

Committee on Culture and Education
The Chair

Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs
The Chair

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CONFIDENTIAL

Antonio TAJANI
Chair
Conference of Committee Chairs

Dear Chair,

The Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), in accordance with Rule 125 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, held a public hearing on Thursday 3 October 2019 with Mr Schinas, Vice-President-designate for 'Protecting our European Way of Life'. The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs was associated to the hearing.

Preparation of the hearing

On 27 September 2019, the Committee on Culture and Education and the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, pursuant to Rule 125 of the Rules of Procedure and Article 2 of Annex VII thereto, received the letter by the JURI Committee regarding the scrutiny of the declaration of financial interests of Mr Schinas.

Prior to the hearing, Parliament had sent the Vice-President-designate a list of written questions. Our committees noted that Mr Schinas answered those questions and dealt well with the priorities outlined.

During the hearing

Mr Schinas opened the hearing by making a statement in which he referred, inter alia, to the following:

He underlined the importance of European values as defined in the Treaty in all aspects of his portfolio. Across education, culture, security, asylum, migration and health, the common thread is people and nobody should be left behind. His priorities will be to make society fairer, more inclusive and more secure and to deliver on the Pact on Migration and Asylum. He stated that he

takes seriously discussions over the title, but he made it clear that his portfolio is about protecting the most vulnerable, providing healthcare and welfare systems, and delivering equal opportunities.

He outlined that he will take a comprehensive approach to inclusion and integration, transforming the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights into practical deliverables, ensuring that the European Social Fund+ fosters social inclusion and labour mobility, and placing the right emphasis on education and skills in the European Semester. He stated that he will work to deliver the European Education Area and help Member States to reform and modernise their education and training systems, including in digital learning and will offer mobility opportunities through Erasmus+, DiscoverEU and the European Solidarity Corps. He will invest in, and promote, European cultural heritage inside and outside the EU and realise the potential of sport to have a positive impact on society, in terms of health, social inclusion and gender equality.

He acknowledged asylum and migration as a major challenge that can be overcome by mobilising strengths, learning from the past, and ensuring consistency between external and internal policies. He reiterated the need for a holistic 'pact' approach: in addition to solving the central part of the package, the reform of the CEAS and specifically Dublin and the asylum procedures regulation, this means reviewing the Return Directive, concluding further readmission agreements and arrangements with priority countries of origin and transit, stepping up external border controls while restoring Schengen, and creating legal pathways, by building on pilot projects on legal migration, more modern and targeted migration systems, and humanitarian corridors following the model of Niger and Rwanda in combination with resettlement. He argued that, until the reformed CEAS is in force, there should be temporary arrangements.

He recalled that the EU sets world standards in data protection and claimed that respect of fundamental rights has to be designed into security measures. He stated that he would stress implementation of recently passed EU legislation, in particular as regards interoperability of EU information systems. He also put special emphasis on building resilience against hybrid threats and protecting citizens online.

The introductory statement of Mr Schinas was followed by a first round of 7 questions from representatives of each political group and a second round of 18 questions by Members, including also a representative from the non-attached Members.

During the hearing, Members asked questions on all aspects of the proposed portfolio.

CULT evaluation

With regard to issues falling within the remit of the CULT Committee, Mr Schinas gave the following responses and made the following specific commitments:

- To promote a more joined-up approach to education, culture and sport policy, notably by using culture for education and education for culture and by fully exploiting the potential of the Erasmus+, European Social Fund+, European Solidarity Corps and Creative Europe programmes. He did not, however, set out clearly how he intended to achieve this aim;
- To promote complementarity and consistency across the policy fields for which he is responsible and to exploit synergies between different funding programmes (e.g. Erasmus+ and ESF+) to deliver added value; to bring together often disparate parts of the Commission working across similar policy areas. He did not, however, detail specific mechanisms for achieving this.

