



**SPEECH to EC President Ursula VON DER LEYEN and EC VP Maroš ŠEFČOVIČ  
by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland on the 'EU priorities for recovery and the  
implementation of the 2022 European Commission work programme'**

EESC plenary session, 9 December 2021

Dear President VON DER LEYEN,  
Dear Vice-President ŠEFČOVIČ,

I would like to sincerely thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. It is very much appreciated and you are very welcome.

I will begin my comments by **congratulating** the European Commission and yourself in particular, for a very well-managed common approach to **securing supplies of the Covid-19 vaccines and equal distribution** among EU Member States. There is no doubt in my mind, that without this quick and effective intervention, **small EU countries** would have had a **very difficult time in securing the life-saving vaccines**. So thank you.

This brings me to the main topic for my intervention this morning, which will focus on the **European Health Union**, as a **key priority for the EU**. In Ireland, we say that **'Health is Wealth'**. Unfortunately, we often only remember this when our health is in danger. And exactly the same thing happened at the national level, when the Covid pandemic erupted. Suddenly, we saw the **raw impact** of the **austerity-driven cuts to public investment in health and social care services**. Suddenly, we became aware of the **fragmented healthcare architecture and prevention strategies**. These factors had a **direct impact on the loss of life**, increasing inequality and poverty rates over the last 22 months.

The proposals for a **European Health Union** constitute an **enormous opportunity for Europe's recovery**. **First** and foremost, **EU citizens want the EU to play a greater role** in protecting their health and their **right to health**. Hence, progress in this area will undoubtedly contribute to **building trust in and support for the EU**. **Secondly**, the European Health Union is an **opportunity to reflect on how we think about healthcare**. **Healthcare, cannot be treated as a commodity**. Certainly not in an EU which strives to "*...promote social justice and protection*", as is written in Article 3 of the Treaty on the EU. **Thirdly**, the European Health Union is an **opportunity** for the EU and all actors involved, to be **truly ambitious**.

And by this I mean that it is **insufficient** for the EU to **only strive to improve coordination in health policy**. On the contrary, we need to **broaden EU competences** in the field of **health emergencies and cross-border threats to health**. And there needs to be an **upward convergence of health and social protection, along common EU principles**.

Specifically, the EU should aim to **enhance its capacity to prevent, detect, prepare for and manage cross-border health threats**. We should **designate health protection as a public good** and establish a **European model for fair pricing of medicines**. We need **assessments of national health systems** and

of **crisis management**, to be included in the **EU Semester process**. And we also need a well-functioning system of **multi-level governance**, involving regional and local authorities, as well as **civil society organisations**, in order to effectively manage all of the above.

Dear President, I will bring my intervention to a close with **one comment** and **two questions**. My comment is that I am completely **dismayed at the decision to reduce investment in health, within the Recovery and Resilience Facility**. This really was a mistake.

My **two questions** are the following:

- Firstly, **what are the specific plans of the EC for the European Health Union?** Will it live up to the ambitious project that I have just outlined?
- Secondly, given the crucial role that European civil society should play in this Health Union and in the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility: will the EC be **bold enough to structurally and effectively involve these actors in Europe's recovery?** Will the EC strive to **involve civil society organisations as social partners, on an equal footing in their own right?**

Thank you for your attention.