



## Meeting with religious leaders

Friday 27 January 2023

### Report

On 27 January 2023, Vice-President Schinas chaired a high-level meeting with eight religious 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 high-level meeting with religious leaders was the first such meeting since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and thus the occasion to take stock of the broader consequences of the war on the EU. It was also the first meeting with the new Special Envoy for freedom of religion outside the EU, Frans van Daele.

Religious leaders expressed their support and appreciation for the EU response to the war in Ukraine, welcoming the European unity shown in the face of the war. Religious leaders underlined the need to find ways to promote peace, including through interfaith engagement (even if prospects for peace remain dim). Several participants also mentioned the situation of religious minorities and issues relating to freedom of religion in Ukraine. The wider impact of the war on European societies was also discussed, in particular the response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees, the social impact of higher energy prices and inflation.

**Vice-President Schinas** opened the meeting and welcomed **Frans van Daele**, Special Envoy for the promotion of Freedom of religion or belief outside the EU. He welcomed the participants to this first meeting in person since the start of the war in Ukraine. He stated that the war is an attack on our values and the system we stand for. He underlined that the date of the meeting, 27 January, was a particular one, that of the commemoration of the Holocaust. This should be reminder of the potential consequences of hate and nationalism, as our societies witness a resurgence of populism. He reiterated the importance of Article 17 dialogue to address these issues with representatives of organisations which have a broader view on the developments in European societies.

**Othmar Karas**, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, sent a video message referring to the European Parliament's Article 17 dialogue seminars on humanitarian aid (July 2022) and on the importance of defending the idea of liberal democracy (January 2023). He said the war in Ukraine must be seen in the wider context of liberal democracies under pressure. He stressed the need for continued support to Ukraine and to refugees in Europe, but also the need to address the wider consequences of the war on European societies.

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

- The invasion has triggered a debate on the ethics of war, on the law of war and the idea of ‘just war’ in the face of the brutal Russian invasion.
- Some participants referred to the ‘instrumentalisation’ of the (Orthodox) religion by Russian authorities. In response, there were calls to promote interfaith initiatives to engage the different religious groups present in Ukraine and address the divisions among the Orthodox followers.
- Leaders warned about the manipulation of religion, the spread of false news and hate speech, as well as the risks carried by the dehumanisation of people (including Russian people).
- Several participants underlined the need to safeguard plurality, religious freedom (including the rights of religious minorities) and the rule of law as essential steps towards the reconstruction of Ukraine.
- Participants underlined the importance of support to refugees from Ukraine, in particular financial, medical, psychological, practical, and spiritual support.
- The social impact of the rising prices of food and energy, in particular on vulnerable persons, was underlined, as well as EU’s growing dependence on the outside. The need to ensure that environmental concerns remain high on the agenda was also mentioned.

**Vice-President Schinas** concluded by stating that the reconstruction of Ukraine should go beyond financial aid and help the Ukrainian people to bring about a new beginning. In this process, support for bringing communities together and for healing society will be essential. Vice-President Schinas said he will inform fellow Commissioners about the discussions during the meeting ahead of the upcoming mission of the Commission college to Ukraine. He expressed the readiness of the Commission to pursue its engagement on the issues discussed today, in particular as regards the situation in Ukraine.