

Closing speech to EAPN policy conference: 'Can the Semester deliver on poverty and participation?' (13 minutes)

- Ladies and gentlemen,
- I would like to congratulate you for today's conference. The fight for an inclusive, socially fair society and the need to improve participation in decision making, the two main themes of this conference, are strongly linked. They are foundations of democratic legitimacy and as such, are at the heart of the public debate in Europe and certainly are at the core of this Commission's agenda.
- Indeed, already in his Opening Statement in the European Parliament as a Candidate at that time, Commission President Juncker was explicit; As a result of chronic economic and social problems accentuated by the Great Recession, a 29th state is emerging within the borders of the European Union. In the President's words, 'the 29th state is the state where people without jobs live. A state in which young people became unemployed; a state in which we see people excluded, set back and left by the wayside.'
- I do not need to say that such a state runs contrary to the values and principles that the European Union stands for. I do not need to say that it undermines the confidence of people in Europe- and thus the essence of the European

project. I will not stop saying that we are determined to not allow such a state to exist.

- *Stocktaking of EC's 1st year in Office*
- This commitment has already been translated into concrete action to bring a fresh start for Europe.
- Notably, already within the first month in office of this Commission we presented the 315 billion euro investment plan – among the first projects that have been signed are projects in the area of healthcare. Now we need to ensure that the full potential of the Investment Plan to invest in people is tapped.
- We have also taken swift action to address two of the sorest legacies of the crisis for people in Europe, youth and long-term unemployment;

-firstly, by making available to our Member States advanced payments worth a billion euro to help our young people find their way to good quality jobs.

-secondly, with our proposal last month to help the 12 million long-term unemployed in Europe- that is people who are out of work for more than a year- get back into the labour market.

- We also reacted rapidly to the ongoing refugee crisis with a comprehensive and balanced migration agenda, which sets social integration at the core of a successful migration management.
 - *Social Considerations in EU's economic governance*
 - Ladies and Gentlemen,
- From the first day in office, we were very well-aware that a fresh start cannot be brought about if the approach is to do 'business as usual'. Reconnecting Europe with its people means making Europe relevant to the expectations and concerns of Europe's societies and economies.
- For EU to succeed, labour markets and welfare systems need to function well and in a fair manner in all Member States. This is why we immediately started work to rebalance the Union's economic governance so that social considerations are equally taken into account with the economic ones.
- The objective of our economic governance should be to support greater socio-economic resilience, whilst striving for upward convergence. Building resilient economies and societies - based on the right mix of policies and institutions - is essential. That way, we ensure that – rather than becoming a race to the bottom - convergence is a positive

process that improves competitiveness and social standards for all Member States.

- When I refer to economic governance I mean of course the Semester but obviously this extends beyond the Semester, in the cases of our Member States most hit by the crisis that are under reform programmes. I therefore welcome the vote of the European Parliament earlier this week (5/10) which paves the way for swiftly implementing the Jobs and Growth Plan for Greece presented by the Commission on 15 July.
- Of course, these were only the first steps. As President Juncker announced, the work on revamping the European Semester will continue. In the coming period, our focus will be on ways to strengthen the democratic accountability and legitimacy of the Semester. This involves more systematic consultation and involvement of national Parliaments, and stakeholders, such as social partners and civil society in the whole process.
- *Europe 2020 Review – creating resilient economies*
- Indeed, stronger participation and a shared sense of collective responsibility are key to deliver on our goal for a European Union worthy of a social Triple A.
- That was also one of the main conclusions of my meeting last week with civil society organisations on how to forge

common action for a stronger social Europe. The discussions we had underlined the need for a structured and pragmatic civil dialogue that would respond to the changing social needs. An annual Platform on Inclusive Growth will be the central and most visible part of this newly strengthened dialogue.

- This deepened involvement of all stakeholders is also crucial to reach our Europe2020 **objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**; the crisis has taken an enormous toll on our societies. We have been thrown off course on reducing poverty and inequality is drifting our societies apart. **Now, more than ever, we need to focus on the delivery of the strategy.**
- To make solid progress, we need to act in close cooperation with all **stakeholders, including social partners and NGOs**. Your experience on what works and what not, your direct interaction with national and local administration, and people in need of support - all these represent a wealth of knowledge that we must tap into, supporting and sharing it across the EU.
- Social pillar
- Ladies and gentlemen,

- This Commission is indeed aiming for a **greater social convergence between Member States and within societies** over time. Just a few days ago, I held a debate in the College of Commissioners on the establishment of a social pillar. To achieve such a pillar we need to use all the instruments at our disposal: economic policy coordination, legislation, funds.
- We are currently reflecting on two complementary work strands: benchmarks (or common standards) and the modernisation of the existing social and employment legislation.
- This integrated approach would help reduce precariousness, eliminate distortions of competition and return the EU to upward convergence - in line with the objective of “a Triple A social rating for Europe”.
- *The EU as a global player: Sustainable Development Goals*
- The fight against poverty is of course not exclusively a European one. Just recently the United Nations adopted the **2030 Agenda** also with this aim - while making sustainability the guiding principle. The EU played an important role here as it is in the interests of our economy and our environment; but more importantly, for the society that will be left to our children and our grandchildren.

- The Commission will fully engage with the UN in experience sharing, capacity building, and monitoring of progress. We have already started a mapping exercise between the EU-2020 targets and these new Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

- Ladies and gentlemen,
- Strengthening Social Europe is our common journey. We will inevitably come to turns in the road and we will have to decide the best route to take. We should be **structured and pragmatic**, but also **flexible** so as to react to changing needs.
- This is **not about creating extra policy architectures** - but rather, adopting a **pragmatic approach to delivering on Europe 2020 targets and to creating more convergence**. I believe that the **political guidelines** of this Commission provide a roadmap to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.
- We must work with our Member States and stakeholders at European and national level to make sure that we are growing closer together rather than further apart: And that

this convergence takes us all upwards, improving and respecting our social and economic standards.

- Ladies and gentlemen, I count on your support and vital work to help us achieve more fairness and progress towards a truly social Europe.
- Thank you