**Mikuláš Bek,** *President-in-Office of the Council***.** – Mr President, honourable Members, Vice-President of the Commission. Fundamental rights and freedoms, political and media pluralism, the rule of law and free, fair and transparent elections are key elements of our democracies. While participation in politics can take many shapes, political parties remain at the core of political life and play an essential role in engaging citizens and in promoting a healthy confrontation between different – sometimes opposing – views of society and the economy.

Protecting an open and transparent political system, free from hostile interferences, is a challenge that should compel all of us to take action. This is also a task for the EU as a whole, and has led the Czech Presidency to make the resilience of democratic institutions one of its key priorities.

To begin with, I can reaffirm that the Czech Presidency is fully committed to working with this House to reach a political agreement on the revision of the Regulation on the statute and financing of European political parties and foundations by the end of this year. This proposal is one of the two main elements of the Reinforcing democracy and integrity of elections package, presented by the Commission, which aims to strengthen European democracy.

The revised Regulation will increase the visibility of European political parties and strengthen their transparency requirements. In particular, the Council believes that the crucial element to limiting the risks of foreign interference in our electoral processes is to restrict the possibility of contributions to European political parties only to Member States, to member parties from the European Union.

We are also fully committed to making progress on another key proposal on the transparency and targeting of political advertising. This proposal aims to increase transparency and accountability on political advertising and to reveal the mechanisms behind the targeting and amplification techniques used in political advertising. It also covers campaigning activities at all levels, including cross-border campaigning activities, which are clearly of particular interest to this House.

The Czech Presidency is working with a view to finding an agreement within the Council by the end of this year to allow for negotiations with the Parliament to start as soon as possible.

Any interference in our political processes is unacceptable, particularly in the current geopolitical climate, and in the run up to the 2024 European Parliament election. Any false narratives, including anti-European ones, information manipulation and interference in our democracies cannot, and should not, be tolerated.

Let me be clear on this point: our fight against disinformation does not aim at suppressing diverging views, for instance, on the goals and directions of European integration. But our societies deserve to be able to make their own properly informed decisions, whether it is on health matters, on the political parties they choose to vote for, or on global events that directly or indirectly impact their lives.

The Council closely follows new initiatives by the Commission in this area and is actively involved in the implementation of existing ones, such as the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. We look forward to even more ambitious actions based on the whole of society approach, as we must all be together in this fight against propaganda and information manipulation.

Before concluding, let me stress once again our determination to protect scrupulously our core democratic values from any hostile interference, foreign or otherwise.

Thank you very much once again for your attention.