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## State of human rights and democracy in Europe

### State of human rights in Europe

Opinion<sup>1</sup>  
Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee  
Rapporteur: Mr Marcel GLESENER, Luxembourg, Group of the European People's Party

#### I. Committee's conclusion

1. The Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee considers that a democratic Europe concerned to uphold human rights must also enforce respect for social rights, in accordance, *inter alia*, with the principles laid down in the revised European Social Charter.

2. The Committee accordingly urges the member states of the Council of Europe to take all the necessary measures to ensure that these rights are fully upheld and applied, notably as regards education, housing, access to health care and living conditions compatible with the principles enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

#### II. Explanatory memorandum

3. Europe's policies on social protection and social inclusion face major challenges. Globalisation, an ageing population, together with a declining birth rate, and new technologies are having a considerable impact on the long-term policy context, whereas weak growth, higher unemployment and social inequalities have short-term implications.

4. The member states have attempted to devise social inclusion strategies with regard to the labour market, pensions, health care and long-term care, while taking account of population ageing and growing globalisation. However, these strategies have come up against the problem of exclusion and social inequality and have highlighted the need to reform social protection systems.

5. The reforms carried out by states have primarily converged towards active inclusion policies, recognising the importance of giving people an active role in society.

6. Economic and labour market reforms must contribute to strengthening social cohesion, and social policies must support economic and employment growth. Active inclusion policies can increase labour supply and strengthen society's cohesiveness. Improved child well-being will help more people to develop their full potential and contribute fully to society and to the economy. The pension and health care reforms in progress have a clear impact on both sustainability of public finances and labour market behaviour.

<sup>1</sup> See Doc. 11203 tabled by the Political Affairs Committee and Doc. 11202 tabled by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

Action on health care improves quality of life and productivity and helps to maintain financial sustainability.

7. It has nevertheless to be recognised that healthy economic growth and job creation do not automatically lead to a reduction in income inequalities, in-work poverty or regional disparities. For this reason a stronger commitment should also be shown to the most disadvantaged members of society by, for example, addressing labour market segmentation and precariousness and helping poor households benefit more from employment growth. Measures to ensure the sustainability of public finances must be accompanied by provisions to protect the most vulnerable groups. Strengthened and more visible interaction is required at the European and national levels.

8. The Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee believes that, in taking up the challenge of reducing child poverty, the member states must clearly commit themselves to breaking the cycle of deprivation. This will contribute to stronger and more sustainable social cohesion. Ensuring access to quality education and training for all, with a specific focus on pre-schooling and tackling early school leaving, is vital. In this connection, the situation of immigrants and ethnic minorities needs particular attention.

9. Active inclusion can accordingly be seen to constitute a powerful means of promoting the social and labour market integration of the most disadvantaged. Increased conditionality in accessing benefits is a major component, but this must not push those unable to work further into social exclusion. While most member states champion a balanced approach combining personalised job search support and accessible, high-quality social services, more attention needs to be given to ensuring adequate levels of minimum income. There is also a clear trend towards making benefits more strictly conditional on active availability for work and enhancing incentives through tax and benefit reforms.

10. However, there can be no effective social cohesion without universally accessible health care. This means that the member states must be encouraged to take very rapid measures allowing the introduction of equal access to health care for all categories of the population, including specific schemes for the elderly and for people with disabilities. This also entails an effort to train health care professionals, inter alia in the implementation of preventive health care systems.

11. Against this background, notably in view of the ageing of the population, long-term care needs to be expanded. Stronger coordination between healthcare and social services, support for informal carers and use of new technology can help people to stay as long as possible in their own home. The changing structure of families, increased geographical mobility and increased female labour market participation require more formalised care for the elderly and disabled. There is nonetheless a consensus on giving priority to home care services and introducing new technology (e.g. independent living systems) which can enable people to live in their own home for as long as possible.

12. As regards pension systems, recent studies have shown that older people often face a higher poverty risk than the general population. In addition, population ageing means that people will be expected to work longer and longer. It is therefore vital that governments initiate a debate on pension systems suited to the new economic environment and on the possibility of extending people's working lives.

### **III. Amendments to the draft recommendation**

#### **Amendment No. 1**

Insert after para 2.7 the following sub-paragraph:

2.8. take the necessary measures to ensure that member states that have not already done so ratify the revised European Social Charter, the Protocol Amending the European Social Charter and the Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter Providing for a System of Collective Complaints and grant national NGOs the right to lodge complaints;

**Amendment No. 2**

Insert after para 2.7 the following sub-paragraph:

2.9 invite the parties to extend the scope of their undertakings so that the revised Charter can become a reference standard for European social policy and thus help to develop the legislation of the Council of Europe's member states;

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*Reporting Committee:* Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights

*Committee for opinion:* Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee

*Reference to Committee:* reference No. 3217 of 29 May 2006 and reference No. 3283 of 6 October 2006

*Opinion* approved by the Committee on 22 March 2007

*Head of Secretariat:* Mr Geza Mezei

*Secretaries of the Committee:* Ms Agnès Nollinger, Ms Christine Meunier