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**EXAMINATION OF NEW TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING SOCIAL
RIGHTS PARTICULARLY TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN, MIGRANTS
AND REFUGEES AND VULNERABLE GROUPS INCLUDING THE ELDERLY**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Across the globe there are trends and challenges brought about by the economic crisis, immigration and other socio-economic issues that pose a threat to combating poverty and social exclusion. The fallout from the global economic crisis remains significant on families and vulnerable people across the board with poverty and social exclusion becoming inevitable consequences of the destabilising period.

Recent studies and reports revealed that the financial crisis left a considerable impact on European societies. On top of that, the refugee crisis meant that member States had to adjust and find immediate solutions to the large influx of migrants moving towards the European continent. In this context, access to social rights became more challenging and living conditions of individuals, especially those coming from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, deteriorated.

The report examines the new trends and challenges in specific areas and countries of Europe. The focus is on social cohesion, particularly in relation to the access and enjoyment of social rights, social and health protection and the challenges brought about by the economic crisis. Additionally, the report makes notable emphasis on the targeted groups: migrants and refugees, youth and children and vulnerable people.

The information presented in the report is based on evidence collected via a questionnaire, which was first sent to the three groups of rapporteurs and later to the Platform's Representatives of member States, of which 12 responded. The member States that responded to the questionnaire were:

- a) Albania
- b) Armenia
- c) Belgium-Flanders
- d) Bulgaria
- e) Croatia
- f) Hungary
- g) Italy
- h) Lithuania
- i) Malta
- j) Portugal
- k) Switzerland
- l) Turkey

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 of the report gives a brief snapshot of the recent trends and challenges in Europe. Subsequently, the next chapter presents the findings of the questionnaire. In the last chapter of the report the information collected is analysed and a number of indications are presented to the European Social Cohesion Platform to consider forwarding them to the Committee of Ministers.

Chapter 2: Recent trends and challenges in Europe

The report 'Towards a people's Europe' (Lara Montero, 2016) discussed a number of recurring themes that were highlighted by the members of the European Social Network (ESN)'s Reference group on the European Semester.

According to Alfonso Lara Montero (2016), the fallout from the financial crisis is still significant for various member States. In these cases, the consequences across social services are significant, and left a considerable impact on families and vulnerable groups. The impact of the crisis was also seen on employment where youth unemployment and long-term unemployment have become a cause for concern in several member States.

This financial and economic predicament created a situation of uncertainty in many European countries which reflects itself in the trends and challenges discussed in this chapter.

Access of young people to social rights

The report 'Access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights' (Council of Europe, 2015) emphasised the need to improve the living conditions of young people coming from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The indications show preoccupation about the continued deterioration of the social situation, as well as, life chances of young people during the economic crisis, and thus they shed a strong ray of light on the challenges that young people in Europe face.

The report evaluated several aspects ranging from education and training for people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their transition to the labour market to housing and participation in social, cultural and leisure activities. Amongst the barriers that hinder youths' access to education are the lack of physical access to educational institutions, poor quality of education and education failure (Council of Europe, 2015).

Furthermore, young people face numerous hurdles to independent living, including the purchasing of decent, affordable and secure housing. As a result of the discrimination they face on the private market and the inability to access social housing, youths risk homelessness or poor living conditions. These situations are all detrimental to their health and wellbeing. People living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more susceptible to certain health risks and thus less likely to access quality health services for prevention and care. Moreover, young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are amongst those most in need of obtaining information and counselling, yet they have limited access to these resources. While the ever increasing commodification of sport, leisure and culture make it unaffordable for young people to access (Council of Europe, 2015).

Eurostat (2017a) showed that 17 million young people aged 20-34 were neither in employment nor in education or training. Figures demonstrated that the share of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) in the EU28 fell from 18.7% in 2005 to a relatively lower rate in 2008 where it stood at 16.5%. Nevertheless, in 2009, the rate regained momentum when it leaped to 18.5%, after the emergence of the global financial and economic crisis, while it rose with a modest pace to 20.1% in 2013, and decreased again to 18.9% in 2015.

Protection and integration of migrants and refugees

Migration is growing, and growing very fast and is potentially a permanent aspect of European societies. According to Eurostat (2017b) the number of persons from non EU countries seeking asylum for the first time in the EU28 during the first quarter of 2017 reached 164,500, that is 143,000 less than the same period in 2016¹.

Clearly, member States took in migrants in different number proportions, and as Lara Montero (2016) put it, member States reacted differently to the large influx of migrants coming towards Europe. In the case of asylum seekers, the highest number of first time asylum applicants in the first quarter of 2017 was registered in Germany, followed by Italy, France, Greece, and the United Kingdom. All together they account for 80 % of all first time applicants in the EU28.

One of the major challenges for migrants and refugees is the labour market. Martin et al. (2016) took the case of Denmark to highlight that 40% have no schooling or a very low level of schooling from their country of origin, or they are illiterate in the Latin alphabet. These are barriers that hinder migrants and refugees from participating in the labour market.

Fric and Aumayr-Pintar (2016) on the other hand, stressed the need to aid refugees to overcome language barriers and to access services. The lack of language skills was also mentioned in EEPO Synthesis report (Arora, et al., 2016), that went on to cite a number of challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in their process of integration into the labour market such as legal and administrative barriers, low labour demand and insufficient integration programs.

The impact of the economic crisis on health and social protection, in particular combating poverty and social exclusion

The period of economic instability and stagnation has deeply affected many public services through cuts in public spending. Thus the economic crisis left an impact on health and social protection in various countries in the European Union and Europe, and thus on the economic and social situation of many Europeans.

