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1. European Pillar of Social Rights

On 26 April the European Commission published its proposal for the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Pillar of Social Rights represents one of the political priorities of the Juncker Commission. It aims to deliver new and more effective rights for citizens, and builds upon 20 key principles structured around three categories:

- Equal opportunities and access to the labour market: education, training and life-long learning; gender equality; equal opportunities; active support to employment.
- Fair working conditions: secure and adaptable employment; wages; information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals; social dialogue and involvement of workers; work-life balance; healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection.
- Social protection and inclusion: childcare and support to children; social protection; unemployment benefits, minimum income; old age and pensions; health care; inclusion of people with disabilities; long-term care; housing and assistance for the homeless; access to essential services.

Housing and assistance for the homeless within the Pillar includes:

- Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need.
- Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.
- Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.

In 2014, 70% of the EU population lived in owner-occupied dwellings, 19% were renting accommodation at market prices and 11% were tenants in reduced-rent or free accommodation. The challenges identified by the Commission include:

- Limited access to affordable housing can be an obstacle to labour market adjustment and job uptake.
- Cities in particular have a limited capacity to supply additional affordable and quality housing.
- New investments, particularly new construction, slowed down during the crisis due to the adjustment in house prices from elevated pre-crisis levels and existing zoning regulations. Mortgage lending activity also decreased considerably.
- Growing financial difficulties for people on low and middle incomes have resulted in more frequent arrears in rental and mortgage payments and a rise in evictions and foreclosures.
- Barriers to receiving cash housing assistance and to affordable social housing for the most vulnerable people are increasing the risk of homelessness.

There are existing references to housing within the body of EU law. Article 34 (3) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU affirms recognition and respect of the right, inter alia, to housing assistance for those who lack sufficient resources. In accordance with Articles 151 and 153 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, the Union and its Member States have the objective to combat social exclusion, and EU legislation lays down specific protection for vulnerable people such as unaccompanied children, asylum-seekers and refugees as regards access to shelter.

Directly enforceable rights to housing exist only in a few Member States, although provisions on the protection of the home appear in most national constitutions. Only a few Member States have a large social housing sector, with significant differences across the EU in terms of shelter quality, coverage, capacity and support services. The Pillar covers the different aspects of the right to housing in a comprehensive manner for the first time at Union level. It includes housing assistance for everyone in need

(not just those without sufficient financial resources), and represents a significant reinforcement of the right to housing and housing security for vulnerable people in the case of eviction. Vulnerable people can include both at-risk tenants and owners at risk of eviction. The principle is with due regard of the interests of landlords and in justified, lawful cases. The Pillar also establishes universal access to adequate shelters for everyone in a homeless situation. Adequate housing can be understood in terms of security of tenure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy.

Member States are invited to adopt measures, in particular national, regional or local housing, cash and in-kind, to support universal and rapid access to shelter for people in all kinds of emergency situations as well as to enhance the coverage and capacity of enabling social services in order to give effect to the principle. The reform of social housing, the accessibility and affordability of housing, as well as the effectiveness of housing allowances are monitored and assessed within the European Semester process. The implementation of the principle will be supported by Union funds, including the European Fund for Strategic Investments for social housing investments and the European Regional Development Fund for housing infrastructure.

2. New Tools for the Single Market

As part of its ongoing work on the Single Market Strategy, the Commission published on 2 May a package of measures intended to make it easier for people and companies to manage their paperwork online in their home country or when working, living or doing business in another EU country. They also aim to ensure that EU rules are respected. These tools include three concrete measures:

- A Single Digital Gateway: giving easier access through a single digital entry point to high quality information, online administrative procedures and assistance services, e.g. to start a business.
- A Single Market Information Tool (SMIT): allowing the Commission, in targeted cases, to source defined and readily available data (e.g. cost structure or pricing policy) in cases of serious difficulty with the application of EU Single Market legislation. The Commission would not use SMIT routinely, but only as a last resort, and always following a case-by-case assessment. The use of SMIT would be limited based on the following criteria: there must be a serious difficulty with the application of EU law; the information is not publically available; the information has not been provided by a Member State or by a natural or legal person upon request by the Commission.
- A SOLVIT Action Plan: building on the success of the existing SOLVIT system which is free of charge and provides solutions to people and companies when they experience difficulties with public administrations while moving or doing business cross-border in the EU, e.g. in the recognition of professional qualifications. The action plan aims to increase access to SOLVIT and improve data collection so that evidence from SOLVIT cases can be used to improve the functioning of the single market.

