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NOTE

from : The Bulgarian delegation
to : COUNCIL (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs)

Subject : European Social Policy week (Sofia, 26-30 May 2008)
- Request from the Bulgarian delegation
(Any other business item)

Delegations will find attached a note from the Bulgarian Delegation.

**Short Information about the European Social Policy Week,
held in Sofia, 26-30 May 2008**

**This information will be presented by Minister Maslarova at the EPSCO Council on
9 June 2008, Item „Any other business” on the Agenda**

The European Social Policy Week was held in Sofia from 26-30 May 2008. This is the first ever European event initiated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria and carried out in co-operation with the European Commission. The forum was a meeting place for more than 500 participants from many EU Member States including Commissioner Špidla and his team, the EU “Troika” Ministers of labour and social affairs and ambassadors of EU Member States, Bulgarian politicians and statesmen, representatives of state institutions at national, regional and municipal level, leaders and experts of social partners’ organizations, as well as representatives of business and non-governmental organizations and scientific circles.

The five thematic days covered diverse spheres of social policy: anti-discrimination and equal opportunities, social protection and social inclusion, employment, migration, occupational safety and health, development of administrative capacity. The contribution of the European Social Fund to carrying out those policies was also presented. The discussions were devoted to the policy components at European and national levels, the accomplishments achieved, the problems and the good practices for managing the challenges ahead.

The first day was dedicated to the policy of **anti-discrimination and equal opportunities**. The three leading priorities of the new vision for Europe were outlined – granting of access, more opportunities and solidarity. The stress was laid on solidarity between the generations, and the encouragement of the equal participation of all in contemporary life – including women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. The correspondence between the Bulgarian and the European vision is reflected in the existing legislative and institutional framework and the strategic documents (National Strategy on Demographic Development of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006 – 2020, Strategy for Ensuring Equal Opportunities of People with Disabilities 2008 – 2015, etc).

The second day was dedicated to **social protection and social inclusion**. The focus was put on the elements of the open method of coordination – inclusion, pensions, health and long-term care. Bulgaria shares the European challenges: preservation and increase of the principle of solidarity, achieving a balance between the reforms for growth and employment and social cohesion, the high level of child poverty, the low level of employment among elderly people, inequalities in the access to quality health care, the need for better management and goal determination of social policy. The specific challenges for Bulgaria are the following: the necessity to promote the open method of coordination, to activate the participation of all the interested parties, to expand the practices for monitoring and impact assessment. There was a useful exchange of experience between experts across Europe on the best tools for active inclusion.

Health and safety at work issues were considered on the third day. Bulgaria, in compliance with the guidelines of the European Strategy on Health and Safety at Work, has set the goal of reducing the number of accidents at work for the period until 2012 by 25 % on average. All participants shared the view that accidents at work and occupational diseases represent a heavy financial burden for social protection systems. In this respect, it is of particular importance to encourage the activity of labour inspectorates in order to improve the effectiveness of control and monitoring over the unified application of the legislation. According to the participants in the forum, an increase in the competitiveness and productivity of enterprises is necessary for the reduction in the overall cost of accidents at work and health injuries.

The topic of the fourth day focused on **migration and labour**. The “Free movement of persons, challenges in the migration and integration policies and their interrelation with the labour market” was highlighted. The importance of the management of migration processes was stressed, as were their direct relation with the labour market and the need that national competences in this domain should be exercised by each of the Member States, while all steps undertaken should be in compliance with EU initiatives. Two main strategic objectives are formulated under the Bulgarian National Strategy on Migration and Integration– the attraction of Bulgarian citizens and persons of Bulgarian origin from abroad to settle permanently in the country. It was underlined that receiving citizens from third countries is not a viable solution to demographic challenges. The Bulgarian side stated that the shortage of labour within the EU calls for a fresh debate on the efficiency of the transitional period arrangements.

The fifth day was devoted to **employment policy within the renewed Lisbon Strategy**. The positive results achieved by Bulgaria were presented (62.6 % employment rate in 2008, reduction of the registered unemployment in April 2008 to 6.51%) and the future priorities, laid down in the updated Employment Strategy 2008-2015 and the Draft Strategy for Life-long Learning were indicated. The debate was oriented towards determining the steps in the process of formulation of the program budgeting of the ministries for the period 2009-2011. The basic conclusions and recommendations outline the necessity of looking for lasting solutions to problems on the labour market, by continuing the reforms in view of reaching the common purpose– highly efficient and quality employment; active employability of a greater number of persons with working capacity; achievement of flexibility and security on the labour market.

The **European Social Fund (ESF)** was the theme for discussion on the last day. It was organized as four separate panels related to the four fundamental intervention policies of the ESF– labour market, education and training, social inclusion and social economy, and administrative capacity. The European Commission representatives underlined the mutual cooperation and partnership which had laid down the foundations for a successful commencement and implementation of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme and the Administrative Capacity Operational Programme. In the course of the forum, during the meetings and discussions, the participants presented their experience and “best practices” and exchanged views on the prevention and solution of problems.

The forum attracted great media attention and high interest among the participants of more than half of the EU Member States. The “best practices” and experience shared should serve to deepen cooperation between the Member States. We hope that the success of the European Social Policy Week will be further developed and will inspire successive initiatives contributing to the progress of all Member States in the process of implementation of EU social policy objectives, particularly on the eve of the launch and subsequent implementation of the renewed Social Agenda.