Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1355 (1998)[1]

Fighting social exclusion and strengthening social cohesion in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Deeply concerned about the grave social problems arising in all the member states and the resulting risk of a social explosion, the Assembly notes that persistent unemployment, poverty and all the manifestations of social exclusion affecting a growing number of individuals and families pose a threat to the social cohesion of European states.

2. In the countries of central and eastern Europe, the transition to a market economy with its accompanying economic restructuring has gone hand-in-hand with the disappearance of communist social policies. The ensuing dramatic social situations are insurmountable at the present time because of inadequate and inappropriate health-care and social infrastructures and the absence of appropriate legislation.

3. In the countries of western Europe, social protection policies are declining and being called into question, with a concomitant massive disengagement of the state.

4. The traditional concept of poverty limits itself to considering the poor as those with the lowest income levels. The Parliamentary Assembly underlines in its Recommendation 1196 (1992) on severe poverty and social exclusion: towards guaranteed minimum levels of resources, that "severe poverty relates to the possibility of living and bringing up children in minimally decent conditions", and is a cause for exclusion from normal social life.

5. The concept of poverty refers to inadequacy or inequality of material resources, whereas social exclusion goes well beyond participation in consumer society and includes inadequacy, inequality, or total lack of participation in social, economic, political and cultural life. Exclusion extends from social isolation to a total rupture with society.

6. However, certain specific groups are the victims of poverty, which is condemning a considerable proportion of young adults, women, children, old persons, single-parent families, large families, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as members of ethnic minorities such as Gypsies, to social exclusion.

7. Poverty and exclusion must not be the price to pay for economic growth and well-being. Today, social exclusion is no longer a marginal problem in Europe: it is a painful and dramatic reality for millions of people.

8. Social exclusion not only offends against human dignity and denies people their fundamental human rights; it also leads, in conjunction with social and economic instability and worsening inequality, to phenomena of marginalisation, withdrawal or violent reactions, thereby creating conditions which undermine the democratic foundations of our societies.

9. Social exclusion clearly calls into question the principles underlying current security and social protection policies and structures, and underscores their inappropriateness.

10. Referring expressly to its Recommendation 1196, the Assembly notes that the concerns it voiced at that time are unfortunately still topical.

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1. Assembly debate on 28 January 1998 (5th Sitting) (see Doc. 7981, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Hegyi). Text adopted by the Assembly on 28 January 1998 (5th Sitting).

11. It also draws attention to its Recommendation 1290 (1996) on the follow-up to the Copenhagen Summit on social development, which sets out the undertakings made by the heads of state and government to eradicate poverty through action at national level and international co-operation, to achieve social integration and the participation of all in society and to provide access for all to education and health care.

12. As industrial peace and a resumption of the social dialogue are prerequisites for democratic stability in Europe, it is urgently necessary today to give fresh impetus to the fight against exclusion and to take up the challenge of strengthening social cohesion.

13. In particular, social cohesion means promoting a Europe of social rights, these being fundamental human rights on an equal footing with civil and political rights.

14. The Assembly fully endorses the wording of the final communiqué adopted by the participants in the Colloquy on Social Cohesion, organised jointly by its Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee and the National Council of the Slovak Republic and held in Bratislava on 16 and 17 September 1997, and calls for a "better state" based on a more just society and a new social contract.

15. Because it makes respect for human dignity and personal integrity paramount and enables the social link between the individual and society to be restored, the best response to the tragedy of exclusion that has struck tens of millions of Europeans is to strengthen social cohesion. Given the upheavals in our societies and the risks of social explosion, confidence and social tolerance must be restored if social equilibrium, an essential element of democratic security in Europe, is to be maintained.

16. The Assembly welcomes the decisions taken by the heads of state and government at the second summit, in Strasbourg on 10 and 11 October 1997, to reaffirm the Council of Europe's social dimension, and in particular that social cohesion now constitutes one of the vital requirements of an enlarged Europe, an indispensable adjunct to the promotion of human rights and human dignity. It notes that the Council of Europe is the sole pan-European organisation capable of effectively proposing to all the countries of the continent the necessary measures for taking on the challenge of strengthening social cohesion in Europe as a factor of the continent's democratic stability.

