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Social aspects of the Lisbon Treaty

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Conference of European Churches

"Shaping European Economic and Social Policies in Times of
Uncertainty"

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you on the Lisbon Treaty.

Many commentators consider that the European Union is in a crisis following the victory of the 'no' vote in the Irish referendum. In addition, we are going through an unprecedented economic recession since World War II, and the consequences for our societies and economies are hard to predict.

Of course, a time of crisis is a time of uncertainty. But history teaches us that crises also bring opportunities.

John F. Kennedy once said: "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger — but recognize the opportunity." *[John F. Kennedy, speech in Indianapolis, 12 April 1959]*

And by the way, the belief that every crisis holds an opportunity for a new beginning lies at the heart of the feast of Easter, which the Christian churches have just celebrated.

So this conference comes at the right time!

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this opening speech, I would like to focus on the new opportunities offered by the Lisbon Treaty.

Let me make this clear: **the Lisbon Treaty would not give the European Union any fundamentally new competences** in the field of social affairs, employment and equal opportunities.

Rather, it would consolidate the existing competences.

But — and this is my main argument — **the Treaty of Lisbon would open up opportunities for the further strategic development of social Europe.**

Let me illustrate this with five examples.

First, a set of values are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. In addition to those in the existing Treaties — such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights — the Lisbon Treaty also lists human dignity and equality as values of the Union.

The Treaty states that these values are "*common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail*".

And it goes on to say that the EU must uphold and promote its values in its relations with the wider world.

The Treaty also mentions the Union's contribution to peace, security, sustainable development, free and fair trade and solidarity, as well as the elimination of poverty and the protection of human rights.

My **second example** concerns the Union's objectives. The Treaty of Lisbon explicitly puts social objectives and economic objectives on the same level.

It says that the Union is to "*work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress*".

It also says that the Union is to "*combat social exclusion and discrimination*" and "*promote social justice and protection*".

In line with this approach, a protocol on services of general interest is annexed to the Treaty. It underlines the importance of public services for a socially sustainable Union and reaffirms the responsibility of Member States for their establishment and organisation.

The Treaty adds *"equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child"* to the Union's social objectives.

Thirdly, the Treaty of Lisbon recognises the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as having the same legal value as the Treaties. I believe this represents a real opportunity for the development of social Europe.

As you may know, the Charter proclaims not only conventional rights and liberties, but also many social rights — such as workers' right to information and consultation, the right of collective bargaining and action, and the right of access to a free placement service.

The Charter also provides for protection against unjustified dismissal, a right to fair and just working conditions and the right to social security and social assistance.

Even if the Charter states that it does not extend the competences of the EU, the fact that the Treaty recognises the Charter could make a big difference.

It could give social rights greater importance in the case-law of the European Court of Justice and in the activities of the Union in general. This would make it easier for citizens to take legal action to enforce their rights.

The **fourth example** I want to mention is social dialogue. Such dialogue between the representatives of trade unions and employers' organisations at European level is one of the pillars of the European social model.

The Treaty of Lisbon would not only explicitly recognise the role and autonomy of the social partners but also provide a Treaty basis for the tripartite social summit involving the European social partners, the Heads of government of the current and two subsequent EU Presidencies and the European Commission.

In addition, encouraging social dialogue would become the task of the Union, and not just of the Commission — as has been the case up to now.

My **fifth** and last example is the fact that the Lisbon Treaty would contribute to reducing the EU's democratic deficit, which is so often criticised. I'm thinking in particular about the European citizen's initiative, about the closer involvement of national parliaments in decision-making, and the greater role of the European Parliament. In fact, the European Parliament would be on an equal footing with the Council in almost all areas of legislation.

To sum up, ladies and gentlemen, the Lisbon Treaty offers a strategic opportunity for the further development of Europe's social dimension.

- The Treaty's comprehensive approach to the Union's values and objectives sends an important signal. It shows that the Union is ready to transcend those contradictions between the 'social' and the 'economic' people criticise so often.
- The recognition of the Charter of Fundamental Rights would reinforce social rights in the activities of the EU. As you may know, one of the many reasons for the 'no' vote in Ireland was the perception that the EU leads to lower wage rates and lower worker protection.

- Provisions such as the European citizen's initiative could pave the way for more consideration of social concerns at EU level. In 2007, the European Disability Forum collected 1.3 million signatures in favour of a directive on the protection of disabled people outside the field of employment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Lisbon Treaty offers a real opportunity to reinforce the social dimension at EU level. This is the message we need to send our fellow citizens.

My best wishes for a good discussion!

Thank you for your attention.