The labour market situation in the European Union depreciated drastically during the economic storm. The unemployment rate in the EU28 went up from 7% in 2008 to 10.9% in 2013. It experienced a rapid increase in 2009 (9%) and took a downward trend in 2014 (10.2%) (Turrini & Duiella, 2014). Duiella and Turrini (2014) argued that the rise in at-risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) after the crisis was driven by increases in severe material deprivation and in the share of people living in low work intensity households.

Latest Eurostat (2016) statistics showed that even some few years after the crisis, in 2015, 118.7 million people, or 23.7% of the population in the EU28 were at-risk of poverty or social exclusion.² Worrying is the fact that during the year 2015, more than a third of the population was at-risk of poverty or social exclusion in three EU member States: Bulgaria

¹<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/6049358/7005580/Asylum+Quarterly+Report+Q1+2017.pdf/94c64b2c-39ec-4228-a47f-1877c19070ad>

² This means that these people were at least in one of the following conditions: at-risk-of-poverty after social transfers (income poverty); severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity.

(41.3 %), Romania (37.3 %) and Greece (35.7 %). Additionally, in 2015, individuals living in households with very low work intensity made up 10.5 % of the population aged 0–59 in the EU28.³

Conclusion

This chapter evinces that some of the major challenges are widespread and affect more than one or few member States. Needless to say, the impact of the global economic and financial crisis underlies most of the aforementioned trends and challenges.

Therefore, member States across the continent face the growing challenge of funding the increasing demands for social and health protection while ensure that everyone can enjoy their social rights, as guaranteed by the European Social Charter.

Chapter 3: Findings

Question 1.1 - What major new trends and challenges are you experiencing in your country with regards to the way the targeted groups enjoy the social rights as indicated in the European Social Charter?

The Croatian response showed concerns about the lack of access for young people to the labour market. In Croatia, in 2013, youth unemployment peaked with 113,200 registered on average during the entire year. The high unemployment rate in Croatia was a consequence of the economic crisis, lack of jobs, redundancies and general employment insecurity. Unemployment, particularly amongst the younger generations and the vulnerable segments of the population, is a major strain for the Portuguese. Additionally, Portugal discussed the challenges the country is facing to ensure decent working conditions for all workers in all forms of employment. In this member State, the most vulnerable groups at-risk of poverty are children, single-parent families and households with unemployed adults.

In Malta, on the other hand, the rise in property prices which went up by 67% since 2001 make it very difficult for young people to either rent or purchase a property. In fact, it was stated that the accelerated economic growth is partially the reason for the rise in the property prices.

Croatia went on to discuss vulnerable groups,⁴ and so did Turkey. The latter asserted that unfavourable conditions such as low income, informal work, irregular income and insufficient social security are prevailing problems in the country. In Croatia, by the end of 2016, the share of long-term unemployed persons of the total registered unemployment was 49.4%.

Croatia, like Bulgaria and Hungary, has a Roma community. Figures show that this community accounts for 2% (4,777) of the total unemployed population in Croatia.⁵ Issues

³ "Work intensity refers to the ratio between the number of months that household members of working age (aged 18–59, not being a student aged 18–24) worked during the income reference year, and the total number of months that could theoretically have been worked by the same household members" (Eurostat, 2016).

⁴ By vulnerable people the respondent from Croatia meant persons with disabilities, long-term unemployed persons, elderly persons and Roma national minority.

⁵ By end of December 2016

related to education and employments were highlighted by Bulgaria and Hungary. For instance, lack of access to education and employment are main issues for the Roma community in Hungary, while early school dropout affects disproportionately the Roma children in Bulgaria.

The responses to the questionnaire indicated that the labour market is very challenging for migrants and refugees. In fact, in Malta barriers such as language and culture hinder their integration into society, as well as, their access to the labour market. Moreover, migrants living in Malta may experience difficulties to find accommodation due to an increase in the cost of housing as a result of high demand, population density and land scarcity. Meanwhile, migratory movements in Albania are characterised by regular migration related to family reunion, study and labour, on the one hand, and irregular migration flows such as asylum seekers, on the other.⁶ Turkey was described as a country of migration, and in particular as a transit country. Considering the situations in some parts of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, over the last two decades more than half a million transit migrants were absorbed in Turkey in an attempt to make their way to other European countries. Hence, in Turkey a number of challenges due to the migration flows had to be faced as a result of irregular labour migration, transitory migration, asylum seeking and irregular migration.

Several issues were mentioned by Belgium-Flanders, such as the increasing number of migrant unaccompanied children, the growing demand for social and mental help for children and young people and the need of having a more demand oriented care. Three countries - Bulgaria, Malta and Croatia - face common challenges in the disability sector. The priorities set by policy makers in these countries reflect the major challenges they face, namely; the right for disabled people to live a dignified life, access to information, independent living, access to quality health services and access to education and employment.

Malta and Bulgaria also raised their concerns about the elderly population as they may be affected by lack of income security, lack of access to health care, goods and services and independent living. The gender perspective featured in three responses of the questionnaire. In Bulgaria, conditions are yet to be established to achieve 'de facto' equality between women and men in all spheres of life. On the other hand, when it comes to gender-based and domestic violence, Albania will have to undertake a number of steps to comply with the requirements of the ratified international conventions, and ensure zero tolerance to violence. Focusing on the labour market, Portugal asserted that it is struggling to promote and strengthen gender equality, as well as, to achieve a work-life balance.

Question 1.2 - What policy action is your country taking to address the challenges and increase social cohesion particularly for the targeted groups?