These proposed new tools will now be discussed by the European Parliament and Council and, if approved, could be available in 2020.

3. Tenants' Access to Solar Self-Consumption

The energy strategy of the EU aims to pave the way for consumers to fully benefit from new technology and future energy markets. But how can consumers who are tenants access these benefits such as solar electricity when they live in multi-apartment buildings? This question is considered in a policy paper issued jointly by the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) and the International Union of Tenants (IUT).

Four out of five Europeans live in a region where producing solar electricity on the rooftop of the building they live in is cheaper than buying electricity on the market. However, the 150 million Europeans who are tenants do not have the same access to these benefits as homeowners. Many of these tenants live in multi-apartment buildings. The policy paper now published argues that EU and national policymakers should make it easier for such tenants to benefit from solar electricity that has been generated on their buildings' premises.

The paper recommends that future legislation should:

- establish a right to self-generate, self-consume and export renewable electricity to the grid collectively;

- ensure consumers who self-generate and export electricity individually or collectively are protected against inappropriate levies;
- simplify tenant models by treating any supply of electricity within tenant models as being self-consumption;
- combat ongoing market distortions with targeted support schemes as well as by preserving priority grid access and priority dispatch of renewable power plants;
- guarantee that tenants always enjoy the same established consumer rights as customers of a retail electricity supplier.

In its recommendations on self-consumption, the European Commission highlights that “business models and financial instruments need to be developed to make self-consumption widely accessible to all consumers from all income levels, including special programmes for vulnerable consumers”. Investment costs for solar energy are decreasing, but self-consumption for tenants cannot take off by itself. The paper examines four tenant models, two based on participative self-generation, where tenants run a segment, or rent a share, and two based on direct sales, by the landlord or electricity supplier. The first two require a relatively high level of involvement by the tenants. The direct sale models are simpler and less risky for tenants but provide less control.

The policy paper can be downloaded from the link shown in useful links.

4. Accessibility of Products and Services

The accessibility of products and services for persons living with disabilities has been under discussion in the EU for some time. One of the points under discussion has been the extent to which it should apply to the built environment. Differences in legislation, standards and guidelines exist between Member States. The proposed Directive will provide for a common EU definition and implementation framework for accessibility requirements of certain products and services. It concerns particularly transport ticket machines and check-in machines, banking services, consumer terminal equipment, telephone and audio visual services, passenger transport services, e-books and e-commerce.

The proposed directive:

- harmonises accessibility requirements at EU level for a number of products and services but does not prescribe in detail how the obligation to render a product or service accessible by complying with the defined accessibility requirements has to be achieved in practice. In case this still leads to obstacles in the internal market, the Commission can consider other options in the future to provide guidance to Member States such as standardisation or implementing measures;
- includes the option of using voluntary harmonised standards to provide presumption of conformity with the accessibility requirements;
- provides that Member States must transpose the Directive within two years after its entry into force at the latest;
- requires Member States to apply all measures, within six years after the entry into force of the Directive.

On 25 April the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) Committee amended and approved the proposal, which would apply to products and services placed on the EU market after the Directive takes effect. The committee also decided that the accessibility requirements would cover the built environment where the service is provided “as regards to the construction of new infrastructure or renovations with a substantial change of the structure of the existing building”. Micro-enterprises (employing fewer than 10 people and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet does not exceed €2 million) would be exempted.

The proposal still needs to be agreed upon by the European Council before the final negotiations on the terms of the proposed legislation can take place.

Useful links

www.cepi.eu

European Pillar of Social Rights

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

New Tools for the Single Market

http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1086_en.htm

Tenants' Access to Solar Self-Consumption

http://www.iut.nu/EU/Energy/BEUC_%20IUT_solar_self_consumption_March2017.pdf

European Parliament procedure file: accessibility requirements for products and services

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=&reference=2015/0278\(COD\)](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=&reference=2015/0278(COD))