

Speech by Séamus BOLAND, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC
EESC plenary debate on One year from the start of the war in Ukraine – Impact of the war on people in Ukraine and in the EU, linked to the adoption of EESC resolution on '*Ukraine - One year after the Russian invasion – the European Civil Society Perspective*', with **Oleksandra Matviichuk**, Head of the Centre for Civic Liberties, and **Lora Pappa**, Founder and President of the Greek NGO METAdrasi – Action for Migration Development
23 February 2023

Esteemed guests, dear colleagues,

When thinking about my presentation, I remembered a speech given in **2017** by the **former President of the European Council, Donald Tusk**. It was a very personal and emotive speech, in which he stated and I quote: "*For me, the Second World War is not an abstraction. The road I took to school every day led through the ruins of the burnt city of Gdansk*", end of quote.

I find that these words, spoken on the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, echo the reality that History and War are above all about individuals, communities and nations. And it is my firm belief that **civil society organisations**, like the ones that we all represent here at the Committee, will always be at the **centre of efforts to help people**, as we have seen in Ukraine.

With the help of CSOs, EU countries are currently hosting 8 million Ukrainian refugees. Volunteers in these organisations have saved lives, at the same time as risking their own lives. And CSOs should get much more credit from the EU for the vital work that they have been carrying out over the last year.

It is for this reason, that in the draft resolution to be adopted this morning, we call for an **EU mechanism to empower civil society, notably our Ukrainian partners**. Without doubt, they need more funding and assistance to coordinate their activities and to effectively participate in EU civil society networks. As the House of European Civil Society, it is our moral obligation to enlist the support of the European Institutions to help them.

Ladies and gentlemen, I mentioned earlier that **History and War** are about individuals, communities and nations. Unfortunately, they are also about **States, regions and realpolitik**. And here, there are a number of dangers. Firstly, there is a very real danger, that we are returning to a world of 'might is right'. If Ukraine fails to win this war and to regain its lost territory, then Putin will understand that his actions could be repeated in Moldova or in Baltics.

There are already rumours that **Russia is amassing half a million soldiers for a Spring offensive**. There are also clear signs that the Kremlin is **militarizing the economy**, with **military production running at 24 hours per day** in 3 shifts. Even the country's main tank manufacturer has enlisted prisoners to meet orders.

Equally worrying, is the militarisation of the consciousness of the Russian people. And although it took Hitler 5 years to achieve this in Nazi Germany, the message relayed daily to Russians is that "**Russia is fighting for its survival against an encroaching West**". This message is used as a **tool for repression**, even though I am sure that a great many conscripts are wondering what exactly Russia is fighting for.

At the **regional level**, it has to be said that the **EU was unprepared to deal with such military aggression**. And despite the unity of Member States during Brexit and Covid, there is a real fear that in a protracted war, there could be a return to national solutions. After all, the perception of emergency from the war is higher the closer one is to the border with Ukraine and Russia.

And this is why it is imperative that however long this war continues, the **EU remains steadfastly united**, in both its **rhetoric and actions, behind the values of democracy, freedom and human rights**.

For these precise reasons, in the draft resolution we express our support for the resolution of the European Parliament, which calls for **recognizing the Russian Federation as a State sponsor of terrorism**. We also voice our support for the EP resolution in favour of establishing a **special international tribunal on crimes of aggression against Ukraine**. The EU should take the lead on international assistance in the investigation of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. It is also imperative that the **Wagner Group is included within the EU terrorist list**.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to end with another quotation from **Donald Tusk**, who in the same speech in 2017 stated "*I lived behind the Iron Curtain for half of my life, where it was forbidden to even dream about those values*".

Thank you for your attention.