



Protection of human life and public health in the context of a pandemic

High-level videoconference
Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

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Statement by

Giuseppe PALMISANO,
President of the European Committee of Social Rights

Minister Varvitsiotis,
Secretary General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I wish to thank the Greek chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers for organising this much needed initiative and for giving me the opportunity to make a statement on the sanitary crisis and social rights.

I would like to focus my intervention on three points:

First:

As the Covid-19 crisis painfully revealed, **preparedness is all about social rights** and therefore about the European Social Charter, which is the major European instrument for the protection of such rights. In fact, **Pandemic-readiness requires:**

- universal health care and well-equipped and resourced, resilient – I would say – public health service,
- health and safety at work,
- arrangements to ensure protection of the rights of older people,
- employment security,
- a minimum income and adequate guarantee of the right to housing.
- adequately resourced and solid public education and the protection of children,

All these requirements are inherent in the Social Charter and fulfilling them is crucial when confronted with a crisis such as **Covid-19**.

This is why the European Committee of Social Rights has already adopted - on the 21st of April - a **statement of interpretation** on the right to protection of health in a time of pandemic (related to

Article 11 of the Charter), and we have also announced a more general statement on Covid-19 and social rights, which will be ready in the near future.

Let me say that while the first statement was essential as it has explained what does it mean implementing the right to protection of health, and giving priority to such right in the event of a pandemic like Covid-19, and during the pandemic threat and crisis, the second statement will be equally important as it will try to clarify how to properly safeguard many fundamental social rights that are under stress in the aftermath of a pandemic, also due to possible measures taken by States to cope with the pandemic crisis.

Second point, but closely related to the first one:

The outcomes that countries have experienced are not aleatory - or random - they are rather the result of **good practice**, or sometimes less good practice, and people have felt those outcomes directly on their lives.

It is therefore necessary to draw the **lessons**, in terms of:

- improving and investing in public health and making it truly universal,
- ensuring safe and healthy working conditions.
- care arrangements for the elderly,
- services for and the protection of children,
- modernising education to ensure its sustainability and universality,
- employment security,
- reducing social and economic inequalities,

Given that this **virus is here to stay** and that it is likely, unfortunately, that **there will be other viruses**, or other non-viral disasters, it is fundamental to draw such lessons and to **construct our future** with the necessary national legislative, regulatory and funding mechanisms in one hand, of course, but also with the European Social Charter in the other.

The Charter is a unique instrument at European level. It is alive and well and has potential to continue developing and growing. The Charter should be the lighthouse guiding the development of a new (or renewed) social contract fit for the 21st century which many world leaders and reputed personalities now demand.

And, the third aspect I would like to touch upon:

The Charter and its procedures are key **governance instruments** for member states to be best informed and equipped to take the best possible decisions in all areas which are covered by the Charter and relevant for responding to pandemic, sanitary, or other general social crises.

Each state owes the best possible governance arrangements to its people and to all persons within its jurisdiction. Anything short of embracing the best instruments of democratic governance is unacceptable, and amounts to government or legislators failing people.

It is therefore necessary to **step up efforts to strengthen commitment to the Charter** and strongly argue in favour of member states that have not yet done so **ratifying the revised Charter, accepting more provisions (preferably all) and accepting the collective complaints procedure**. In particular, the

collective complaints procedure is not only a good governance tool for member states, but also a good democratic tool giving the fundamental role of social partners and civil society at large in identifying the issues that require special attention and scrutiny.

In the same vein and for many reasons, the Council of Europe, alongside member states that are also members of the European Union, should **put on the table the question of accession by the European Union to the European Social Charter**.

To sum up, I propose urgent and vigorous action

- first, to ensure that the European Social Charter (and the case law and findings of the European Committee of Social Rights) is fully relied upon as a key governance tool for responding to the current crises and that it inspires changes—and a new social contract that will allow for improved risk management and sustainability—after the emergency is over,
- and, second, to strongly encourage member states that have not yet done so to ratify the revised Charter, to accept more provisions (preferably all), and to accept the collective complaints procedure.

Lastly, given the welcome forward-looking reflection that you have proposed under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, dear Minister, I would like to add a very final suggestion.

The current crisis has already had a significant impact on the wellbeing and the lives of people, I dare say of everyone in our societies. There has been and there continues to be so much suffering and so much loss that people (communities and also millions of individuals) will have to be given the opportunity to engage with, understand and mourn their losses and their suffering. People will need to come to terms with all this. If people's needs are not satisfied and there is no opportunity to rebuild trust, the damage will persist and the ripples will destabilise communities and countries, and possibly threaten social and democratic sustainability. In order to mitigate these risks, I think that there will be a need for some form of social dialogue to enable "reconciliation" after Covid-19. I am thinking, for example, of an ad hoc public platform or forum; and the Council of Europe could and should play, in my humble view, a part in such a reconciliation process and organised social dialogue.

Thank you for your attention.