Bulgaria and Malta both mentioned the implementation of the *Youth Guarantee Scheme*. In Hungary, a number of programs were put into practice to promote youth employment and full participation in society. Examples include, support for career starters with vocational

⁶ This excludes return migration that is both migrants returning voluntarily and those forced to return.

qualifications, support of part-time employment to provide an opportunity for skilled graduates to gain work experience, as well as, training support on and off the job.⁷

The Ministry of Labour and Pension System in Croatia introduced guidelines for the implementation of active labour market policies in order to support vulnerable categories access the labour market. Croatia adopted a comprehensive *National Youth Program 2014-2017* where the priority areas are education, vocational training and professional training in the context of lifelong learning, employment and entrepreneurship, health and healthcare, social protection and inclusion, volunteering activities, active and political participation of young people in society, young people in the European and global environment, as well as, young people and culture.

On a separate note, but related to youths more than to any other age group, is the *First-time Buyers' Scheme* introduced by the Maltese Government. The scheme allows first time buyers to benefit from the exemption of stamp duty on the purchase of immovable property on the first €150,000.⁸ To assist further, the government, through the *Home Ownership Scheme* assists those couples who cannot afford the 10% bank deposit to purchase their first property, to raise this amount.

In Lithuania, the *Children Rights Protection* was revised, while social security improved to guarantee stability and cohesion in society. The Government in Portugal is committed to fight child and youth poverty by a strategy that reassesses the national framework of social benefits. This, in addition, to the *Development Plan of the Long-term Care Network for 2016-2019* and other measures taken to enhance the disposable household income, especially of those who are most vulnerable and at-risk of poverty and exclusion. The increase of the minimum wage from €505 in October 2014 to €557 in January 2017 was one measure of the sort.⁹

Belgium-Flanders mentioned two important actions: the first one is on the elevation of financial means and investments in youth care and increasing collaboration between different actors in this domain¹⁰; the second one is relating to the increasing places for residential supply of unaccompanied minor refugees/asylum seekers. Youth care makes efforts to accompany these persons, by offering also special mental guiding.

Armenia's response mentioned a variety of aspects ranging from the reform on *Integrated Social Service* to the shift from a passive to an active state employment policy and programs.¹¹ In Turkey the *National Employment Strategy* is in place to provide a solution to the structural difficulties in the labour market. Akin to this is the *National Employment Fund* by which the Hungarian Government seeks to ameliorate the position of jobseekers and increase social mobility. On the other hand, Croatia adopts a personalised approach to address long-term unemployment. This entails dealing with the causes rather than the

⁷ In case of training support, 'a young person (below 25 years or, in case of a person with a tertiary degree, 30 years of age) can be supported unless that person became eligible for job-seeking support or aid after the termination of their status as a student'.

⁸ The First-time buyers' scheme will now be extended to second-time buyers as well.

⁹ For a more detailed description of this measure and other measures refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#))

¹⁰ More demand oriented care with early access to youth care; Reducing the "waiting lists"...

¹¹ Other related measures were mentioned. Refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#))

symptoms of long-term unemployment, offering personalised and group employment preparation and counselling, job mediation and referrals to employers.

Responses from Turkey, Malta and Albania demonstrated that these countries have a migration policy in place. Turkey enacted legislation to regulate foreigners in the country, namely; the *Work Permit for Foreigners and Regulations Act* and the law on *International Labour Force*.¹² In Malta the migration policy document – *Strategy for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants* – was established to create a comprehensive approach to the reception of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, and to better safeguard the rights of asylum seekers and irregular migrants. In Albania, migration policies focus on maximizing benefits from regular migration, guaranteeing the fundamental freedoms and rights of migrants, preventing illegal migration, promoting voluntary return, correlating the migration and the country's stage of development while managing immigration flows and facilitating their integration.

Hungary is a member of the *European Network on Social Inclusion and Roma under the Structural Fund*, which aims to promote the inclusion of Roma people and enhance the effectiveness of policy targeting this community. Based on the *National Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2013-2020*, Croatia set up a number of activities seeking to improve access to quality education, including care and education in early childhood, as well as, in primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Particular emphasis was placed on removing possible segregation in schools, preventing early school leaving and ensuring easy transition from education to employment.

National policies in Malta and Albania cater for the LGBTIQ community. In Albania, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth adopted the *National Action Plan for LGBTI Persons covering 2016-2020* to safeguard this community from discrimination.¹³ Malta launched its *LGBTIQ Action Plan in 2015-2017*; this is a two year action plan that seeks to strengthen policy initiatives across all government departments and public services. Besides that, in July 2017, Malta legalised same-sex marriage as the House of Representatives voted in favour of the Marriage Equality Bill. This meant, that same-sex couples obtained all rights and obligations that the institution of marriage brings about.¹⁴

Another sector of priority for the respondents was disability. In Croatia the *Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disability*¹⁵ introduced a number of key changes, such as the establishment of the Institute for Disability Certification, Professional Rehabilitation, and Employment of Persons with Disabilities. The act was critical for the inclusion of persons with disability into employment, creating the quota employment system, the introduction of a register for employed persons with disabilities,

¹² Other related laws and regulations were mentioned. Refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#))

¹³ Adopted with DCM No.390, dated 25.05.2016, for an addition to DCM No. 87, dated 3.02.2016 - 'On the Approval of the Social Inclusion Document'

¹⁴ The Civil Union Bill was already introduced in Malta in 2014. The bill granted same-sex couples the opportunity to enter legally-recognized civil unions. This union was basically alike marriage in all but name.

¹⁵ Entered into force on January 1, 2014

along with other changes related to incentives for employment of persons with disabilities and access to integrated and secured workspaces.¹⁶

Similarly, Malta enforced the existing quota system requiring companies employing more than 20 people to have at least 2% of the employed made up of people with disability. In addition to that, the 2015 budget introduced fiscal incentives for companies that employ disabled persons. In more specific terms, this means that an employer who employs disabled people would be exempt from paying social security contributions for these employees.

