**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

**President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**Annual Conference on Fundamental rights and the Rule of Law**

**"Putting the Rule of Law Report recommendations into action"**

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**Opening Speech**

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Dear Commissioner Reynders,

Dear distinguished speakers and participants,

I am very pleased to welcome you all at our annual conference on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law, and in particular, thank you, Mr Commissioner Reynders, for opening this event on behalf of the Commission – this says much about your commitment to involve organised civil society in the defence of the rule of law and of our common values. We very much value your commitment and our cooperation.

The EESC is bringing its own contribution – the views of employers' organisations, trade unionists, and other civil society organisations – to the much-needed joint effort to create a shared European culture of the rule of law. Through its Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group, the EESC relays the voice of civil society on these central concerns. Such work is indispensable, because we live in the recent years a real "rule of law crisis". The systemic dismantling of checks and balances in some EU countries might have a spill-over effect on their neighbours, and ultimately on everyone on our continent. And this comes in in the context of rise of populism and anti-democratic forces in all of our societies.

This rule of law crisis has itself been fuelled by other crises that have affected our continent, to a point that a permanent situation of "crisis" and "emergency" seems to have become our new daily reality. I think here of the pandemic. And, today, what we are facing is much more than a crisis: we are facing a war on our continent.

In her "State of the Union" speech, on 14 September, Commission President Von der Leyen rightly said that the war in Ukraine was "about autocracy against democracy". Autocracy or Democracy. This is the reality we face now. During the years, we thought that the EU's promise to secure peace for its inhabitants was an out-fashioned concern. And then came 24th February 2022, the start of the war of aggression against one of our closest neighbours The 24th February will mark the start of a new page in our Union's history textbooks. This page says that our democratic models are, really, in danger – that enemies of democracy are determined to suppress the rule of law, minorities, and civic liberties – and that we should be even stronger than we thought to defend them. It is a matter of life or death for our democratic societies.

It would be a mistake to believe that this choice between democracy and authoritarianism, is only a challenge for our neighbours. Societies rarely turn from democracies to autocracies in a day, and this should be a warning for us. The reason why the war-mongering machine of the Russian authorities has faced no resistance is because it has been deployed on top of a long-term meticulous plan to: divide the people, eliminate independent voices, silence journalists, supress human rights defenders and opponents, and neutralise civil society. This is the reality. Authoritarianism cannot be pacific. After smashing their own people, autocracies often lead war on the outside. It is clear, we do not want that for Europe. Therefore, we must not turn a blind eye on the reality of our times.

The EU needs to decisively react to any new attack on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, as soon as they emerge, and anywhere they happen, either the North, the South, the West, or the East of our continent. Commissioner Reynders, you have always had the support of our Committee in the work that you have done to develop the EU tool box on the rule of law. This year, the European Commission Report of the rule of law includes, for the first time, concrete recommendations to the Member States, which is going into the right direction. The EU should always use all its tools – including budget conditionality, as rightly done recently – to address the most serious developments. Dear Commissioner Reynders, you can count on the Committee's pro-activity in the defence of fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Since our last year's conference, the EESC has continued to engage with civil society from various parts of the EU and on various topics. By the end of this year, our Committee will have carried out fact-finding missions in 20 out of our 27 Member States. The President of the Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group, Mr Cristian Pîrvulescu, will tell us more about the findings highlighted in the second synthesis report of the group, which covers visits led in 2020 and 2021.

In addition to these country visits, the EESC has worked on various opinions on topics like:

• Digitalisation of cross-border judicial cooperation

• Hate crime and hate speech

• Integrity of elections

And we continue, adopting for example an opinion on Abusive litigation targeting journalists and rights defenders at our October plenary.

Today's event is more than a yearly stocktaking exercise. It is a key moment for a common reflexion: where do we stand in the defence of our common values, in front of the many challenges we face? The objective is to discuss not only the findings of the European Commission report, but two central topics: the inclusion of civil society, and the much-needed implementation of recommendations.

I am sure that today's reflections will reinforce the important Rule of law mechanism.

I thank you for your attention and wish you all very good discussions!