity, freedom of religion and rule of law in their programs and campaign for the upcoming European Elections.

On behalf of the CEC I highly appreciate this dialogue taking place. These dialogues enrich European politics and decision making. Therefore, I call upon you to enhance the full implementation of Article 17 (3) of the Treaty of Lisbon, concerning an open, transparent and regular dialogue with Churches and religious organizations.

*Thank you for your attendance.*

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<sup>1</sup> William T. Cavanaugh built a political theology from that image (*Field Hospital. The Church's engagement with a wounded world*) Grand Rapids 2016. Cf. also Matthew 25 verses 34 to 36: 'Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; 36 I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.'

<sup>2</sup> And Hans Boutellier, a Dutch professor on Polarization and Resilience, recently stated that "The democratic rule of law is the skeleton of society, which we must keep in good shape." According to Boutellier, animated reciprocity has given way to efficiency thinking. Worldviews speak a different language. Boutellier: "That language has been pushed out of the public domain. It is the language of higher good, hope and love." That language of inspiration is needed to understand the rule of law. Boutellier: "Religions must therefore make themselves heard more as meaningful medicine against polarization."

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ekd.de/kirche-gegen-rechtspopulismus-und-rechtsextremismus-49866.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The EKD works against right-wing populist, right-wing extremist, racist, anti-minority and nationalist attitudes. Overcoming boundaries between people between people of different origins has been a hallmark of the Christian faith and the Christian church.