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DEPARTMENT OF THE
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Seminar

Social Cohesion: A New Horizon for 21st Century Europe

Building back better: the role of employment , health and social security policies and new opportunities for social cohesion

Council of Europe, European Platform for Social Cohesion (PECS)

Strasbourg, 17 June 2021

Via Videoconference

KUDO https://vmeeting.coe.int/k8/241114955424/join

Meeting ID: 241114955424

Under the European Social Cohesion Platform, the Council of Europe (CoE) is launching a seminar on the future of social cohesion in Europe. As a pan-European organisation it is the best placed to do that. It is uniquely qualified in this domain, owing to its history of work on social cohesion and on the protection of social rights. During challenging times, reflecting on social rights for action assumes greater importance and in this regard social rights shall frame the discussions in seeking new solutions and approaches to 21st Century social cohesion in Europe. There is no better venue for exploring the threats to and opportunities for social cohesion in a post-pandemic Europe.

The pandemic has posed new challenges to social cohesion which will have a lasting effect. It is evident that this crisis has significant negative consequences for all Council of Europe member states and beyond. It harshly hit the economy and social environment, affected the labour markets, suspended some public services, posed significant challenges to the education system, and restricted or suspended cultural activities. It is currently not possible to list the full extent of the impact of the Covid-19, as some of the consequences will persist over time, or occur in the future, or it will be only possible to observe and comprehend them much later. Others require specialised research and assessments.

Our societies face physical, social and economic challenges as a consequence of the pandemic. Social cohesion provisions ensured *de jure* were damaged. Those challenges overlay the already existing challenges. They need to be identified and discussed.

As social cohesion gains on political prominence in the 21st century, new approaches need to be identified, which would addreess those challenges. Renewed political commitment for social cohesion continues to shape by the reality of the time and the emerging challenges facing societies[1].

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The New Strategy and Action Plan for Social Cohesion which were adopted by the Council of Europe in July 2010, define social cohesion as the "capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members (…), to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members".

Social Cohesion is then a dynamic process, a work in progress, a never-ending adjustment to economic challenges and social changes and an ideal towards which societies have to strive continuously. "It is a goal to which they aspire, but never fully achieve"[2]. Yet, social cohesion is a worthy objective: all are better off living in socially cohesive societies.

In setting themselves this ambitious goal, CoE member states first sought to identify the factors of division and the obstacles to a society's ability to organize its "living 'together", in order to combat them more effectively. Since the 1990s, Europeans have long been aware of a number of threats to social cohesion. Demographic changes, mutating employment patterns and outflux of stable well-paying jobs induced by technological change and globalization, as well as tight public finances have cast doubts about the sustainability of social security systems; social and crime problems in run-down areas undermined the belief in the effectiveness of the welfare state in addressing social problems and ensuring public tranquility. New risks and forms of poverty and exclusion have emerged, such as inadequate access to new information and communication technologies, while social and income inequalities kept widening.

Furthermore, the current social and economic crisis instigated in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic reveals the existing shortcomings of the welfare state, and calls into question both the effectiveness of democratic governments and the soundness of expert advice in confronting the pandemic. Lockdowns instituted for sanitary reasons, deepened social isolation and segregation. New patterns of work (especially teleworking), introduced and popularised during the pandemic, will have a lasting effect in terms of creating new tensions at work, in families and in community life. The distributional effects of the crisis will also likely be uneven, with the most vulnerable being disproportionately affected. They will pose new challenges to social cohesion and, consequently, new challenges to social policy at all levels, community, national and regional .

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[1] *Background paper - Towards a Revised Council of Europe Strategy for Social Cohesion*, PECS(2020)5, September 2020

[2] *A new strategy for Social Cohesion*. Revised strategy for Social Cohesion approved by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 31 March 2004. European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS), part 1, para. 3.

"But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass"[3]… This new virus has unleashed new layers of resilience in overcoming the ills it has caused.   We commit to overcome them together as families, communities, and nations gathered in the Council of Europe. The crisis has made us more aware of the value of social cohesion[4] . "Rebuilding better" - something that was not fully destroyed yet…- is the new motto of multilateral institutions and agencies, eager to make a difference by assisting the national governments in their efforts to developing plans that build a more sustainable and resilient future. As post-pandemic recovery opens opportunities for ambitious strategies in adjusting to climate change and to digitalisation, it will also pose new challenges to social cohesion. Therefore, similarly bold approaches to finding new sources of revenue, as well as to wage formation and income redistribution are likely to be needed.

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While "examining new trends in and challenges to social cohesion" is among the enumerated tasks of the European Platform for Social Cohesion (PECS) for 2020-2021, this seminar will also focus on the new perspectives opened by the post- Covid-19 pandemic recovery in Europe.

