'This is Europe' debate in the European Parliament: Speech by Nikos Christodoulides, President of Cyprus, 13 June 2023

'This is Europe' – an initiative proposed by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola – consists of a series of debates with EU leaders to discuss their visions for the future of the European Union. In his address to the European Parliament on 13 June 2023, the reunification of the island was a central theme for the President of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides. He stressed that the EU has every interest, but also an 'obligation to actively contribute to its final settlement' by taking a leading role in the process. He stressed that the wider Middle East and Gulf were the EU's neighbourhood, and that Cyprus was the 'geopolitical gateway' from the EU to the MENA region. He also called for further European integration, and promised to promote the deepening of the EU within the European Council.

We must regain the trust of our citizens in the great European ideal of peace, cooperation, solidarity and prosperity. To achieve this, we first need to do more to make European citizens aware of what the EU is doing to ensure their safety and improve their daily lives, and perhaps we need to communicate better what is happening and what will happen.

Nikos Christodoulides

Background

Roberta Metsola launched the 'This is Europe' initiative shortly after her election as president of the European Parliament in January 2022. Nikos Christodoulides is the 10th EU leader to have addressed the Parliament since its Conference of Presidents endorsed the initiative on 28 April 2022. These debates will continue during subsequent sessions. A similar Parliament initiative, ahead of the 2019 European elections, saw a number of EU leaders speak in Parliament's plenary sessions about their views on the future of Europe. A 2019 EPRS analysis of those debates pinpointed similarities and differences in EU leaders’ views.

Figure 1 – Time devoted by Nikos Christodoulides to various topics in his speech

Source: EPRS.

The 'This is Europe' initiative is particularly relevant in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), a bottom-up exercise which allowed EU citizens to express their opinions on the EU's future policies and functioning. On 30 April 2022, the CoFoE plenary adopted 49 proposals (see EPRS overview), including more than 300 measures by which they might be achieved. As a follow-up, Parliament adopted a resolution, by a large majority, calling for a convention in accordance with Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union. This call was backed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech on 14 September 2022.

1 MENA countries consist of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

2 An earlier speech to the Parliament in this context by Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas took place before this endorsement.
At the June 2022 European Council meeting, the Heads of State or Government 'took note' of the CoFoE proposals. While calling for 'an effective follow-up', they did not provide specific guidelines in this respect. Instead, they merely stated that each EU institution should follow up on the proposals 'within their own sphere of competences', rather than acting jointly. EPRS research has shown that there is significant convergence between the results of the CoFoE and the priorities of the European Council, as expressed in the latter's 2019-2024 strategic agenda and its conclusions over the past 3 years. The European Council, under the impulse of its President, Charles Michel, is initiating the reflection process on the priorities for the next institutional cycle, which will lead to the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda.

Main focus of Nikos Christodoulides’ speech

Christodoulides addressed a wide range of topics in his speech to Parliament (see Figure 1). In terms of words, he devoted most attention to i) the reunification of Cyprus, ii) the eastern Mediterranean, iii) migration, and iv) Cyprus in the EU.

Cyprus settlement

With newly re-elected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan having called for international recognition of the Turkish-occupied northern part of Cyprus, Christodoulides reiterated his 'unwavering efforts' to reunify Cyprus through a comprehensive settlement in line with international law, UN Security Council resolutions and EU law, values and principles. As reflected in the level of attention dedicated to this topic, the President stated that reunification was the 'highest priority' of his government.

Eastern Mediterranean

The Cypriot President stressed that maintaining a stable and secure environment in the eastern Mediterranean was not just to the benefit of the region and its people, but also of strategic importance for the EU. He added that challenges in this region could only be addressed collectively, and that Cyprus, together with Greece, promoted regional cooperation to create regional synergies and partnerships.

Migration

He welcomed the agreement reached in the Council the previous week on two important parts of the new pact for migration and asylum, and expressed the hope that negotiations between the co-legislators would proceed speedily. In Christodoulides’s view, for the migration pact to succeed, it is important to maintain a balance between solidarity and the principle of responsibility, and to keep working hard on the external aspects of migration, so as to reduce irregular flows.

Cyprus in the EU

Looking back over Cypriot membership of the EU, Christodoulides identified Cyprus's accession to the EU as the 'greatest historic achievement since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus'. Looking ahead to 2026, when Cyprus is due to hold the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, Christodoulides pledged to be 'an honourable mediator to ensure institutional cohesion'; he plans various initiatives as part of the EU’s political cooperation with the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East.

Specific proposals and positions

The President of Cyprus used the opportunity to present his views on how the European Union should advance in specific policy areas, summarised below.

Table – Specific proposals made by Nikos Christodoulides, by policy area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy issue</th>
<th>Priority action and proposals (quotes)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>'Gas has a vital role to play in the energy transition, as the most environmentally friendly conventional fuel and a potential raw material to produce hydrogen'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia's war on Ukraine</td>
<td>'We will never allow border changes stemming from violence and war. We will never accept the result of Russia’s aggression against an independent, sovereign state'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic autonomy</td>
<td>'The EU must be strategically autonomous, in areas such as security, energy, health and elsewhere'.</td>
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