



Speech by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland

Conference on 'Civil society organisations: Key actors for the future of Europe', organised by the Diversity Europe Group in partnership with Civil Society Europe and with the support of the EESC's Liaison Group and Associational Life Category

Brussels, 5 November 2021

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome you to this conference and it is my particular pleasure that we have co-organised it with **Civil Society Europe**, with the support of the EESC's **Liaison Group** and **Associational Life Category**. As goes the Irish proverb "Ní neart go chur le chéile", which in English translates as "*There is no strength without unity*"!

I find it particularly fitting that our first joint event will focus on the **future** and notably, on the **role of civil society organisations in shaping this future**. And I cannot emphasise enough, both the extent of the challenges facing European societies today and the necessity for civil society cooperation, in order to overcome these difficulties.

To illustrate this, I would like you to imagine that you are standing **in front of a precipice**. I apologise in advance for a somewhat unorthodox speech, but I find that visualising things helps to put them into perspective.

So, you are standing in front of a precipice. It is very **deep precipice** with many layers, each one representing a **challenge to European societies**. We can say that the first layer represents the socio-economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, increased poverty and public debt. The second layer, we will call the **political crisis**, with threats to liberal democracy, fundamental rights and a shrinking civic space. Both the socio-economic fallout and the political crisis are existing problems which have been **exacerbated** by Covid-19. The third layer will be the **global Climate urgency** and the **EU's green transition**. The fourth and final layer, we will call the **EU's digital transition**.

Now, the first thing that we will all want to do, is to find a way over this precipice. We want to get across to the other side, we want to **move on!** And in my imaginary scene, an **archway** over the precipice does exist. It is composed of **civil society organisations**, one next to the other **working together**. And this archway of CSOs leads to '**The Future**'. Crucially, the instruments in which the CSOs have recently put their hopes and aspirations, are the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)** and the **National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)**!

I remember that in previous speeches, I have referred to civil society as being the '**Guardians of the Common Good**'. CSOs are very determined, innovative and resourceful, often with strong local networks and expertise. And they have a key role as **social and economic innovators**, in a sense 'gluing' our communities together. What is certain, is that faced with the four layers of challenges that I have

already mentioned, CSOs want to claim their rightful place, in **shaping, delivering and improving our common European future.**

I would like to add that for the Diversity Europe Group, this topic of civil society engagement and participatory democracy has been at the heart of our **identity and work** for many years. Most recently, at a high level conference on **12 March this year**, when we explored the role of civil society organisations during and after Covid-19. This morning we will hear the first results of a **study** requested by our Group on "*The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space*". And only yesterday, I spoke on the role of civil society in **democratic checks and balances**, at a successful event of the EESC's Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law Group.

Ladies and gentlemen, during the course of the today's event, you will also have the opportunity to exchange on **national and European experiences of participatory democracy**. And of course, after this conference, there will be **conclusions and recommendations** which will be drafted and sent to all participants. Nonetheless, in order to stimulate the day's discussions, allow me **highlight to two specific issues.**

The first, relates to the numerous **missed opportunities in effectively involving civil society organisations in the European Union project.** Article 11 of the Treaty on the European Union raised our expectations that civil society would become privileged interlocutors, working in direct partnership with the European Institutions. However, those expectations have not borne fruit. There is **not enough structured civil society partnership and dialogue** on EU policy-making. And there are **too many quantitative and qualitative differences** in this dialogue, depending on the policy area, European Institution and Member State.

For this reason, I would argue that the time has now come to **better structure the role and access** of European civil society, in order for these actors to **unlock their full potential.** Hence, during the course of this conference, you will hear two proposals. The first concerns the establishment of a **European Statute for Associations**, following the conclusions of an EESC Information Report proposed by Group III. The second relates to the creation of an **EU Civil Society Strategy.**

The second issue that I would like to stress, relates to the **future** and the **opportunities** provided by the **National Recovery and Resilience Plans** and the **Conference on the Future of Europe.** In both cases, there has to be a greater sense of **urgency and boldness** by civil society, the European Institutions and Member States. For example, in the case of the recovery plans, there is an increasing recognition today that economic and social recovery will be harder than originally expected. Recovery is losing **momentum.** We have steep rises in food and energy prices and we are moving into a '**shortage economy**'. We also have **stagflation** – with both high inflation and stagnation rates. Unfortunately, we have to admit that Covid-19 is not over and that our economies and societies will be negatively impacted for several years, despite the 'Next Generation EU Recovery Plan'. In this context, it is imperative that civil society is effectively involved in the **co-design, co-implementation and co-assessment** of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. I would like to make a particular plea for the **Social Economy** to be better involved, as an alternative to 'for-profit' business models of growth.

This necessity to '**seize the moment**' applies particularly to the **Conference on the Future of Europe.** European civil society must have a key role in **shaping our common future** and in '**building back**

better'! Personally, I see the Conference on the Future of Europe as a huge test for the European Institutions, on whether they can effectively liaise with citizens. And unfortunately there has been limited interest in the Conference outside those directly involved. **National media** could make a lot more effort in this regard. But one point which is clear to me, is that after the Conference on the Future of Europe, it will be for civil society to **pick up the pieces** and to implement what has been recommended by the Citizens' Panels! We had exactly the same situation with citizen's panels in Ireland: organised civil society was sidelined during the process, but we had to do all the work after the citizen's panels were dissolved.

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I will bring my introductory remarks to a close by recalling what the EU does best when faced with crises: it **'muddles through'**. But if we go back to our precipice and the layers of challenges, **I don't think that 'muddling through' is good enough anymore**. I want to see the EU taking a **'leap of faith' across that precipice** and **hand-in-hand with civil society**. And that is what we as the Diversity Europe Group will be recommending to the Conference on the Future of Europe! Thank you for your attention.