- To respect and promote diversity, inclusion and solidarity across his portfolio;
- To continue to engage actively with young people, recognising that young people are particularly active on climate change;
- To draw on his communication experience and skills to raise awareness about the opportunities available to people through EU programmes and to make those programmes more inclusive and accessible;
- To use the European Semester and the country-specific recommendations to promote access to education and healthcare, to address the skills gap, tackle youth unemployment, both basic skills and labour market skills, and to use the full range of programmes to support skills investment;
- To develop and promote more flexible learning pathways in education, training and skills through a lifelong learning approach and steps to recognise non-formal learning outcomes;
- To support upskilling efforts, particularly among more vulnerable adults, and to help bridge the skills gap and to use the upgraded Digital Education Action Plan to enhance digital skills;
- To support fully a tripling of the budget for the Erasmus+ programme. He did not, however, detail how this might impact on other MFF programmes;
- To deliver a more inclusive Erasmus+ programme and to seek to use the European Social Fund+ to achieve this;
- To enhance the cultural and educational dimension of DiscoverEU. Interestingly, he consistently referred to DiscoverEU as a programme whereas the Commission has proposed that DiscoverEU be subsumed into the Erasmus+ programme. This may require further clarification.
- To work to deliver the European Education Area by 2025, notably by making education more inclusive, accessible and innovative, putting in place a European Student Card and supporting teachers more actively. He pointed, in this respect, to the need to break down barriers to mobility and cooperation, notably through the Erasmus+ programme;
- To introduce a European Child Guarantee to ensure children at risk of poverty or exclusion have access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education and to promote universal access to healthcare and education;
- To promote a European sense of belonging, rather than identity, through education and culture. However, he drew a distinction between culture on the one hand and history and citizenship on the other - which belong to Ms Jourová's portfolio - which appears to be an artificial distinction;
- To consider where, in line with EU competences, measures might be taken to protect artistic freedom and freedom of expression;
- To invest in and promote European cultural heritage inside and outside the EU;
- To continue to support the European Week of Sport and other initiatives to support the health-enhancing and inclusion dimension of sport; to seek to exploit synergies between the health and sport portfolio, though he did not detail how he would achieve these synergies;
- To use education, culture and sport as tools to promote the integration of minorities, migrants and refugees, using and beefing up existing tools, including the 2016 Action Plan, and avoiding a Brussels-centric approach. He did not, however, set out clear initiatives or tools for achieving this aim;
- To engage in a continuous policy dialogue with the Parliament, including through regular appearances in the CULT Committee and based on a concrete schedule of structured dialogues, and to encourage Commissioners and Commission officials under his guidance to do likewise.

LIBE evaluation

With regard to issues falling within the remit of the LIBE Committee, Mr Schinas gave the following responses:

He mentioned several times that his portfolio was about people and bridging different policy areas in finding cross-cutting solutions. Responding to several questions regarding the title of his portfolio, he recalled the President-elect's political guidelines, and explained that it reflects the values and principles upon which the Union is founded.

He stated that he will ensure a holistic and sustainable EU approach to asylum and migration, including returns and readmission agreements, a review of the Schengen Area, as well as coherence of the external and internal dimension of relevant policies. Mr Schinas insisted on the need for comprehensive solutions in view of the complex nature of migration. He acknowledged the work done by the Parliament on CEAS, referred to the need for a fresh start, having Dublin and APR as a core of the reform, while building on the progress achieved in the five CEAS files on which a provisional agreement was found. In terms of timing, after consultations with capitals and the Parliament, he stated his intention to unveil a "scoping" paper by the end of this year on CEAS reform options, that would be addressing the main issues and create a new impetus. But he felt that the application of qualified majority voting in Council would not be politically wise although provided for in the Treaties. He mentioned that the EU-Turkey statement should be revised, including to speed up returns, and stated readiness to support Greek government in ameliorating the situation on Greek islands.

He did not elaborate further on how resettlement should be combined with humanitarian corridors.

He acknowledged there is scope to advance on the Blue Card and further review EU legislation on labour migration, including the long-term residence Directive, to resolve inconsistencies and gaps, in particular on intra-EU mobility.

Therefore, he wishes to work for modern and targeted legal migration schemes supported by the EU Trust Fund and building on the pilot projects. He also acknowledged the importance of empowering local actors, such as towns and regions, in integration and inclusion, notably via financing relevant measures under the future funds (AMF and ESF+), although the question of direct funding to civil society and municipalities remained open.

He also welcomed the Finnish Presidency efforts to unblock the proposal for the Anti-discrimination Directive at next EPSCO Council.

He said that security policies could only be sustainable if they respect fundamental rights and that any initiative in this area should be balanced against the right to privacy and protection of personal data.

