



Turin Forum on Social Rights in Europe

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It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to our Forum on social rights.

The Council of Europe – the organisation I represent – is Europe’s biggest human rights organisation.

Our starting point is simple: social rights are an integral part of human rights.

Civil and political rights are an essential precondition for guaranteeing freedom. However, the exercise of freedom – the fulfilment of human dignity in the full sense of the term – requires many other conditions to be met. True freedom is the chance to stand on one’s own two feet, to be able to seize opportunities and make choices, to achieve one’s full potential.

For this, you need social rights: a good education; a decent home; the opportunity to work, and social protection to satisfy people's needs at the critical moments in their lives and help them get back on their feet.

These rights are guaranteed in the European Social Charter which, in a way, is Europe's social constitution, which to date has been ratified by 43 of the 47 Council of Europe member states.

And Turin, where the Charter was first signed in 1961, is, perhaps, its spiritual home, if international conventions can have such a thing.

It is therefore fitting that we meet here, together, to discuss the future of social rights in Europe today.

I am especially pleased that we will be hearing from our two distinguished speakers – Professors Fitoussi and De Schutter, who will be passing on to us their views on these matters.

The topic we are discussing is a complex one.

We all believe in social rights, how could it be otherwise?

But our dilemma is how to make them real – and how to do so in a deeply challenging economic climate, in which recovery is slow and uneven, the global economic outlook is uncertain, there is still a high level of unemployment in many countries, the financial markets remain volatile and geopolitical tensions in various parts of the world are not conducive to economic growth and investment.

When state budgets are under pressure, how do we guarantee social rights for all, without discrimination?

How can we strike the right balance between strict tax policies and essential structural reforms – including infrastructure investment – between a healthy banking system and support for families and businesses, between policies which strengthen demand and those that sustain supply? How can we create new models of growth with due regard for each country's own traditions? In short, how can we achieve our shared objective of strong, sustainable and balanced growth while respecting everyone's social and economic rights?

In this context, what role falls to civil society, businesses, workers and the international institutions?

Such questions are urgent. The answers require political leadership and courage at national level and concerted action internationally.

Years of hardship are taking their toll on cohesion within our societies: public anxiety is at a high.

Many citizens have grown cynical towards their democratic institutions ...

... and resentful towards others, those they feel are taking their opportunities – their families' opportunities.

All around we see populists and xenophobes exploiting this climate of anxiety and fear, especially with regard to the waves of refugees arriving en masse in our countries.

And so, we have an *even greater responsibility than ever* to pursue the policies and approaches which will ensure that our societies are cohesive and united.

Respect for social rights is the remedy that will enable our societies to remain united and overcome difficulties.

Respect for social rights restores and strengthens citizens' trust in their political leaders and the state.

Respect for social rights is the antidote to social exclusion, as it offers a way for the vulnerable and marginalised to reintegrate society.

In short, respect for human rights is even more necessary in times of crisis and economic difficulties than in ordinary times.

For me, this debate comes down to one question:

In what type of society do we wish to live and what type of society do we wish to build?

In the Council of Europe we firmly believe that the strongest and most robust societies are those can draw on the talents of all their citizens and are able to maintain a high level of social cohesion.

They are inclusive societies, inclusive democracies, based not only on political and civil liberties, but on social rights too.

In its efforts to put this aspiration at the top of the European political agenda, the Council of Europe has brought together governments, members of parliament and academics. Yesterday we discussed these topics with members of parliament from many countries in Europe.

Today, it is your turn to take part in the debate that will follow, in the presence of two distinguished experts who will open the debate on the issue I have referred to.

I am most grateful to all of you for giving up some of your time to attend this event which will conclude with the ceremony to mark the ratification of the Revised Social Charter by Greece, to be attended by the Greek Minister of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity.

I wish you a productive meeting and stimulating discussions.