



**Opening Speech to the High-Level Conference on the Social Charter  
of the Council of Europe  
by the President of the Conference of INGOs  
Vilnius, July 4, 2024**

75 years ago, the Council of Europe was founded on the smouldering ruins of Nazidom and War in the shadow of an ever more vicious Cold War threatening nuclear annihilation. It was founded as a bold beacon of Human Rights and to help the new democratic states of Europe to develop into true liberal democracies. In 1961 the Council of Europe took another bold step in drafting the Social Charter – acknowledging that Social Rights were Human Rights and without protection of Social Rights democracies could not thrive – and intrinsically that Social Rights are universal as parts of the Human Rights System.

Therefore, the Conference of INGOs urges all member states to join the Revised Social Charter and to sign up to the Additional Protocol on Collective Complaints. We ask them not to opt out of certain chapters or opt for territorial exclusions. For us it is not acceptable to create second class citizens and deprive parts of the population of the protection of the Social Charter.

Any convention can only be as good as its implementation. This is why we are deeply disappointed with the outcome of the recent reform process of the Social Charter System. For the European population to truly enjoy the benefits of the Social Charter it needs dedicated monitoring and meaningful, consequential follow up. The findings and recommendations of the European Committee of Social Rights must be adhered to. And again - it is of the utmost importance that all citizens of Europe should enjoy the same rights and the same protection. Therefore, we urge all member states to sign up to the reporting system and the appropriate amended and additional protocols to ensure a proper supervision of the implementation of the Social Charter.

Two generations ago the Council of Europe acknowledged the importance of social cohesion to strengthen democratic societies and make them resilient – not the least to combat the threat posed to democratic Europe by the Soviet Union. One generation ago it revised the Social Charter in the light of the fallen Iron Curtain and the prospect of a new, united, democratic Europe. Now we must live up to these bold acts and make the Social Charter fit for the challenges of our time. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a wakeup call with a big bang. The Reykjavik Summit was a pledge to all Europeans to stand united around our values.

We now must bring this promise to life. We bemoan the democratic backsliding, the rise of populism and the lack of clear orientation. We see the gaps in our societies widening and extremism rising. Just as in 1961 it is a fundamental need to safeguard the social rights of our citizens and to ensure their social wellbeing, to create an environment of hope and optimism and not of fear and disillusion. The Social Charter is as important as 60 years ago and it needs all our effort to countermand the negative developments in our societies. We therefore truly hope that this High-Level Conference is not just a box to tick in the implementation process of Reykjavik but that it will be the launch of a new effort to bring the Social Charter up to date and make it a vibrant instrument for the benefit of the whole population in the territory of the Council of Europe.