

High-Level Conference on Social Rights

The European Social Charter

19 March 2026, Chişinău

Speech by Ms Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Madam President,

Madam Minister,

Mr Secretary General,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to bring the parliamentary voice to this High-Level Conference. As President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I speak on behalf of Europe's elected representatives — and through them, the citizens who expect social rights to be real, visible and protected.

Today, social rights are under pressure. Across Europe, rising inequalities, the cost-of-living crisis and growing insecurity are eroding trust in our democratic systems. When people cannot afford housing, when healthcare becomes inaccessible, when opportunities depend on social origin, democracy itself begins to weaken.

This is precisely why the European Social Charter remains so essential. It reminds us that social justice is not secondary to democracy — it is one of its foundations.

The Parliamentary Assembly has been clear: access to adequate housing is a fundamental human right and a social good. Yet too many people in Europe face homelessness, precarious housing or unaffordable rents.

States must step up public investment in social and affordable housing and treat housing as a central pillar of social stability and human dignity. The house you live in is your second skin, as it was framed to the point in our yesterday's side event.

Vienna is the global role model for affordable housing. As a proud Viennese, I know that well-organised public housing at a large scale can also help stabilise and reduce costs in the private housing sector.

We must also protect the right to health in its full meaning — including sexual and reproductive health and rights. These rights are fundamental to equality, autonomy and human dignity, and they must be guaranteed without barriers or discrimination.

At the same time, social rights must truly be for everyone. Our societies include people of all ages and abilities, as well as many who are marginalised or vulnerable. The Charter must protect them all. No one should face discrimination because of their social origin or personal circumstances.

Inclusion is not a slogan — it is a democratic duty. That is why we must also lift the remaining limitations in the protection of the Charter. It must serve especially those who need it most — the most vulnerable and the most marginalised.

The Parliamentary Assembly also strongly supports the recognition of the right to live in a healthy environment as an autonomous right within the Council of Europe system. Environmental degradation and global heating are not only ecological challenges — they are social challenges that directly affect health, dignity and equality. Recognising this right explicitly as autonomous would strengthen both social justice and democratic stability across Europe.

As parliamentarians, we have a special responsibility. Rights become reality through legislation, public budgets and democratic oversight — all of which pass through parliaments. The Parliamentary Assembly will continue to encourage member States to strengthen their commitments to the Charter and to fully implement the rights it protects.

Let us be clear: protecting social rights is not a secondary political agenda. It is the very foundation of democratic stability. And social injustice is never neutral. It affects women, children, people with disabilities and those already marginalised the most.

When housing becomes unaffordable, when healthcare is inaccessible, when decent work is an illusion, when social protection fails — inequality deepens and democracy weakens. A truly democratic Europe cannot accept that.

The European Social Charter reminds us that dignity is not a privilege reserved for the fortunate. It is a right that belongs to everyone. And rights only become real when we are prepared to defend them — politically, legislatively and financially.

As parliamentarians, that is our responsibility: not only to speak about social justice, but to make it happen. Because the strength of a democracy is not measured by the promises it makes — but by the dignity it guarantees.

And let us remember one simple truth: Social rights are not the soft side of democracy. They are its backbone.

Thank you.