

4 July 2022

### Press release of the European Secular Network

During a meeting with the President of the European Parliament, the President of COMECE “expressed the concerns of the Catholic Church for the way the issue of abortion is treated at the EU level”, and stated that “attempting to introduce a supposed right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union would gravely endanger the right to conscientious objection”.

Once again, the Catholic Church, through the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), shows its contempt for women's human rights and gender equality, and deliberately manipulates international law.

The outrageous decision to end the federal right to abortion in the United States, the virtual ban on abortion in Poland, the total ban in Malta, endanger the health and lives of thousands of vulnerable women. These violations of women's fundamental right to control their own bodies are the consequence of the retrograde ideology promoted by fundamentalist Christian organisations and the Vatican hierarchy. They impose these regressions on societies in an authoritarian manner, bypassing democratically elected authorities, because they know that citizens are overwhelmingly opposed to them.

The European Secularist Network recalls that, contrary to what COMECE claims, the right to abortion is part of international law. According to international conventions to which all EU member states are party, "violations of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as, inter alia, the criminalisation of abortion, the denial or delay of safe abortion services and/or post-abortion care, the forced continuation of pregnancy, as well as the abuse and mistreatment of women and girls seeking sexual and reproductive health information, goods and services, are all forms of gender-based violence."

The failure to provide sexual and reproductive health services, such as abortion, is considered by the UN specialised bodies to discriminate against women. Discrimination against women goes against the core EU principle of gender equality.

Thus, the European Parliament clearly stated that "sexual and reproductive health and rights are key for gender equality (...) and the elimination of gender-based violence," and called on states to ensure "safe and legal access to abortion anchored in women's health and rights". The Parliament condemned the regressions and violations of women's rights, both within and outside the Union. In doing so, it is fully in its role as representative of the citizens of the Union.

Once again, COMECE deliberately chooses to ignore the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in international law. Furthermore, COMECE invents a so-called "right to conscientious objection". Conscientious objection is only recognised in international law in the field of military service, and has never been recognised in any other case. On the contrary, too often the invocation of the "conscience clause" in countries that have established it leads to the denial of women's right to sexual and reproductive health and puts their health or lives at risk.

The European Secularist Network calls for a clear declaration of the EU institutions in favour of the right to abortion, a fundamental right which derives from its founding principles of human dignity, freedom and gender equality.

The European Secularist Network reaffirms its commitment to a secular Europe, where politics is separated from religion and the rules of law are not inspired by religious doctrine, but aim at the effective realisation of fundamental rights for all.