The Vice-President-designate committed:

- to revise the 2016 Action Plan on Integration to expand it to long-term integration, including by addressing obstacles to free movement ;
- to cooperate with the Commissioner-designate for international partnerships as regards readmission agreements, insisting that conditionality does not work and that global agreements and arrangements creating a win-win situation have to be envisaged,

addressing root causes of migration, visas, investment, education, skills, trade, among other aspects, breaking the business model of smugglers;

- to include civil society and local and regional authorities in the development of solutions in the area of asylum and immigration;
- to review the Blue Card proposal in order to unlock the current deadlock and revise the long-term residence Directive ;
- to present a “scoping” paper by the end of this year on CEAS reform options, while keeping the five files where progress was achieved on the table

Before the end of the hearing, the Commissioner-designate made a brief closing statement in which he stressed that he has been entrusted with a new portfolio that has never existed before. The portfolio is rooted in a need to tackle old challenges in a new way and to break down organisational silos.

Joint evaluation

On the basis of the responses to the Members present at the hearing, as well as the discussion among our committees' coordinators, who met in camera after the hearing under our chairmanship, we hereby give the following assessment:

As regards the proposed structure of the Commission, Vice-President-designate Schinas explained that his role would be to steer and coordinate the work of the Commissioners for Innovation and Youth, Equality, Home Affairs and Health, implying a hierarchical relationship. This structure potentially hinders scrutiny of the future Commission. The Vice-President-designate will therefore have to ensure transparency and accountability towards the Parliament, in terms both of who is responsible for which decision and of who will be the main interlocutor for specific legislative files and policy areas.

The Vice-President-designate communicated clearly and compellingly his over-arching plans for most policy areas in his portfolio - education, skills and integration, finding common ground on asylum and migration and the Security Union. He demonstrated that his ideas are consistent and that he has clear objectives on how his portfolio will contribute to the development of the European project. He also highlighted the synergies across his broad portfolio, identifying people as the common thread. Mr Schinas has extensive experience both as an MEP and as a long-serving senior Commission official across a wide range of policy areas. His experience in communications makes him well-placed to engage positively with citizens.

The Vice-President-designate conveyed a genuine passion for the European project and commitment to core values like equality, diversity and inclusion. He also demonstrated a positive attitude to engaging with the European Parliament. Our Committees welcomed the commitment of the Von der Leyen Commission to support a right of initiative for the European Parliament. They expect all Commissioners, including of course Mr Schinas, to honour that commitment fully.

Throughout the hearing, the Vice-President-designate was able to answer Members' questions confidently and, in general, showed a very good grasp of the different policy areas. On occasions, his replies focused on headline policy priorities and lacked some detail in terms of execution. There were relatively few specific commitments in terms of translating those headline priorities into tangible policies.

The opinion of the EMPL Committee is annexed to this letter.

Decision

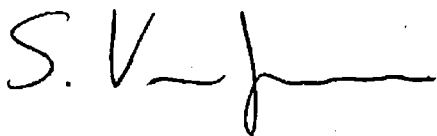
The CULT/LIBE coordinators representing a majority of two-thirds of the committees' membership decided that the Commissioner-designate, Mr Schinas, is qualified both to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned to him.

The committees, by a simple majority, nevertheless strongly oppose the title of the portfolio and urge the President-elect to change it.

The coordinators from the ID, ECR and GUE/NGL Groups requested to include the following minority views, which are annexed to this letter.

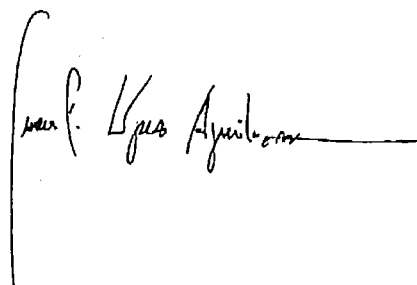
We would be grateful if you could bring this assessment to the attention of the Conference of Presidents.

Yours sincerely,



Sabine VERHEYEN

Chair of the Committee
on Culture and Education



Juan Fernando LÓPEZ AGUILAR

Chair of the Committee on Civil Liberties,
Justice and Home Affairs

Annexes:

- I. Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs
- II. Minority view by ID
- III. Minority view by ECR
- IV. Minority view by GUE/NGL

ANNEX I - Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

Overall, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs finds the Vice-President-designate qualified to carry out the particular duties he has been assigned within the remit of the EMPL Committee.

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs takes note of the commitments expressed and emphasis put by Vice-President-designate Schinas during the hearing, in particular as regards the following issues that are in the Committee's mandate, and expects the Vice-President -designate to fully cooperate with the Committee:

- To build a Union of equality and diversity;
- To identify and fill skills shortages, support up- and re-skilling, strengthen digital vocational skills, and give a strong role to lifelong learning with special attention to ensure decent working conditions for young people including in traineeships;
- To create pathways to legal migration to contribute to bring in people with the skills and talent that the European economy and labour market need, and improve the matching of jobseekers and vacancies;
- To improve the social inclusion and integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market;
- To ensure that the future European Social Fund+ is adequately strengthened to foster social inclusion, support those most in need and help enhance labour mobility across the EU;
- To introduce and implement an ambitious Child Guarantee.

