

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Interparliamentary Conference on the European Social Charter and  
the Forum on Social Rights in Europe**

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*Check against delivery*

**Economic hardship and the refugee crisis: a dual challenge for social  
rights**

How the world can change in less than two years.

When we first launched the Turin process in October 2014, to elevate  
social rights in Europe...

...our continent was still picking itself up from the global financial crisis.

It still is.

Indeed, it was only last summer when we watched the stand-off between Brussels and Athens which took the Eurozone – once again – to the edge of collapse...

...and, today, our economic challenges remain huge.

They have, however, been overtaken...

...on the front pages of our newspapers at least...

...by a refugee crisis which is testing European solidarity and generosity to their limits.

When the Turin process began I, like many, believed that we needed to prioritise social rights in order to protect the worst off in our societies, during a period of prolonged austerity.

I still think this – but I also believe that the rationale for recommitting to social rights has become even more profound.

Because, not only do many of our citizens face ongoing economic hardship...

...they now also see migrants and refugees arriving in large numbers.

Migration is not a new challenge: our societies have been growing steadily more diverse for some time.

But public anxiety is now at a high.

And while, today, the migration debate might be dominated by questions of quotas and borders...

...tomorrow it will be about whether or not there are enough jobs to go around; or school places; housing; access to healthcare and social security.

Populists and xenophobes are in their element: telling citizens that newcomers will take their jobs and their homes, stirring up resentment and jealousy towards foreigners.

And it is therefore more important *than ever* that we, by contrast, pursue the policies and approaches that will help our societies hang together.

Where political systems are able to deliver social rights – without discrimination – tensions and jealousies will be reduced.

It is how we rebuild trust and confidence in state institutions, including parliaments.

*And*, by the way, if our nations can work together to guarantee social rights, through our European Social Charter...

...complementing the European Convention on Human Rights, which safeguards civil and political rights...

...with protections for vulnerable groups, [including the elderly, children, people with disabilities] [and, I should point out, migrants and refugees]...

...then all the better for reviving our presently embattled European project, too.

### **Keeping up momentum**

With all this in mind I am greatly encouraged to see you here today.

We have made some meaningful progress since the Turin process began:

Ratification of the revised Social Charter by Greece, for example.

Acceptance of new articles by Belgium, another example.

43 out of 47 member states are now party to either the original 1961 Treaty or the revised text.

We continue to work closely with the European Union including, for example, over current plans to amend the directive on posted workers. In Strasbourg, our Committee of Ministers has agreed to more resources for Charter-related activities in the 2016/17 Budget.

The Parliamentary Assembly has also begun preparing its political report on the Turin process.

Ms Sylvia Eloisa Bonet has been appointed rapporteur, and she will conclude for us later on.

We will also shortly hear from Mr Michele Nicoletti, the Chair of the Italian Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly and the General Rapporteur of the High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter...

...whose report provides a vital road map as we move ahead.

### **The need for political commitment**

So we have kept up momentum.

But the truth – as you all know – is that our efforts to further embed the Social Charter into the national fabric of member States depend, ultimately, on political will.

The Turin process needs renewed backing and, as parliamentarians – as legislators and agenda setters – your commitment is decisive.

My ask to you is a straightforward one:

Promote the Charter; become strong advocates for it at home; use the Turin process to turn declarations of principle into reform on the ground.

The Social Charter remains the most comprehensive and far-reaching set of international, legal, binding social rights in the world.

It is backed by a robust and effective system of monitoring, ensured by the European Committee of Social Rights.

It is a hugely valuable tool in building more inclusive, socially cohesive societies.

At a time of fragmentation and anxiety in Europe, this should not be downplayed

### **Using the Charter to build socially cohesive societies**

I therefore urge you to use the Charter and the Turin Process – in two ways.

First, send a clear and reassuring message to your citizens:

Demonstrate your determination that – despite the pressures in your economies and at your borders – *no one* should slip through the net.

Push for ratification of the revised Charter, if your state has not already done so.

If it has, push for acceptance of more of the Charter's provisions.

Push for effective implementation of the conclusions and decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights.

And, if you are not from one of the fifteen member states who have ratified the collective complaints procedure, push for this too.

Under this procedure, representative bodies like international NGOs, trade unions and employer organisations...

...can raise their concerns with the European Committee of Social Rights on behalf of otherwise silent victims.

The first time it was ever used was by the International Commission of Jurists to highlight child labour practices.

These were children who were not going to find themselves at the European Court of Human Rights.

Yet, thanks to the collective complaints procedure, the exploitation stopped and the practices were changed – helping not just one child, but many more.

It is an important and ground-breaking innovation and it needs your support.

Second, use the Charter to help integrate the most vulnerable individuals and groups in your societies; those most at risk of marginalisation.

The refugee crisis is a case in point.

We know that many of the people arriving in Europe are living in poor conditions – we have all seen the news reports.

But, despite the pressures on states to process these people, certain standards must be upheld.

And we must not forget: many of these asylum seekers are here to stay.

They are future members of our societies and it is in our interests to help them, as quickly as possible, stand on their own two feet.

This is why, for example, the European Committee for Social Rights has been clear: anyone entering Europe – migrant, irregular migrant, asylum seeker, refugee, whichever label or category – has a right to certain basic living conditions while they are within a state's territory.

This includes, at a minimum, safe and clean shelter, food, clothing and medical assistance, for anyone. And, of course, there is a wider package of Charter rights for those migrants who have obtained lawful residence, for recognised refugees and for stateless persons.

How else can these people begin their new lives? How can they even begin their journey to becoming active and self-sufficient, able to work and make their contribution?

When we see individuals being pushed to the peripheries, the Charter and the decisions from the European Committee of Social Rights are there to be invoked as we seek to draw these people back into mainstream society.

These decisions are a rich resource for parliamentarians looking to hold executives to account.

By drawing on them, you can be even more confident that the measures you advocate will promote social cohesion, meet international standards and therefore stand the test of time.

The whole point of the Charter system is that it is a dynamic tool, for practical use by member States.

## Sum up

To conclude, before the detailed discussions begin, I think it is useful for us to keep in mind the one question which has brought us here today; the question behind the whole Turin Process:

What kind of societies are we trying to build?

At a time of great pressure and change in Europe – of economic uncertainty and demographic change – what can we do to make sure our societies emerge intact – stronger and more resilient than they were before?

At the Council of Europe we are clear: the strongest, most resilient and most cohesive societies are inclusive societies.

Inclusive *democracies*, filled with individuals who not only have well-protected civil and political liberties...

...but who also enjoy social and economic security, enabling them to fulfil their potential; individuals who have real, enacted social rights – this, for us, is true freedom.

It is an ambition which crosses national boundaries and party lines – and I am hugely grateful to all of you for being here today as we strive to make it a reality.

Your time and commitment make the difference.

I wish you the best for our conference.