



Meeting with Religious Leaders

‘Responding to the Polarisation of Our Societies’

Monday 1st December 2025

Summary report

On 1st December 2025, Commissioner Magnus Brunner chaired a high-level meeting with philosophical and non-confessional leaders in the framework of the Article 17 dialogue with churches, religious associations, philosophical and non-confessional organisations (see list of participants attached).

This year’s meeting was dedicated to ‘Responding to the polarisation of our societies’. The meeting looked at ways to respond to the growing polarisation 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 social media and artificial intelligence.

The meeting also looked at the role that philosophical and non-confessional organisations can play in this respect. Participants noted in particular that social media (and artificial intelligence) is used to manipulate people and foster hatred. They underlined the importance of educating people about the new technologies and promote a rational debate in society. Several participants expressed the wish to hold joint Article 17 dialogue meetings between religious and with non-confessional leaders.

Commissioner Brunner opened the meeting by underlining that the Article 17 dialogue should be a place for an open discussion and finding ways to enhance cooperation. He underlined that we are at a turning point, as the post-world war II era is over and the EU needs to reconsider its global position.

Technological change, whose pace is accelerating is another driver of change. One can see the effects of this change in the disinformation campaigns carried out by hostile states and organised criminals to undermine our democracies.

In this context marked by hybrid threats, our priority should be to protect European values, including our democracy, fight hate speech and racism, and to make sure these technologies are used responsibly.

The present meeting will be an occasion to discuss the drivers of polarization in our societies and ways to respond to these challenges.

European Parliament Vice-President Sberna intervened (via a video message) underlining the importance of the engagement with philosophical and non-confessional organisations

to the promotion of dialogue within society. Disinformation and social fragmentation weaken the bonds that sustain our communities. These developments challenge our shared commitment to the principles that have shaped our Union from the beginning. 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. VP Sberna concluded by referring to the efforts made by philosophical and non-confessional actors to promote education, dialogue, and civic engagement, particularly among younger generations.

The participants in the dialogue made the following points:

- The potentially harmful role of social media was pointed out with the rise in disinformation (blurring the line between what is real and what is not - a confusion aggravated by artificial intelligence) and hate speech (some of the participants have themselves been targeted by instances of hate speech, mentioning in particular the importance of a rapid judicial reaction to stop online harassment).
- Social media are a place where the conditions of the debate are degraded, characterised by a lack of expertise, anonymity, 'bubble effect', all leading to polarisation and simplification.
- The responsibility of the platforms hosting social media should be upheld, since they are responsible for the algorithms used, in the same way as editors are held responsible for the content of their media outlet. The Digital Services Act was generally considered by participants as an important step but with a number of limits when it comes to the responsibility of networks and the control over algorithms, in particular to limit virality). Efforts are also needed to better detect hate speech.
- There is a need to regain control over new technologies as instruments to serve humans (not the other way round), in line with a humanist and rational approach.
- The risks of manipulation of democracy were pointed out (a reference was made to the recent presidential elections in Romania) and more generally the role of disinformation in engineering polarisation.
- Some participants cautioned about the need to ensure that free speech and freedom of religion or belief are duly protected when addressing disinformation or hate speech. In particular, criticism of religion is legitimate, even it may be offending to some. Outside the EU, blasphemy laws are sometime used against human rights lawyers (the example of Mubarak Bala in Nigeria was mentioned).
- Polarisation was seen as a global phenomenon (the example of Africa was mentioned – where foreign influence is strong and legal remedies are often insufficient). The role of communitarianism in fostering polarisation, with communities closing themselves from the rest of societies. Extreme political parties are also part of the problem. The EU needs to ensure it has the appropriate instruments to respond to hybrid threats (including through financial means, by better targeting sources of funding).
- Most participants underlined the importance of education to promote critical thinking so people better understand how to use social media (and the related risks of manipulation). Public campaigns – including through social media - should be

organised to promote fundamental rights, non-discrimination and fight racism. Caution was expressed concerning the idea of promoting ‘religious literacy’ as teaching about religion should not lead to indoctrination.

- Several participants questioned the separation between the high-level dialogues with religious and with non-confessional leaders. The need for a position of coordinator against anti-Christian hatred was questioned by one participant who considered that freedom of religion or belief is for all beliefs and none should be singled out.

Commissioner Brunner concluded the meeting with a number of points:

- The discussion showed the need to address disinformation as a form of hybrid weapon through a number of means such as intelligence/data exchange, a ‘follow the money’ approach to better identify the financing flows and ensuring where needed a quick judicial reaction.
- The Special envoy for freedom of religion or belief (who should be appointed soon) will address issues relating to all religions or beliefs.
- Joint meetings between representatives of religious and non-confessional organisations should be envisaged in the future. 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).