

## Speech by Rev. Frank-Dieter Fischbach

Your Eminences, Excellencies,  
Dear organisers of this conference,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting the Conference of European Churches to greet your conference.

It is with great pleasure that I convey the greetings of the President of CEC, Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain from the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

I regret that I am not able to attend the whole conference, but I hope that I will be able to read many of the contributions afterwards. The theme of your conference not only forms part of CEC's founding history, but it makes up its heartbeat to this day.

Founded in 1959, the Conference of European Churches today unites 114 member churches from across Europe: spanning countries such as Armenia and Georgia to Belgium, from Iceland, Italy and Ireland as well as the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople / Istanbul in Turkey. Our churches belong to the Anglican, Old Catholic, Protestant, Oriental Orthodox and Orthodox denominations.

The Conference of European Churches likes to refer to the Helsinki Final Act, as it sees it as a pan-European document and a common political process that embodies bridge-building and cohesion in Europe – which aligns with CEC's vision and mission. As if we were brothers and sisters in spirit.

However, the relationship between CEC and the Helsinki process is more ambivalent than one might think. I myself discovered this through the publications of Prof. Dr Kunter and from conversations with contemporaries such as Laurens Hogebrink from the Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

After 1945, in the time of the bloc building and so-called cold war, the churches – especially those in Western Europe - were faced with the controversy of how they should relate to Europe and its political organisation.

Some viewed the integration of Western Europe and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 as a step towards peace and reconciliation – a process which the churches should endorse.

Others feared that this development would widen and cement the division in Europe. For example, as early as the second half of the 1960s, CEC was influenced by an initiative to promote a conference on 'European security'. This initiative had its origin in soviet policies and strategy.

In a sense of "European security", CEC supported the policy of détente in Europe and welcomed the Helsinki Final Act and its initiatives for peace and disarmament.

However, CEC must acknowledge that, in focusing on détente between the two political blocs during this period, it overlooked the plight of dissidents and the oppression and restrictions faced by Christians and churches in the Eastern Bloc. Despite having sufficient contacts, indications, information and calls to advocate on their behalf, the CEC failed to act. The reflection was that an engagement for the dissidents might harm and endanger the détente between East and West.

One of my predecessors as CEC General Secretary, Jean Fischer, clearly apologized for this

failure at the Prague CEC Assembly in 1992, but this wasn't reflected in the main messages of this Assembly.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the so-called Basket 3 of the Helsinki Act on Human Rights, groups had been formed in Central and Eastern Europe, including active Christians, who campaigned for human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, and were persecuted for doing so.

And I am very thankful and moved by the live music we heard yesterday evening, flowing from this process.

The Conference of European Churches today remains committed to the themes of peace and coexistence in Europe. Since 2022, one focus area has been on Russia's war against Ukraine. With our 'Pathways to Peace' initiative, we encourage our member churches to explore the concept of 'just peace' which has gained prominence within ecumenism in recent decades.

But what does 'just peace' mean when a country is invaded militarily?

From the outset, it has been essential for CEC that this discussion takes place together with the churches in Ukraine. We are very grateful indeed to be in continuous dialogue with the various churches in Ukraine - the two Orthodox churches, the Greek Catholic church, the Catholic church and the Protestant churches. This dialogue is not only taking place at the level of church leadership, but also with theologians and academics, institutes, initiatives and students. Joint projects with a civil society character are now emerging as a result and next step. In other words, one might say, that these projects reflect the civil society action that grew out of the Helsinki Final Act.

In the dialogue on "just peace" with representatives of Ukraine we were told several times that "just peace" must include "speaking the truth" / "telling the truth", in a time of false and fake news, in a time, when by some governments the aggressor is not named aggressor. This must be also part of the understanding of "just peace" and we might understand it as a reminder of the Helsinki Final Act, the demand for Human Rights and freedom – the freedom and the right to witness the truth. Without this, our dialogue partners in Ukraine tell us, there will be no just and lasting peace.

The war against Ukraine and the global geopolitical changes we are facing this year, as well as the societal changes with the polarization in our societies, which we have experienced in Europe in recent years, have made the issues of peace, coexistence and freedom in Europe newly urgent. This raises the question of whether a renewed form of the Helsinki Process can be launched, that once again prioritises peace, détente, demilitarisation and the protection of individual rights - and therefore freedom - and pursues these goals in a concrete political and societal manner.

For example, as we enter a new era of rearmament, shouldn't we also make a renewed call for treaties that define, guarantee and monitor disarmament? Every weapon that is produced to kill a human being means we have failed as human beings. Moreover, we need the financial resources so much for other urgent tasks!

With the global geopolitical changes, a renewed Helsinki process might pursue the question what Europe is about today and shall be in the future in a very different political context, in which the transatlantic partnership seems to fade away and in which Europe has to become much more independent and self-determined. But what does this entail for politics, civil society and also churches? After all, it would be interesting to consider what such a discussion on the future of Europe could look like and how it could be initiated, which would also have to include voices from Ukraine, but then also from Belarus and Russia - ? - and other states

and societies, which are right now polarized between a pro-European conviction and a nationalistic or Russian-related attitude. And, of course, it will have to relate to existing European organisations – the European Union, the Council of Europe, somehow the OSCE.

These very few, brief remarks highlight the potential that lies in commemorating 50 years of the Helsinki Final Act and the importance of your conference in addressing this topic at this time. As Conference of European Churches, we will be following the contributions and results of your conference closely and we would like to continue the dialogue with you beyond the conference.

Thank you once again for your kind invitation!

I wish you continued productive discussions and God's blessing for you all and your work!

Thank you very much for your attention!

Helsinki, 12 June 2025