



Social Rights are Human Rights: The European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights in the follow-up to the Vilnius and La Hulpe Declarations

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Interpretation: English/ French

Introduction

In commemoration of International Human Rights Day, the Council of Europe and Social Platform will join forces to host a roundtable discussion in Brussels dedicated to deepening the understanding of the pivotal role played by the European Social Charter in safeguarding and advancing social rights.

Earlier this year both the Council of Europe, via the [Vilnius Declaration](#), and the European Union via the [La Hulpe Declaration](#), reaffirmed the importance of social rights to underpin progress, social cohesion and democracy. In particular, the La Hulpe Declaration specifically highlights the role of the European Social Charter as a key tool in building Social Europe, while both Declarations specifically mention the importance of further cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union in promoting social rights and the Charter.

However, when it comes to implementing the European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights there is space for improvement and better alignment. Member States can improve their commitment to social rights by accepting more provisions of the revised Charter, ratifying the revised Charter, and accepting the collective complaints mechanism for those states that haven't done so. In addition, the EU can increase the use of the monitoring outcomes of the Charter system in the European Semester, so both the Council of Europe and the EU can foster tangible progress on the ground when it comes to social rights.

This high-level event will aim to look at what comes next for social rights across the European region, and how we can best ensure holistic policy making, whereby the standards and processes of the Council of Europe and the European Union contribute towards a shared vision with initiatives that both support and mutually reinforce one another.

This event comes at an opportune time to discuss concrete next steps to both La Hulpe and Vilnius, as in 2025 the European Commission will propose a new Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). In addition, with the commencement of the mandate for the next European Commission, the alignment of the EPSR Action Plan, and the European Semester to the standards of the European Social Charter will be an important discussion.

Beyond high-level discussions, this event seeks to chart a concrete way to ensure the gradual progression and realisation of social rights at Member State level, particularly in the context of combatting poverty, addressing social exclusion, and fostering a society grounded in principles of social justice, economic equality, and fair work and living conditions.

The event will bring together representatives of governments, civil society and social partners, as well as representatives of the Council of Europe, the European Committee of Social Rights, the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, Eurofound, the UN, etc. The gathering aims to foster an essential dialogue, cultivating a shared understanding of the pivotal role played by the (revised) European Social Charter and its rich case law, as a strong reference for the revised Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This should serve as inspiration for taking a common message of commitment to social rights and social justice to the global level. The event is planned for an estimated 60 participants.

Background:

In the backdrop of contemporary challenges such as global health concerns, the escalating cost of living, energy crises, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the looming threats of climate change, the shrinking of civil space, including that of unionisation, etc., the importance of safeguarding social rights becomes increasingly pronounced. These crises have led to a surge in social exclusion and marginalisation across Europe.

The European Social Charter is a Council of Europe treaty that seeks to protect fundamental social and economic rights as a counterpart to the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees civil and political rights. It provides for a broad range of everyday human rights related to employment, housing, health, education, social protection and welfare.

The Charter is seen as the Social Constitution of Europe and represents an essential component of the continent's human rights architecture, being the most wide-ranging and comprehensive legal instrument for protecting human social rights at the European level.

42 of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe are Parties to either the 1961 European Social Charter or the 1996 Revised European Social Charter.

The collective complaints procedure was introduced by a Protocol to the Charter adopted in 1995, which entered into force on 1 July 1998. It is a unique form of collective redress in the human rights system, open to social partners and civil society organisations, and aimed at resolving systemic problems that affect Charter rights enjoyment. Sixteen member states have embraced the collective complaints procedure, an important good governance tool in pursuing social justice and equality throughout Europe.

The [European Union priorities declared by the EU Council for cooperation with the Council of Europe for 2023-2024](#)¹ specifically highlights the important role of the European Social Charter in relation to the Porto Social Summit. Promoting access to social rights recognised and protected by the European Social Charter is a tool to support the achievement of the Social Summit's goals, and as such the Charter should be viewed as a complementary tool to assist the EU, Member States and Civil Society Organisations in the joint ambition to improve the respect for rights without discrimination, to reduce poverty and social exclusion, and ultimately to achieve social justice .

The desirability of strengthening cooperation with the EU at all levels with regard to the implementation of the European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights has been signalled repeatedly. Strong and persistent calls made, notably by the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Secretary General, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, the social partners, and a range of academics and other personalities should be recalled including regarding the accession of the European Union to the revised European Social Charter. In October 2022, High-Level Reflection Group's report that was meant to inspire the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe also recommended pursuing the European Union's accession to the revised European Social Charter.

This roundtable event will focus on the delivery of a "Social Rights Europe" and the ways in which opportunities for collaboration and mutual reinforcement between the European Social Charter system and the European Union can be leveraged in this regard. In addition, in view of the 2nd World Summit on Social Development, which will take place in Doha in November 2025, the participants are invited to consider engaging in a further reflection on a joint message to the Summit.

Objectives:

1. Raise awareness about the Vilnius Declaration, and in particular highlight the policy implications for EU decision-makers, and implications for EU policy frameworks.
2. Raise awareness about the La Hulpe Declaration, and in particular highlight the policy implications and cooperation perspectives for Council of Europe decision-makers.
3. Discuss social rights as a collective duty for the Council of Europe and the European Union and examine practical ways of ensuring synergy between the European Social Charter and the EU Social Pillar. Explore actionable strategies and policy implementations that strengthen the integration of the Charter into broader EU social policy goals.

