

16th Meeting of the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on
Social and Economic Rights

**Defending the Social Acquis: The Role of the European Social
Charter in Resisting Deregulatory Trends in Labor Law**

7 October 2026

Vienna, Austria (9:00-17:30)

Venue: Novotel Wien Hauptbahnhof, Canettistrasse 6

CONCEPT NOTE

Background and Rationale

The [2025 Conclusions on Labour Rights by the European Committee of Social Rights](#) (ECSR) underscored persistent challenges in the effective implementation of labour protections across Europe. As underlined in the Committee's findings, there is growing tension between the **formal guarantees of the European Social Charter (ESC)** and **regressive pressures on employment standards** driven by geopolitical competitiveness agendas.

Recent developments might have intensified this dynamic. The European Union's ongoing **simplification initiatives**, including the digital omnibus packages released since February 2025, have raised concerns about potential erosion of labour protections, particularly regarding the **simplification of the EU Corporate Due Diligence Directive**. Furthermore, the recent unveiling of the so-called **EU Inc. initiative**, also known as the **28th Regime Corporate Legal Framework**, which was proposed by the European Commission on March 18, 2026, as the EU's new corporate establishment framework, has [sparked debate](#) regarding its potential adverse impact on the protection of employment rights.

The 28th Regime Corporate Legal Framework differs from existing national laws by offering an optional, standalone EU-wide corporate framework that aims to allow companies to bypass the complexities of navigating 27 different national legal systems by providing a single set of harmonised rules for incorporation and operation. There are prominent [concerns](#) that the optional nature of EU Inc. could allow companies to bypass stricter national labour laws, potentially eroding worker protections across the EU in a "race to the bottom" in standards across member states.

Simultaneously, the forthcoming European Commission proposal for a [European Union Quality Jobs Act](#) (expected end of 2026) aims to modernise employment frameworks in a rights-protective way and to preserve core rights. However, it is not clear whether the [proposed safeguards will be sufficiently effective](#) in protecting workers from the adverse impacts of advanced digital technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), on their working conditions and on putting brakes on rights-abusive subcontracting practices by business companies that might rely on subcontracting to circumvent or undermine workers' and trade union rights, labour standards and collective bargaining agreements.

Environmental risks are also increasingly relevant to the protection of labour rights. The 2026 heatwaves across Europe have highlighted how climate-related hazards can affect workers' health, safety and ability to work, particularly those in outdoor, physically demanding or precarious employment. This underlines the need for effective heat-prevention measures and for climate adaptation to be treated as integral to the right to safe and healthy working conditions, without further eroding labour standards or exacerbating workplace inequalities.

In this context, the [European Social Charter](#) occupies a particularly important place within the European human rights architecture. As the Council of Europe's unique treaty on social and economic rights, the ESC establishes a comprehensive framework for the protection of workers' rights, including fair working conditions, collective bargaining, safe and healthy workplaces, protection against unfair dismissal, and equal treatment in employment. Through the jurisprudence and monitoring work of the ECSR, the ESC provides authoritative guidance on the content of these rights and serves as a key reference point for assessing whether legislative and policy developments across Europe remain aligned with fundamental social rights commitments. The ESC therefore complements developments within the European Union legal order and contributes to maintaining a high level of protection for labour rights across the continent.

These provisions, as interpreted most recently **through the ECSR's Conclusions 2025 and collective complaints**, establish binding obligations that provide an important benchmark for evaluating labour law and policy developments and for ensuring that economic and regulatory reforms remain compatible with fundamental social rights standards.

The **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** (EU Charter) provides legal safeguards for workers, particularly through Articles 15, and 27-32, which enshrine the right to work and fair working conditions. These provisions reinforce the ESC by embedding labour rights within the broader framework of EU fundamental rights. The horizontal application of the EU Charter in EU law ensures that labour protections are upheld across all policy areas, including digital transformation and corporate governance reforms.

The [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#) plays a crucial role in safeguarding labour rights amid deregulatory pressures. As an independent EU Agency, FRA collects and analyses law and data and provides evidence-based recommendations to policymakers. FRA's findings point to risks across several dimensions of labour rights, including exploitation in subcontracting chains; gender and racial disparities in labour markets; and the risks related to algorithmic management in employment which can obscure accountability and amplify discrimination. These findings underscore the urgent need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and regulatory safeguards.

Against this backdrop, the COE-FRA-ENNHRI-EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights proposes a **1-day annual meeting** aimed at examining how the **European Social Charter and the Charter of Fundamental Rights can serve as a counterweight to deregulatory pressures**. The meeting will focus on **operationalising these instruments** as safeguards against the levelling down of labour standards, strengthening institutional monitoring capacities, and fostering peer learning among relevant actors at the national level committed to defending the social acquis.

Objectives

The meeting aims to:

1. **Explore the impact** of EU legislative simplification and new initiatives on compliance with labour rights.
2. **Strengthen practical understanding** of how human rights standards can be used to resist deregulation and protect labour rights.

3. **Analyse the 2025 ECSR Conclusions on Labour Rights** and identify priorities for action by NHRSS, Equality Bodies, trade unions and CSOs.
4. **Build a shared framework** to monitor and challenge the levelling-down of labour standards across Europe.
5. **Strengthen collaboration** among NHRSS, trade unions, and civil society engaged in labour rights work, with particular focus on **enforcement mechanisms**, including shadow reporting, strategic litigation, and national engagements to address labour rights violations.

Target Participants

- National Human Rights Institutions
- Equality Bodies
- Trade unions and, as relevant, other social partners
- Civil Society Organisations

Methodology

The meeting will be **interactive and practitioner-focused**, combining expert inputs, research findings, exchange of practice and case-based discussions.

Expected Outcomes

- Improved understanding of key **challenges and solutions** in defending labour rights through existing human rights standards and monitoring mechanisms;
- Identified steps for a **common action** for applying European Social Charter provisions and EU Charter for Fundamental Rights research to resist levelling-down of labour standards;
- A set of **good practice examples from National Human Rights Structures, trade unions and CSOs** for monitoring international standards compliance amid deregulatory pressures;
- Stronger **networks and collaboration pathways** among participants.