Meeting with Religious Leaders

‘Responding to the Polarisation of Our Societies’

Monday 17 November 2025

Summary report

On 17 November 2025, Commissioner Magnus Brunner chaired a high-level meeting with religious leaders in the framework of the Article 17 dialogue with churches, religious associations, philosophical and non-confessional organisations (see list of participants).

This year’s meeting was dedicated to ‘Responding to the polarisation of our societies’. The meeting looked at ways to respond to the growing polarization of European societies, in the context of the rise in hate speech and disinformation. The meeting addressed the current threats on European democracies, the accelerating role played by the Internet, the social media and by artificial intelligence.

The meeting also looked at the role that Churches and religious organisations can play in this respect. Religious leaders noted in particular that religion can be misused and manipulated to foster hate and divisions – noting also that in secularised societies, the expression of religious feelings and practice can be excessively constrained. Religious literacy was seen as important to address this situation and, more generally, interfaith dialogue and places to address openly differences, in particular among the youth.

Commissioner Brunner opened the meeting by underlining that the Article 17 dialogue should be a place for an open discussion and finds ways to enhance cooperation with churches and religious organisations. Migration is one example on which such a dialogue can foster understanding and cooperation. He referred to previous occasions to engage with religious organisations.

Religious organisations act as a moral compass and spiritual guide for many citizens in times of uncertainty. Technological change and its potential to be misused to spread hate speech and racism in our societies is a matter of concern. In this context, it is essential to defend our values and take responsibility, in particular when it comes to defending democracy and fighting hate speech and racism.

European Parliament Vice-President Sberna intervened (via a video message) underlining the role of the engagement with religious organisations to the promotion of dialogue within society. Disinformation is eroding social bounds and fuelling mistrust and divisions. Polarisation takes many forms and should be addressed through education and a culture of encounter. Empathy is needed against polarisation and churches and religious organisations can play an important role as builders of trust.

The European Union is a community of values. Article 17 dialogue can help in building a more cohesive society in which differences are an asset, fostering mutual understanding, building bridges between communities, and helping our societies withstand the forces that seek to divide us.

The participants in the dialogue made the following points:

- The value of the Article 17 dialogue was underlined, referring to the project of a 'Soul for Europe' by former President Delors who initiated with his cabinet regular contacts with religious organisations. The Commission was called to think how increase engagement in the context of the Article 17 dialogue (several ideas were mentioned: advisory forum, dedicated symposium/meeting on certain topics).

- The role played by technology in accelerating hate speech was underlined, as well as the need for digital responsibility and empathy in the online world – and the responsibility of churches and civil society in general in this respect.

- The role played by artificial intelligence and the need for an ethical use of this technology (including also to better identify hate content) was underlined – a suggestion was made to hold a dedicated symposium on this topic in the context of the Article 17 dialogue.

- The issue of migration as well as hate and violence against migrants was also prominent - the role churches can play in integrating migrants in their power structure was mentioned. Integration should be based on respect for diversity and closely linked with the fight against poverty (so as to ensure that the majority population does not see newcomers as excessively drawing on scarce resources).

- The rise in antisemitism was singled out as it means for many Jews in Europe to live under police protection and are harassed in schools and universities. There are also growing limitations to religious rituals (such as kosher food, circumcision), all of which is making Jewish life in Europe increasingly difficult.

- The situation of Christians in Europe, in particular with regards to places of worship, was also mentioned. One participant considered that more could be done to protect Christians, through the appointment of an EU coordinator for the anti-Christian hate and ensuring that refugee status is granted to Christians suffering from persecution.

- The secularisation of European societies was mentioned as leading to a difficulty for religious followers to express their views in the public sphere. The ban on religious symbols or dress is another example of this. The result is a limitation of freedom of religion.

- The external dimension was mentioned in relation with the instrumentalisation of religion to foster hate against other religions or nations was mentioned (in particular the situation in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the conflict between India and Pakistan), with the associated risk of the importation of these conflicts. In relation with the misuse of religion, the intra-faith dynamic is also a complex matter where religious is manipulated to reach believers at grass-roots level.

- The importance of religious literacy, in particular in increasingly secular societies was mentioned – also important to address disinformation and hate based on religion. An interfaith approach is needed, in particular at grass-roots level and in education, to build a common approach against hate. In this context, it is also important to ensure a better understanding of what it means to live in secularised societies. In view of the impact of world events in increasingly intercultural context, institutions (health, education, police, business) should look at what they do to bring people from different faiths/culture together.

- Several participants insisted to the role of religious organisations in promoting non-violence and act as bridge-builders. Some participants mentioned the projects they have developed to facilitate a direct dialogue with people who are not talking to each other, so as to ensure that people with different views can engage meaningfully.

Commissioner Brunner concluded the meeting with a number of points:

- On migration, in order to change the perception of migration and get the support of the majority of the population, there is a need to regain control over migration. In this respect, it is essential to distinguish illegal and legal migration, and ensure that the status of refugees is protected.

- On the role of technology in our societies, the dialogue could focus on the issue of artificial intelligence, including through a dedicated event on this topic.

- Engagement with the youth is important on the topics discussed today – the Commission has developed youth dialogue to ensure regular engagement on EU policies.

- Readiness to explore new ways to develop the Article 17 dialogue (taking also into account the wide diversity among Member States).