Question 1.3 - What indications can you offer to the Committee of Ministers regarding policy measures that would enable real access to and enjoyment of social rights, particularly by the targeted groups?

The respondent of Croatia took a holistic approach to answer this question. Quality and available youth services and the provision of incentives for higher education and lifelong learning, as well as, quality social services for all citizens are important aspects that prevent young people from falling at-risk of poverty and social exclusion. In addition, attention should be paid to ensure adequate financial resources and investment in professional development of persons working with young people.

Malta, on the other hand, focused on encouraging labour market participation of vulnerable groups and disabled people. Mainly, the indications highlighted the introduction of measures that ‘make work pay’ such as supplementary income for low income workers, reduced income tax and tapering of social benefits for persons moving into employment. In addition, Malta’s indications emphasised the need to incentivise employers who engage disadvantaged persons (e.g. persons with disability) through support structures, quotas and financial incentives.

Armenia proposed cross border open innovations on social protection and adopting a universal model on practical provision of social protection. Apart from that, the Armenian respondent spoke about the development of an international social assistance platform, where live consultants will answer to various practical questions and will give case solutions to member States.

Turkey and Albania both focused on migration. Turkey appealed for more solidarity within the international community with policies aimed at burden-sharing in the area of sharing migrants, policy and resources; cooperation with boarder countries that are subject to large migration flows; and conducting a study on harmonization of the policies between country of origin, country of transit and country of destination.

Albania, on the other hand, proposed policy measures that can make a case for full access to and enjoyment of social rights, particularly by migrant groups. Amongst other measures, Albania suggested promoting bilateral cooperation agreements between the country of origin and the host country, strengthening cooperation with the receiving countries on the

¹⁶ Several other national policies in Croatia are in process of being formulated: the National Strategy on Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence 2017-2022, the National Plan on Prevention of Human Trafficking 2017-2020, the National Strategy on Suppression of Addiction 2018-2023, and others. It is more than worth to mention the *Strategy of Women Entrepreneurship Development in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020* and the Action Plan for its implementation. Refer to the questionnaire for a full list of the policies.

implementation of reintegration programs for migrants returning forcibly and strengthening cooperation in the field of social integration of migrants.

Lithuania's indications were less group specific and more comprehensive as the report insisted for the development of more accessible economic and social rights, as well as, for the strengthening of social relations and civil dialogue.

Question 2.1 - Bearing in mind the negative effect of the economic crisis, what trends and challenges does your country face with regards to the provision of accessible and quality social and health protection services particularly to the targeted groups?

In Hungary, the Roma Community and children were those most affected by the crisis. The situation in Bulgaria was similar where most vulnerable groups suffered the harshest consequences of the crisis. Both Bulgaria and Switzerland looked at the transmission of poverty across generations. Breaking the vicious circle of inherited poverty was prominent in the argument of the Swiss respondent.

In Albania, the challenges brought about by the financial and economic crisis are multidimensional. Reintegration of return migrants is one of the main problems as these people encounter difficulties related to finding a decent job, their re-qualification, and better working conditions. Another cause for concern in Albania is the lack of emergency shelters, especially in light of gender-based violence. Ultimately, these groups must be encouraged to participate in the labour market in an effort to integrate them and become independent. Similarly, in Turkey migration remains a key issue, and the global economic crisis turned a difficult situation into a crisis. Turkey received a number of economic migrants during the instable period, and while the level of informal work rose, these people were nonetheless affected by severe poverty and unemployment.

On the other hand, the Lithuanian response has shown that ensuring equal opportunities to access social, health, cultural and legal services is challenging. Portugal is currently addressing challenges related to the National Health Service. The latter is yet to build the capacity to respond quickly to citizens' needs, while access to health care has to be simplified. This has to be done along with other measures to increase the transparency of information.

While a correlation can be created between the aforementioned responses, it is more difficult to bridge them with the Maltese and Armenian responses. In fact, Malta's response to this question acknowledged that the financial and economic crisis was not as severe in the country. While in the period the rate of persons at-risk of poverty stood at 15%, one cannot relate this to a deterioration of the health or social security systems. Nevertheless, the government was finding it more difficult to ensure quality services as it tried to narrow the fiscal deficit and reign in the national debt which had reached unacceptable levels. Malta's unemployment rate at the time fluctuated between 6% and 6.9%. The situation today is much improved and in recent years new social and health benefits were introduced. Somewhat similarly, in Armenia there seems to be no particular challenge following the economic crisis. And if there is any, the most visible challenge is the low rate of economic development.

Question 2.2 - What policy action is your country taking to mitigate such challenges particularly with regards to the targeted groups?

Italy referred to three main policy actions aimed at providing accessible and quality social and health services in the country. The first measure, called *Inclusion Income*, is a national measure to fight poverty and social exclusion targeting families with children, people with disabilities, pregnant women and unemployed over the age of 55. The second measure, also aimed at fighting poverty, is the reorganization of all Social Assistance Benefits. The third measure is the strengthening of the Coordination of all the Social Services' Interventions, in order to guarantee equivalent service delivery across the country.

Hungary, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Croatia and Belgium-Flanders spoke about programs and policies related to children and youth. In Hungary, *Early Childhood Development (ECD)* intervention seems to lay the foundations for cognitive development and long-term health and productivity.¹⁷ Furthermore, Hungary is equipped with a wide network of kindergartens and provides conditional cash transfers for families with multiple disadvantages who enrol their child and maintain stable attendance in preschool before the age of four. In Bulgaria the national strategy to reduce the rate of school dropout was established. On the other hand, the *Swiss National Program against Poverty 2014-2018* seeks to develop early childhood education and care systems for disadvantaged families in an attempt to prevent poverty. In Belgium-Flanders the development of the "Huizen van het Kind" (House of the Child) can support (vulnerable) families with children, and young people in different aspects of family life.

