

EESC-ILO Joint Conference “Civil Society in the Black Sea Region and the Eastern Partnership Countries- Promoting Civil and Social Dialogue”

Brussels, 2-3 March 2009

Speech of Mr. George Dragnich, Executive Director for Social Dialogue (ILO)

President Sepi,
Chief Adviser Herman,
Deputy Minister Hosek,
Representatives of the European Commission and European Parliament,
Distinguished Participants,

On behalf of ILO Director General Juan Somavia, I am pleased to welcome you to this important conference. Organised jointly by the European Economic & Social Committee and the International Labour Office, it represents another step forward under the cooperative framework launched in Geneva three years ago by the leadership of our two organizations.

It is our first joint effort for the Black Sea region and beyond. Coincidentally, and significantly, it occurs amidst the most serious financial and economic crisis to confront Europe and Central Asia in 60 years. This was underscored by ILO tripartite constituents three weeks ago in Lisbon, on the occasion of the 8th ILO European Regional Meeting. Tripartite constituents from Black Sea Region and EU Eastern Partnership countries were present, and energetically contributed to the discourse and debates.

In its conclusions, the Lisbon Meeting emphasized – and I quote --
“Counteracting the adverse impact of the recession on labour-market conditions and contributing to recovery efforts requires well-designed policies and programmes appropriate to specific country situations. Social dialogue at appropriate levels, from the workplace to the national, as determined by the parties, is an important mechanism for developing broad-based support and commitment to efforts to overcome the crisis and build a better future for working women and men”

The ILO Regional Meeting also emphasised that upcoming convocations to address the global economic and financial crisis -- notably the G20 in London and the G8 in Rome -- should address wider governance, employment, decent work, and development dimensions of the crisis.

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia -- including, of course, those of the Black Sea Region and the EU Eastern Partnership -- have

been at the centre of ILO concern since their transitions began in the early 1990s. In the intervening years, the ILO has mobilised an important infrastructure for the region, including the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, two Sub regional Offices in Budapest and Moscow, an Office in Ankara, as well as a Network of National Coordinators at country level.

Together, these offices help build the capacity of national labour administrations, as well as employers' and workers' organisations. We encourage all three Social Partners to work together on the basis of an effective social dialogue, in order to promote decent work for all working women and men.

Most of the countries targeted by this conference share a legacy of centrally planning, and they have been striving for many years to construct functioning market economies based on good governance and against the backdrop of political pluralism. In this context, employers' and workers' organisations have proven their worth to the policy-making process. After all, they don't just represent the real economy; their members make it happen.

While significant advances have been made, further steps are needed still to consolidate progress made so far. Social dialogue and labour administration are two sides of the same coin. Their currency is devalued if treated as separate and disconnected elements of a modern economy.

The ILO mandate is to promote tripartism and social dialogue, and these are essential to the delivery of decent work, as emphasised by the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation, adopted by the International Labour Conference just last summer. Effective bipartite social dialogue between employers' and workers' organisations is also a prerequisite for meaningful tripartite consultations involving their governments. Social dialogue is integral to the ILO and an essential feature of the EU social model. More than ever, countries need Social Dialogue to help devise, build, and sustain a national consensus in these turbulent times.

That said, the ILO also recognises that a hallmark of our era has been the growth and dynamism of other non-state actors. The Social Partners themselves welcome dialogue with wider civil society, and wish to cooperate with those non-state actors that share similar values, virtues, and aspirations. The ILO supports this collaboration to pursue shared objectives in fields such as child labour, labour migration, employment promotion, and social security. Indeed, closer links with wider civil society can be a source of strength for the ILO and its constituents.

We recognize that social dialogue, as defined by the ILO, is not as broad as civil dialogue. But the two are complementary tools of good governance. Together, they can more meaningfully contribute to the design and construction of sound strategies to confront and remediate the current economic crisis.

The ILO and the European Economic and Social Committee clearly share common values. Working together, each within its own mandate, we can achieve better results and bolster the capacity of our respective constituencies in the Black Sea and Eastern Partnership countries.

This joint conference offers an invaluable opportunity to exchange views on how to enhance the role of both civil and social dialogue. Together, we can help ensure that civil society, including employers' and workers' organisations, can better inform and contribute to decision-making at both country and regional levels. Our outcomes can provide an input to the EU partnership with Eastern Europe as proposed by the European Commission and currently discussed in the EU Council of Ministers. The ILO stands ready, within its mandate, to join efforts aimed at strengthening governance and promoting decent work in the region.

I wish you all a fruitful discussion and thank you for your attention.

George Dragnich,
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ILO, Geneva

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