



**European Economic
and Social Committee**
Civil Society Organisations' Group

The 2024 European elections through a civil society lens, with Thierry Beaudet, President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, Zornitsa Roussinova, President of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council, Christelle Savall, President of the Young European Federalists, Hendrik Nahr, Head of European Affairs at Make.org, Brikena Xhomaqi, Director at Lifelong Learning Platform and co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group, and Marilyn Neven, Scene setter, International IDEA, linked to the adoption of the EESC resolution **Vote for a united, democratic, competitive, sustainable and social European Union**

Speech by Civil Society Organisations' Group President Séamus Boland

EESC plenary session, 20 March 2024

Dear Presidents, ladies and gentlemen,

- I would like to begin with a **quotation** from the former American President **John F. Kennedy**, who 1962 said that: "*...a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market, is a nation that is afraid of its people.*";
- 60 years later, we can repeat those words as we prepare for the European elections;
- Elections which are expected to lead to a **shrinking majority of centrist's parties**, as politics shifts inexorably to extremes;
- Fortunately, extreme Right-wing parties generally **dislike each other**;
- The '**me first**' **nationalism of one country**, is not necessarily compatible with the 'me first' nationalism of their **neighbour**!
- I believe that **populism's bubble can and will be deflated**, particularly when these parties have to agree on **what they want** in the European Parliament and not only on **what they jointly oppose**!

- Regrettably, many mainstream national parties do not want to discuss the EU and consequently, **citizens do not understand why the EU is necessary**;
- Whereas what we need in the next few months, is for **national and European politicians to engage with citizens in an open debate on the problems facing the EU** and on what should be done to resolve them;
- Although the EU does face many challenges, the discussions surrounding the elections should also **give citizens a sense of hope for the future**;
- Ultimately, **we need to give voters a reason to want to vote!**

- It is true that many **citizens believe that the EU is only for the few** and our role, as civil society, is to **persuade them that it is for the many**;
 - We must help them realise that the **EU is for everyone** and that it can **continue to create opportunities for them**;
 - To do so, citizens must feel that they are at the **centre** not only of the election process, but of the **EU itself**;
 - This demand for **greater civil society and citizen participation** in national and European policy-making, is a **long-standing request by our Group**;
 - Most recently, it has been communicated to the Presidents of the European Institutions, in the form of an **Open Letter**, calling for **structured avenues for strengthened civil dialogue**;
 - We need **virtuous circles of active participation and trust between representative democracy, CSOs and citizens**.
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- Before closing I would like to mention that on **16 April**, our Group will organise a conference with many European networks of civil society, on the topic '**Building Together the EU We Want**';
 - This will be **our contribution to the second EESC resolution**, which will focus on policy recommendations to the new European Commission and European Parliament;
 - Thank you for your attention.