Belgium-Flanders will establish a new system of child benefit which will be introduced on 1 January 2019; a study shows that this system would decrease the risk of poverty of 1%. They also developed a new concept of flexible day care and investments to increase the accessibility of day care.

In Hungary from 2007 onwards a number of programs called *Chances for Children* were launched in disadvantaged regions with the specific aim to create opportunities for children and eliminate recurring poverty. The Croatian Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy set up the National Authority for Inter-departmental and Cross-departmental coordination specifically to monitor young people at-risk of social exclusion. This Authority aims to analyse the existing categories of young people at-risk of social exclusion, to develop a new system of risk categories and to develop mechanisms that identify and monitor youth groups at-risk.

In Malta, employment seems to be key measure used to eradicate poverty and social exclusion. This is testified by schemes like the *Tapering of Benefits*, the *In-Work Benefit*, the *Mature Workers*, the *Job Brokerage*, the *Work Programme Initiative*, the *Access to Employment*, as well as, the increase in the minimum wage.¹⁸ The State Employment Policy developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Armenia seeks to ensure the implementation of international standards and consistent enforcement to secure decent work, as well as, assistance programs for non-competitive people in the labour market.

¹⁷ These interventions involve 'effective cognitive development in the first 1,000 days, in addition to, better parenting skills; healthy development as supported by regular maternal/child health checkups; good nutrition practices; smart incentives for immunization; and community outreach regarding learning stimulation and good parenting practices.' If such early childhood education (ECE) is extended to the age group 3-6, it would allow these gains and cognitive and behavioral foundations to be further consolidated and developed.

¹⁸ For a more detailed description of these schemes refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#))

On the other hand, Albania's *Strategy for Social Protection 2015-2020* is set to bring three major reforms: first, a reform in Social Protection Program through the transformation of Economic Aid in an Active Scheme of Social Reintegration; second, a revision of disability assessment system; and third, protection and reintegration of people in need, by paying special attention to the provision of integrated services by social work professionals.

The word 'reform' featured prominently in Portugal's report as well. The focal point seemed to be the National Health Service where reforms are aimed at (i) promoting health through a new ambition for Public Health, (ii) reducing inequalities among citizens in access to health, improving accessibility, speed and humanization of the service, (iii) expanding the capacity of the primary health care network, (iv) improving hospital management, circulation of clinical information and articulation between levels of care, (v) expanding the long-term care national network, (vi) improving the governance of the National Health Service and (vii) improving the quality and safety of the care provided.¹⁹

In answering this question Albania and Bulgaria also dealt with the issue of asylum seekers. In cooperation with UNHCR and other line institutions, Albania developed the document governing the Asylum System in Albania. In Bulgaria, a *National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration* was adopted, consistent with the migration policy of the European Union. It is meant to offer an effective and uniform national policy on the management of migration processes.

Question 2.3 - What indications can you offer to the Committee of Ministers regarding measures that would improve the accessibility to and quality of social and health protection services particularly to the targeted groups?

Responses to this question presented a diversity of replies. The Lithuanian report emphasised the need to develop alternative care models for children with and without disability, as well as, promoting local community-based approach for migrants. Croatia's indications focused on the youth population. Croatia emphasised the importance of ensuring a number of measures to improve the health of young people, increase their chances of employment, provide affordable housing, and support to achieve the desired level of education and training. In addition, young people at-risk of social exclusion require different and tailor-made support systems, coordinated by different stakeholders at different levels of the administration.

Malta emphasised the need to discourage dependencies and promote self-determination, increase the purchasing power of all the citizens but also on having a sound economy policy that generates wealth and social policies that aim for social justice. The recommendation is to create more labour market opportunities by incentivising individuals to enter the labour market and 'making work pay'. Malta attributes the increase in employment rate mainly to the introduction of the *Free Child Care Scheme* for parents in employment, education or training. Apart from this scheme, the Maltese Government introduced a number of reconciling work-life balance measures such as the *Breakfast Club Scheme*, *Klabb 3-16* and the Summer Programme - *Skolasajf*.²⁰

¹⁹ Other aspects mentioned by the Portuguese respondents were the 'Long-term care national network', the Commitment on Cooperation for the Solidarity Sector 2017-2018 and Social Services Network. For a more detailed description refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#))

²⁰ Refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#)) for a description of these schemes.

Measures seeking to increase the spending power generally but for the young people in particular featured prominently in the Malta report. Examples given were; raising the minimum wage, lowering the cost of utilities and having universal access to free education and health care. In addition, Malta remarked on the importance of a diversified economy focused on added value and quality jobs that motivated the younger generations to invest in their abilities.

Question 3.1 - Bearing in mind that poverty and social exclusion may foster violent radicalization, what trends and challenges does your country face with regards to the targeted groups?

While Armenia is not facing hunger or violent radicalization issues, the main challenge remains migration. In Albania, the Roma and Egyptian communities present a challenge for the state as it is difficult to identify these communities. This makes it very difficult for the Roma and Egyptians to benefit from programs targeted at these communities. Additionally, Roma and Egyptians in Albania are mostly engaged in informal work such as, work in the collection of recyclable waste sector which carries low wages.

Albania raised also concerns about the high unemployment rate amongst youths, while in Bulgaria reducing school dropouts and reaching the invisible NEETs were considered to be major priorities.

In Malta, youth unemployment registered a decline but early school dropouts did not and this category of young people is considered at-risk of poverty. Malta's response also targeted the disability sector, claiming that ensuring that these persons have equal opportunities is critical for its policies. In the migration sector Malta finds the issue of fully assessing migrants' health conditions particularly challenging.

