



Presentation of the priorities
of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU to

in the area of
employment and social policy priorities
before the
Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality of the European Parliament

Biser Petkov, Minister of Labour and Social Policy
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DEAR MS BLINKEVIČIŪTĒ,

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND
GENDER EQUALITY COMMITTEE,

It is a great honour for me to be here with you today to present the employment and social policy priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency which are linked to the work of your committee.

Bulgaria is taking over the Presidency of the Council at a time when Europe and the European citizens are in great need of increased opportunities for quality employment, social security and confidence in the European project. The expectations placed on the Union are high and we are aware of our responsibility. The employment and social policy priorities we have identified are the expression of this responsibility.

On a foundation of unity, justice and the cohesion policy, Bulgaria's vision is to develop tools to generate effective joint action and strengthen the social dimension of the European Union.

Over the next six months Bulgaria will act as an honest broker in its Presidency of the Council. Given the stage the European institutions are at in their institutional cycle, a significant part of the Presidency's busy agenda will be closely inter-related with the work of the European Parliament on key dossiers in the trilogue phase.

Today, more than ever, we need to make the needs of European citizens the focal point of our attention. The positive economic growth that we have seen should be used to its fullest extent to strengthen resistance to future crises, create jobs and improve social justice.

The future of work is a key topic for us, where we will build on the results achieved by the previous Presidency and work towards further progress in finding solutions for productive employment and for sustainable and balanced economic growth. We will pay much more attention to the changing realities in Europe's societies – the negative demographic trends and ageing populations, the influence of technology on the labour market, the negative effects of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, the ever faster changes in the labour market. We will work to foster a better environment for the social economy, with a focus on social innovations, equal opportunities, non-discrimination and the role of women in the digital world. The new and innovative employment policy approaches, focused on young people, fair migration and improving the link between education, skills and labour market needs, should be taken into account.

The future of work is, of course, linked to our next priority – **the future funding for Social Europe and the opportunities for support from the European Social Fund after the 2014-2020 programming period.** The focus in this debate will be on further simplifying rules and enhancing synergies with regard to economic, social and territorial cohesion. It is essential to further improve employment opportunities, enhance efforts on social inclusion, and promote education, skills and lifelong learning for EU citizens.

Under our third priority **we will focus on promoting the relatively new but promising concept of early childhood development**, as well as on the work to recognise and accept the relevant policy as an integrated policy tool to ensure support for families and for the welfare of children at an early age. The Council will adopt conclusions to that effect.

Our fourth priority is **devoted to people with disabilities**. Full enjoyment of all rights and freedoms by people with disabilities, without any discrimination, is laid down as a key priority in a number of national and European strategic documents. There is a need to further develop and improve this approach with a view to guaranteeing equal rights for people with disabilities. In this regard, we will work to achieve significant progress and, if possible, to conclude the trilogue on the European Accessibility Act during the Bulgarian Presidency.

We will also prioritise the work on other legislative dossiers during our Presidency.

I would like to point out that we acknowledge the political importance of the Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (the Equal Treatment Directive). Discussions in the Council have been going on since 2008 but, unfortunately, there are challenges related to the requirement of unanimity among Member States on the dossier.

Regarding the Directive on improving the gender balance on company boards (Women on Boards Directive), which is still blocked, the aim of the Presidency is to closely monitor the situation and, should there be any change in the positions of some Member States, to make every necessary effort to put the matter forward. Gender equality is among Bulgaria's priorities for its Presidency in 2018. We are going to work hard within the Presidency Trio (Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria) to strengthen gender equality, increase the efforts to ensure equal economic independence, eliminate gender-based violence and examine the effect of digitalisation on gender equality.

It is with these goals in mind that the Joint Trio Declaration on Gender Equality was signed at the informal meeting of the ministers for employment and social affairs in July 2017 in Tallinn. The document puts particular emphasis on the importance of the problem of finding legal and

political mechanisms to ensure the equal participation of women and men in all spheres of social life and includes the Trio's priorities in the field for the period from July 2017 to December 2018.

Following the publication of the Commission's Action Plan on Tackling the Gender Pay Gap, we plan to hold a ministerial debate on this important issue during the EPSCO Council in March 2018.

Let me turn, as I finish, **to the key element in our efforts – the citizens of the EU**. Following the signature of the interinstitutional proclamation endorsing the European Pillar of Social Rights, the acts performed under the Pillar will be the focus of our attention over the next six months. We plan to start work on the initiatives which are part of the Social Fairness Package. We will also work actively on the other legislative proposals which are directly linked to improving the working conditions of European citizens. **I would like to draw special attention to improving the work-life balance for parents and carers – a dossier where we have set ourselves ambitious goals.**

I believe that in the field of employment and social policy too, the motto of the Bulgarian Presidency – **United We Stand Strong** – is the key to our success. In the next six months we will work towards its practical implementation. Together we stand strong and can contribute to strengthening the social dimension of the European Union.

I remain at your disposal to answer any further questions you may have.

Thank you for your attention.