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HIGH-LEVEL PANEL DISCUSSION
60th Anniversary of the European Social Charter
18 October 1961 – 18 October 2021

Opening statement by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg, 18 October 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Co-panelists, dear Chair,

I am very pleased and honoured to address you today to mark the 60th anniversary of the opening for signature of the European Social Charter.

The European Social Charter and the work of the European Committee of Social Rights have been of fundamental importance to the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, from its very institution. My predecessors and I have always worked on the firm understanding that social rights are crucial. There is no life in dignity and no active enjoyment of human rights without access to basic social rights. My Office and the Secretariat of the Social Charter have therefore closely co-operated over the years and my predecessors and I have systematically called on member states to implement social rights more effectively and to follow up closely on the decisions and conclusions of the European Committee of Social Rights. I cannot emphasise enough the fact that there is no hierarchy in human rights. Social rights may therefore not be treated as a luxury or an afterthought – they form an integral, fundamental part of the international human rights protection system and women, men and children depend on them every day.

Today, on this important anniversary, I want to make three points regarding the role played by the European Social Charter:

Firstly, I want to highlight the capacity of the European Committee of Social Rights, particularly through the Collective Complaints Procedure, to provide not only retrospective analyses of conditions in States Parties, but also to tackle newly emerging challenges. And this is precisely what we need today in a fast evolving and constantly changing environment. This is what we need, given the precarity of the socioeconomic situation of a growing part of the population in Council of Europe member states, the alarming rise in homelessness, and the shortcomings of our health care systems in terms of their emergency preparedness. The European Committee of Social Rights helps us confront the human rights violations of today and it draws our attention to the challenges of the future. The Committee has aptly defined the urgent tasks ahead, including the right to a healthy and sustainable environment, the rights to food and water, the challenges we face in terms of unhealthy and precarious working conditions in an increasingly automated and digitised labour market, and the growing predicaments of poverty, social inequality and exclusion.

Secondly, I want to stress the significance of the Charter and the particular contribution of the European Committee of Social Rights during times of crisis. During the economic crisis, the Committee reminded us that austerity measures were gravely exacerbating the already severe human consequences in Europe and provided vital guidance and support to member states in their efforts to avert the worst in difficult times. In the wake of COVID-19, it has again been the Committee which, right from the start, emphasised that socially vulnerable groups were the ones hardest hit by the virus and by virus containment measures. It – already in March 2020 - provided member states with detailed advice on necessary measures in the fields of health and education, employment, working conditions and gender equality to ease the impacts of the crisis on the enjoyment of social rights in Europe. We all know that it is short-sighted not to expect

other crisis situations to occur – and the European Social Charter mechanism makes us that much more resilient.

Because of the European Committee of Social Rights' ability to address problems as they emerge and because of the particular importance of the European Social Charter during crises, I want to thirdly underline the absolute need for Council of Europe member states to boost their political commitment and provide real support to this instrument. It is not enough to enshrine social rights in international conventions and national legislation and talk about the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights. We must actively close the widening gap between what is written on paper and what people face in reality. This means, first of all, to effectively implement the decisions and conclusions of the Committee. Also, and importantly, more states must ratify more provisions of the revised Charter and more states must accept to be bound by the Collective Complaints Procedure. 16 States Parties are not enough given the breadth and complexity of social rights related challenges in Europe. Closing the gap also means more financial support. The fulfilment of social rights necessitates the allocation of sufficient and sustained financial resources as well as adequate fiscal policies. I am pleased to see the intended actions to reinforce the Committee's role in the interpretation and enforcement of social rights across the continent. Renewed political commitment and enhanced vigour to protect social rights are acutely needed and indispensable for the equal enjoyment of human rights in Europe today.

Last but not least, I want to join my co-panelists in congratulating the European Committee of Social Rights and the Secretariat of the European Social Charter for their devotion and impressive achievements in protecting and promoting human rights in Europe over the past six decades.

Thank you very much, I look much forward to continuing our cooperation towards the protection of social rights and making the progress that we all need.