Portugal's response stated that despite the recent evolution of the economic and social situation pointing towards an improvement in labour market indicators and a stabilization of indicators that reflect Portuguese living conditions, there has not yet been a reversal of the negative effects of recent years. For instance, the most recent indicators show that the monetary at-risk of poverty rate was 19% in 2015, which is lower than the 19.5% in 2013 and 2014, but still above the 17.9% recorded in 2009 and 2010.²¹

Question 3.2 - What policy action is your country taking to reduce poverty and integrate those at risk of social exclusion, particularly the targeted groups?

Hungary is of the view that education plays a key role in 'producing' qualified people to enter the labour market and therefore avoid poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, the government focused on talent management of disadvantaged people, on developing appropriate training systems, on preventing early school leaving and on creating better opportunities for future labour market participation. Examples included the *Arany János Talent Fostering Programme* that caters for disadvantaged students and the *Útravaló Scholarship Programme* that provides opportunities for disadvantaged gifted students to develop their abilities.

²¹ Refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#)) to see a list of various other indicators.

Moreover, certain programs, such as the skills training for the Roma and active citizenship of disadvantaged people, including the Roma, are considered pivotal to increase the active participation and employability of these communities. Roma are, in fact, a target group for policy makers in Croatia as well. The *Action Plan for integration of the Roma & Egyptians* is driven by the principles of human rights, minority rights, youth and gender equality, amongst others.

In Portugal the *National Support and Local Centre for the Migrants Integration (CNAIM)* serves as One-Stop-Shop to assist in the process of integration of Portugal's migrants, including the refugee population, by offering competent, efficient and humane assistance in order to respond to their needs.

In Malta the *National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social Inclusion (2014–2024)* intends to promote the well-being and improve the quality of life for all, particularly for persons at-risk of poverty and social exclusion. The *National Youth Policy 2020*, published in 2015, underpins the same objectives. The policy was founded on three interlocking pillars; the reality of the lives of young people in Malta today, the development of youth policy over the past 20 years at both European and at national level and greater democratic participation, equitable economic and social progress for all.

In Belgium-Flanders, the Flemish Poverty Reduction Action Plan 2015-2019 is focused on families with young children. The aim is to distil concrete policy indications for local authorities into a more efficient poverty reduction policy. Another important aspect is tackling poverty through the activation to work, especially by introducing certain social benefits for jobseekers that are facing poverty.

The Government of Flanders also continues to concentrate on health promotion (such as the access to sufficient healthy food ...) and quality housing. In Albania, in February 2017, the new *Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child* was enacted. Additionally, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth and State Agency for Protection of Child Rights developed the *National Agenda for the Rights of the Children 2016–2020* in collaboration with UNICEF.²² This document expresses Albania's commitment towards the promotion, protection and realization of children's rights, including the protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation.

The Portuguese Government is seeking to strengthen social cohesion and equality, with a strategy that is set to convey an integrated and coordinated approach between various sectorial measures.²³ In addition, the Portuguese Government developed the *Social Integration Income (RSI)*, which aims to guarantee protection to the most fragile and vulnerable groups. It is pertinent to note that this measure is distinguishable from other benefits as it holds a component of integration and inclusion, which is materialized through integration agreements with the beneficiaries.²⁴

Armenia's response has shown that the State policy on reduction of the poverty in this member State was implemented by various ministries. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Italy implemented several measures to fight poverty and social exclusion. The

²² DCM nr 372, date 26.04. 2017

²³ For a more detailed description of this strategy refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\) 7A](#))

²⁴ Refer to the answers to the questionnaire ([PECS \(2017\)7A](#)) for other policies and programmes.

Support for Active Inclusion (SIA), for example, seeks to ameliorate the economic situation of families in financial difficulties. Apart from ensuring economic support, the SIA develops a care project tailor-made for the specific needs of the households and its members. Another critical measure is Law nr. 33/2017 - *Rules to fight poverty, to reorganize assistance benefits and to coordinate the system of social services interventions* – as it provides a comprehensive systematisation of measures against poverty, it counters economic and social constraints and promotes wider and harmonized social policies.

Bulgaria highlighted the *Gender Equality Act* which is considered to be an indispensable tool that will serve to introduce a gender perspective in policies that cover different sectors. On the other hand, Malta's response refers to the disability sector and the reform in the disability pension introduced during the 2017 budget. In this case, three tiers of payment for those entitled to take the disability pension were established aimed especially at those who will never be in a position to be gainfully occupied.

Question 3.3 - What indications can you offer to the Committee of Ministers regarding measures to combat poverty and social exclusion and integrate successfully those at risk of social exclusion particularly the targeted groups?

Croatia's response asserted that the development of an active employment policy is pivotal. This will enable easier access to the labour market for individuals who are perceived to be unemployable. In line with this, an integrated approach to develop different methods of learning shall be developed, ideally tailor-made, for individuals with lack of education. Croatia recommended appending practical work with education programs and developing support systems for young start-up entrepreneurs.

One of the indications provided by Malta was related to quality employment. People should be actively engaged in the labour market so they will have full control of their life's choices and transition. More specifically, the focal point in the labour market shall not solely be the low unemployment rate, but the creation of quality jobs that will attract and keep individuals in the labour market. Another indication spoke about integration of migrants in mainstream society. The idea stems from the fact that if integrated within mainstream society migrants can be a resource and thus can give their contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of European societies.

Akin to this the Portuguese response mentioned that in changing, complex and multicultural societies, as those we live in, social rights awareness-raising is a crucial educational issue, which deserves deep consideration both in curriculum development and students' education.

