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EUROMIL's Contribution to the High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter (Chişinău-Moldova, 2026)

1. Introduction

The European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL) is the umbrella organisation of almost 40 democratic military associations and trade unions from across Europe. Representing nearly 500.000 active and retired service members, EUROMIL is committed to securing and advancing the fundamental rights, social protections, and professional interests of military personnel.

Since its establishment in 1972, EUROMIL has been a staunch advocate for the full recognition of soldiers as "Citizens in Uniform", entitled to the same rights and obligations as all other citizens, in line with the values and principles of the Council of Europe and the European Social Charter.

2. Objectives Addressed

Strengthening the Social Charter System & Reinforcing Implementation

Military personnel in Europe continue to face legal and practical barriers to the enjoyment of fundamental social rights guaranteed under the European Social Charter (ESC), particularly with regard to:

- **Article 5 (Right to organise):** Denied in part or in full in several Council of Europe member states.
- **Article 6 (Right to collective bargaining):** Still largely excluded in military contexts, often justified on vague grounds of national security or military discipline.
- **Article 11 (Right to protection of health):** Including specific gaps in mental health support tailored to military realities.
- **Article 12 & 13 (Right to social security and social assistance):** Uneven implementation in transition schemes and reintegration after service. Missing veterans policy.

On the articles 5 and 6, EUROMIL introduced until now three collective complaints, namely EUROMIL v. Ireland (112/2014), EUROMIL v. Portugal (199/2021) and EUROMIL v. Spain (2019/2022).

EUROMIL's contribution supports the goals of the conference to:

- Strengthen the Social Charter system and its enforcement;
- Raise awareness of underrepresented social rights;
- Identify priority areas for reform at national and pan-European levels.

3. Key Issues and Proposals

A. Right of Association and Collective Bargaining for Military Personnel

Problem:

While some progress has been achieved in recognising soldiers' right to form and join professional associations or unions (e.g., via ECSR decisions such as *EUROMIL v. Ireland*, *EUROMIL v. Portugal* and in preparation *EUROMIL v. Spain*), several states continue to deny or unduly restrict these rights based on outdated security doctrines.

Proposal:

- Establish a formal commitment within the Action Plan 2026–2030 to integrate the rights under Articles 5 and 6 of the ESC into national (military) regulations, with guidance on permissible restrictions under Article G.
- Promote peer-exchange and legal reforms via a dedicated Council of Europe working group on labour rights in uniformed professions.

B. Mental Health and Psychosocial Risks in the Armed Forces

Problem:

Military duties involve prolonged stress, high-risk deployments, and social isolation, contributing to PTSD, depression, and suicide among service members. Psychosocial risks are still under-recognised and often culturally stigmatised in the armed forces.

Proposal:

- Incorporate a discussion on psychosocial risks in the framework of Article 11 of the ESC and link it to national prevention strategies in defence institutions.
- Invite Ministries of Defence and Labour to present national action plans on health protection in military workplaces.

C. Equal Social Protection and Post-Service Transition

Problem:

Military personnel often face systemic obstacles when transitioning to civilian life,

such as the non-recognition of military qualifications, lack of tailored support services, and inadequate pension portability across borders.

Proposal:

- Include in the 2026–2030 Action Plan a call for coherent social protection frameworks that facilitate transition from military to civilian careers.
- Encourage coordinated action under Article 12 (right to social security) and Article 15 (right of persons with disabilities) to ensure continued protection for injured and retiring military personnel.

4. Priority Topics for the Conference Programme

EUROMIL proposes the following topics for plenary or parallel sessions:

- **“Labour Rights in Uniform: Legal Reforms for Modern Armed Forces”**
A session co-hosted by EUROMIL, national ombudspersons, and legal experts to discuss good practices in recognising and balancing soldiers’ rights with the unique nature of military service.
- **“Invisible Wounds: Addressing Mental Health in Defence Structures”**
A dialogue on creating stigma-free and proactive support systems in the military context, including early detection, peer support networks, and veteran-specific psychological services.
- **“From Barracks to Society: Strengthening Reintegration Measures”**
With focus on vocational retraining, education, family support, and recognition of service-related skills in civilian sectors.

5. Side Event Proposal

Title: “Citizen and Worker in Uniform: Making the European Social Charter Work for Soldiers”

Format: 90-minute interactive session with policy and legal experts, national representatives, and soldiers’ staff associations or trade unions. Includes discussion of recent ECSR jurisprudence and national implementation models.

Topics:

- Implementation of ECSR decisions and collective complaints.
- Legislative pathways to secure Articles 5 and 6 rights in the military.



European Organisation of
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Brussels, Belgium
<http://euromil.org/>

- Cross-sectoral recommendations for reintegration and support.

EUROMIL Contribution: EUROMIL is ready to co-organise and fund the side event, contribute speakers, and disseminate the results within its European network.

6. Final Remarks

EUROMIL considers the 2026 High-Level Conference in Chişinău a unique opportunity to reaffirm the universality of social rights and eliminate remaining discriminatory practices against military personnel.

We welcome the Council of Europe's openness to integrating the perspective of uniformed services and hope that this contribution can help shape an inclusive and actionable programme.

We remain available for further collaboration and would be honored to take an active part in the preparation and implementation of both the conference and the 2026–2030 Action Plan.

Emmanuel JACOB, President