

Interparliamentary Conference on the European Social Charter

Turin, 17 March 2016

Mr Mario Marazziti, Chairman of the Social Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

Opening speech

The Interparliamentary Conference which I have the honour of introducing today, following the sincere words spoken by Piero Fassino, is part of what is known as the "Turin process", which was launched in October 2014, again in Turin, at the initiative of Mayor Fassino and Secretary General Jagland. I convey to you the best wishes of the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, and my own personal wishes.

I am truly grateful to the organisers of today's event who are here alongside me: the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, and Mayor Fassino, who has also played a significant role in our recent democratic history. I likewise thank the Chairman of the Italian Delegation to the Council of Europe, Mr Nicoletti, who, together with the President of the Chamber of Deputies, promoted this initiative and presented the conclusions of the conference held two years ago.

The event taking place over these two days is enriched by the holding of this Interparliamentary conference, bringing together, for the first time, the Chairpersons of the competent committees from the 47 Council of Europe member states. I consider it indeed important to involve parliaments as well as governments, for, while it is a government responsibility to implement treaties, it is for parliaments to verify that decisions taken during the downstream law-making process are consistent with the international treaty rules.

Parliaments, if I may say so, truly are the most direct expression of citizens' participation in political life. I believe that there is a need not just for parliamentary diplomacy, to reinforce cooperation and collaboration between governments and between States, but also, in mature democracies, for parliaments to become the place where a country's leaders, in order to assume their role as such, have the possibility and the responsibility to resist populist, plebiscitary or authoritarian pressures in times of crisis. Without checks and balances and without the use of mediation, and the place for it, the danger is that the pressure of public opinion, which may fluctuate, will ultimately transform the leaders into mere "followers". Parliaments, however, can come to their assistance by playing a screening role, thereby providing a place for the construction, mediation and continuous renewal of the essence of democracy. This is a very topical challenge for all of our democracies.

I welcome the broad participation in this initiative, since 30 out of the 47 Council of Europe member States are represented here. I wish to extend my personal greetings to each of the Chairpersons present, and in particular Mr Sergei Naryshkin, President of the State Duma of Russia, and Mr Angelo Farrugia, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malta. I would also like to applaud all of you here today, if I may!

In the face of Europe's current struggles, political Europe must move forward. The world needs this, and the penalty for failure is lack of relevance and decline.

I understand the difficulties which some member States of the European Union are experiencing. However, we must emerge from the crisis with more, not less, Europe. If some countries wish a temporary reduction in their share of joint European responsibility, I believe it only right to consider that, temporarily, they may also share in proportionately fewer of the benefits of belonging to Europe, if that is what they want, and without making a fuss.

The crisis that has been taking place in Europe in recent years has revealed differences in the ways in which States protect fundamental rights, particularly social rights. However, we need social rights in Europe and we need the rule of law. The crisis has brought to the fore the true importance of social rights and of the European Charter.

There is now increasingly widespread support for the political belief that respecting fundamental social rights is the best way of enhancing citizens' participation in democratic processes, and their faith in European integration and the fight against fundamentalism and radicalism, by fostering processes of social inclusion and cohesion. That is the true objective of the Turin Process – to make the European Social Charter the focal point of the European political landscape.

Migration is top of the European agenda today, as confirmed by the fact that, right now as we speak, the European Council is holding its third meeting in Brussels on this topic in the space of a few weeks.

Migratory movements require that social rights become the first item on the political agenda.

During its history Europe has witnessed periods, above all during economic crises or transitions, when pogroms sullied the continent, right up to the Ural Mountains. Europe has grown; it was born out of the rejection of war and totalitarianism, based on the dream and the necessity of inclusive democracy and on the painful memory of the Holocaust, which must never be repeated. Today, as in the past, Europe is nurtured by a history in which Christianity and secular, humanist values, pluralism and coexistence – a new humanist and humanitarian democracy – became part of Europe's DNA, for the benefit of the entire world.

For this reason, I consider that social rights truly are central to the challenges facing Europe and the Council of Europe. Either they become entrenched or we will regress. When I say this, I am thinking of the social rights of the Roma, the first, albeit stateless, European citizens, who are still too often treated more as a problem than as people, as refugees permanently unsettled and marginalised despite being the first Europeans. I am thinking of the non-conjunctural challenge of our age, that of forced migration, which concerns some 60 million people around the world, while only a few million stand at the gates to our continent.

Many of these refugees are also refugees because of mistakes we have made. Let us bear in mind that the basis for initiating a political solution to the Syrian conflict, the political rather than military solution which is now actively being sought, already existed five years ago, before 400,000 people died in Syria and Iraq and before 11 million became internal and external refugees, before global terrorism made such frightening headway and before Daesh.

We cannot give in to the temptation of fear when social rights are under discussion. Last year, there were 32,700 victims of terrorism worldwide, with more than 30,000 in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, India and other non-Western countries. 96% of the victims are not from the West, as we

have seen in Tunisia, the Ivory Coast and, over the last few days, Turkey. Our thoughts are for these victims.

Social rights constitute the medium and long term alternative, also in the face of the challenge of terrorism. In the immediate future, the answer is not to surrender to fear and to those who preach words of hate - not to become like them, or how they would want us to be. As Mr Renzi, the Italian Prime Minister, reminded us yesterday, while we send spacecraft to Mars, Europe is at risk of suffocating behind walls and barbed wire. We cannot backtrack on Schengen – that would be like building our own prison. Europe is growing old, it needs other people or it will forget what it stands for. It can either go forward or come to a standstill and grow old, whether in Idomeni or Calais. I'll say it again: humanist and humanitarian democracy. The duty to welcome and protect people, so we do not end up commemorating the decline of Europe.

European citizenship, European asylum and the Dublin Treaty need rethinking: European refugee status, positive and not just negative solidarity, joint management of borders, of the reception of refugees and of repatriation.

It is short-sighted that, at this point in time, 3 billion euros have been allocated to the refugee crisis in Turkey and only 2 billion are being invested in 23 African and North-African countries.

There was one initial positive breakthrough in Europe a few weeks ago with the first humanitarian corridor, a civil society initiative taken by the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy and the Tavola Valdese (here in Piedmont, the Waldensians have their own historic homeland), along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I hope that this experiment will catch on. This project made use of Article 25 of the European visa regulations of 2009, which provides a legal means of enabling people to flee from war and desolation, without leaving them to die at the hands of traffickers, by granting them a visa with limited territorial validity, a derogation from the rules as an exceptional humanitarian measure. A precedent of this kind had already been tested for Kosovo.

The Turin Process also supports the idea of promoting social rights as an integral component of a system founded on the rule of law, democracy and human rights, including the rights of others. The Charter may therefore rightly be considered the "Social Constitution of Europe".

The Turin Process represents an opportunity; we must move on from a declaration of principles, at the national and European levels, to targeted political actions. We hope that, as a result of this conference, there will be an increase in the number of ratifications of the revised Social Charter (1996) by member States of the Council of Europe and the EU, that they will accept more Charter articles, and that there will also be an increase in ratifications of the Additional Protocol. Another key objective is to ensure that greater consideration is given to the Charter standards, and particularly the interpretations of those standards by the European Committee of Social Rights.

This is an ambitious plan, but it is a plan that is necessary. It is therefore the only plan, because it is the only realistic plan. The outcome is in our hands and your hands. I wholeheartedly wish you a very successful conference.