

Seminar on the Reform of the European Social Charter
Helsinki, Finland, 8 February 2011

Madame President,
Deputy Secretary General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I. The European Social Charter (revised) – a major human rights treaty aimed at safeguarding the social rights of European citizens

I am very proud to be here with you today to address the future of social rights in Europe and the commitment of the Council of Europe member states to the protection of these rights.

I welcome this seminar because I also believe that the European Social Charter itself must continue to evolve in order to remain a genuine reference point for member states in the medium and long term. In the current period of economic crises, the Charter is more relevant than ever. Poverty has increased throughout Europe, the gap between rich and poor has increased, the unemployment rate – especially for young people – has increased, and gender equality has decreased. This is the situation in Sweden, as well as in many other countries in Europe.

I was, therefore, very interested to hear Professor Matti Mikkola speak about the “Needs to strengthen the monitoring mechanism of social human rights”.

It is very important to continue work to encourage our member states to ratify and implement the revised European Social Charter, which contains articles about, for instance, protection against poverty and social exclusion, the right to housing and the right of workers to safe working conditions. It would be even better if we worked in conjunction with other international and European organisations, in particular the International Labour Organization and the European Union.

I believe that it was very important that the President of the Republic of Finland, Tarja Halonen spoke and was involved in the discussions at this seminar. It's not often that Presidents and Prime Ministers are involved in this type of conferences, when social items are discussed and when politicians, researchers and NGOs have the opportunity to meet each other.

The forthcoming anniversaries are a particularly good time for the implementation of the revised European Social Charter and its monitoring mechanisms. Let us start now, because it is necessary now for all citizens and for future generations – our children and grandchildren.

Moreover, we need to make sure that when we celebrate the anniversary of the European Social Charter, the celebration does not remain rhetoric. The best way to celebrate is with good practice.

II. The recent Parliamentary Assembly's decisions

The European Social Charter, which was opened for signature in 1961 and revised in 1996, is one of the most significant human rights treaties of the Council of Europe aimed at safeguarding the social rights of European citizens.

The European Social Charter monitoring mechanisms enable our member states to keep track of their progress in advancing towards a better life, guaranteeing rights and meeting the concerns of millions of people.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe welcomes the member states' strong support for this significant charter. Last week, on 28 January 2011, the Parliamentary Assembly held a debate and adopted the Resolution 1792 (2011) and Recommendation 1958 (2011) on the Monitoring of commitments concerning social rights. The Parliamentary Assembly invites the Council of Europe member states to continue promoting, at the European and national level, the signature, ratification and implementation of the European Social Charter and its Protocols.

With its Resolution 1792 (2011), the Parliamentary Assembly took another far-reaching political decision, namely, to hold joint debates on the situation of social rights and on the state of human rights every two years, the next occasion being in June 2011 during the Assembly's 3rd part-session. A report and a resolution on the Role of parliaments in the consolidation and development of social rights in Europe will be prepared by the Assembly's Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee. The Resolution 1792 shows the strong political support given by the Parliamentary Assembly to the protection of social rights in Europe, and its understanding of social rights as an integral, indivisible part of human rights.

The Parliamentary Assembly agreed that the ratification of the revised European Social Charter is an imperative that needs to be met by the member states. At the 2005 Warsaw Summit, the Heads of State and Government considered that the revised European Social Charter should be regarded as constituting the minimum core of social rights that all member states must guarantee.

I am absolutely convinced that the ratification of the revised European Social Charter and its Protocols must continue to be promoted at all possible levels. The implementation of the Charter must be further strengthened.

Member states should welcome the application of collective complaints procedures, as this is what true democracy is about – the right to express the citizens' concerns and the possibility to negotiate with public bodies various redress measures with a view to meeting those concerns. I am happy to mention today that the Parliamentary Assembly included in its recommendation a specific reference to the good practice in Finland in securing to national non-governmental organisations the right to submit such complaints. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Finland for taking this decision.