The EMPL Committee expects close cooperation with the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Affairs and requests additional information regarding organisational aspects, including DGs and services he will directly control.

The EMPL Committee notes the concerns expressed on the title of Vice-President-designate portfolio.

ANNEX II - Minority view by ID

1. With regards to personal suitability to fulfil the portfolio we find Mr Schinas to be so focussed on the European project, having been worked in the institutions for most of his professional life, that he does not see any broader picture. We think he is blind to the citizens' needs to have their national sovereignty respected. This was borne out in his hearing where his zeal for tolerance for everyone, through his vision of a 'fair society' was more fantastical than achievable; his promotion of mass migrant integration was unrealistic, and his minimising the threats posed to our European way of life is dangerously naive. His dismissal of views expressing alarm at the failure to secure our external borders, his wanting to open up greater pathways, and not tackle illegal migration, demonstrate that he is unsuitable to tackle this portfolio. Moreover, we are concerned that he plans to include asylum seekers in the labour market of Member States as an answer to our demographic decline, and the failures of the supply of labour; a view which is fatal to the functioning of our labour and social systems.
2. Unlike many in the parliament we believe the title of this portfolio is entirely reasonable and raises worthy questions - what is our European way of life, and from whom are we protecting it? He has failed to understand the seriousness of the security problems coming from within and without, perhaps consciously choosing to overlook the fundamental hostilities of some ideologies being imported into our Member States. Those identifying as LGBTQi, young women and other minorities have a right to know how they are to be protected in our cultures, when newcomers are being fast-tracked into the EU irrespective of their intolerant outlook. Commissioner designate Schinas said nothing to give them peace, but on the contrary he will not "protect the most weak and vulnerable in our society".
3. From a CULT perspective, Mr Schinas failed to detail what he meant by a "European way of life". He referred to paragraphs in the treaties, but this is a political interpretation and such a definition of course does not exist.

ANNEX III - Minority view by ECR

ECR considers that Vice-President designate Mr. Schinas is qualified both to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned and agrees with the content of the letter, except with the request of changing the title of his portofolio.

ANNEX IV - Minority view by GUE/NGL

The GUE/NGL group does not approve Mr Schinas for the position of the Vice-President of the Commission.

Our main reasons are as follows:

Mr Schinas has evaded all critical questions as to the title of his portfolio and did not commit to any efforts to change the title "Protecting our European way of life", on the contrary he seems comfortable and supportive of the title despite its extremely disturbing nature, as expressed by a majority of political groups during the hearing. Our group insists on the necessity to change this unacceptable title.

He seemed not to grasp the dangerous implications of the co-existence of culture, security and migration within one portfolio in parallel with the absence of the Justice Commissioner's portfolio from those under the remits of his coordination. Nor did he understand the necessity to address issues of security from the proper legal point of view on the priority of fundamental rights.

Despite the importance he gives to the Security Union, he displayed a lack of knowledge on important aspects of this portion of his portfolio, in particular with regard to data retention and PNR collection.

It was surprising to hear him saying that rulings by the ECJ will have to be considered. Decisions of the ECJ are to be followed and his role would be to ensure their implementation.

The way he referred to the visit of Commissioner Avramopoulos and Member States' Home Affairs Ministers to Ankara and the solution they will bring to migration management flows, makes us believe that he would repeat intransparent procedures that will, on top of everything else, side-line again the European Parliament.

Even though many vague statements regarding a reform of the CEAS as well as search and rescue and safe and legal pathways to the EU were made by the Vice President-designate, no actual commitments were undertaken. Despite repeated claims of a 'fresh start', only old and failed policies were put forward.

His repeated references to access to healthcare failed to convince us that he will pursue policies in favour of promoting free, universal access to quality public healthcare services.

By repeatedly referencing to a unique European culture which is to be envied, he showed a deep lack of understanding of cultural diversity to the point of underestimating other cultures.

His denial of the existence of cultural racism in Europe reveals in a flagrant way that he will not take any action to tackle this major issue.

For all the above reasons, our group cannot give a positive evaluation and, thus, abstains.