Bulgaria's response regarding the elderly highlighted the importance of having accessible information and communication technologies. Additionally, improving computer literacy, skills and regular use of internet would make information and communication more accessible. On the other hand, Malta's response emphasized that active ageing is important to integrate the elderly into mainstream society. Examples of policy responses included, making public spaces and public transport more accessible to the older people.

In conclusion, Portugal's response looked at developing and supporting projects based on concrete needs of society and promoting links between the different levels of governance

(national, regional and local) and between the different actors in society as an important asset for social cohesion and the realisation of social rights.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Conclusion

The analysis and conclusion chapter will analyse the major trends and challenges that participating member States are facing with regards to the social rights as indicated in the European Social Charter, the negative effects of the global economic crisis, as well as, poverty and social exclusion. Subsequently, this chapter will look into policy actions that the participating member States are implementing in their effort to address the challenges and increase social cohesion. Moreover, the indications provided by the participating member States which could be possibly transmitted to the Committee of Ministers will be presented.

Trends and challenges

The results from the questionnaire seem to echo earlier reports about trends and challenges in Europe. Many of the member States responding to the questionnaire have discussed numerous challenges using different perspectives, ranging from education and employment to gender and disability. The majority of the member states responding to the questionnaire reinforced the report compiled by Alfonso Lara Montero (2016) and stated that they were seriously affected by the global financial and economic crisis which hindered progress and limited the responses against poverty. It came out rather evidently that vulnerable groups were those most affected by the impact of the crisis.

The difficulty for young people to access the labour market was a key finding. In line with the assertion of Alfonso Lara Montero (2016), it was found that youth unemployment and long-term unemployment are both major causes for concern. The economic crisis, the lack of jobs and employment insecurity, together with early school dropouts were considered as the main factors contributing to the development of an invisible group of NEETs. Nevertheless, the findings evinced that education and employment are not the only challenges for youths. The rise in property prices is worrying for young people because it makes it very difficult to either rent or purchase an apartment.

Another aspect brought forward was the issue of long-term unemployed, who are considered amongst the most vulnerable groups. In this regard, the Roma community, migrants or refugees are disproportionately affected. In the majority of the member States, language and cultural barriers make it very difficult for these communities to integrate in society, and in particular, the labour market. In other member States, unfavourable conditions such as low or irregular income, informal work and insufficient social security are serious concerns.

Integration of migrants turned out to be a complicated and sensitive task. Undoubtedly, the political situation in some countries of the Middle East, Asia and Africa did not help. In fact, the migration issue is complex; first, lack of pro-active responses to the migratory movement which most countries still find overwhelming, and second, incentives might not be in place to encourage migrants to join the labour market which places them at risk of exploitation in the black economy. This reinforces the perspective of Martin et. al (2016) who considered labour market integration as a major challenge for migrants.

Labour market integration, as well as, participation in society, was considered challenging also for persons with disability. These individuals face various difficulties, as a result of several environmental and social barriers, such as lack of access to information, lack of access to education opportunities and inadequate working conditions that impede them from living a dignified and rewarding life.

In general, access to social, health and cultural services seems to bring about a challenge in the participating member States, partly because of the economic crisis but even due to social issues such as migration, unemployment and the lack of inclusive measures in society.

Policy Action

Despite the challenges discussed in the previous section, a number of pro-active measures were taken even if to varying degrees of spread and focus. Measures like the *Youth Guarantee Scheme* by which EU member States are committed to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive an offer of employment, education, traineeship or apprenticeship seem to be on the increase. Other programs and/or action plans, like the national youth programs, assistance to young people to overcome access barriers to health services, education, employment and housing were mentioned by several respondents.

Strategies that are more specific and target children and early school dropout, such as the *Chances for Children* program and the *Children Rights Protection*, can be critically important as an early intervention strategy and to mitigate initial social inequality. In fact, where a more strategic approach is taken, action plans such as the national programs against poverty and social exclusion tended to focus on childhood education and care systems that provide equal opportunities for each child in particular but also measures that increase access to health and housing, as well as, employment.

Evidently, the labour market is pivotal to alleviate people from poverty and social exclusion. Schemes such as the *Tapering of Benefits*, the *Mature Workers*, the *Free Child Care* and other active labour market policies attract more individuals to the labour market even if the job market still offer challenges to most respondents.

Finding solutions to migration is no easy task, and akin to what Lara Montero (2016) said member States reacted differently to the large migration flow. Laws and strategies such as the law on *Work Permit for Foreigners* and the *Strategy for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants* are practical for a threefold of reasons. First, they seek to regulate foreigners in the country; second, they establish protocols that guarantee appropriate reception of migrants; and third, they safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of migrants. In addition, these laws and strategies move away from a protectionist and isolationist approach. Nevertheless, migrants continue to remain in a precarious situation and greater strategic approaches seem to be needed.

Aeging, disability and gender are definitely very important issues, but seemed less prominent than other issues in the replies. The fact that not all respondents discussed these themes probably means that they continue to follow established policies with nothing significant to report but nevertheless some respondents reported about these sectors. Member States have a number of policies, programmes and action plans in place to mitigate disability, including measures for the elderly and the promotion of gender equality.

For instance, increases in the disability and old age pensions, the *Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disability* and employment quotas for persons with disability, empower these individuals and give them the possibility to engage and contribute to well-being and their communities. Such schemes and policies ensure that these individuals experience financial security, quality standard of living and full participation in social activities.

Indications

Participating member States offered a series of indications.

i. Youths and children

Indication: Provide incentives for higher education and lifelong learning

Incentives for higher education and life-long learning lead to secure employment. The provision of stipends to students in post-secondary, higher and tertiary institutions would encourage them to further their education while schemes that give a second chance at education ensure that those most likely to face challenges for their education find support when they most need it.