17. Consequently, it encourages the promotion of the key instruments of social cohesion in Europe, and in particular the European Social Charter, the revised Social Charter and the European Code of Social Security, among those states that are not yet parties thereto.

18. As it underscored in its Recommendation 1304 (1996) on the future of social policy, it is essential to implement active employment policies at the same time, employment playing a vital role as a factor for integration. However, economic growth and technological progress constitute necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for strengthening social cohesion.

19. Accordingly, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite the governments of the member states to act and take the following measures:

19.1. give social rights the same priority as that accorded to human rights;

19.2. reform existing social policies as a matter of priority, basing them on the principle of solidarity, with the objective of apportioning aid to the most disadvantaged in a more efficient, targeted and balanced fashion and protecting them more effectively against social exclusion;

19.3. promote policies to prevent poverty especially aimed at groups with the highest risk factors;

19.4. step up policies for the reintegration of marginalised or excluded persons, based on the contractual principle, by means of occupational training, literacy campaigns and the acquisition or updating of skills so as to restore their sense of social usefulness;

19.5. improve the process of participation and civil dialogue as a sine qua non of social inclusion and citizenship;

19.6. define rapidly and jointly effective policies to fight unemployment.

20. In particular, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage the governments of the member states:

20.1. in the field of town planning and housing:

a. to reinforce legal protection of tenants and sub-tenants who are victims of poverty;

b. to establish a mechanism for rent-rebate as well as assistance for basic utilities;

c. to stimulate the supply of low-rent housing and to develop programmes to build or renovate welfare housing;

d. to adopt town planning policies that prevent ghettos and violence;

20.2. in the field of education and training:

a. to put into practice positive actions to make up for the educational disadvantages of the poor and excluded;

b. to promote training programmes for unemployed of all ages;

20.3. in the field of health care:

20.3.1. to provide free medical care for the poor, with the aim of preventing serious illness;

20.3.2. to fight pathological diseases prevalent among the poor, through special medical care programmes;

20.4. in the legal field:

a. to establish free legal assistance for the poor;

b. to set up legal advisory services for the socially excluded in need of immediate help, for example, the homeless or unemployed;

21. The Assembly expresses its full support for the "Human dignity and social exclusion project" begun in 1995, which has drawn the attention of governments to the problems of exclusion and afforded a clear picture of the scale of the phenomenon. It intends to be closely involved in the preparation and holding of the follow-up conference, to take place in Helsinki in May 1998, and calls on the Committee of Ministers to pursue the project.

22. The Assembly also invites the Committee of Ministers to create an observatory of social cohesion in Europe, which could be set up on the basis of a Council of Europe partial agreement, with the task of collecting information and statistics on poverty and exclusion in the states parties and of producing, either at their request or as requested by the steering committees or the Parliamentary Assembly, expert reports on questions relating to social cohesion as well as opinions on national and European policies to promote it. The Assembly takes note of the invitation of the Turkish Government to host the observatory of social cohesion in Europe in Istanbul.

23. The Assembly welcomes the decision of the Committee of Ministers to launch a campaign on "Global interdependence and solidarity: Europe against poverty and exclusion", and hopes that the Council of Europe's wide experience in the field, in particular through the "Human dignity and social exclusion project", will benefit the substance of this campaign. It asks the Committee of Ministers to include representatives of the competent committees of the Assembly in the campaign as from the preparatory stages.

24. Finally, aware of the current redefinition of the Council of Europe's goals and working methods in the social sphere, the Assembly urges the Committee of Ministers to give practical effect to the decisions taken at the 2nd Summit of Heads of State and Government, and to keep it informed of progress made in stepping up activities relating to social cohesion, including the relevant restructuring within the Secretariat.