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OIB 93604401369

Zagreb, 11 November 2011

Conference:
"50 years of the European Social Charter: Accomplishments and social challenges for Croatia and Europe"

The Conference "50 years of the European Social Charter: Accomplishments and social challenges for Croatia and Europe" was held in the Old City Hall in Zagreb on Friday, 11 November 2011.

The Conference was attended by the President of the Republic of Croatia, Mr Ivo Josipovic, under whose auspices the Conference was organised, beside the Ministry of Economy, Labour and Entrepreneurship.

A special guest of the Conference was Mr Luis Jimena Quesada, President of the European Committee of Social Rights.

The Conference, organized by Pragma, intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the European Social Charter. The Republic of Croatia had signed the European Social Charter in 1999, and had ratified it in 2003.

The European Social Charter - an international treaty of the Council of Europe that defends economic, labour and social rights - after the European Convention on Human Rights, is the second most important document of the Council of Europe, and a kind of equivalent to the Convention.

It comprises a total of 31 rights. The Revised Charter replaces the Charter from the 1961, and her Additional Protocols. The Revised Charter confirms that during the time, awareness on social rights and the need for a stronger organization of the society of solidarity and social justice has increased in Europe.

In the context of the expected entry of Croatia in the EU, a more complex social and economic situation in Croatia and Europe, as well as the expected accession of Croatia to the Revised Charter - the Conference focused on the current application of the Charter and its role in creating a social state.

In the first part of the Conference, participants were greeted by the President of the Republic of Croatia, Mr Ivo Josipovic, Mr Milan Bandić, the Mayor of Zagreb, Mr Boris Sprem, the President of the City Assembly of Zagreb and Mr Ante-Zvonimir Golem, State Secretary for Health and Social Welfare and the delegate of the Vice President of the Croatian Government and the Minister of Health and Social Welfare, Mr Darko Milinovic.

President Josipovic said that he did not want the European Social Charter to remain "a dead letter on a paper". "Croatia is according to its Constitution, a welfare state, and has signed the revised European Social Charter, so I expect immediately - after the Parliamentary elections - this document to be ratified by the Croatian Parliament," said Josipovic.

„The City of Zagreb has not reduced social rights of its citizens because of the crisis and recession, but we tried to find better solutions in order to protect the citizens, especially the most vulnerable“, said the Mayor of Zagreb in his welcome speech.

In the working part of the Conference, Mr Luis Jimena Quesada, President of the European Committee of Social Rights, stressed in his speech that the European Social Charter is the most important pan-European treaty of social rights within the European System for the Protection of Human Rights.

Speaking about positive effects of applying the Charter in States Parties and the importance of monitoring its application through the reporting system and the system of collective complaints, Quesada emphasized: „the economic and financial crisis cannot be an excuse to reduce the standards already achieved“. And a better connection between institutions of the European Union and the Committee of Social Rights will provide a uniform approach to the protection of social rights in Europe.

It is extremely important to encourage all countries that have signed the European Social Charter, to accept the Revised Charter because it is more in line with current national legislation and elaborates in a better way the provisions of the Charter. "It is also important for Croatia to apply the adopted procedure of collective complaints and to ratify the Revised Charter," concluded Quesada.

Mr Vlado Puljiz gave an interesting historical overview of the development of social models in Croatia and Europe, as well as the legacy of social policy and social rights in Croatia. He pointed to the necessity of supporting and strengthening the Charter, its control mechanisms and its promotion among the general public because it is "a promoter and a guarantor of social sustainable development." He also alerted to a certain antagonism between the need to accept greater social rights due to new social risks, on the one hand, and strong requirements - due to the impact of the economic point of view - to cut social rights, that is the so-called "economic reductionism", on the other side.

Mr Siniša Zrinščak from the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, noted that the Charter is still not perceived in public as an important strategic document and an instrument of social development. He particularly emphasized the role of civil society as an innovator in identifying the social needs of individual groups and in the development of new social services, allowing civil society organizations to get a significant role in the implementation of the Charter.

Ms Vesna Mastela Bužan, head of department in the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of Croatia, speaking about the new legislative solutions that are at the basis of the reform of the system of the social welfare in Croatia, pointed out the importance of three policy documents: Strategy of the development of the Social Welfare system, the Social Welfare Act and the Plan of Deinstitutionalization and Transformation of Social Welfare institutions and the Joint Inclusion Memorandum.

Ms Anny Brusić, the Director in the Croatian Employers' Association, giving an overview of the economic situation in Croatia, has tried to point out the role of employers in creating a democratic

society. She stressed the importance of strengthening the private sector, because the entrepreneurs create jobs. "As well as it is difficult to talk about democracy without social rights, it is hard to talk about improving living and working conditions of workers and citizens, without economy", said Brusic.

Mr Mladen Novosel, the President of the Association of Independent Croatian Unions, pointed out that, economically impoverished and socially disadvantaged persons who are often focused on survival, are excluded from community life and have no real opportunity to influence policy-making. Therefore the role of trade unions in a clear and reasoned engagement in ratifying the Revised Charter by the Republic of Croatia.

Ms Gordana Dragičević from the Ministry of Economy, Labour and Entrepreneurship, in her speech referred to the reporting system and cooperation of Croatia with the bodies of the Council of Europe in connection with the Charter.

Ms Romana Galić, Assistant Head of the Office for Social Protection and Persons with Disabilities of the City of Zagreb, presenting the process of formation of Zagreb Social Policy, said: "The City of Zagreb is in the phase of democratic and institutional strengthening". She also opened interesting questions about how the system stakeholders, citizens and civil society organizations, are willing to participate in policy-making and better legislation.

At the end of the Conference, Nedjeljko Marković, President of Pragma - thanking the City of Zagreb, City Assembly of Zagreb and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare on their professional, technical and financial support in organizing the Conference, as well as the sponsors of the Conference, the President of the Republic of Croatia Ivo Josipovic and the Ministry of Economy, Labour and Entrepreneurship - encouraged all participants of the Conference to continue to promote the Charter.