This event is part of the overall effort of the Council of Europe to promote the mainstreaming of social cohesion and to enhance the Council of Europe's work in the area of social cohesion, in particular through the promotion of the European Social Charter, for the full enjoyment of social rights.

The seminar will then give participants the opportunity to discuss the state of social cohesion in the crisis-stricken Europe, new challenges to social cohesion posed by the crisis and other secular trends (demography, digitalisation, climate change) and suggest new horizons for social cohesion, i.e., ways in which social cohesion should be effectively striven for in the 21st century.

COVID-19 and social cohesion challenges and experience expected to be shared from all corners of Europe.

Sustainable Development Goals should be reflected when elaborated each theme.

In addition to members states' representatives to the PECS, the conference will be attended to by the distinguished representatives of the Council of Europe, European Commission, Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, Fundamental Rights Agency, academics.

Objectives:

> ➢ ***Challenges to Social cohesion - understanding unequal impacts of the crisis and the following lockdowns and social distancing measures***

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[3] As stated by Samwise Gamgee, in J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: *The Two Towers*.
[4] *The New Normal ? A 7-country comparative study on the impacts of COVID-19 on trust, social cohesion, democracy and expectations for an uncertain future,* More-in-Common, July 2020.

During the first session, the meeting participants will discuss the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on the quality of the social fabric and the confidence of citizens in their institutions. How to make sure, that social distancing and health measures taken by member states during the current crisis remain proportional to the threat posed by the spread of the virus and are limited in time? How to make sure that they do not entail undue restrictions on human rights, particularly social rights?

Participants will also discuss on how to reinforce the human rights approach throughout the policy frameworks, and how actions taken are consistent with the requierments of the European Social Charter. They will address the need to tackle underlying fragility factors while addressing immediate needs arising from the pandemic, in particular towards the most vulnerable.

> ➢ *Solutions for improving the situation of the most vulnerable in the post-Covid recovery*

The second session will give the opportunity to exchange ideas on public policies to promote the social welfare, and to support the most vulnerable, with a focus on best practices regarding, *inter alia*, employment, inclusion and health, and contributing to the achievements of the "2030 Agenda" goals.

Attention will be given to moving beyond the emergency response and ensure stabilisation and plan for longer-term recovery.

Participants will express their views on the challenges to be met by the social cohesion, and how they intend to address them, relying on the European Social Charter and the existing CoE policies, programmes and tools.

PROGRAMME

<u>08:45-09:00   Registration</u>

<u>09:00-09:15   Opening</u>

Welcome by Mr Christophe POIREL, Director of Human Rights, Council of Europe

Introduction by Ms Rita SKREBISKIENE, PECS Chair

<u>09:15-10:30   First session. COVID-19 - Social cohesion at risk?</u>

Moderator: *Alexis RINCKENBACH, Head of European and International Affairs Bureau, Directorate General for Social Cohesion, Ministry of Solidarity and Health, France*

09:15-09:30   **"The new normal"**

Impacts of COVID-19 on trust, social cohesion and democracy

Mathieu LEFÈVRE, the CEO and Co-Founder of the Think Tank More in Common

09:30-09:45   **The welfare state put to the test by Covid-19**

How the crisis affected our social life and might change our future

Ms Monika QUEISSER, Head of Social Policy Division, OECD

09:45-10:00   **Defending right to health care during the COVID-19 and of life itself**

Protecting public health: responses and resources

Mrs Tatiana PUIU, Member of the European Committee of Social Rights

10:00-10:30   *Tour de table*, PECS delegations

Main challenges faced by Member States

10:30-11:00   Break

<u>11:00-12:25   Second session: building back better – for a sustainable social cohesion</u>

Moderator: *Joe GERADA, Chairperson, Foundation for Welfare Services, Ministry for Solidarity, Social Justice, Family and Children's Rights, Malta*

11:00-11:15   **Renewing our commitments for solidarity, democracy and wellbeing**

Investing on vulnerable groups in terms of enforcing an access to social rights and access to justice

Mr Jan MALINOWSKI, Head of Departement of the European Social Charter, Council of Europe

11:15-11:30 **Solutions to tackle poverty and social exclusion in Europe**

No one is left behind, special attention should be given to population groups and individuals who have been made particularly vulnerable by the crisis

Ms Katarina IVANKOVIC-KNEZEVIC, Director for Social Affairs and Inclusion, DG EMPL European Commission

11:30-11:45 **The future of employment**

What perspectives do we see while mitigating the impact of the crisis

Mr Philip VON BROCKDORF, Professor, University of Malta

11:45-12:00 **Inclusive dialogue**

Social-economic partners and society at large in the dialogue around building back better

Mr Piotr SADOWSKI, INGO Volonteurope, Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

12:00-12:25 *Tour de table*, PECS delegations

Member States' innovative measures

12:25-12:30 **Closing remarks**