

SPEECH by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland
Debate on the Rule of Law, the New Strategy for the Implementation of the Charter of
Fundamental Rights and the European Democracy Action Plan (linked to opinions
SOC/671 and SOC/672) with **Didier Reynders**, European Commissioner for Justice
EESC plenary session, 10 June 2021

Dear Commissioner Reynders, dear colleagues,

Next week will mark the anniversary of the signature of the '*Magna Charta Libertatum*', signed in **1215**. Although eight centuries is a long time ago and as an Irishman, it does not come naturally to me to praise the English (!), nonetheless, it was an extremely important treaty and directly relevant to our discussions today.

For the Magna Charta, established the principle of *rule of Law*, as opposed to *rule by Law* and this brought about a radical change to the **concept of power**. It determined that power does not derive from the 'top', but from the 'bottom'. And that any political system must be based on a **social pact**, where freedom and civil society prevail.

Some 806 years later, we are still discussing the **same principles and values**. Although now in an EU of 27, we are without the English!

I passionately believe that both the EU and the EESC have a **responsibility** to be very affirmative on this topic and to recall that **rights are not automatic** and that they **must be constantly defended**. One only needs to glance at the international pages of credible media outlets, to see the **constant limitations** to freedom of speech, restrictions to civil society and the centralisation of State power, across almost all continents.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has been widely used as an **excuse to reduce rights** and to make **democracy more vulnerable**. This is something that we have followed closely in the Diversity Europe Group, through recent events and studies. Indeed, according to a study we commissioned on the impact of Covid-19 on CSOs, it appears that **55 %** of the civil society respondents felt that the **centralisation of power** during the Covid pandemic had **hindered** their **political work**. Similarly, many CSOs felt voiceless during the pandemic, with **32%** of them stating that Covid-19 had a **negative effect** on their **ability to promote rights and democracy**. Even the **UN** last year called on States to ensure that their responses during the pandemic, were **in line with their human rights obligations and commitments**.

Of course, the key word in all of this is '**education**'. Citizens must understand that **democracy** can **improve their rights** and should be encouraged to become **active citizens**. There is also **limited knowledge of the existence and role** of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and **limited use by CSOs**. As is written in the draft EESC Opinion: "*We cannot wait for another decade to make the rights in the Charter a reality for the general public, civil society and public institutions*". Might I add that I **fully support** the proposal in the draft EESC Opinion, to include in the Charter' planning process, the **EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, the EU Disability Strategy and the LGBTIQ Strategy**. We must be both

forceful and **coherent** in all EU policies, **fighting disinformation** and defending our values both **within the EU** and in externally, in our **relations third parties**.

Thank you for your attention.