

## EAPN RESPONSE TO SOTEU 2022

On 14 September, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen delivered her speech on the State of the European Union in 2022. This political exercise aims to give the Parliament and civil society an overall understanding of the general vision for the year to come. The following statement contains EAPN's reaction.

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Whilst Ukraine and the need for solidarity with Ukrainians were at the centre of the speech, the President failed to address the structural, systemic crises people in vulnerable situations are facing. Concerningly poverty, inequality and discrimination were not mentioned. Even worse, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), including Minimum Income, was not put forward as the main social policy delivering on the fight against poverty, in times of multiple crises such as inflation, cost of living, energy poverty and food insecurity.

The recovery of Ukraine from the Russian invasion and its accelerated integration in the EU single market were presented as the key priorities of the EU. EAPN welcomes the announced reform of the electricity market and the application of a cap on the revenues deriving from unfair profits of electricity companies. However, the temporary reduction of the overall electricity consumption and diversification of suppliers will leave citizens facing rising energy precarity and unsafe climate change. Since the deregulation of the energy market, Member States and the EU have a limited margin of manoeuvre on energy prices, failing thus to protect low-income households from energy poverty. Systemic failure requires structural changes rather than short-term solutions. Although the President of the EU Commission called for an end to the EU dependence's on fossil fuels and investment in renewables, people living in poverty are still at risk of remaining locked out from accessible and affordable clean energy.

In this high-level political exercise, the choice of words is essential. Not once did President von der Leyen mention the word "poverty", "inequality" or "discrimination". The most excluded from the society were also excluded from her speech, including people experiencing poverty, LGBTIQ+, racialised groups, youth, elderly, people living with disabilities, Roma people and women.

Europeans were referred to as consumers, making a rights-based approach impossible. Moreover, we are particularly concerned by the level of double standards, that is, the discriminatory process between Ukrainian and non-Ukrainians refugees, with respect to access to social protection measures in their host countries. A general statement on the need to extend solidarity to all refugees was made, but, nonetheless, EU migration policies remain in the frame of a fortress Europe where borders need to be controlled and migration “managed”.

Overall, this year’s SOTEU was not up to our expectations. We welcome the announcement of a new initiative on Mental Health and 2023 as the European Year of Skills. Those are positive developments in social progress, although still insufficient. While people living in poverty are facing unprecedented energy bills and fearing they will not be able to heat their homes this winter, Ursula von der Leyen failed to propose strong solutions. Inflation and the real cost of living are skyrocketing, and the EPSR is aimed to be the Commission’s compass and the main channel to foster social inclusion. By not mentioning the EPSR at all, the President of the Commission openly confirmed that social rights and inclusion are not a priority in tackling these crises. In failing to anchor the EPSR in the current socio-economic and political context, the President risks failing in the Union’s core purpose: to guarantee a life of dignity to all.

We urge the Commission, the European Parliament and EU Member States to take stock of the lived experience of people in poverty. Ensuring safe civil dialogue spaces, to listen and learn from vulnerable groups, is necessary to secure an adequate recovery. Participation and inclusion of people in vulnerable situations are crucial for delivering a social Europe, free of poverty and inequality.

The turmoil from the war in Ukraine cannot become the sole pretext to prevent strong structural reforms in Europe. Additionally, the shortcomings of this SOTEU must not provide any excuse for EU Members States to not engage in the fight against poverty. The upcoming Council Recommendation on Minimum Income will be the next opportunity for EU Members States to rise to the challenge and provide a long-term solution to eradicate poverty in Europe.