

VTC Tripartite Social Summit for Growth and Employment

A united tripartite response to the social and economic impact of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine

23 March 2022

Opening speech of Luca Visentini, ETUC General Secretary

Esteemed authorities,

Colleagues of the Social Partners,

After two years of pandemic, and in the moment when Europe was recovering from one of the worst crises ever, we are now facing the horrific conflict in Ukraine.

In this context, the Tripartite Social Summit today is of crucial importance for the social partners, and I want to thank the institutional representatives who have found the time to attend it, although we would have preferred to have a meeting in presence.

The European trade union movement has strongly condemned the invasion of Ukraine, in breach of international law, and we have called on Russia to respect Ukrainian territorial integrity, demanded the immediate cessation of military operations, insisted that Russian troops leave the country, and called for dialogue and talks for peace.

We expect the European Union to step up as an institution, and not leave diplomatic efforts and actions for peace just to individual governments and leaders.

We support all necessary forms of sanctions, which target the interests and assets of the Russian leadership and elites, but also Belarus for its part in the military aggression.

At the same time, we ask the European Union to open a constructive dialogue with Ukraine regarding its accession process. Even if such a process will take time and will have to follow all the necessary steps in EU rules, it would give a very powerful signal to Russia and the international community that Ukraine is welcome to participate in the European integration project in a spirit of peace and solidarity.

The same dialogue should be opened with the other countries associated with the EU like Georgia and Moldova, to guarantee stability and equal treatment to the region.

Further efforts and protection measures have to be taken to establish safe and secure humanitarian corridors.

We really appreciate the extraordinary measures and financial means put in place to provide immediate aid and humanitarian support to Ukraine and its population, as well as the measures to assist those who have fled the country.

We are constantly in touch with our trade union colleagues in Ukraine, and in cooperation with our affiliates we contribute to humanitarian support, in Ukraine , on the border and in the rest of the EU.

Welcoming all refugees and people fleeing from Ukraine and other countries, including Russia and Belarus, is essential, and we recognise a significant change in the attitude of some Member States that until few months ago were building walls and fences against migrants and refusing to participate in any relocation process.

We also welcome the activation for the first time ever of the Temporary Protection Directive, but we call for the implementation of the full range of rights provided by this Directive, such as access to the labour market, housing, health care, education, and welfare support.

This must be guaranteed to Ukrainians and their families, and also to third-country nationals residing in Ukraine who are unable to return in safe conditions to their country of origin.

Millions of people fled Ukraine to the EU, mainly women and children, while hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian men have left Europe to go and fight for their country. This will create enormous disruption in our labour markets, particularly in the border countries.

However, we have to do whatever possible to pave paths for integration in the labour market for people who have left their countries because of war, by guaranteeing them full equal treatment in the workplace and in society, and preventing and fighting against any form of exploitation and discrimination, which is unfortunately already taking place.

On this, the role of social partners is essential. We are active with integration projects at EU, national and local level, and are ready to contribute to labour market needs and skills' matching through our structures on the ground.

We have to be aware that sanctions and migration flows will have serious impact on our economy, jobs and living conditions. This comes on top of the consequences of COVID and of the already existing and totally unacceptable speculation on energy prices.

That's why we demand you, EU institutions, to urgently introduce measures of compensation.

We welcome what's been done to ensure alternative supply of goods and energy sources, to fight against speculation and unjustified profits, and to establish EU funding to minimise the increase of prices and tariffs.

At the same time, we ask you to immediately address the consequences of war on economy and employment. And this must be done through the continuation of emergency measures successfully used by the EU to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak (such as SURE), by refinancing and refocusing them to compensate the disruption which is already happening.

This crisis requires the same quick reaction that was put in place two years ago to counteract the effects of the pandemic. This is not the time for 'frugality', it's the time to protect jobs and businesses. If we want to defeat Putin, we have to defend our democracy, wellbeing and way of life.

In this respect, we warn against attempts to use the war to justify a deregulation agenda on workers' rights and social protection, or to go back to austerity and restrictive fiscal rules, which would exacerbate even further the negative consequences of the conflict.

Therefore, we strongly recommend you keep implementing the review of the European Economic Governance and the Semester process, in a way that ensures continued public investment for an inclusive recovery, expenditure flexibility and debt sustainability.

But also, we ask you to make sure that every EU policy, every legislative initiative, every single euro of public investment mobilised, guarantees a verifiable impact in the creation of stable and well protected jobs, social justice and protection of workers' rights, socially just environmental and digital transitions.

Many important policy reforms and new legislation are in the pipeline, we ask you to deliver very quickly and with high ambition, through social dialogue and social partners' involvement, and by always considering workers' and business' interests.

Thank you very much for your attention.