¹ "In the context of economic and social rights, the EU will work jointly with the Council of Europe on respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights in line with the European Social Charter and revised European Social Charter (ESC), which place emphasis on the rights of older persons, women, children, persons with disabilities and migrant workers. The main strands of cooperation in this area will focus on promoting decent work for all and in particular implementing a zero-tolerance policy on child labour and the eradication of forced labour; curbing inequalities by combating poverty and social exclusion, promoting universal access to social protection and non-discriminatory access to social services; social dialogue; the right to safe and healthy working conditions for all, a world of work free of violence and harassment as well as responsible management in global supply chains. Cooperation with the Council of Europe in promoting social rights is also reflected in its involvement in the biannual fora for monitoring the implementation of the commitments made at the EU's Social Summit, in Porto in 2021. The EU will also promote the effective implementation of the ESC and its protocols, and follow with interest the ongoing reform process aiming to improve the ESC system."

4. Present the comparative study between the European Social Charter and EU law and draw consequences from the common ground between them.
5. Discuss how to improve the number of accepted provisions of the European Social Charter by Member States, as well as the collective complaints mechanism.
6. Explore the synergies and collaborative efforts required among institutions and stakeholders, aiming to enhance the realisation of social rights and address challenges collectively.

Outcomes:

1. Enhanced understanding of how the European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights can deepen synergies and promote social rights across Europe.
2. Further develop the network and relationships between key stakeholders involved in realising the rights set out in the European Social Charter and delivering the European Pillar of Social Rights, including the European Committee of Social Rights, European Commission, European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, Social Partners, Civil Society, EU agencies including FRA and Eurofound, UN, etc.
3. Collect concrete ideas for the increased acceptance and effective implementation of the Charter and its better reflection into the Pillar, including the role and contribution of the EU and other actors in achieving this goal.
4. Mapping means of strengthening the European Social Charter within the forthcoming revised Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Guidelines for Participation

This will be an in-person event in Brussels. The format is a roundtable discussion designed to stimulate conversation, discussion and debate. The discussion will be broken into an introduction session, summarising key takeaways from both Vilnius and La Hulpe, followed by roundtable discussion in two panels and concluding remarks.

Programme

09.00 Welcome Coffee & Registration

9:30

Moderator: Dr Robin Wilson, former editor-in-chief, Social Europe

Opening Remarks and Welcome

Official opening of the event, with a few words to welcome participants, encourage active participation and sharing of expertise and perspectives and frame the event's discussions.

- **Ambassador Andriy Zayats**, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Brussels
- **Denis Genton**, Director, European Pillar of Social Rights, Strategy, DG EMPL
- **Aoife Nolan**, President of the European Committee of Social Rights
- **Oliver Röpke**, President of the European Economic and Social Committee
- **Heather Roy**, President of the Social Platform

10.00 Panel 1: Challenges & Opportunities for Greater Cooperation

The session will present the European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights, as well as the commitments deriving from the Vilnius, respectively the La Hulpe Declarations. It will kick start with a keynote presentation highlighting the correspondence between the European Social Charter and EU Law. The presentation will highlight challenges linked to the acceptance of Charter provisions at member state level, and the implications for EU policy making processes.

Keynote presentation

Julie Gomis, Governmental Committee of the European Social Charter & Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, Ministère du Travail, France

Speakers

- **Henrik Kristensen**, Head of the Department of Social Rights, Council of Europe
- **Gerrit Van de Mosselaer**, Social Affairs Advisor, Cabinet of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, Belgium
- **Isabelle Schömann**, Deputy Secretary General, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
- **Peter Verhaeghe**, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, Caritas Europa, Belgium
- **Cláudia Pinto**, Senior Policy Officer in Social and Economic Inclusion, European Youth Forum

Questions and answers, all participants

11.15 Coffee Break

11.30 Panel 2: The Way Forward: Synergies and Collaborations

This panel will look to the future and look at possible ways forward in terms of fostering deeper collaboration between the Council of Europe & European Union with a view to stimulate member states to take further commitments under the Charter as the most comprehensive social rights standard in Europe. It will also look at opportunities for better alignment of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its upcoming revised action plan to the European Social Charter.

Keynote

- **Olivier de Schutter**, Professor at UC Louvain and Sciences Po and UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Speakers

- **Aoife Nolan**, President, European Committee of Social Rights
- **Denis Genton**, European Pillar of Social Rights, Strategy, DG EMPL
- **Rita, Skrebiškienė**, Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the EU
- **Paul Galles**, Chair of the Sub-Committee on the European Social Charter, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- **Drahošlav Štefánek**, Chair of COHOM, European External Action Service

- **Piotr Sadowski**, Vice-President of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) of the Council of Europe

Questions and answers, all participants

12.45 Conclusions and follow-up

The conclusions will highlight key elements of the day's discussion and possible next steps. It will also underline the contribution of different stakeholders in particular social partners and civil society in achieving the objectives discussed at the event.

- **George Theodosis**, Associate professor of Labour Law and Director of the Laboratory of Comparative and European Social Law at Democritus University of Thrace, member of the CoE European Committee of Social Rights
- **Laura de Bonfils**, Secretary General of the Social Platform

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch