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**1<sup>st</sup> Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion**

**Moscow, 26-27 February 2009**

Ministers, Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- As the Chair of the European Social Cohesion Committee, the CDCS, First of all thank the Russian authorities for their hospitality and indeed for having taken the initiative to organise this conference following the presentation of the High Level Task Force report to the Committee of Ministers.
- Thank Professor Mary Daly and the other members of the High Level Task Force.
- We greatly appreciate the tremendous work Professor Daly and her expert group has carried out. And I also thank you for the excellent exposé just now.
- The Council of Europe has been working on social cohesion for over ten years now, and, as is to be expected with such a dynamic subject, the approach and the working methods applied have constantly evolved

The Strategy for Social Cohesion was first drafted in 2000, and a revised version was approved by the Committee of Ministers in 2004.

- Immediately afterwards, in 2005, the Warsaw Summit of Heads of state and Government of Council of Europe member States, decided to ask a High Level Task Force to elaborate a report on Social Cohesion in the 21st Century. This report has just been presented to you
- The European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS) is the intergovernmental body, in charge of implementing and developing the strategy for social cohesion and now also of the follow-up to the conclusions and recommendations of the High-Level Task Force report
- **As already mentioned the European Committee for Social Cohesion welcomes the report as a key document on the main questions and challenges concerning social cohesion in Europe.**

- You are all highly skilled, extremely professional people, whose engagement in analysing social cohesion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in an elaborated report encapsulating the relevant elements of social cohesion. We – the CDCS – think you have included very essential issues and we have devoted ourselves to take your work, your recommendations and proposals for follow-up very seriously – and will do our utmost to carry out the follow up – also in the light of transversality.
- As already said we take the report seriously and shall continue to do so – in the first place by carrying out projects directly evolving from the recommendations of the Task Force. – of which this valuable ministers’ conference is one.
- Many people consider social Cohesion a difficult concept to explain, I know it has already been explained this morning by the Secretary General, but I suppose there’s no harm done in repeating it, social cohesion is: the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation, manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all
- Yes, they say, this sounds quite nice, but what does it actually mean? This is precisely what the eminent the High Level Task Force report tells us in great detail.
- It is important that you as Ministers have listened to the presentation: **legislators are called upon to put into practice what the Task Force recommends.** This is the wish that I wish to express on behalf of the CDCS.
- Mary Daly has mentioned the four basic principles, which are separate but interlinked and complementary:
  1. Reinvesting in social rights, which means promoting and guaranteeing social rights, including with regard to public health care and education;
  2. More sharing of responsibilities between public authorities, civil society including the social partners, and indeed - not to forget - the citizens themselves;
  3. Very importantly: to strengthen mechanisms of representation and social and civic dialogue, in other words to strengthen participation mechanisms, allow citizens to experience that their contribution and commitment does make a difference;

4. These three points directly lead to the 4<sup>th</sup>, building confidence in a common and secure future. You all know that the lack of confidence in the future and subsequent alienation, exclusion, possibly radicalisation, is one of the biggest challenges societies face and has a direct impact on their stability;

I do look forward to these principles being discussed in the working sessions to day and to morrow.

- Of course, this is what you also find on national level. Social cohesion is not a policy concept which can be confined to one field of intervention, simply run by one ministry. A **coordinated transversal approach is required**, and therefore promoted by the High Level Task Force report. We have adapted our working methods accordingly.
- The Council of Europe is, first and foremost about respect for and the promotion of Human Rights. That social rights are part and parcel of the Council of Europe Human Rights framework has meanwhile been generally accepted. **There are no first and second class human rights, they are all equal.**
- **In the same way, it must be clear that social cohesion underpins, strengthens and supports all three core values of the Council of Europe.**
- The link to Human Rights is obvious: social rights are one of the pillars of social cohesion, and in a socially cohesive society, all citizens have equal access to the same social rights;
- With regard to the Rule of Law, well functioning and impartial legal and judicial systems are another key-factor of social cohesion, which enables citizens to develop trust into the State and its institutions;
- Cooperation and dialogue between public authorities, civil society and other stakeholders, recognising and strengthening representation of vulnerable groups are all means to support pluralist democracy and **I therefore very much welcome the proposal, by the Secretary General, to dedicate future meeting of the Forum for the Future of Democracy to this topic;**

- The economic dimension of the current global crisis will probably – hopefully - be overcome at some point. The social dimension will remain, since many of the questions asked in the aftermath of the first shock have never been answered and are still valid.
- **Social cohesion, which comprises such concepts as justice, equality, solidarity, sustainability should be the objective societies aim for.** The current disorientation and search for new parameters may be a good moment to promote and reinforce this concept.
- **I therefore appeal to you all to continue supporting the important work that the Council of Europe accomplishes in this field also once this conference is over.** The European Committee for Social Cohesion is delighted with the high level participation in this 1<sup>st</sup> Council of Europe Conference of Ministers for Social Cohesion. We hope that at the next one we shall be able to report to you what progress has been made in the Council of Europe.
- With the help of an **Action Plan** it will be possible to break down the work carried out on Council of Europe level into policy recommendations and guidelines as well as into specific projects and activities according to the needs of member States. This, taking into account a transversal approach, will be our task for the coming years.
- **The High Level Task Force gave us the parameters and also the impetus to embark on this work, for which I would wish to thank them again.**