



23
TERM OF
OFFICE 25

Oliver Röpke
President of the EESC



President Oliver Röpke Speech on "Building a Strong Social Europe across Borders" at High-Level Conference on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights

[check against delivery]

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Vandembroucke,

Dear Chair Pîslaru,

Dear President Roy,

Distinguished participants,

- It is my turn to warmly thank the Belgian Presidency for reaffirming, through this conference, the key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and for launching vital conversations about their future implementation.
- The European and Economic and Social Committee has always been a strong ally in elaborating and implementing the Social Pillar and safeguarding sustainable competitiveness. A regular and meaningful dialogue with civil society can only strengthen the EESC's commitment to a strong European Social model.

- We remain strongly committed to moving forward the EU's social agenda. EU institutions have all our support in turning the Social Rights Pillar into reality.
- I would also take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and successes achieved by the European Commission, the Parliament and by the recent EU Presidencies that have left their imprint in the building of a more social and fairer Europe.
- And this is precisely what citizens and organized civil society expect from us. When asked about what the most important dimensions for the future of Europe are, Europeans mention first the economy, social justice and jobs (29%), and then climate change (24 %), and education and youth (24 %).
- With the European Pillar of Social Rights we are on the right track. By promoting social cohesion alongside economic prosperity, and by addressing inequalities and fostering opportunities for all members of society, social policy becomes the cornerstone of a thriving democracy, ensuring that no one is left behind.
- The Pillar has been very useful to navigate recent crises and today's megatrends and to address common employment, skills, and social challenges. It has also allowed for upward convergence in working and living conditions in the Union.
- That is why the Committee believes that the Pillar's implementation should remain a key priority. We look forward to the review of the Action Plan in 2025, and we will contribute to it.
- I already mentioned that climate change is among the most important matters for Europeans. Undoubtedly, the European Green Deal is one of the most ambitious initiatives ever undertaken by the European Union, which we fully support.
- However, we cannot afford the risk of 'too little, too late'. From the beginning, the EESC advocated for a European Green AND SOCIAL Deal. Among our concrete proposals to the Belgian presidency, we advocate for the establishment of a European Directive for Just Transition (of the world of work) .
- We also believe we should further strengthen dialogue on the use of Artificial Intelligence at the workplace and its development, procurement and deployment. The EESC is working



at the moment on several opinions on Artificial Intelligence, including on generative AI.

- Making the transitions just also entails empowering everyone with good skills. All adults, especially the most vulnerable, should have the right to access effective, quality and inclusive training, paid educational leave, and guidance and counselling.
- For all these endeavours, we need adequate financial means and we need fiscal rules that allow the urgently needed investments. The EESC has recently emphasized the importance of investments in social areas, as they have a positive impact on economic growth, productivity, and competitiveness. The Committee also worries that tight budgets might slow down progress on important goals like fighting poverty and climate change.
- Finally, I would like to say some words about the strategic importance of the Pillar of Social Rights beyond our current EU borders.
- Without any doubt, the EU integration process of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership represents a geostrategic investment in the future.
- To be clear: The integration of candidate countries starts not with the accession, it starts now. Governments in the candidate countries need to create opportunities for employment and economic growth. They need to empower Social Partners and to guarantee social dialogue and collective bargaining. And they have to equally strengthen civil society organisations and to safeguard civic space and a vibrant dialogue.
- Our Committee is accompanying their organised civil society in order to be able to provide their valuable input in this process.
- Moreover, to put in practice a gradual integration of candidate countries into the EU, we have launched, at the Committee, a flagship initiative to involve social partners and civil society representatives from EU candidate countries in the regular work of the Committee.
- Outside or inside the European Union, we cannot advance the social dimension without a proper involvement of social partners and relevant civil society organisations in the designing, implementation and evaluation of policies.
- Social dialogue plays a key role in shaping economic, labour and social policies that



promote the upward convergence of living and working conditions.

- In addition, the dialogue with civil society organisations plays an essential role in amplifying the voice of the most vulnerable groups in our society and to give concrete responses to the diverse needs of the people in Europe.
- Collective action has a great potential for transformation. We've come a long way since the proclamation of the Pillar of Social Rights. Yet, we have to continue our journey and fully implement the Pillar. It is only with ambition that we will align people's aspirations with actions.
- The La Hulpe conference must be another important milestone in our joint endeavour!
- Thank you very much for your attention!