Indication: Ensure that different support systems are in place to cater for the diverse needs of young people

Different methods of learning including tailor made study programmes, wider carrier choices and quality and accredited courses, tend to break the cycle of poverty and mitigate the challenges of disadvantaged groups.

Similarly, the development of support systems such as start-up grants, credits on social security and tax incentives for young start-up entrepreneurs would, on one hand prevent early abandonment of entrepreneurial ideas and self-employment and on the other encourage them to try again and capitalise on their experience.

In addition, appending work experience and entrepreneurship with education and academic programs would facilitate the transition from full-time education to employment.

Indication: ‘Make work pay’

Dependencies must be discouraged and labour market participation encouraged. The ‘carrot and stick’ approach can underpin various policy actions, programs or schemes that fall within this pragmatic framework. Therefore, measures of ‘making work pay’ such as supplementary income for low income workers, reduced income tax and tapering of social benefits for persons moving into employment may be delineated.

Indication: Ensure the creation of quality job opportunities

While encouraging people to enter the labour market is imperative, member States equally highlighted the importance to create adequate working conditions and stimulate economic growth in order for these people to keep their jobs. Therefore, it is critical to create more quality jobs, improve legislation to allow for flexibility yet avoid abuse while encouraging and striving for innovation.

ii. Migrants and refugees

Indication: Ensure more solidarity within the international community with policies aimed at burden-sharing

The chorus of countries calling for a common migration policy was also echoed in the responses received. Respondents also called for bilateral cooperation agreements between the country of origin of migrants and their host country for more orderly and safe migration flows. This would secure cooperation and coordination between the country of origin and the receiving country.

Indication: Ensure full access to and enjoyment of social rights for migrant groups

There seems to be greater recognition that migrants can contribute in many ways for the economic, social and cultural richness of European societies. More policies that facilitate the integration into mainstream society should be encouraged, namely: language and culture classes, access to employment and affordable housing. Particular attention must be employed to younger migrants who may lack skills and knowledge. In addition, education and special classes should be offered to children who might have experienced gaps in their education.

iii. Vulnerable groups including the elderly

Indication: Access to public spaces, information and communication technologies for the elderly

As highlighted in the responses, elderly people should have access to public spaces, information and communication technologies. This would enable this community to remain active and productive for longer periods. For those whose health condition limits their mobility, this accessibility would secure their well-being and avoid isolation.

Indication: Develop active ageing strategies

Few respondents claimed that they have in place national active ageing policies and strategies which among other aspects address the economic, financial and psychological challenges of elderly people. They recommended such policies for all countries.

In particular respondents claimed that the pressure for residential homes for the elderly and community care is increasing exponentially and in some situations demand outstrip supply. This highlights the need for more community based support.

Indication: Ensure that schemes to encourage labour market participation are in place for people with disabilities

Respondents recommended assisting disabled people to acquire marketable skills and offering incentives to employers to recruit and assimilate these individuals in their workforce. Quotas for employing people with disability, exemption from social security payments, job coaching service and tax exemptions were some of the indications made.

Indication: Develop strategies to ensure full access to and enjoyment of social rights of the LGBTIQ community

In order to obtain equal treatment and enjoy equal opportunities in society, the LGBTIQ community needs more empowerment through policies, strategies and legislation. While most acknowledge great strides forward in reducing discrimination against LGBTIQ people, their situation is still far from what the Council of Europe perceives as equality. Some member

States said that while policies are in place, the attitude of society is still ambivalent on a number of issues and more education and social marketing were indicated as precursors for upgraded legislation and change in culture.

Concluding remarks

While the findings do not necessarily reveal new strategies, most of the respondents seem to be active in implementing policies that the Council of Europe has been long advocating, namely the active labour market strategies and tailor made solutions for disadvantaged groups as opposed to blanket cover policies that consider all humans as homogenous. This is encouraging although there was little mention of the outcomes and results of these policies. In fact, most respondents focused on describing what policies they have in place and less on their experience of the outcomes of these policies. Nevertheless, almost all respondents are taking an integrated approach to fighting poverty and it seems that this phenomenon has become a priority on the agenda of governments and a cross policy domain for policy makers.

So while the twelve respondents may not be representative of the whole Platform, however, the reports carry considerable value, as they tend to validate to a degree, the discussions and reports that the Council of Europe produced over the years.

Appendix 1 - Questions

Question 1

- 1.1. What major new trends and challenges are you experiencing in your country with regards to the way the targeted groups (indicated below) enjoy the social rights as indicated in the European Social Charter?
- 1.2. What policy action is your country taking to address the challenges and increase by the targeted groups listed below?

Question 2

- 2.1. Bearing in mind the negative effect of the economic crisis, what trends and challenges does your country face with regards to the provision of accessible and quality social and health protection services particularly to the targeted groups?
- 2.2. What policy action is your country taking to mitigate such challenges particularly with regards to the targeted groups?
- 2.3. What indications can you offer to the Committee of Ministers regarding measures that would improve the accessibility to and quality of social and health protection services particularly to the targeted groups?

Question 3

- 3.1. Bearing in mind that poverty and social exclusion may foster violent radicalization, what trends and challenges does your country face with regards to the targeted groups?
- 3.2. What policy action is your country taking to reduce poverty and integrate those at risk of social exclusion, particularly the targeted groups?
- 3.3. What indications can you offer to the Committee of Ministers regarding measures to combat poverty and social exclusion and integrate successfully those at risk of social exclusion particularly the targeted groups?

The Groups mentioned in the questions are:

- A. Migrants and refugees
- B. Youth and children,
- C. Vulnerable people, including the elderly

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