

Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence, Peter Burke, TD

Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

07 February 2024

Opening Statement

I am very pleased to be back before the Committee and its Members this morning to brief on the work of the General Affairs Council.

I attended the most recent meeting of the Council last week in Brussels on 29 January. This was the first meeting of the Council under the **Belgian Presidency** and Foreign Minister Lahbib, as is customary, began with a presentation of the **priorities** under their Presidency which has adopted the overall theme of “protect, strengthen, prepare”. Ireland welcomes and support the Belgian Presidency programme and particularly its emphasis on both promoting and strengthening European competitiveness and upholding the Rule of Law.

Before proceeding, I should also extend a word of praise to the Spanish Presidency which achieved real progress in a number of important areas during their Semester and in particular on Enlargement, with the decision to open accession negotiations with both Ukraine and Moldova at the December European Council, and also on Migration where political agreement was reached between the Parliament and Council on the Migration and Asylum Pact after lengthy negotiations. This latter agreement represents a real political advance which will hopefully equip the EU to be better able to manage more efficiently the difficult migration situation confronting all Member States.

The two main substantive items for discussion at the Council were the Commission's legislative package for Defending European Democracy and a review of four Member States under the annual rule of law dialogue.

On the **Defending European Democracy** proposals, while there was a broad welcome for the Commission's package, some concerns were expressed in relation to a proposed directive aimed at regulating interest representation by third countries within the Union. Ireland shares these concerns as the proposed directive would potentially involve a lowering of the standards which we apply domestically in relation to lobbying and the registering of lobbying interests. The divergence in approaches pursued by Member States on this issue was recognised as an obstacle and the Commission have undertaken to do further work to try and address this.

Under the **Rule of Law** item, four Member States – Italy, France, Croatia and Spain – provided updates and responded to questions regarding their 2023 Rule of Law report. Ireland very much welcomes the fact that the Annual Rule of Law Report and regular GAC dialogues are now an established part of the EU's toolkit in reviewing and reinforcing rule of law standards across the Union. It is a valuable opportunity to engage in peer review with other Member States and learn from their experience as well as reaffirming how respect for the rule of law remains a cornerstone of our Union.

Under **Any Other Business** at the Council, Slovenia and Germany presented a non-paper on extending the use of QMV in relation to the accession process. Specifically, the intention is that decisions on the opening of individual clusters and chapters in the accession process would in future be taken by QMV rather than by unanimity as at present.

The Committee will be aware that Ireland has recently become an Observer member of the Group of Friends on QMV in the EU CFSP, on the basis that we recognise there is now a growing discussion about moving to greater use of QMV within the CFSP as part of the Union preparing itself for future Enlargement and we believe it is in our interests to follow developments in this area closely.

We are supportive of the intention behind the German and Slovenian initiative as it is clearly intended at improving the Enlargement methodology and we have also made clear that we are open to exploring ways in which greater use of QMV within the CFSP can be extended, within the parameters provided by the current Treaties.

Views still differ within the Council on any move towards greater use of QMV with quite a few Member States still hesitant about such a prospect. It is an area and evolving discussion to which the Council will need to return and which will also continue to be prioritised by the Belgian Presidency.

Ministers also looked ahead to the forthcoming **European Parliament elections**, with the Presidency organising a lunchtime discussion of how to promote increased turn-out at the elections in June. This is an issue of interest to all Member States and I appreciated the opportunity to discuss with colleagues both what are likely to be the predominant themes on citizens' minds when they go to the polls in June as well as how we can encourage increased turn-out, particularly among younger voters, and also deal with the very real threat posed by disinformation.

On the margins of the Council, I also had a short bilateral meeting, at his request, with the Hungarian State Secretary for EU Affairs, János Bóka. The

State Secretary wished to brief me on plans for the Hungarian EU Presidency which begins on 1 July and I, in turn, updated him on our own preparations and planning which are now well underway. It was also an opportunity to impress on the State Secretary our strong hopes that agreement could be found among all 27 Member States on future multi-annual funding for Ukraine at the extraordinary European Council on 1 February.

The General Affairs Council itself was not directly involved on this occasion in preparing the discussion on future funding for Ukraine and completion of the MFF medium-term review which took place at last week's European Council as it was an extraordinary Council and essentially a continuation of the discussion which took place and ended inconclusively at the December European Council.

I accompanied the Taoiseach to the European Council on 1 February and it was obviously very welcome that agreement was finally reached on the overall MFF medium-term review, including the €50 billion in multi-annual financing to Ukraine which is absolutely vital to ensure that Ukraine can continue to defend itself and resist Russia's unjust aggression. The agreement demonstrates both the strength and resilience as well as the value of EU unity while also making clear our determination to continue to provide full support and solidarity to Ukraine and its people.

Chair,

Many thanks again for the invitation to address the Committee today and for its attention and I would now be happy to respond to any questions you or Members may have.