



Speech on "The impact of COVID-19 on fundamental rights and the rule of law across the EU and the future of democracy" by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus BOLAND

EESC plenary debate with Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, linked to the opinion SOC/691

23 February 2022

Dear Commissioner Jourová,

On behalf of the Diversity Europe Group, I would like to thank you for being with us today to discuss this extremely important subject, which touches on the very foundations of our living together.

As we have heard today, Covid-19 has been and still is impacting the life, safety, welfare and dignity of all of the people living in the EU. While addressing the sanitary situation and strengthening the resilience of European health systems remains a priority, we should not forget that the pandemic has put enormous pressure on the respect and people's access to fundamental rights. In a context already marked by an authoritarian shift and democratic backsliding, the pandemic has led to further limitations to fundamental rights and the rule of law. In some cases, these have been open-ended and escaping parliamentary scrutiny, and over time they may risk normalising restrictions to basic freedoms.

Among those who have seen their exercise of fundamental rights curtailed – and this leads me to the point that I want to share with you today – are civil society organisations (CSOs). You will remember that our Group discussed this topic at an extraordinary meeting with your contribution on 5 November last year. We also requested an EESC commissioned study on "*The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space*".

Those who are not familiar with the work of CSOs might wonder: why commission a study pertaining to the protection of both fundamental rights and civic space? The reason is simple: being independent from the State and the market, but concerned with areas of common interest, CSOs are a key pillar of public life. Independent CSOs enable citizens to act collectively to further areas of common concern. They contribute to the promotion of European values, hold decision-makers to account, provide safety nets for individuals and local communities and drive societal innovation, for instance in the field of the green and digital transition!

And while our study reveals that the public image of CSOs has improved due to their rapid response during the first waves of the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of surveyed CSOs report a deterioration of their operating environment. They also report reduced access to and sustainability of funding, reduced access to decision-makers, in addition in outright threats and attacks.

In this context, it is not enough to recognize that a vibrant and open civic space is a precondition to maintaining the rule of law and a healthy democracy. CSOs must be supported in their missions with sustainable and simplified access to funding. In addition, public authorities should be systematically incentivised to engage with and involve civil society organisations, to name only some of the most pressing issues.

Dear Commissioner, dear colleagues, thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to sharing the results of our study with you in the coming weeks.