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Address by the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, at the High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter (Turin, 17-18 October 2014)
(Translation from the original Italian)

Greetings to Giuliano Poletti, Minister of Labour and Social Policies, to Piero Fassino, Mayor of Turin, to Michele Nicoletti, Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Chair of the Italian delegation, and to Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, who all promoted the idea of holding this conference. And greetings to everyone present.

Thank you for inviting me to address this conference on the European Social Charter. I regard this idea adopted by the Council of Europe, the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the City of Turin as very important, since it serves to bring new public attention in both Italy and the rest of Europe to the content of the Charter signed here in Turin exactly 53 years ago.

In order to take stock of the situation of social rights in Europe, it is necessary to start with the people concerned by the economic crisis and austerity policies and their tangible effects on everyday life for millions of European citizens. Are these consequences bearable? Are they acceptable? Let us say straight away that the individual states and the European Union as a whole have been unable to provide adequate protection against the high price paid by their citizens in terms of the curtailing of social rights.

There are too many Europeans currently experiencing increasing difficulties in securing living conditions that offer a minimum of dignity. Reductions in absolute terms in social expenditure in many countries of Europe are having their own dramatic effects. More and more families are struggling to get their children through to the end of their education or are unable to obtain quality health care. Certain categories are the worst affected, such as single-parent families and families with three or more children. According to the European Commission, the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy are receding, to the extent that the number of people at risk of poverty could still be close to 100 million in the year 2020. And let me tell you, this is truly scandalous. A true scandal in the European Union, the world's greatest economic power!

The people most exposed are those living in countries which have borne the greater part of the austerity burden. One of those countries is Italy. Amongst all the critical aspects of the Italian situation, one in particular should give rise to the greatest alarm: the situation of our young people. Italy's youth unemployment rate (at around 42%) and truancy rate are amongst the highest of all European Union states.

The other major victims of exclusion from the labour market are women, whose employment rate in Italy falls well short of European objectives, with particularly dramatic figures for the southern regions. Women still lag behind, suffering the effects of a welfare system pared to the bone, and also because of the lack of policies designed to provide an incentive for the employment of women.

In the face of these situations of growing hardship, families no longer play the role of social shock absorber. Europe has not managed during these years of crisis to act as a provider to citizens of tangible social guarantees capable of offsetting the effects of stringent financial policies. The frustration generated by this failure may well gain the upper hand: in the recent European elections, radically anti-European political movements emerged in most European Union states, often with openly populist and xenophobic aims.

This widespread feeling that European social protection policies are hopelessly inadequate is echoed by analyses carried out at a more advanced level of economic science. In two recent lectures given in Italy's Chamber of Deputies, authoritative contemporary economic thinkers, Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty, emphasised the great limitations of current European economic governance. Stiglitz criticised the one-way austerity policies which have so far continued to depress European economies, particularly within the Eurozone, while Piketty illustrated the current tendencies which, on the basis of neoliberal theories, are increasing inequalities in the United States and in Europe. Without corrective action, according to Piketty, we are destined to go back to a wealth distribution pattern similar to that of the 19th century!

When it comes to questioning and reconsidering in most of Europe the gains which have been consolidated in the field of social rights, it seems to me as useful as ever, as this conference proposes, to make a strong reaffirmation of the binding force of the fundamental principles of the European Social Charter: the right to work, the right to join a trade union, the right to social security, the family's right to social, legal and economic protection, the right of migrant workers and their families to protection and assistance. In this context, it was rightly emphasised during today's debate that close synergy is necessary between the law of the European Union and the European Social Charter. Those rights are an essential part of European civil identity, rights hallmarking us worldwide, and the observance of which needs to be kept under constant supervision. In order to protect those rights better, it might be very useful to put in place an early warning procedure in the parliamentary context to monitor the compatibility of European and national legislation with the principles of the Social Charter, and to organise regular meetings between the competent committees of the different European parliamentary assemblies.

In order to maintain the effectiveness of the vital core of social safeguards, however, the culture and politics of rights must in my view go onto the attack. In the face of truly tangible threats of regression, it is not enough to defend what already exists. It is necessary to look ahead, outlining the protection that will be required for the new needs emerging in the present era. That is what the European Social Charter itself has already partly done, with its 1996 revised version encompassing guarantees of new rights, such as the right to equal opportunities, protection against sexual harassment and protection for all forms of disability. And this is what it must continue to do now.

And talking of new rights, last Monday – during the conference of fundamental rights committees of the parliaments of the European Union held in the Chamber of Deputies – the draft of a declaration of Internet rights drawn up by a committee of MPs and experts in the Chamber was made public. This was the first experiment in Italy relating to these crucial issues: the Internet today is not just a means of communication, but a dimension of our day-to-day lives in which an ever-growing part of our personality and social relations is expressed. It is therefore

becoming vital, as proposed by this innovative Internet “Bill of Rights”, to secure a new generation of rights such as the right of access to, and neutrality of, the Internet, the right to the elimination of the digital divide – which might otherwise lead to the very same economic inequalities as exist now – and the right to protection of personal rights. On the basis of the text drawn up by the committee, a public consultation is to take place from 27 October onwards on the Chamber’s website. It is important in my view for such new texts today to come from a parliament working in close co-operation with civil society. Parliaments – today perhaps more than ever before – reflect for better or worse the complex pluralism of our society, unresolved conflicts and new bodies seeking recognition. Parliaments today can make a decisive push for a new culture of rights which is equal to the challenges of the present day. It is my hope that positive co-operation can start on these subjects with governments and supranational institutions such as the Council of Europe, the very *raison d’être* of which is the promotion of fundamental rights and democracy.

Thank you.