



Recommendation 1661 (2004)¹

Future of social security in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Europe's economic environment has altered considerably over the last thirty years, and the economies of European countries have progressively opened up to the global economy. As a result, the competitiveness of the European economies is dependent not just on production costs, but also on the performance of social security systems guaranteeing security for the future. Concurrently, the transformation of production methods and the organisation of labour, now more "flexible", and less uniform careers, presuppose new standards for social protection.

2. In this connection, the Parliamentary Assembly expresses its deep concern at the persistence of mass unemployment, which poses many problems for Council of Europe member countries and for their social security systems. It wishes to point out that social rights, if effectively guaranteed, are a factor of social cohesion, as well as one of democratic stability. Social security has a price, but it can cost still more economically, socially and politically to be without it.

3. The future of the retirement pension systems poses a major challenge, in particular considering the ageing of the population due to longer life spans and the declining number of births. In this context, the Assembly wishes above all to emphasise the positive aspect of lengthening life spans, often represented as a constraint. Confronted with the challenge of the future sustainability of retirement pension systems, it reaffirms the need to maintain a retirement pension system founded on national and inter-generational solidarity, and to preserve the right balance between public and private schemes, as well as the state's role as guarantor.

4. Specifically, the Assembly considers that the social policies most favourable to the family and to childbearing are those enabling parents, and in particular women, to combine working and family life harmoniously. Countries that have pursued this type of policy have the highest fertility rates compared to those which prefer to provide assistance only to mothers who remain at home.

5. The Assembly is convinced of the need to modify social policies, bearing in mind that societies have changed since the foundation of the European systems of social protection, which are no longer altogether suited to the current situation. Present and future reforms should have three salient objectives:

5.1. to better control the development of welfare-related expenditure, as the resources available to fund it are more limited than before;

5.2. to better respond to new ways of life and changing social risks, as well as to new social needs, through better life-long training and services catering for the needs of working women and elderly dependent persons, and the phasing out of decreasing household living standards following the birth of children;

5.3. to render social security systems more employment-oriented and, in particular, to recognise the work done by carers of family members.

1. Assembly debate on 30 April 2004 (16th Sitting) (see [Doc. 10098](#), report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Evin). Text adopted by the Assembly on 30 April 2004 (16th Sitting).



6. The Assembly stresses that there is no single, unequivocal and uniform answer as regards social security reforms, considering how traditions and goals in the social security field differ from one European country to another. While it is not possible to determine one path alone for reforms to social protection, some principles should none the less be recalled which the member states have a duty to uphold.
7. The Assembly advocates applying certain principles of social security as set out in the legal instruments of the Council of Europe, namely, the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) and the Revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), the European Code of Social Security (ETS No. 48), the Protocol (ETS No. 48A) thereto and the Revised European Code of Social Security (ETS No. 139).
8. The Council of Europe legal instruments in the social field have defined a real European standard and made social protection a fundamental right, with an international supervision system. Social security also has a prominent place in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), as many judgments over the last fifteen years have addressed this issue.
9. The Revised European Social Charter introduced a new right to protection against poverty and social exclusion (Article 30). In this context, the Assembly deplores the fact that only eight member states of the Council of Europe have consented to be bound by Article 30. It perceives the need for an expression of political will at European level in order to make social rights more accessible.
10. Concerning reform of the health systems, the Assembly recalls its [Recommendation 1626 \(2003\)](#) on this subject which states that the “main criterion for judging the success of health system reforms should be effective access to health care for all without discrimination, which is a basic human right. This also has the consequence of improving the general standard of health and welfare of the entire population”.
11. The Assembly also emphasises the state’s role as a guarantor of the stability of the social security system, which should intervene as soon as the fundamental principles are infringed, without delegating its essential responsibilities to private agencies. Likewise, during periods of reform and transition, the state’s responsibility is of prime importance for the future development of social security.
12. The Assembly is convinced that the strengthening of social cohesion, thanks to a sustained level of social protection, is an effective preventive strategy for reducing the risk of social unrest and political disturbances in some of the new democracies belonging to the Council of Europe. Here it recalls that the 2nd Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 1997 stated its resolve to pursue social cohesion as an “essential complement to the promotion of human rights and dignity”.
13. The Assembly also wishes to point out that a number of Council of Europe texts set objectives which would make it possible to raise the level of rights to social security in all member states. This is the case with the Revised European Social Charter, of which Article 12 asserts the right to social security, Article 13 the right to social and medical assistance and Article 30 the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion. The European Code of Social Security, for its part, lays down the rules necessary to guarantee those rights. The Assembly recalls the need for these instruments to be ratified as soon as possible and requests that the Committee of Ministers step up its efforts to that end.
14. In this connection, the Assembly welcomes the work carried out by the European Committee for Social Cohesion in the social security field, particularly the discussion initiated on the impact of the pension system reforms currently under way on social cohesion and equality between men and women. It also notes the initiative of holding a Euro-Mediterranean conference, open to Mediterranean states which are not Council of Europe members, in 2004.
15. It also welcomes the fact that the Steering Committee for Human Rights is currently working on the inclusion of social rights in the European Convention on Human Rights, which would make it possible, *inter alia*, to implement the Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation No. R (2000) 3 on the right to the satisfaction of basic material needs of persons in situations of extreme hardship. It supports this endeavour.
16. The Assembly welcomes the decision in December 2003 by the European Council in Brussels on employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs to “strengthen existing coordination processes on the policies adopted by Member States in the field of social protection, thus contributing to the necessary modernisation of social protection systems”. In this regard, it considers that social security should be a priority area of co-operation between the Council of Europe and the European Union with better planning of joint activities in the medium and long term.

17. The Assembly invites the parliamentarians of the member states to launch a debate in this connection at national and European level, and also to promote – at national level – the Council of Europe's legal instruments, in order to find viable solutions to the complex questions of reform in the social sphere. In two years' time, the Assembly should consider a report presenting the conclusions of these debates in each of its member states.

18. Accordingly, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

18.1. include the question of social security and the fight against poverty on the agenda of the 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe and promote the inclusion of the five principles of Recommendation No. R (2000) 3 of the Committee of Ministers into the European Convention on Human Rights' system;

18.2. strengthen the supervisory machinery in the social sphere, recognising as a priority the honouring of member countries' undertakings in this respect;

18.3. compile knowledge on the circumstances of different communities, in terms of social indicators, in those member countries where social problems are a serious cause of political instability, in order to prepare thematic, regional and integrated projects and to implement them in close co-operation with the European Union;

18.4. back the co-operation initiatives led by the European Committee for Social Cohesion and the International Labour Office aimed at improving social security in the different member states.