



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

Defence of Democracy Package, with Ana Gallego Torres, *Director General, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), European Commission, and Ken Godfrey, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy, linked to the adoption of opinion SOC/773 on the Defence of democracy package*

Speech by Civil Society Organisations' Group President Séamus Boland

EESC plenary session, 24 April 2024

Dear Ana Gallego Torres, Ken Godfrey,

- Thank you for taking the time to discuss with us today, it is much appreciated;
- Last Thursday, the **European Council** adopted **conclusions** on a number of economic and foreign policy subjects;
- However, the very **first point** in those Council conclusions asserted the determination of Member States to **closely monitor and contain risks stemming from disinformation**;
- This could be disinformation through **artificial intelligence**, as well as **foreign manipulation and interference in electoral processes**;
- Crucially, the European Council invited the European institutions and national authorities to **cooperate on such matters**.

- With the **elections to the European Parliament less than two months away**, it is of no surprise that the European Council is pre-occupied with curtailing foreign manipulation and interference;
- **Disinformation is not a new phenomenon**;
- But with AI and digital tools, what is new, is the **speed, reach and instruments** that are used to attack or simply undermine liberal democracies;
- Already in 2017, the think tank **Freedom House** announced that **only 13%** of the world's population live in a country with **true free press**;
- This is shocking, when we reflect on how **independent thinking is a precondition for democratic life!**

- However, during today's discussion on the defence of democracy package, I would like to reiterate that **firstly, democracy cannot be taken for granted**;
- **Secondly**, that **CSOs play a crucial role in protecting and nurturing democracy and civic spaces** within the EU;
- They play a **pivotal role** in maintaining the EU's unique socio-economic model and in promoting sustainable growth, social cohesion and inclusiveness;

- Independent CSOs **build mutual trust** in societies, **shape public opinions** and act as **positive agents of change**;
- Often this entails **defending** and **promoting freedom of expression and media diversity**, against disinformation and media monopolies;
- Perhaps what is **less well known, is the crucial role of CSOs in communicating the benefits of democracy to citizens**;
- For if citizens do not understand the concepts of fundamental rights and the rule of law, then **they will not know when these principles are threatened, nor will they take action to defend them.**

- Our Group has dedicated much of our work to this subject, through events and studies;
- When we look ahead to the next legislature and to the **Europe of tomorrow**, it is imperative that we have a **virtuous circle of dialogue** between **representative democracy, the EU and national executives, CSOs and citizens**;
- And this dialogue must be open, transparent, regular and structured;
- It should take place during the **formulation, implementation and follow-up** of all EU policies, including in the sphere of the **defence of democracy**;

- Ladies and gentlemen, let us not forget that the word '**democracy**', is defined by the two Greek words that mean '**people**' and '**rule**'. **Defending democracy is everyone's business!**