Country-specific recommendations 2015 - Speaking points of Commissioner Marianne Thyssen

Brussels, 13 May 2015

The European Semester exercise is of course about economic governance in the first place but we know that at the end of the day it is also about people. And that is why I am here.

The unemployment rate in the EU28 has been decreasing to the single digit of 9.8% in March 2015, the lowest rate recorded in the EU since September 2011.

Nevertheless, an impressive set of challenges remains ahead of us. We still have over 23 million European citizens who remain without a job. 4.8 million of them are young people.

However, at this point we can look at these challenges with renewed confidence in Europe's capacity to create growth and jobs. This is not the time to sit back and relax. This is the time to embrace change in order to make a long-lasting revamp of our labour markets.

The European Semester 2015 is focusing on the most essential structural reforms to help those left behind during the crisis back in the labour market.

Our most pressing challenge is youth and long-term unemployment. The Youth Guarantee is starting to show its first results: more than 500,000 young people found a job in 2014. But we should not be complacent, there is still a long way to go - one young person out of five on the labour market is still without a job and almost half of the 12.4 million unemployed today are long-term unemployed. We are recommending that they are assisted through targeted active labour market policies and efficient employment services working in cooperation with the social assistance offices. We wanted to provide them with integrated services.

On the skills side, skills development is very important. We continue to advocate apprenticeships and life-long learning as keys for development.

We are also focusing on targeted measures to increase labour market participation of vulnerable groups, such as women, older workers or migrants or workers with a migrant background, the second and even the third generation.

We are also recommending increasing pensionable ages and reducing early retirement opportunities to ensure the sustainability and the adequacy of pensions. Both must be assured.

Contrary to employment and unemployment developments, divergences in poverty trends have continued to increase among the Member States, in particular due to the steep increase in the euro-area countries most severely hit by the crisis.

This year's recommendations focus on reducing poverty and social exclusion by filling gaps in Member States' social safety nets and on activation measures.

There is also attention to the importance of childcare and early pre-school education for children with deprived background. These interventions are important for breaking the transmission of poverty and social exclusion, in particular for the Member States with a big Roma population.

Finally a word on healthcare, a big and growing item of public finances which we have not yet found the way to contain. But healthcare is also about making sure everyone has access to quality healthcare, not just the rich. So the key message of the recommendations on healthcare is cost-effectiveness; to rationalise provision in the most cost effective way.

In short, times are ripe for completing the structural reform agenda which is essential for Europe. We need to look past the emergency of the crisis and build up the adequate skills that high-productivity economies require in order to be competitive on the world stage while strengthening our European social model.

This Commission believes that with the new streamlined approach, thanks to a stronger prioritisation of more urgent issues, we have kept our part of the bargain. Now it is up to Member States to ensure implementation.

And I must say I count also on the social partners for their support.
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