

SPEECH by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland
Resolution on the EESC's contribution to the European Commission's 2022 work programme
EESC plenary session, 9 June 2021

Dear colleagues,

I would like to begin by thanking and congratulating our three rapporteurs, who have worked so constructively together and agreed on a joint resolution on next year's work programme by the European Commission. It is a challenging exercise and I credit you for having found the right balance between coherence and ambition in your proposals to the EC. The fact that there are no amendments, also demonstrates the trust of colleagues and the quality of your work.

I am not going to repeat nor comment on the different parts of the resolution. But as we are speaking about the future EC work programme, I would like to take the opportunity to focus on **one specific item** that in my opinion should be **prioritised by the EC next year**. Namely: the European Health Union.

Allow me to link my commentary to what I think we have **learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic**. Firstly, that **'health is wealth'**, something that my mother used to say. So perhaps we should speak more of what we have **re-learnt** in these modern times! What is certain, is that the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown that the health of Europeans, **dictates the financial health** of the European Union. So it is high time that we started to **prioritise health and a European Health Union**, in the same way as we prioritised the Banking Union during the economic and financial crisis.

Secondly, we have learnt that those who have been the **most impacted** by this health crisis, are the same groups of individuals who were **already the most vulnerable** in our societies. Namely, those on the **lowest incomes**, the **elderly** and those who had **pre-existing health problems**. I think that we should add **'young people'** to this list. This is perhaps the only category not previously marginalised, although of course young people were the most hit by the economic crisis in terms of unemployment.

And I cannot but wholeheartedly agree with Ms von der Leyen, who stated that "***We cannot wait until the end of the pandemic to repair and prepare for the future***"! The EC President also described the European Health Union as an **opportunity** for "...27 countries (to) work together to detect, prepare and respond collectively."

And work together we must, to **build European capacities in research and development, to invest in innovative thinking and develop the necessary infrastructure**. We must increase the **resilience and competitiveness** of the European pharmaceutical and healthcare supply chains, so that our production capacity becomes more robust and the EU gains a degree of **geo-political autonomy** in the sector. Crucially, we must make the necessary investments to ensure that we are **better prepared for possible future pandemics**. Might I also add that I sincerely hope that the coordination and energy put into fighting Covid-19 across Member States, will repeat itself through the Health Union, with cooperation on other health challenges, such as **cancer**.

Despite or perhaps because of these difficulties, I believe that **European civil society** has the potential to be of great assistance to the European Commission and to Member States. We will not be able to create a European Health Union, **without an open and honest debate** at the Member State and local levels with **European citizens**. We need to agree on **what we really want, how competences will be shared and difficulties overcome**. To me, this sounds like a key topic for the Conference on the Future of Europe!

Thank you for your attention.