

High-level Panel Discussion on the 60th Anniversary of the European Social Charter Strasbourg, France, 18 October 2021

Speech by Leen VERBEEK, President of the Congress

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Opening Statements

Madam Secretary General, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to address this meeting where we celebrate the European Social Charter's 60th anniversary.

It is thanks to the Social Charter that, today, we recognise social rights as an integral part of human rights. Social rights are not secondary to civil and political rights. On the contrary, all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent.

That is why, during the last decade, the Congress has made it a priority to remind local and regional authorities in our members States of the link between governance and human rights, including social rights.

The Social Charter is a crucial reference point for our Congress and for the local and regional authorities we represent in how we develop strategies and policies to improve local democracy.

I would like to take advantage of this occasion to bring to your attention the expanding role of local and regional authorities in the defence of social rights.

The competences of local and regional authorities in the social sphere continue to increase, thanks to the decentralisation of power under the European Charter of Local Self-Government and its principle of subsidiarity.

They are directly responsible for ensuring access to a whole range of rights – from housing allocations and regulations for local employment to access to health care services and to schooling, and even to higher education in certain regions – I could continue with this list.

Local and regional authorities often oversee some of the most pressing social policies, as is the case during health crises for example, to ensure that its benchmarks are guaranteed, and that its principles are respected.

They are also a focal point where national policies and citizen initiatives come together on the ground. It is at the grassroots where communication and cooperation between the different levels of government and civil society organisations take place to assess the social needs of citizens. Moreover, the intimate proximity with citizens allows them to establish a continuous dialogue between inhabitants and to raise awareness on social rights issues.

However, I fear that this role of local and regional authorities is often underestimated. Social rights are universal, but the context in which they are implemented is not.

Threats to the respect of social life vary greatly between our European communities. At the local level, authorities have all the assets to be at the frontline of the defence of social rights”, which are what we may call “daily rights”.

This is why the Congress has been collecting data and good practice examples of human rights applications at local and regional levels of government.

And this is why in our Human Rights Handbook in 2020, we stressed the importance of all social rights and provided concrete good practice examples for local and regional authorities to guarantee that all their citizens can enjoy their social rights.

However, I don't think I exaggerate when I say that the implementation of the Social Charter in member States remains unsatisfactory and uneven, despite social issues becoming even more relevant.

We believe that the Social Charter now needs to develop an effective local anchorage to allow for a better and harmonised implementation. Local and regional authorities must be trusted, consulted, and when possible, integrated into monitoring procedures. We will need all the energy and involve all levels of governance to face the upcoming social challenges.

To conclude, the Congress is fully commitment to the rights and values defended by the European Social Charter. We stand by the Council of Europe and the European Committee of Social Rights for the defence and promotion of these most valuable rights.