



'Building Together the EU We Want'

Brussels, 16 April 2024

Inaugural speech by Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

Dear guests, dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC. I would like to **thank Jacki** for agreeing to moderate our conference – it is **always a pleasure!**

Allow me to open this event by asking **two questions**:

- Firstly, why do these elections matter?
- Secondly, why are we, European civil society organisations, here today?

In my reply to the first question, I would like to quote the former American President **John F. Kennedy**. In 1962, he 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*". Sixty-two years later and transposed to the European Union, those words still echo a **deep truth**.

Regrettably, many mainstream national parties do not want to discuss the EU with their citizens. Consequently, the latter **do not understand why the EU is necessary**. However, what people do understand and often fear, are the significant socio-economic, climatic, technological and geo-political **changes** and **uncertainties** that are already impacting their daily lives.

What are the **five topics** that Europeans consulted by **Eurobarometer surveys** would like the incoming European Parliament to concentrate on? They are:

- The fight against poverty and social exclusion;
- Public health;
- Action against Climate Change;
- Support to the economy and the creation of new jobs;
- Democracy and the rule of law.

This is what matters to voters. And they are looking for both **national** and **European leaders**, who will provide **solutions** to **these** issues.

So, if we return to our question on why these elections matter... They matter, because there is a real fear that many voters will be so **disconnected, fearsome or frustrated**, that we could end up with **¼ of incoming MEPs belonging to extremist parties**.

Traditionally, populists are **long on rhetoric and short on solutions**. Personally, I believe that **populism's bubble** can and will be **deflated**, particularly when these parties have to agree on **what they jointly want** in the European Parliament and not only on **what they jointly oppose**.

Nonetheless, gaining 25% of the seats will directly affect European policy-making over the next five years, at a time when the EU urgently needs to **focus on unifying projects on security, energy, climate protection, industrialisation, social cohesion**, etc.

In addition, the increasing prevalence of **digitalised tools to disinform, distort truths and create mistrust**, are already having a direct **negative impact** during this election period. You will have heard that on Thursday, the Belgian authorities launched an investigation into a **pro-Russian propaganda network active within the European Parliament**. It has also come to my attention that some extremist parties are using applications such as **Tik Tok**, to influence the voting of **younger voters**, with **boys** being particularly susceptible.

In this context, it is imperative that we are able to keep the EU in line with its values as expressed in **Article 2 of the Treaty on the EU**: a Union respecting human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights!

What is urgently needed now, 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.

The recent demonstrations by European **farmers** have got the ball rolling. To some extent, the EU and Member States have shown that they are listening. And **listen to the People they must!**

This brings me to my **second question: why are we, European civil society here today?**

I have spent most of my adult life working with civil society organisations trying to reduce poverty. Within the EU, we have close to **100 million people at risk of poverty** and reducing this figure is essential for social cohesion.

In my opinion what characterises the work of **all** civil society organisations, is our **proximity to individuals and communities**. However, in this crucial time before the elections to the European Parliament, this proximity is coupled with an **obligation to help voters to better understand the Union and its benefits**. To help them learn to **trust** in the EU.

It is true that many citizens **believe that the Union is only for the few**. Our role, as civil society, is to **persuade them that it is for the many** and that it can **continue to create opportunities for everyone**. The **Single Market** is for all Europeans and not only the mobile cosmopolitan ones. Climate Change, European security, public health, the digital transition and social inclusion are better managed by **complementing national and European actions**.

Ultimately, although the EU does face many challenges, the discussions surrounding the elections to the European Parliament should also **give people a sense of hope for the future.**

We need to give voters a reason to want to vote!

This is why we thought of the title for today's event: '**Building Together the EU We Want**'. European civil society organisations working **together**, to determine what needs to be **improved** in the EU over the next few years. Our role this morning is to put forward **concrete ideas** on **what we want the Europe of tomorrow to look like.** And to explore what **role CSOs should play** in making these recommendations a reality. I hope to hear many innovative and concrete recommendations from speakers and participants.

I would also like to inform you that the **conclusions and recommendations of this event**, will directly feed into an **EESC resolution** with policy proposals to the new European Parliament and European Commission. So, there will be a **follow-up to our discussions** this morning.

However, in the title of this conference, the word 'together' also implies placing citizens at the **centre** of the election process and at the centre of the **EU itself.** This request for **greater, more effective and more structured civil dialogue** in national and European policy-making, is a **long-standing demand by our Group.**

Earlier this year it was communicated to the Presidents of the European Institutions, in the form of an **Open Letter.** And I would like to **thank** the very many civil society organisations and networks which **co-signed the letter.**

This afternoon, an **inter-institutional declaration** on the **European Pillar of Social Rights** will also be signed. I mention this, because although our Group very much welcomes the EU's commitment to the Social Pillar, we are **disappointed** that in the draft version of the declaration, there is **no reference to civil dialogue.** In addition, the text uses quite **insipid language**, only "acknowledging" civil society, whose role is relegated to helping only underrepresented and vulnerable groups.

In our opinion, this certainly does not go far enough. In the **Europe of tomorrow**, we need a **virtuous circle of dialogue** between **representative democracy, the executive, CSOs and citizens.** And this must take place during the **formulation, implementation and follow-up** of all EU policies.

I will end by reminding us that '**democracy**, is defined by the two Greek words that mean '**people**' and '**rule**'. **Defending democracy is everyone's business!**

Thank you for your attention.