



Meeting with philosophical and non-confessional leaders

Friday 2 December 2022

Report

On 2 December 2022, Vice-President Schinas chaired a high-level meeting with nine philosophical and non-confessional leaders in the framework of the Article 17 dialogue. This year's theme was '**The impact of the war in Ukraine on the European way of life**'.

The meeting looked at how the war in Ukraine is affecting and challenging the European way of life, and the broader response by the EU to these challenges. Participants agreed that the war is challenging the fundamental values which underpin the European way of life. All agreed that the EU must stand for its values, referring in particular to the rights of LGBT people, to women's rights. The issue of education was mentioned, one participant mentioning in particular education about the effects of communism in Eastern Europe. There was some debate on the extent to which support should be extended to Russians who oppose Putin (the security related problems were mentioned, as well as the influence of movements supported by Russia by the participants from Poland and Lithuania).

The meeting also addressed other issues such as the importance to address the challenges related to the enlargement of the EU to Ukraine (on top of other enlargement countries), the continued need to address the migration-related challenges as well as the mandate of the new Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief who should cover freedom of thought as well as freedom of religion.

Vice-President **Margaritis Schinas** opened the meeting (the first in-person meeting he had chaired as vice-president in charge of the Article 17 dialogue). He said that the war in Ukraine is having large-scale effects on the world order and on the European Union in particular. The Russian aggression against Ukraine is also an attack on our fundamental values on which the 'European way of life' is founded. The war in Ukraine should lead us to revisit the discussion held during the last high-level meeting which addressed the future of Europe and lead to a broader discussion on EU policies on energy, climate change or migration. A number of steps have already been taken: the Temporary Protection Directive was activated to provide protection to six million refugees that fled the war. The EU is providing a decisive macroeconomic assistance which allows Ukraine to sustain its war effort.

Vice-President of the European Parliament **Othmar Karas** stated that we have a common responsibility for the future of Europe, and that in these times nothing can be more important than unity and cohesion. In the same way, the EP and the Commission should complement each other as regards implementation of the Article 17 dialogue. He announced that he will organise in January 2023 an Article 17 dialogue seminar on the theme 'liberal democracy'.

Participants in the meeting underlined a number of points in relation with the effects of the war in Ukraine on the European way of life:

- The importance of defending EU values in the face of Russian aggression was underlined. Economic prosperity should not be promoted at the expense of values such as freedom and solidarity.
- The fate of women in the conflict. Among the first victims of the crisis are women. Similarly, when it comes to migration, women are victims of trafficking, rape and other violence. The specific needs of women should be taken into account when delivering humanitarian assistance.
- The protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, in particular LGBTIQ community was also underlined, in particular the need to protect them from hate and violence.
- Some participants referred to the conservatives and religious extremist groups who receive support and funding from Russia, as well as the ‘instrumentalisation’ of the (Orthodox) religion by Russian authorities.
- Some participants underlined the need to keep contacts with Russian opponents to the war and support the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, set up with a view of holding those responsible to account.
- The EU should address the new situation created by the war. European policies to reinforce a common defence and energy independence. Enlargement to Ukraine and other countries will require a revision of the way the EU functions.
- Education was mentioned as a tool against totalitarianism and to teach fundamental EU values. Education should also be developed to teach the effects of communism on Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics. There is a need to address mental health issues, in view of the collective trauma of people faced with the war.
- The cultural dimension of the situation in Ukraine should not be overlooked. The Commission should provide support to Ukrainian cultural programmes and artists.
- The shift from religion to secularism in Europe was mentioned. As a result, the position of Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief should have as a clear mandate to cover not only freedom of religion, but also freedom of thought and conscience.