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Oliver Röpke
President of the EESC



European Economic
and Social Committee

President Oliver Röpke Speech at “Porto Social Forum 2023”

“Check against delivery”

*Dear Prime Minister Costa,
Dear Commissioner Schmit,
Dear Vice-President Pereira,
Dear Minister Godinho,
Distinguished speakers and guests,*

- It is an **honour and a great pleasure** to be joining you here today as the newly elected President of the European Economic and Social Committee.
- I am quite humbled but very proud that I can represent the voice of the European organised civil society at this Forum:
 - Firstly, because it shows that there is a **joint commitment** between decision-makers and civil society to work together for a more social future for EU citizens.
 - Secondly, because moving forward the EU's social agenda, where people are at the centre of any decision, is **one of my political priorities**.
- So for that, I would like to thank Prime Minister Antonio Costa. Thank you for the opportunity to be here.
- It is mostly thanks to you, dear Antonio Costa, that we have kept the momentum alive for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- Ladies and gentlemen,
- It has been two years since the EU leaders met here in Porto for the Social Summit. They agreed on ambitious targets and committed to building a Europe that works for all.
- Today, we meet here again to ensure that we are on track to achieve those targets and that we are actually making a difference in the lives of EU citizens.
- Looking back at where we were in 2021 and where we are today – I can say that we are going in the right direction. But **the job is far from done** – to give you one example, the 2022 employment rate in the EU was 74.6 %, while our target is 78 %.
- This is only one example, there is still a lot of work ahead of us, and therefore this Porto Social Forum comes so timely.

- There are also **new variables in the mix**, which were not there two years ago, and which cannot put our project on hold:
 - Europe recovering from the pandemic,
 - the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine,
 - the increase in the cost of living, high energy prices and inflation,
- All this had a major impact on those that are the most vulnerable.
- Our first priority should **therefore focus on how to protect citizens in this new reality and how to ensure a strong social net and more social investment.**
- The second priority is how **to better prepare Europeans for the changes** brought by this new reality. Very rightly on the agenda of today's meeting is the **development of people's skills, especially in the context of the green and digital transitions.**
- I am sure we will hear a lot today about upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning – those are not just fancy words. They are key elements to ensure **a fair and just transition**, to create new opportunities and to adapt to **the digital age.**
- That being said, something where we need to put our heads together is how to **identify the right needs and develop the right skills for today's and tomorrow's workplaces.** We need to get it right, because people's lives and their future depends on it. Whether they can stay out of poverty, have quality jobs and fight social exclusion.
- Let me add that this challenge cannot be done without the **social partners and civil society organisations.**
- At the EESC, we believe that quality and inclusive training should not be a privilege but a **RIGHT** for all: **A skills guarantee** to offer the right to access quality and inclusive training for all. Let's not forget that especially low-skilled workers have the lowest participation in training, this has to be tackled immediately.
- We, the social partners and civil society, have the right tools for dialogue to support decision-makers and to promote the exchange of best practices.
- **All this is part of our European social model, which draws attention also beyond our borders, for instance in EU candidate countries. It is an important geopolitical lever and we should use it.**
- In this context, allow me to turn to **the EU's neighbourhood**, which is one of my key political priorities. Our focus is of course on the civil society, because healthy and vibrant civil society is a reflection of the state of democracy in a country.
- This is why we advocate for a well-functioning social and civil dialogue at national level as a key criterion for EU membership. We also intend to involve candidate countries in the daily work of our Committee.
- Building bridges with the civil society in these countries **is not about altruism, it is about our credibility. We can and we should share our experience**, but we can learn too. It is not a one way street.
- We cannot afford to grant candidate status to these countries and then leave them alone in the waiting room. We have to be proactive to support them in work towards the standards of the Social Pillar.
- This means concretely that the European Pillar of Social Rights must become the benchmark, in the sense of upward social convergence.
- As I said, I have taken a firm stand in involving civil society and social partners of neighboring countries already now in the daily advisory work of our Committee.



- I am glad to see that representatives of candidate countries are present today and I believe that this should become a systematic habit in our European discussions.
 - Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude: Social rights are the backbone of the EU's construction. European social partners and civil society are ready to stand next to EU institutions and Member States to nurture them.
 - We at the EESC have continuously supported the creation and subsequent implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights from day one.
 - I can assure you that we will not stop keeping the spirit of the Porto Commitment alive! You can count on our support!
 - **I thank you for your attention** and I look forward to the discussions at this Forum that will, I am sure, **put people's well-being and rights at the centre of our policies.**
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