



Opening Remarks

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Introduction

A Chathaoirleach agus baill an Choiste – is mór agam a bheith libh agus tá mé an-bhuíoch as an gcuireadh teacht chun cainte libh inniú ar ábhair fhíorthábhachtacha dúinne i nGluaiseacht na hEorpa in Éirinn, agus daoibhse mar choiste gan amhras. European Movement Ireland is the longest-established organisation working in European affairs in Ireland. Since 1954, our mission has been to develop the connection between Ireland and Europe and achieve greater public understanding of and engagement with the European Union and our European partners. This year marks a special 70th anniversary for us.

I'm delighted to be joined here today by my colleagues: our new DCEO Policy and Research Lorna Hayes, and Rory Harte our Head of Strategy, who is leading on our Disinformation Project.

It is a privilege to be here today to discuss the findings of European Movement Ireland's ongoing disinformation research project, and the work we're doing in advance of the European elections in June. Indeed, Cathaoirleach, if I may commend you and your committee for the foresight in taking such proactive engagement on such an important topic.

European Parliament Elections

As we approach these European elections, it is of vital importance that all stakeholders are aware of discourse around the EU, and European issues. EM Ireland is particularly conscious of public sentiment regarding the EU, and members of the committee will be familiar with our longstanding attitudinal polling, which provides us with a nuanced perspective on how people view the EU and our broader relationship with the EU. We note that in our research carried out in June 2023, 88% of respondents agreed that Ireland should remain in the EU. But, support for the EU can be mercurial, and we note the coarsening of language used around the EU and issues related to Europe since our last polling. While we're not in a position to pre-empt the results of our this year's poll, which is currently being prepared, we are conscious that this shift in discourse is likely to have an impact. We look forward to sharing the findings of the poll with the committee in advance of the elections.

European Elections

EM Ireland is mindful of our role as an important source of information regarding the elections. This year, our work will focus on three separate cohorts; for young people and students, we will be carrying out information sessions in third level institutions in each European constituency. As an apolitical organisation, our work will be focused on providing information about voting, candidates, the role of the Parliament, and answering any questions that arise. For a more general audience, we will be carrying out townhalls in Cork, Dublin and Galway to provide a forum for the public to discuss issues with experts and members of the media. Finally, we are very aware of the important role that civil society play in the democratic process. For these elections, we are providing a coordination platform so that organisations can plan their activities and schedules in a way that supports a broader sectoral approach.

It's important to note, we are mindful of the excellent work of the Electoral Commission in regards to these elections, and we are conscious that our work compliments their own.

Disinformation

I will now hand over to my colleague Rory who will talk you through our Disinformation project particularly as it pertains to our election-focused work.

Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee; EM Ireland are very conscious of our role as a custodian of Ireland's relationship with the EU. A core part of this relationship is a trustworthy and clear information environment. This is especially true as we approach these crucial European elections. Since 2023, we have carried out programmes aimed at buttressing Ireland's information ecosystem in relation to issues regarding the EU, and examining the impact of disinformation online so that we as a society can address these issues head on.

First, let me address how our work supports Ireland's information ecosystem. We are very cognisant of the strong network of academia, industry and civil society working to support media literacy and giving people living in Ireland the critical skills they need to evaluate the information they come across online. Through the working group coordinated by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media that is leading on the development of Ireland's National Counter Disinformation Strategy, and organisations like Media Literacy Ireland, the European Digital Media Observatory Hub and the Future of Journalism school in DCU, theJournal.ie, the Hope and Courage collective, among many others, incredible work is being done in Ireland to push back against the tides of false information.

We see our role in EM Ireland as to support the work of all organisations who want to provide accurate information about Europe to the public. We recognise our own long-standing expertise on the EU, how it functions, and the role that Ireland plays. We also recognise that not everyone has the same access to resources as we do. So, especially in advance of these upcoming elections we are providing opportunities for researchers, journalists and those working on EU issues to come to us, if there's anything that they aren't sure of, want to check, need advice on. We can and will provide expertise and access to resources to ensure that where possible, people can feel confident that the information they're putting out is correct.

We note through engagement with stakeholders in academia, industry, civil society and at governmental levels, that there is a well-developed network of organisations carrying out innovative research into disinformation channels and narratives in Ireland. Our own Disinformation Research programme is focused on examining the impact of disinformation on how people in Ireland discuss issues related to the EU in online spaces. Using thematic and linguistic methodologies, our work cross-references disinformation narratives against Irish social media content, to explore how these issues are being framed online.

For instance, in our most recent research paper, published this week, we note a continuing focus on migration, and a significant amount of discussion around the Israel-Gaza conflict.

Most disinformation themes are localised – in the US, migration is tied to the southern border. In the UK, it is tied to channel crossings. In Ireland, it is linked to housing and the role of government. In our most recent data, we see how discourse on these topics is coarsening – delegitimising terminology about those coming to Ireland is predominant, while the use of legitimate terminology is becoming less prevalent. More generally, sentiment around migrants and those seeking international protection is becoming more negative.

Our data also draws attention to the role of language around the war in Gaza. Antisemitic tropes echoing disinformation narratives are common, as is language questioning Israel's motivations. There is evidence of language being used to frame Hamas as puppets who do not have agency in the conflict. This in itself attributes a level of victimhood to them.

Understanding how disinformation affects communities is vital. We use our results to develop tailored awareness campaigns and support our work in media literacy. Moving forward, it's vital that NGOs in Ireland are supported to carry out work in this area in collaboration with media outlets and civil society more broadly, to facilitate access to trusted sources of factual information. As we continue this ongoing project, we look forward to building further partnerships and networks to support the effectiveness of our efforts.

I think all of us here recognise the importance of these elections. We are well aware that voter turnout for European elections has been on the decrease, with Ireland's voter turnout historically being below the European average. Nevertheless, we are heartened by reports from the European Parliament that voter interest is on the rise.

A thriving European democracy relies on increased voter turnout and informed and engaged citizens both in Ireland and across the EU – work which is a fundamental part of EM Ireland's mission. EM Ireland has played a vital role in informing the public and encouraging participation in the EU's democratic process over the past 70 years and we look forward to continuing this work into the future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address you, and we look forward to your questions.

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