

Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs Wednesday 4th November 2020

Opening Remarks by Maria Walsh MEP Fine Gael and EPP Group

Good morning Chairman and thank you to the committee members for the invitation. Given this is my first time attending this committee, I would like to wish the committee the very best in its work and I look forward to cooperating with the committee at what is a very important time for the European Union.

I am pleased the committee have identified some important issues facing the EU for discussion today, including Brexit, Migration, Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights and the Future of Europe.

I want to briefly explain to the committee what areas I have specific influence and access to. In the Parliament, I sit on three committees; Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Committee on Fisheries and Committee for Civil, Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. I am also a member of the Delegation for relations with the United States and am also co-chair of the LGBTI Intergroup as well as an active member of the Mental Health Alliance.

Many of the discussion points you have raised today come under the remit of the Civil, Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee. On the topic of Migration, as members will be aware the New Pact on Asylum and Migration was presented by the Commission at the end of September. It is quite a comprehensive overhaul of the current migration system and policies. I am cautiously hopeful that the Council will be receptive to the ideas put forward on EU solidarity, but in my opinion there are definite humanitarian aspects which are lacking; creating legal and safe pathways for asylum seekers and having translators to support each citizen when they arrive safely. I have proposed and included a number amendments calling on the Council and Commission to fund not just physical support for citizens, but also mental health support which I believe is a basic right to any and all citizens.

The Parliament has discussed migration consistently since the crisis began. What citizens are living through right now is simply not adequate. We have been constantly kept abreast of the developments in the Greek islands and have had many discussions with the Commission, NGOs and the Greek authorities on what the EU is doing about the tragic state of reception facilities present there.

On Brexit, Chief Negotiator Barnier has expressed some hopeful language in the most recent round of talks; although the Parliament remains slightly less hopeful. A No-Deal Brexit continues to be the most profitable option for the UK Prime Minister and so we are not yet convinced they will shift their mindset in the coming weeks. As you are fully aware, the Irish government and the EU institutions have continued to prepare for every Brexit scenario. The biggest confusion will be about the situation along the border with Northern Ireland, which of course the UK government seems not to have considered much as of yet. As a member of the Fisheries Committee I have met with a number

of fishing organizations in Midlands-North-West and in turn I have spoken with Michel Barnier and our Commissioner of Oceans and Fisheries Mr. Virginijus Sinkevičius to ensure my constituents' voices are being heard and working with our leaders here in Ireland to ensure our communities living within these communities are able to access as much of the €5 billion Brexit Recovery Fund available to our country.

On the issue of **Rule of Law** and the protection of Fundamental Rights within Europe, the Parliament has worked consistently on this throughout this year. The first Annual Rule of Law Report was released at the end of September and offers a comprehensive look at the issues and developments in each EU country in this regard. The pandemic has only amplified the extremists groups within the EU. We have seen xenophobia, racism, and homophobia rise throughout the Union. Rates of domestic violence and the online sexual abuse of minors have skyrocketed, as we have seen reflected here in Ireland also. The EU of course continues to strive to be a world-leader in the protection of fundamental rights, but huge gaps remain between the protection of different groups within our societies. We have, unfortunately, seen this at home too.

Finally, I would like to focus my final words on the Future of Europe. We have recently had a discussion on this within the EPP Group. Broadly speaking, the environment, migration, employment and skills and the protection of our democracy and fundamental rights are the big picture items in this discussion. These are issues which consistently come up in our debates in the Parliament and seem to be the ones where the divides within our societies become quite clear. These will also be the issues which we will see come up again and again at home, the issues which mobilise Irish citizens. We have seen the benefit of Citizens Dialogues in this country, and I have encouraged this citizen centered conversation within my Group. We need to work collectively at bridging the gap of misinformation of the EU, confusion of what happens in and on behalf of the Institutions and really engage with our communities on the essence of the European Peace Project.

I'll wrap up here so that we can have enough time for a full and fruitful discussion and thank you again for the time.

ENDS