

Address by Hans Christian Krüger (Strasbourg, 18 October 2001)

Caption: Address by Hans Christian Krüger, Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, at the ceremony to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the European Social Charter held on 18 October 2001 in Strasbourg.

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Address by Hans Christian Krüger, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, at the ceremony to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the European Social Charter (Strasbourg, 18 October 2001)

Human Rights Building, Courtroom II

We are gathered here this evening to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the European Social Charter. This treaty was long disregarded but it has now been installed in its rightful place as one of the Council of Europe's most important agreements and one of its main achievements in the protection of fundamental rights.

40 years ago, the opening of the Social Charter for signature went practically unnoticed. The world was going through a series of major international crises.

Today the Social Charter has a higher profile and it is our responsibility to ensure that this anniversary draws even more attention to it, despite the fact that the world is currently undergoing another dramatic crisis.

The Council of Europe has good reason to be proud of the progress it has made in the last ten years which virtually relaunched the European Social Charter. Over this period it has been able to flesh out and clarify the rights contained in the Charter while there has been a major increase in the number of states which have accepted the treaty. The inevitable result of this is an improvement in the economic and social rights of a larger number of European citizens. This consolidation and expansion of the Social Charter has now established it as a genuine counterpart to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Why have there been so many ratifications in so short a time? 20 in 1997, 30 today! It would be too simple to imagine that it is only because the Social Charter has recently managed to acquire the notoriety which it so sorely lacked in its first thirty years of existence. There are undoubtedly more deep-seated reasons than this. All we need to do is to look at the words and concepts that lie at the heart of the Charter: housing, health, education, working conditions, social protection and non-discrimination. These words and these real-life situations help us to understand its refound force of attraction: how much and how many men and women in Europe today need to be protected from violations of their most natural rights and human dignity.

Ratification of the Social Charter is not a panacea. It reflects the desire and the determination of European states – 30 today, 43 tomorrow – to create, preserve or restore the conditions in which it will be possible to promote the basic standards set out in the Charter.

We are all aware of the social dimensions of the conflicts, crises and difficulties that the world is currently undergoing. We all know how strongly guaranteeing fundamental rights in the social and economic field contributes not only to the protection of human rights as such, but also to democracy and the rule of law in general. This is why the Social Charter is one of the Council of Europe's statutory goals, which derive from the ambitions of the founding fathers of our organisation. The Charter has been able to adapt to the new challenges of the Council of Europe's enlargement: therefore it can truly be said to be a treaty for the 21st century.

Of course there is still a long way to go and other changes will be necessary if we wish to continue along the road enabling us to secure effective rights for all Europeans.

I would particularly like to congratulate and thank the governments who have taken part in the efforts to modernise the Social Charter over recent years and those who have agreed to be bound to the treaty and adopt the rights and values it articulates as their own. I would also like to thank the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers, as it was their commitment which made these reforms and this consolidation possible.

The work carried out by the Committees of the Social Charter should not be underestimated and I would like also to thank the members of these Committees for their contribution to the modernization of the Charter.

I would like to emphasise, on behalf of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe how ready and willing we are to go further still and put all our efforts into ensuring that the fundamental rights of all Europeans are effectively guaranteed.