



European
Social
Charter

Charte
sociale
européenne



Rapporteur Group - Social and Health Questions (GR-SOC)

Exchange of views on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social rights with the President of the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) and the Chair of the European Platform for Social Cohesion (PECS)

23 June 2020

The impact of the pandemic on social rights and social cohesion

Intervention by Rita Skrebiškienė, Chair of the European Social Cohesion Platform

Your Excellences,
Dear colleagues,

We welcome this initiative to reflect together on the impact of COVID-19 on social rights, which are often proclaimed as everyday human rights, and social cohesion, and therefore its impact on each and anyone of us.

I would like to emphasise two phases of the pandemic in relation to social cohesion – **not just impact but also recovery.**

I start from the question: is it possible to say at this stage **what are the pandemic's impacts** on our rights and freedoms, for our democracies and institutions?

It is evident that this crisis had 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 they will occur in the future, or it will be possible to observe and apprehend them much later, while 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.

The most **vulnerable groups** faced exceptional difficulties in this respect. In some cases, the crisis revealed discrimination and inequalities that were ignored or invisible, in many cases it augmented them.

When the pandemic hit, those most in need were agonisingly and embarrassingly neglected and let down because social services were not equipped to provide the minimum safety net. Take older people as an example: in some countries – not the poorest in Europe – older people

in certain care homes were left unprotected, many died because decisions were taken by the administrations to preclude, proscribe or de-prioritise their hospitalisation for care. This is not an accident. It is bad management and human rights neglect, as it is also the failure to “medicalise” immediately care homes for the elderly. The outcome, where sometimes half or more than half of the victims of Covid-19 are older people in care establishments because they were neglected by those whose duty was to protect and care for them, is intolerable in a 21st century civilised society.

We hear numerous reports about increased numbers of domestic violence against women and children. According to certain evaluations women may become the main victims of the social consequences of the pandemic. Home-schooling posed particular challenges for children in need and from disadvantaged families. Many of them did not have proper electronic devices to follow classes and I am not mentioning secured meal for a day. Because of social distancing and isolation, people with disabilities were deprived from access to services. In many countries, migrants and refugees were left in a limbo, with no access to essential needs or even proper shelters. Roma faced particular risks. Unemployment is rocket high even in developed European countries and may increase further as furlough measures phase out.

The list can continue!

Allow me to remind that, on the one hand, social cohesion means creating societies where people have the opportunity to live together with all their differences, and, on the other hand, the way to approach unity and diversity. This means supporting and protecting the most vulnerable, making equal rights for all a reality and contributing to the development and respect of variety.

A question that must be addressed is why the Covid-19 pandemic hit so hard all areas of our life. Why even developed European countries had difficulties in coping with it? The answer is preparedness.

Preparedness is about resources to meet social rights and social cohesion needs.

Social work (and social cohesion work) is fundamentally important for society and for the delivery of social rights, that are human rights (and as such universal, indivisible and interconnected). Social services are an obligation linked to the obligation of states to ensure the enjoyment of social rights and the effectiveness of social cohesion. The obligation stems from rights, and it is therefore not a question of affordability or resources, it is a question of prioritisation: A public monument or the life of an old person in care? Low taxation and big profits for corporations and bonuses for their CEO's and Directors or the wellbeing and food on the table for a poor child on a daily basis? Wealth accumulated out of corruption and skimming of public resources into financial havens or personal protective equipment for frontline staff that have to respond in case of a pandemic and care for those infected with a dangerous virus?

Social rights and social justice in Europe came under considerable pressure in recent years, not just because of the pandemic. Due to the 2008 financial crisis, austerity measures amputated social services, but economic recovery was not used as an opportunity to reconstruct them.

If preparedness is demanded of member states, the same applies to the Council of Europe (in other words, when Covid-19 hit Europe, where was the Council of Europe? Discussing what? What were or what have been its priorities?).

Erosion of resources for social cohesion over the years is also part of the problem.

Dismantling and de-funding social cohesion and social rights intergovernmental bodies **IS** a problem. During this pandemic, states have seen the consequences of de-funding public health (for example), while the alert and cooperation systems in the Council of Europe (the steering committee entrusted with public health intergovernmental work) had been disabled for years. PECS was left unauthorised, unresourced or ill-equipped to function properly.

As we phase out of isolation and emergency measures, and put the emphasis on the economy, let me turn to the **next phase: recovery**.

After the economically devastating effect of quarantine, during which many member States managed to successfully cope with the virus and to contain the pandemic, the time has come to focus, with equal eagerness, on how to restart the economy. It is a very sensitive and difficult process, but it is an important moment to make sure that no one is left behind.

Recovery should be based on the **lessons learned**.

We have learned that neglect of social rights and social cohesion may lead not only to economic crisis but cost human lives.

New policies and measures should be put in place addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups. Investing on these groups in terms of social security, health care, employment, protection of victims of violence, fighting poverty and income inequality, education, enforcing an access to social rights and access to justice should be prioritised.

To help member States in this process Council of Europe has a working and an effective tool - the European Social Charter. Member States are encouraged to accept further commitments under the Charter and use it as a guideline in their policies and practices.

Another tool is the European Social Cohesion Platform, which focuses on promoting social cohesion and social rights across Europe.

One of the current priority actions for PECS is the revision of the Social Cohesion Strategy. We consider it as an essential task in order to develop an effective reference tool to promote the well-being for all members of society and create a shared vision of social cohesion in Europe. It would support member States in ensuring that social rights for all are effectively realised. The strategy could elaborate on the impact of the pandemic and propose action to ensure lasting and effective social cohesion and social rights recovery.

Dear colleagues,

In conclusion, I would like to say that we shall be ambitious regarding our future. We can – and it is the time to – renew our commitments for solidarity, democracy and wellbeing.

We need to consolidate efforts of all stakeholders on all levels: individual - community - institutions. Dialogue between different actors must be increased, including the Council of Europe, the European Union, the International Labour Organisation.

Full and effective enjoyment of human rights, solidarity and social inclusion can be achieved relying on the protection and promotion of the rights enshrined in the European Social Charter and ensuring social cohesion.

Thank you for your attention.