**Main positions of the Bulgarian ESC**

13-14 June 2019, Rome

The elections for European Parliament have passed. Europeans have clearly stated that they want ever more consolidated and more competitive Europe. At the same time, it became clear that Europe faces another test, pressed by fast-developing processes. The ability of the European institutions to cope in time with the challenges of global technological and climate changes, as well as the emerging new dividing lines in the social sphere, will be crucial for the unified and successful future of the European Union.

The Bulgarian ESC has a consistent attitude towards social development at both European and national level. We have repeatedly stated the willingness of the organized civil society for economic progress and social progress to be made in a balanced way by Member States and across the Union. For Bulgaria, the European Pillar of Social Rights is a widely recognized mechanism that enables the social processes of cohesion to be assessed more clearly and treated with the same importance as economic processes. According to the Bulgarian ESC, the European Pillar of Social Rights is the mechanism that will allow Europe to prove once again that its concept of the "European Social Model" lies at the heart of European and global civilization.

The stability of the EU depends on building a sustainable balance between economic and social development. This is the position of the Bulgarian ESC, related to the future of the EU and expressed in a number of acts over the last 4-5 years.

During one of the first European and national public discussions, organized by the ESC and the EESC in Sofia in October 2016, the Bulgarian organized civil society supported the EPSR project and proposed to the European institutions that it should apply in all Member States, not only in the Member States of the Eurozone as it was envisaged. Our proposal was shared by other countries and is now a fact.

Together with the positive evaluation of the European Pillar of Social Rights as a reliable mechanism for balancing economic and social development through the European Semester, we have proposed and we continue to insist that the EU should draw up an European Action Plan for Implementation of the EPSR with specific social guidelines. This Action Plan should be linked to the monitoring within the European Semester.

The procedures within the European Semester can be improved and should include reports on social progress in accordance with the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and National Reform and Convergence Plans should be updated in accordance with the recommendations made in those reports. We also propose that each country should develop a national action plan according to the national specificities of the social challenges and for appropriate funding. The Bulgarian ESC has made its proposals to the national institutions for priorities in such a plan to be developed in the future. For us in Bulgaria, but also for the EU, the first priority is the good quality education for the young people that should be adequate to the new technological environment. Therefore, we support all EU and national initiatives related to this priority. Modern contemporary education is the factor for the positive development of the labour market, for better jobs as well as the defence against poverty and social exclusion. Good quality education is a unifying instrument for Europe to overcome disparities and achieve economic and social progress.

Whether we are talking about economics or social development, in our times their interdependence is brought to the fore also regarding the ecological challenges we are facing. We are increasingly aware of the importance and the connections between economy, ecology and social policy. But this interdependence has proved very complicated. In this respect the Bulgarian ESC has endorsed the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, because we consider them the only base for suitability in the world, in our European Union and in our countries. The base for peace and prosperity.

We notice alarming signals for underestimating this interdependence of the 3 pillars in the Agenda 2030 – economy, ecology and social rights. Globally there is even a withdrawal from commitments in the area of nature protection. This increases the urgency of a common environmental policy of the EU and Member States. And here comes the contradiction between economic interests, environmental norms and social consequences.

We need an ambitious but clever European Agenda 2030. We also consider that the process of transition to a low-carbon economy, that we all face, is difficult, expensive and long. But we believe it should be implemented smoothly and without strong pressure on the labour market, employment and incomes, energy prices, investments in new carbon-free energy capacities. A transition without pressure on the economic growth potential and on the competitiveness improvement. Otherwise, the social cost will be very high. According to the Bulgarian ESC, it is necessary to make a fair restructuring of the labour market in line with the new development model in the energy sector and by creating new high-quality jobs. With regard to the restructuring of the energy market, the Bulgarian ESC has repeatedly called on the European institutions to formulate a definition of the phenomenon “energy poverty” in order to take adequate measures at national level against this new negative European social phenomenon, which is a consequence of the ongoing restructuring and liberalization of the energy market.

Last but not least, the Bulgarian ESC stresses that social cohesion in the EU will lead to increased confidence in the institutions and will be the basis for a strong and united Europe. However, cohesion processes also require an adequate financial resource at both European and national level. Therefore, the Bulgarian ESC in all its acts dedicated to the future of the EU takes the view that cohesion policy should not be limited but expanded by providing the appropriate funds. In its Resolution of January 2019 on the main EU budget mechanism - MFF 2020-2030, ESC stated that the financing of cohesion policies (the sum of ERDF, CF and ESF) should be maintained in the MFF 2021-2027 at least with the same resources, at constant prices, as in the current financial framework. At the same time, clear tracking criteria for the use of these funds should be introduced to reduce the gap between lagging regions and average European levels. In the same opinion, we consider as unacceptable the proposed reduction in rural development funds and insisted on conditions and implementing rules facilitating a lasting and visible result of cohesion.

ESC recognizes that policies and measures in the social sector are primarily within the powers of national and local authorities as well as social partners, but ESC believes that new initiatives to support national efforts can also be undertaken at the European level to ensure and accelerate the processes of social cohesion in areas such as demography, migration, protection against unemployment, poverty and risk of exclusion.

These positions of the Bulgarian organized civil society are dictated by the main European values of solidarity and equality.

We believe that the EU is strong when the principle of fairness and openness is the leading principle and we see in the implementation of the EPSR exactly this message.