



Opening Remarks

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introduction

Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you to the Chair and members of the Committee for the opportunity to address you today. Is mór agam a bheith anseo inniu agus táiman-bhuíoch as an gcuireadh labhairt libh inniu ar ábhair fhíorthábhachtach dúinne i nGluaiseacht na hEorpa in Éirinn, agus daoibhse mar choiste gan amhras.

It is a privilege to be here today to discuss the findings of European Movement Ireland's 2023 EU Opinion Poll, which is the first dedicated concurrent all-island opinion poll on European Union issues. I will also briefly discuss the launch of our new disinformation research project which may be of interest to members of this committee.

As we mark Ireland's 50 years of EU membership this year, as well as the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the findings of this year's EU Opinion Poll are even more significant. At the same time, we are looking towards 2024, which will mark a pivotal election for the European Parliament as well as European Movement Ireland's 70th anniversary as an organisation.

As I mentioned, this is the first time we have included Northern Ireland in the findings. Since Brexit, the relationship between people in Northern Ireland and the European Union has become uncertain, and we think it's important to

measure public sentiment towards the major issues affecting the relationship between the European Union and this island as a whole.

Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the EU Opinion Poll

Since 2013, European Movement Ireland has carried out annual independent polling on Ireland's relationship with the European Union.

Our efforts to track and analyse Irish sentiment towards the EU is unique and, I hope, valuable. The regularity with which we carry out this exercise allows us to not only capture a snapshot in time but also to track changes and present trends on Irish EU sentiment that have occurred over the years.

Bearing the usual caveats and health warnings around opinion polls in mind, I will highlight a few points from our results this year that members may find interesting.

Support for Ireland's continued membership of the EU remains stable and overwhelmingly positive at 88% in Ireland and 79% in Northern Ireland. Support was highest in the youngest and oldest age cohorts at 93% and 91%, respectively.

While support for Ireland remaining a member of the EU remains stable and overwhelmingly positive at 88% in Ireland, just 58% in Ireland believe the EU is moving in the right direction. There was a significant 9% increase in the number of people in Ireland unsure if the EU is moving in the right direction, a jump from 18% to 27% in one year, which is a salutary reminder that we cannot be complacent in terms of continually engaging with the public on Ireland's relationship with the EU.

However, more encouragingly, as we face into next year's European Parliament elections, 70% of people in Ireland say they could not be convinced that Ireland would be better off outside of the EU. Meanwhile, three-quarters of people in Northern Ireland 74% but only 51% in Ireland believe Northern Ireland should be represented in the European Parliament.

When polling on policy areas that Irish people wished for greater EU involvement in, there is also a clear demand for the EU to be more active in

policy areas important to Irish people. Almost one in three in Ireland would like to see an increased role for the EU in healthcare at 32% and housing at 28%. Housing was seen to be a higher priority for younger people. While in Northern Ireland environment topped the poll at 32%, followed by healthcare at 25%.

Regarding the question on a united Ireland, our poll found that about one in four people at 24% in Ireland, believe that there will be a united Ireland in the EU within ten years. This represents a 7% decrease since last year. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland almost half of the respondents at 45% believe that there will be a United Ireland in the EU within ten years.

What's surprising is the large jump of people in Ireland in one year – up from 43% to 58% - who do not believe that there will be a united Ireland in the next ten years. This is particularly noteworthy as the responses on this issue had previously remained relatively constant over the last three years, with about one-third of people in Ireland saying that they believed there would be a United Ireland in the EU.

Interestingly, regarding budgetary issues, our poll found that, more people in Ireland are satisfied at 43% than dissatisfied at 35% that Ireland pays more than it receives as a net contributor to the EU budget.

Of course, there has been much discussion on defence, security and neutrality and only last week we've seen Professor Louise Richardson present her Consultative Forum report to the Tánaiste. Around half those polled, 49% in Ireland, and 52% in Northern Ireland feel that Ireland should be part of increased EU defence and security cooperation. The number opposing participation is higher in Northern Ireland with 34% vs 28% in Ireland. Those aged 55+ both in Ireland and Northern Ireland were most likely to respond in favour of increased participation.

Our findings on media in Ireland showed that traditional media remains the critical source of information on EU issues, ranking highest for 1st mention for both Ireland at 61% and Northern Ireland at 62%. Social media ranked in second place for both jurisdictions so similar findings both North and South on this topic.

Finally, in Ireland, our poll reports an equal division of trust between the Irish Government at 50% and the EU at 50%. In Northern Ireland, 44% trust the EU, compared to 34% for the Irish Government and 22% for the British Government. In Ireland, those aged 18-34 were most likely to trust the EU, while in Northern Ireland, those between 18-34 were most likely to trust the Irish Government.

To sum up, I would say that overall, the survey reveals stable and overwhelmingly positive support for Ireland's continued EU membership, though some concerns exist about the EU's future direction for our 2023 poll.

Disinformation Research Project

I would like to move on now to discuss European Movement Ireland's ambitious new research project, of which the first findings were published this month and follows on and supports the work we're doing on our annual polling. This goal of this research is to understand the impact of disinformation on Irish social media discourse.

Disinformation poses a serious threat to Ireland's democracy, national security, and social cohesion. Disinformation campaigns seek to manipulate public opinion and can undermine free and fair elections and other democratic institutions.

By understanding the nature of these disinformation threats, Ireland can take measures to safeguard its democratic processes, monitor risks to national security, and build a more resilient society.

Disinformation can be defined as false information that is shared deliberately online. It is often used to sow confusion around different issues and create conflict. One challenge we collectively face when disinformation goes viral online is that it is often too late to counteract the damage done at that stage.

We only need to examine disinformation's impact on the COVID-19 pandemic to understand its influences. Disinformation led to fewer people getting vaccinated and divided communities. This was reflected in our poll two years ago when 45% of respondents said that they had confidence in the EU's vaccine strategy.

A core theme emerging from EM Ireland's analysis is how disinformation rhetoric exploits division and grievances within Irish society, for example, on issues such as NATO membership and the digital euro.

Another theme is how language inflames anti-immigrant prejudice – e.g. by scapegoating Ukrainian refugees for domestic problems as we've seen in our analysis

Together, these themes reveal how disinformation erodes complex debates. The narratives present an 'Us vs Them' binary—the people against the elites and nationals against foreigners.

This fragments public discourse, degrades trust in institutions and risks undermining Ireland's democratic culture over time.

Within the last year, we have seen the rise and use of Generative AI. To tackle disinformation within Irish society, automation will not be enough.

A balanced combination of technology and human oversight is needed. Therefore, no single actor can tackle disinformation alone. We would like to thank Minister Catherine Martin and her departmental colleagues for setting up the National Counter Disinformation Strategy Working Group.

We would also like to thank the different academic researchers, fact-checkers, platforms, government agencies, citizen groups and other experts who regularly share best practices and insights on evolving disinformation with us.

To maximise impact of this project, European Movement Ireland as an NGO has adopted an evidence-based strategy grounded in research.

Understanding how disinformation spreads and affects communities is vital. At European Movement Ireland, citizens are at the centre of the work that we do. We will be ensuring the development of tailored awareness campaigns and

literacy programs within our area of expertise of the European Union to build societal resilience.

It is also imperative to continue collaboration with media outlets and civil society to facilitate access to trusted sources of factual information.

Finally, I want to stress to this committee that is vital that NGOs be supported in their efforts to tackle this issue. With our community ties and hyperlocal expertise, NGOs are indispensable allies in this important fight against disinformation.

I thank you again for the opportunity to address this committee, and I look forward to your questions.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

ENDS