European pillar of social rights

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PURPOSE: to launch a consultation on a European pillar of social rights.

BACKGROUND: President Juncker announced the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights in his State of the Union address in the European Parliament on 9 September 2015. This initiative is part of the work undertaken by the Commission for a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and part of the Commission 2016 Work Programme.

President Juncker stressed in his speech that a European Pillar of Social Rights should take account of the changing realities of Europe's societies and the world of work. And which can serve as a compass for the renewed convergence within the euro area.

This Communication outlines a way forward for the European Pillar of Social Rights. It sets out the rationale behind the initiative, discusses its role, scope and nature, and launches a broad consultation aimed at gathering feedback.

A first, preliminary outline of the Pillar is annexed to this Communication to facilitate the discussion.

CONTENT: the establishment of the Pillar is an opportunity to steer the thinking on:

- existing social rights,
- the particular needs of the euro area,
- the changing realities of the world of work, as well as on the reforms needed at all levels.

The consultation process should therefore be as far-reaching as possible

Suggested outcomes: the consultation process has three main aims:

1. make an assessment of the present EU "acquis". In particular, the consultation should help to determine the extent to which existing rights are practiced and remain relevant for today's and tomorrow's challenges, and/or whether new ways to deliver on these rights should be considered;
2. reflect on new trends in work patterns and societies, due to the impact of demographic trends, new technologies and other factors of importance for working life and social conditions. The identification of best practices and lessons from social innovation should be actively encouraged;
3. gather views and get feedback on the outline of the European Pillar of Social Rights itself. The consultation should serve to discuss its scope and content, as well as its role as part of the social dimension of the EMU, to reflect on the particular needs of the euro area, to discuss the specificity of the principles proposed here and to explore the related challenges linked to these. The consultation should also help Member States not in the euro area to determine whether to participate in the Pillar.

The European Pillar of Social Rights: the purpose of the Pillar is to express a number of essential principles to support well functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems. The Pillar will thus build on, and complement, the existing EU-level social "acquis", and the principles it contains will have a specific focus on addressing the needs and challenges confronting the euro area. Once established, the Pillar should become a reference framework to screen the employment and social performance of participating Member States, to drive reforms at national level and, more specifically, to serve as a compass for renewed convergence within the euro area.

The outline of the Pillar is structured around three main headings:

1. equal opportunities and access to the labour market, including skills development and life-long learning and active support for employment, to increase employment opportunities, facilitate transitions between different statuses and improve the employability of individuals;
2. fair working conditions, to set an adequate and reliable balance of rights and obligations between workers and employers, as well as between flexibility and security elements, to facilitate job creation, job take-up and the adaptability of firms, and promoting social dialogue;
3. adequate and sustainable social protection, as well as access to high quality essential services, including childcare, healthcare and long-term care, to ensure dignified living and protection against risks, and to enable individuals to participate fully in employment and more generally in society.

A number of policy domains are identified, to which different principles are attached. These principles take as a starting point a number of rights already inscribed in EU and other relevant sources of law, and set out in greater detail possible ways to operationalise them. These formulations also draw inspiration from existing guidance at EU level, for instance in the context of the coordination of economic policy, while seeking to capture latest trends.

The Pillar should help to modernise, broaden and deepen social rights, at work and in society, by facilitating their actual take-up and by promoting practices that can be beneficial from an individual, firms and societal point of view.

Mobilising for the debate: in the framework of this consultation, the Commission will actively engage with other EU institutions, national authorities and parliaments, trade unions and business associations, NGOs, social service providers, experts from academia, as well as the public. At national level, the Commission will facilitate discussions through its Representations in the Member States.

EU social partners will be invited to play an active role in shaping the Pillar: the Commission will also request the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee and of the Committee of the Regions.

The consultation process should be concluded by 31 December 2016, as the basis for the Commission to put forward a final proposal for the Pillar early in 2017.

In addition to the public consultation, three work streams will be organised to feed into the discussion. The Commission will hold a European conference by the end of 2016 to gather feedback.

Questions for the consultation: the questions for which the European Commission seeks views are the following:

On the social situation and EU social "acquis"

- What do you see as most pressing employment and social priorities?
- How can we account for different employment and social situations across Europe?
- Is the EU "acquis" up to date and do you see scope for further EU action?

On the future of work and welfare systems

- What trends would you see as most transformative?
- What would be the main risks and opportunities linked to such trends?
- Are there policies, institutions or firm practices existing or emerging which you would recommend as references?

On the European Pillar of Social Rights

- Do you agree with the approach outlined here for the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights?
- Do you agree with the proposals contained in the annex to the Commission on the scope of the Pillar, domains and principles proposed here?
- Are there aspects that are not adequately expressed or covered so far?
- What domains and principles would be most important as part of a renewed convergence for the euro area?
- How should these be expressed and made operational? In particular, do you see the scope and added value of minimum standards or reference benchmarks in certain areas and if so, which ones?