A Seminar entitled ‘A different take on Europe’ was organised on 1 April 2019 by DG JUSTICE - with the contribution of the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) - in association with the European Association of Free Thought (AEPL), Contribution des Obédiences Maçonniques Adogmatique et Libérales à la Construction Européenne (COMALACE), Egalité, Laïcité, Europe (EGALE), Institut Maçonnique Européen (IME) and the European Humanist Federation (EHF).

The seminar took place in the context of the ongoing dialogue with churches, religions and philosophical and non-confessional organisations in which topical EU policy issues are discussed. The meeting focused on taking stock of the reflection initiated in past meetings under the Article 17 Dialogue on the future of Europe in 2017, the theme being of particular interest as European elections are approaching and a number of the issues reflected on are high on the European agenda (enclosed are a number of papers presented by the partner organisations during the seminar). The seminar focused on two themes: the future of European democracy and how Europe can address social challenges.

The main points raised by the Article 17 partners present were:

**On the future of European Democracy:**

- The EU must be given a new impetus and reaffirm its core values of democracy, freedom, equality and solidarity. Freedom of thought and the protection of non-believers was mentioned as well secularism.

- The Copenhagen criteria should be revised to take into account not only respect for democracy, but also a commitment to the objectives and purposes of the European Union. At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity should be protected.

- The EU must be better at communicating and more transparent. In some countries, the fight against corruption should be given a high priority, in particular when it comes to EU funding.

- The EU should reinforce its role in a number of policy areas, in particular economic policy (including budgetary policy), defence and media (fight against excessive concentration, fight against fake news and support to impartial and scientific approach to policy matters).

**On social challenges and how Europe can address them:**

- Inequalities are rising in the EU and this situation has detrimental effect on growth as the increase in the wealth of the richest does not translate in growth in the wealth of the rest of the population.

- Erosion of living conditions: wages appear increasingly insufficient to ensure a basic standard of living – minimum wages should ensure such a basic standard.

- Environmental policies should take into account social justice concerns.
The impact of the digital transition and related technologies on the future of work including Artificial Intelligence (AI) should be taken into account in order to design appropriate policies and responses – including its impact on equality between men and women (which is questioned by the rising gap between male and female employment in digital related jobs).

The EU should implement the European Social Pillar principles with special attention being given to those principles addressing the impact of digital technologies. Monitoring of actions taken to implement basic labour standards could be addressed under the European Labour Authority (ELA) project still under discussion, together with an enhanced coordination mechanism of the EU member States labour inspectorate systems;

The EU and its members States should take further and concrete steps to ensure that environmental and labour standards be provided with similar legal binding effects as compared to economic freedom standards applied in the EU.

The Commission side made a number of points in response to the above concerns:

Importance of EU common values (rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights set out under Article 2 TEU). It is important to recall this ‘values tripod’, notably in a time when the ‘raison d’être’ of the EU Institutions is challenged by ‘populist’ movements. The current Commission’s response to promote these values was presented, in particular: the election package for a free and fair elections, improving the protection of the rule of law in the Member States and the legislative steps taken to translate fundamental rights into reality.

The importance of ensuring appropriate conditions for democratic institutions, in particular the respect for equality and trust in public speech (referring in particular to the issue of fake news) was pointed out. On transparency, EU rules are among the most advanced and provide already a high level of transparency.

While the main levers to address social exclusion, inequalities and access to opportunities are in the hands of the Member States, the Commission has a significant part to contribute in social matters, whether it is through legislation, governance, funding, collaboration, networking, standard setting and global leadership. The main challenges ahead involve improving tools to anticipate and support the transitions as demographics, technological changes and climate change intersect. This involves managing changes in the labour market; up/reskilling; addressing concerns with regards to fairness (real/ perceived inequalities, inter-generational, between regions, diversity, taxation); and supporting a just and fair transition towards a carbon neutral economy – particularly for places and people who are most vulnerable.