

## Istanbul Ministerial declaration adopted

An important declaration on “Building a secure future for all” was adopted by the Ministers responsible for social cohesion in Istanbul on 11-12 October 2012. In the words of Mr Faruk Çelik, Minister of Labour and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey during his concluding remarks this ministerial declaration will provide a guide “for us and for our governments” in the years to come. The priorities raised at the conference form an integral part of the ministerial declaration.

“This 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for social cohesion comes at a crucial moment” declared Gabriella Battaini Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe during the ministerial conference. “Unemployment takes a heavy toll. Income inequality is at its highest for the past century, and it continues to rise”, as the Secretary General of the OECD informed us a few days ago in Strasbourg. We witness extremely worrying tendencies of marginalisation and exclusion of entire segments of society” continued the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe. These sentiments were echoed by Halil Etyemez, Vice Minister of Labour and Social Security during his speech. “The negative effects of the 2009 global crisis have not been totally tackled yet. It is still a problem that needs to be combated. The countries that got over from crisis untouched or with minor damages are the ones that paid attention not only to economic policies but also to social policies. For this reason, our efforts for putting social cohesion at the top of the national and international agenda should continue” concluded Halil Etyemez.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Nils Muižnieks provided his vision on the importance of defending human rights and promoting social cohesion to ensure the well being of future generations. He said, “Without a glue to hold our societies together, social and economic development is difficult, because there is no solidarity, no trust, no co-operation. Without such a glue, cultural development is problematic, because people do not share common memories of the past or common hopes for the future, they cannot speak the same language-both literally and in a figurative sense. Without such a glue to bind our societies, democracy and human rights are problematic, because people do not have shared values and expectations, they do not give others the benefit of a doubt, and conflicts, tension, inequality and social exclusion can result”.... In the context of the global financial crises, our societies have come under even greater strain and the glue is weakening” he concluded.

The Ministers responsible for social cohesion first met in Moscow, the capital of The Russian Federation, back in 2010. The objective was to elaborate and adopt a Revised Council of Europe Social Cohesion Action Plan. A four pillar strategy was adopted. It focused on reinvesting in social rights, promoting shared social responsibilities, strengthening representation of democratic decision making and building a secure future for all.

During the more recent ministerial conference interventions by national ministries focused on the implementation and impact of the Council of Europe’s new strategy and action plan at a national level. During the plenary session amidst others the Minister of Labour and Social Security from the Republic of Turkey provided an overview. He declared, “We have covered all our citizens under the scope of a universal health insurance regardless of whether they have any social security. We have launched incentive packages that will promote employment of youth, women, the disabled, and started the employment insurance system”.

The focus of the presentations then turned to protecting and empowering groups of vulnerable people, particularly in time of crises. The Director of the Council of Europe's Human Rights and Anti-discrimination Directorate, Mr Ralf René Weingärtner, homed in on specific priorities. For example, he stressed that the elderly, people with disabilities, members of the Roma community and other minority groups were amongst the most marginalized members of society. When focusing on Roma, Mr Weingärtner declared: "There are about 10 to 14 million Roma in Europe, and no country can afford to leave them behind, all the more so because 25 to 30% of Roma are under 15 years of age". The Minister of Labour and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey presented his vision of the way forward to protect and empower vulnerable groups. He said, "I have the full conviction that, for overcoming such problems, social cohesion and social solidarity are needed more than ever at both a national and international level". Mr Muižnieks stressed the role that national human rights structures play in giving a voice to the most vulnerable. He said that they "can help give voice to the concerns of the most vulnerable and, with their investigations and research, help ensure transparency and accountability".

Best practices were exchanged on achieving social sustainability through intergenerational solidarity. Measures adopted in this area included protecting the elderly through pension rights and care services, as well as guaranteeing young people access to education, vocational training and employment. During her intervention, the Council of Europe's Deputy Secretary General, Ms Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni emphasized youth as a priority to tackle. "Youth is and must remain- a priority theme. Democracy cannot be built without the commitment, active involvement and creativity of young people, otherwise democracy will die" she declared.

Addressing participants at the ministerial conference Mr Weingartner referred to a Turkish saying: "Hard tasks can only be accomplished through co-operation". The way forward from here is just that. Mr Muižnieks emphasized the fundamental link between human rights and social cohesion. The discussion and exchanges of good practices started at the conference will continue between ministries and the Council of Europe right up to and beyond the third Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for social cohesion in 2015. "The declaration will also provide a constructive contribution to the revision of the "Council of Europe Strategy for Social Cohesion" in the year 2015" declared the Minister of Labour and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey during his concluding remarks.