

Report

High-Level Meeting with Philosophical and Non-Confessional Leaders (Brussels, 8 February 2024)

'The European way of life in times of instability'

The last high-level meeting with philosophical and non-confessional leaders under the current Commission was an occasion to review the issues discussed during previous high-level meetings, in particular the consequences of the Covid crisis, the discussion on the future of Europe, the war in Ukraine and, more recently, the war in Gaza. The meeting also addressed developments in EU policies on climate change, migration and asylum, artificial intelligence, as well as enlargement. Participants recalled the need for the EU to uphold its fundamental EU values when implementing these policies.

Vice-President Margaritis Schinas stated that the meeting, the last under the current Commission, was an opportunity to take stock of the state of play in the Article 17 dialogue. The dialogue has addressed issues such as the consequence of the Covid pandemic, the future of Europe, the impact of the war in Ukraine, and – more recently – the situation in the Middle East. These crises – which could have hardly been predicted at the beginning of this Commission in 2019 - have deeply impacted the European way of life.

A first consequence of these crises is that the EU must move from being a 'security consumer' to become a 'security provider' in particular as Ukraine depends on EU's continued support. Reinforcing EU defence is essential in a multipolar world where new players are claiming their share and challenging the existing rule-based multilateral order in favour of a power-based order.

Another imperative is enlargement: the EU cannot close itself to aspiring countries to the EU and enlargement is thus a priority. The new enlargement package recognizes this new imperative. At the same time, it is important not to lower the threshold to access the EU which should remain a 'merit-based' process.

A values-driven Union is more needed than ever in a world where democracy is under attack from authoritarian regimes. This is why the Commission has approved a 'defence of democracy' package in December 2023. The Commission has also shown its commitment to gender equality as shown by the accession of the EU to the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence.

The new EU Pact on migration and asylum is major breakthrough on an issue which is deeply divisive in our societies. After years of failure, the EU finally provided with a comprehensive, systematic policy. The new rules will improve treatment of migrants.

The EU is facing a twin transition, first towards a greener Europe. The goal of becoming the first decarbonized continent by 2050 remains, but the Green Deal needs to be adjusted to take into account economic needs, such as the ones expressed recently in the agricultural sector. Second, the digital transition is being addressed by EU with the digital regulations (DSA, DMA) which give the EU the powers to regulate this transition. The transition towards Artificial Intelligence is an area where role of religious and non-confessional organisations will be essential as AI cannot only be in the hands of AI developers.

European Parliament First Vice-President Othmar Karas underlined that 2024 is a decisive year with major elections taking place around the world and in the EU. These elections come at a defining moment: liberal democracy or autocracy, Europe in the world or disintegration into nationalisms,

responsibility or populism, honesty or fake news. This is why the European Parliament will organize an Article 17 dialogue seminar on 13 February 2024 which will be dedicated to disinformation and foreign influence in the context of upcoming European elections.

As European elections are coming up, it is time to take a clear stance for the European way of life based on peace in freedom, liberal democracy, rule of law, respect for the dignity of every human being, tolerance and solidarity. In this context, it is essential that philosophical and non-confessional leaders express support for the EU values and contribute to mobilizing citizens in view of EU elections.

Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief, Frans van Daele underlined his insistence on freedom of belief in all his meetings with third countries. It is essential to work and engage with local actors who promote human rights, including humanist and non-confessional actors. He also referred to the rise in hate speech following the recent events in the Middle East, referring to the European Commission communication 'No Place for Hate' adopted in December 2023. He referred to his visit to Jerusalem in June 2023 and his finding that there was room for dialogue among the different religious representatives. The 7 October Hamas attacks and the war in Gaza have changed this willingness to enter into dialogue but it remains important to pursue work aimed at opening dialogue channels.

Philosophical and non-confessional leaders took the floor to offer a number of remarks and comments in relation with the theme of the meeting:

- In general, participants were very positive about the dialogue as responding to a genuine need in a challenging global context, marked by the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Faced with these challenges and their impact on the EU, the EU institutions have shown resilience and solidarity. The response to Covid was seen as a good example of how the EU has been able to provide stability in the face of an unforeseen challenge.
- Some participants regretted the absence of religious representatives, feeling that the dialogue should include both religious and non-confessional representatives. Today, one third of the people in Europe do not identify with religion, showing the need for a genuine dialogue with religious and non-confessional partners.
- Participants underlined that it is essential for the EU to stick to its basic humanist values. Equality is the fundamental humanist value (and its corollary, the respect for diversity). Some participants underlined that, as the European way of life is under attack from conservative religious groups which are in particular targeting minorities, it is essential to recall the rights of migrants, of LGBT, as well as women's rights. The social dimension and need for solidarity was also pointed out: the EU must protect the most vulnerable, including when addressing climate change).
- Some participants underlined the need to defend secularism as the best way to ensure freedom of conscience and the co-existence of different beliefs and to fight extremism and populism – in a moment where the rise in hate speech is putting into question the fabric of our societies.
- As regards enlargement, participants cautioned against enlargement without ensuring respect for EU values. Some participants considered that EU treaties should be revised before any future enlargement. Other participants underlined the need to protect the cultural cohesion of Europe and its borders.

- Some participants agreed that the war in Ukraine shows need for an autonomous EU defence capacity. In this respect, the role the EU could play in securing the Red Sea (against attacks by Houthis) was mentioned.
- The need to protect the human dignity of migrants was raised by several participants who pointed out the need to ensure the protection and humane treatment of refugees, in particular women who are more vulnerable. One participant mentioned the need to address the root causes of migration and promote the development of the parts of the world where the migrants originate.
- As regards Artificial Intelligence, one participant proposed to agree on a 'charter of digital rights' to ensure that AI is meant to serve man and not the other way round. Education, including lifelong training, is essential on the topic of Artificial Intelligence and the digital in general to ensure that the digital divide does not become a new inequality).
- A proposal was made as regards the next Olympic games to promote the EU visibility: establish a common count of the medals won by all EU countries [VP Schinas added that other initiatives are planned in this respect: ensure the presence of the EU flag alongside the national flags of EU member states, the Olympic flame will arrive in France (in Marseille) on Europe day (9 May)].