

*PRIME MINISTER VLADIMIR PUTIN ADDRESSED COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOCIAL COHESION*

The following information was released by the government of the Russian Federation:

Mr Secretary General of the Council of Europe, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

I want to thank Mr Davis and all colleagues for holding this meeting in the Russian capital, Moscow.

Such regular contacts between the Governments of European countries are certain to improve mutual understanding and strengthen trust in Europe. Russia welcomes such dialogue.

This meeting is taking place in the year of the 60th anniversary of the Council of Europe. Since its establishment, the Council has been expanding the sphere of its operation, including through Russian initiatives, which, we think, fully correspond to the fundamental principles and goals of European cooperation.

Social cohesion was the priority of the Russian presidency at the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in 2006. We are also actively contributing to drafting the Council's social cohesion programme. We attribute high importance to such programmes, especially now. In conditions of the crisis, we should pay more attention to social problems and to preventing unfavourable developments in this field.

I believe it is logical that Russia has been chosen as the venue for the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Cohesion.

The subject of the Moscow conference is "Investing in Social Cohesion - Investing in Stability and the Well-Being in Society", which is highly important, as I have said before.

We are convinced that truly sustained and harmonious development in the age of globalisation is possible only in societies that are trying to ensure well-being for their citizens and can effectively combat the destructive forces of social, ethnic and any other discord and hatred.

We must remember that economic growth as such, without the solution of accompanying social problems, will not ease social tensions but, on the contrary, can be compounded by growing inequality, poverty and instability. Even in periods of relative prosperity, many people, including in Europe, had no access to the basic benefits of modern civilisation such as comfortable housing, quality education, efficient healthcare, and decent pensions. Social and economic equality between men and women was not ensured everywhere, and the rights of children and persons with disabilities were not always properly guaranteed.

The level of respect for social rights differs from country to country because of differences in economic development. We should also remember the diversity of European traditions and cultures.

However, all of us are focused on a common interpretation of the basic social civil rights and are therefore able to formulate the common principles and goals for our states in this sphere, just as we are doing this in another, equally important sphere of our activities - human rights. In turn, this offers opportunities for a fruitful exchange of experience, for drafting coordinated decisions on practical problems, and for implementing joint projects, including within the framework of the international and interreligious dialogue.

One of the priority goals of this conference is to encourage the work on a Social Cohesion Action Plan, which, we believe, should stipulate broader social rights, especially in healthcare, education and the housing policy.

We must also continue to develop the principles of the authorities' social responsibility at the central, regional and local levels. We must focus our attention on the problems of the most vulnerable groups of population. I have spoken about this before - I am referring to children and adults with disabilities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ensuring its own steady development, each member of the Council of Europe is simultaneously contributing to the consolidation of stability and social well-being in the whole of Europe.

Our Constitution has proclaimed Russia a social state that aims to create conditions for a decent life and free development of the human being. It guarantees to everyone the entire package of political and social rights. Now, in the uneasy period of the global financial crisis, we believe it is crucial to secure worthy guarantees for our citizens.

Despite a tangible reduction in budget expenditure, social security in Russia will remain at the same level. I have just mentioned a reduction in budget expenditure, but this is not quite precise. We haven't reduced budget expenditure but restructure it by channeling certain resources to areas we didn't plan before, and increasing the funding where it seems to be needed the most.

Our package of anti-crisis measures provides for stronger material support of citizens who have lost their jobs or are about to lose them.

The maximal unemployment benefit has been increased by 50% since the start of the year. We have allocated 44 billion roubles from the federal budget for additional support of the unemployed, such as priority professional training, assistance in establishing small businesses, creation of new jobs, and help in moving to a new workplace. We are planning to carry out all these measures on the basis of special programmes drafted by regional authorities. In other words, we'll be as flexible as possible, and will act with due account of the local conditions.

We are also planning to enhance our efforts in improving the position of other socially vulnerable strata. Even before the crisis, we planned to eliminate poverty among pensioners by increasing their social pensions to the subsistence level. Regardless of all financial troubles, this task will be fulfilled by the end of the current year.

On the whole, we are convinced that a fall in social standards, a kind of "social dumping" should not be used as an anti-crisis measure because it will not only fail to improve the situation but will also complicate steady economic recovery.

I'd like to say once again that we have not cut social expenses in adjusting the budget. On the contrary, in absolute figures we are increasing it, although only slightly. In relative figures there is no reduction, either, as compared with other areas of government activity. Moreover, there is even an increase. I'm referring to the special character of measures needed in the circumstances.

I know that the majority of European Governments share this approach and are taking active measures to alleviate the consequences of economic turmoil for their citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we should not only resolve current problems but also lay the foundation for the future development. The crisis should not motivate us to change the chosen road but should encourage us to carry out our declared priority goals with increased vigour.

Last November, the Government adopted a concept of Russia's long-term development until 2020. Its goal is to upgrade key social standards dramatically.

We are planning to stabilise the numerical strength of the population and secure its steady growth with active demographic policy. I know that practically all European countries are currently facing demographic problems. There is probably not a single country that doesn't have them. Heads of state and Government, and leaders of all major countries, both G8 and G20, never forget about these problems.

I'm pleased to say that recent measures in this area have created a positive trend in Russia. We had long debates over the potential effectiveness of the measures planned five years ago. Today, we are glad to say that they have produced the desired effect.

In 2008, the number of newborn babies was 1.7 million, that is, seven percent more than the year before. This trend took shape some time ago, and has been steady during the last five years. This couldn't have happened by accident.

This trend was produced, in particular, by our measures to encourage the birth rate in the last few years, such as a substantial increase in family benefits, and the introduction of special payments for women with two and more children. We have called these payments "maternity capital" to emphasise a special character of these government actions. We wanted even the name of this benefit to encourage women to have at least two children.

The social atmosphere has changed considerably. Family values and motherhood have become more prestigious and popular.

Another major goal is to give Russian citizens access to the best modern educational programmes.

We are also planning to enhance the quality of the social environment and public health, to make housing more affordable and comfortable, and to create an effective system for ensuring personal security of citizens and protecting them against crime and emergencies.

To implement these tasks, we drafted a number of special programmes six years ago. We called them priority national projects. We didn't do anything special but merely wanted to concentrate small but targeted funds, administrative and political resources, and the efforts of the entire society on improving healthcare, education and housing. In general, the Government's close attention to these areas has proved very effective even despite small additional funding.

In carrying out these tasks, we relied not only, and sometimes not so much, on the state's potentialities. Non-profit organisations and other civil society agencies are designed to play a key role in this area. They enjoyed and will continue to enjoy the biggest tax benefits. They will also have easier access to government contracts to provide social services to the population.

We will be trying to introduce procedures and rules to reveal and guarantee the interests of every social group in resolving problems at all levels of federal and municipal Government.

Allow me to repeat that our strategic goal is to raise domestic social standards to the best European and global levels. Therefore, we in Russia are attentively studying practical proposals on social development. We are actively using the experience of European experts in law making.

In the near future, the Russian parliament will discuss ratification of the European Social Charter. The Government has already approved a relevant draft proposal.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our entry into the Council of Europe in 1996 was a natural and well-considered decision. It reflects Russia's commitment to becoming part of Europe without borders. This fully applies to the formation of common social space in Europe.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you once again for coming to Moscow, and wish you all the best. I'd like to wish successful work to the participants of the conference.