



The European Social Pillar is the real test for a Europe that protects

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Speaker

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Dear Vice-President McGuinness, dear Mairead,

Your Eminence Metropolitan Ignatios,

Your Excellency Nedzhmi Dabov,

Your Excellency Chief Rabbi Di Segni,

Ladies and gentlemen,

'Development is the new name of peace', said Pope Paul VI, for there is no true peace whenever people are cast aside or forced to live in dire poverty.

Now, you may know that I am a Catholic, educated by Jesuits in Italy. This schooling, this cultural background, influences my thinking and guides my actions.

But let me be clear: there is no hierarchy amongst religions, and I welcome with all my heart the representatives and citizens of different beliefs and philosophies present here. Social justice is an aspiration common to people of all faiths and value-based philosophies. Helping the poor and needy is a moral – if not also economic and social- imperative that we all share. If there is no solidarity, there is no social cohesion and thus no competitiveness.

Poverty alleviation is thus also part of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Nevertheless, across the European Union 24 % of all citizens are still touched by poverty, far from the reduction goal by 20 million of the EU2020 strategy. The economic crisis has had severe negative impacts across Europe, and even those in employment can be affected by poverty. Nearly one-tenth of employed persons aged over 18 in the EU are at risk of poverty.

Very concretely, this means that the EU needs to improve its social dimension right now.

The European Economic and Social Committee has been calling for an improved social dimension for a long time, and welcomed the Proclamation of a European Pillar of Social Rights as a first step.

The EESC dedicated many resources to shape the European Pillar and, because of our clear commitment to it, initiated debates with organised civil society in all 28 Member States during the consultation phase:

Close to 1,800 representatives of civil society organisations from a wide range of employers' organisations, trade unions and other civil society organisations, including faith based organisations and non-confessional philosophical organisations took part in the debates and their recommendations fed into the EESC's opinion.

One of the concrete outcomes: The protection of children from poverty was included in the Pillar's 20 principles. This shows how civil society organisations have a big role to play in shaping the social policies of Europe.

Now: Implementation will be the real test.

The EESC has asked for a roadmap for the Pillar's implementation and a clear division of tasks between the different actors. The EU can provide regulation and impetus, but Member States and civil society organisations are the ones which have to make sure these are implemented on the ground.

When we look at the European Institutions:

The Commission has proposed a social scoreboard to be used when issuing recommendations under the European Semester.

The Commission has also proposed a directive on work-life balance, a regulation on the creation of a labour market authority, a directive on transparent and predictable working conditions and a Council recommendation for access to social protection of workers and the self-employed.

The implementation of these legislative tools is, indeed, essential:

We followed the EPSCO Council on 21 June and welcome the agreements reached during that meeting on Work-Life balance, on the Directive on transparent and predictable working conditions and on the rules governing social security coordination.

The Member States – through their general approaches – have now allowed the Council to go ahead with negotiations with the European Parliament. This will hopefully pave the way for a final adoption of these legislative tools which constitute an important element of the Pillar.

For the EESC, the EPSCO's June decisions go in the right direction and offer a balanced and reasonable approach. And now let us see if during these further negotiations an even more ambitious approach might emerge.

We are for example observing with caution a tendency to water down or omit elements which might indeed provide a positive change for the work-life balance of parents and carers, such as a meaningful payment of parental leave. Furthermore, the non-transferability of the leave between parents can be a step towards promoting greater gender equality.

Thus: the level of vigilance of the EESC will not diminish: rather on the contrary!

In fact, we call, more than ever, for a concrete implementation of the Pillar. We are not only asking for the adoption of the proposals adopted by the Commission. We also continue to push for ambitious texts that can protect European citizens that have to face social and economic changes.

The EESC has issued opinions or is in the process of issuing opinions on the Commission's proposals, supporting these initiatives but also suggesting improvements.

For the EESC it remains clear that the only 'option' we cannot afford to opt for is non-action. This would mean turning a blind eye to the needs of our citizens.

And citizens will respond by turning their frustrations in two directions- both against vulnerable groups and against those in power.

These frustrations will feed anti-democratic voices. We are seeing the dangerous results in elections across Europe and internationally – also in my home country, where the government in power seems to be turning against the weakest, those who need our hope and solidarity the most.

So we must redouble our efforts to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, and we must ensure adequate funding for it.

I have explicitly called for the European Pillar of Social Rights to be taken into account in the Multiannual Financial Framework, as well as in regional cohesion.

We also called for a minimum share of 30% of the future new European Social Fund to be allocated to the "social inclusion component", equalling the percentages the new ESF+ devotes to "employment" and "education". This supports for example the similar position in a paper on the MFF by Caritas Europe, who I am happy to see represented in the next panel.

The EESC also called for appropriate taxation policies to allow for increased social investment. Investments in the welfare state are not only a source of social progress, but are also economically and fiscally profitable.

In this regard, we must support the social economy. Private actors can be forceful partners in the delivery of effective social services. This is why I have welcomed, on the 6th of June, the Commissioner's proposal on the InvestEU programme, which will trigger 650 billion Euros in additional investments over the seven years of the next MFF and will concentrate of four windows of opportunities: sustainable infrastructure; research, innovation and digitalisation; small and medium-sized businesses as well as social investment and skills.

Finally, we must enhance cooperation with civil society organisations, including faith-based ones, to help the

implementation of the pillar on the ground.

We must empower our citizens to strive towards a rEUnaissance.

As Pope Francis stated in his Address to the Heads of State and Government for the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome: 'Europe finds new hope when man is at the centre and the heart of her institutions. I am convinced that this entails an attentive and trust filled readiness to hear the expectations voiced by individuals, society and the peoples who make up the Union.'

I am proud that the EESC, the House of Civil Society, can play a role in this process of people-centred listening and of action, making a new rEUnaissance possible.

Thank you.