

Minutes of the meeting in virtual mode on 29 March 2022 with the members of the Cabinet of Mr Charles MICHEL, President of the European Council

The meeting was attended by :

- For the Cabinet of Mr. Charles MICHEL: Mr. Rudy VOLDERS, Head of the Integrated Europe Team, more specifically in charge of the management of the climate and digital agendas and the Internal Market) and Mr. Cibran Fernandez SILVA, Employment and Social Affairs Advisor.

- For FERPA: Lajos MAYER, President; Agostino SICILIANO, Secretary General; Angeles BRIALES, Deputy Secretary General; Dick DE GRAAF, Luc JANSEN, Ana MARTINEZ and Werner THUM, for the FERPA Executive Committee; Henri LOURDELLE, FERPA Special Advisor and Jessica MONTIEL, P.A SG, for the Secretariat and Moderator of the meeting

After a brief introduction and presentation of the participants, Jessica Montiel gave the floor to the Secretary General of FERPA, Agostino SICILIANO first thanked the members of Mr. MICHEL's Cabinet for having welcomed us. He then introduced the delegation, indicating that they were members of the Steering Committee from Italy, Hungary, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and France. He then turned to the presentation of the Manifesto, noting the important points. Beforehand, he recalled the consequences of the economic crisis of 2008, the pandemic and the health crisis which hit the elderly particularly hard and now the war in Ukraine. He indicated that FERPA needs answers to the demands contained in the Manifesto. In particular, he insisted on the need to revalue pensions for a dignified life and the introduction of a minimum pension everywhere in Europe, especially in view of the increase in poverty which is particularly affecting retired women in Europe. The pandemic has highlighted the fragility of European health systems, which have already been undermined by the economic crisis of 2008, and the pandemic illustrates the need for coordination at European level in this area. He also mentioned long-term care. Energy poverty, which was pre-existing, has been reinforced by the war in Ukraine, the consequences of which and the sanctions taken as a result of this war, will have consequences in all the countries of Europe and will create even more human drama, particularly among the elderly. Furthermore, the right to decent and functional housing for the elderly population is another important point to be addressed. The Secretary General called for a more inclusive Europe and for the implementation of the European Social Rights Foundation, to enable all people, especially the elderly, to live in dignity.

Jessica Montiel then gave the floor to Mr. VOLDERS who began by underlining that the COVID19 crisis was the biggest that not only Europe but the world has ever known. He acknowledged that the implementation of the minimum pension is a big challenge. Without being overly optimistic, he added, the introduction of a minimum wage at the European level seemed impossible a few years ago, but today it is on the European agenda. So, he said, will the minimum pension. But the challenge that needs to be addressed as soon as possible is inflation, which is an aggravating factor for poverty. It has an immediate impact on purchasing power. Another major challenge is to acquire our energy sovereignty. Europe is too dependent on gas supplies from Russia, for example.

Demography is also a challenge in Europe. There is certainly poverty among the elderly, but also among single women. This requires an immediate response because they are at immediate risk of poverty, long before the pandemic, long before the war. Mr VOLDERS then returned to health and argued in favour of the "Pandemic Treaty" being promoted by Mr MICHEL, joined on 1 December 2021 by the 194 members of the World Health Organisation (WHO) to establish an international instrument to improve pandemic preparedness and response by lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Universal and equitable access to safe, effective and affordable vaccines, medicines and diagnostics must be ensured in the context of the current and future pandemics. Building effective health systems is a necessity not only at the European level, but at the global level. This topic is a key element of the European Agenda, as are social inclusion and the reform of pension systems. Indeed, with the pressure of demographic change, there is a need for sustainable pension systems. This means that more people have to work for longer. In the 1970s, young people entered the labour market at 15/16 years of age, today it is well over 20 years. Europe has a duty of economic independence to establish its sovereignty: to have a robust economic base. Housing is another challenge for older people, especially the energy transition. It is necessary to know where the risks are, especially for certain categories of citizens, and to control the changes. The FERPA Manifesto and the European Social Rights Framework have the same objectives. There is a risk of poverty, but poverty should not be created. For example, in the case of energy prices, it is necessary to put in place accompanying measures. Finally, Mr Volders is not pessimistic, because he says "we have learned a lot from these crises. Everything is important for inclusion. We have to come back to European values": "inclusive" health, "inclusive" housing, "inclusive" poverty, etc. There are benefits but also obligations, such as participating in vaccination.

His colleague, Mr. Cibran Fernandez SILVA, also intervened to add a few details. He referred to the last Summit on 22 and 23 March where an important Declaration was made. He noted that a large part of our demands were national competences, for example the minimum pension. He also said that he was willing to meet with us to work together.

Jessica Montiel asked if there were any questions or interventions from the members of the Steering Committee.

Dick DE GRAFF (FNV) asked for the floor and said that in its approach to ageing and the place of older people in Europe, the focus of the European institutions in its positions and publications, see for example the Green Paper on Ageing, is more on the costs of pensions and pensioners to society than on the right of older people to participate fully and respectfully in society. For FERPA, this is not how we want to see the place of pensioners in society. We want to be fully respected for our role and place in society.

Mr. VOLDERS replied that he understood the question and agreed with the remarks made. But he added that we cannot avoid addressing the issue of the future sustainability of pensions in Europe. If we continue with an unchanged policy, we will see that pensions are no longer 'payable'. Then we "go to the iceberg". We need to create (more) jobs for the elderly to keep pensions affordable. And, he adds, we must not forget the demographic challenge. There have to be costs and expenses that are 'payable', that are bearable. The increase in life expectancy and the demographic challenge entail enormous expenses.

He agreed on a minimum pension indexed to inflation, but it must be decided that retirement must be adapted to work, i.e. the pensionable age must be increased, although of course everyone is entitled to a minimum pension.

President Lajos MAYER in turn wished to speak. He said that what Mr. VOLDERS had said was important for the Conference on the Future of Europe, where he sat in the ETUC working group on behalf of FERPA. It is an important support, especially for the Recommendations of the final declaration of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The right to a minimum pension, which is part of the adapted Recommendation of the Citizens' Panel, should be included. Another important recommendation should also be introduced, which concerns long-term care. On the other hand, FERPA opposed the raising of the retirement age to 67. For FERPA, 65 years is sufficient, especially for those who have worked under difficult conditions.

Mr. VOLDERS answered that for him there are two main priorities. The first is the minimum pension. There are different assessments between countries on this issue: should the minimum pension be set at the level of the poverty line or below? The debate that took place on the minimum wage that was impossible at European level a few years ago is now on the European agenda. In the same way, the issue of the minimum pension must be "pushed" to the European agenda. The second challenge is that no one should be left behind because of the energy crisis. The main objective is the success of the energy transition. This has a cost, especially in the transitional period. With the implementation of the principles and measures contained in the Green Deal throughout Europe, the European Union should achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Alternatives to fossil fuels must be found and the energy transition accelerated. We need to invest in innovative and efficient energy sources. As has been said, there is a cost, but there will be a return on investment.

The Secretary General of FERPA took his turn to conclude the meeting. He first of all thanked the members of the Cabinet for their availability. But he insisted on asking what concrete action plan to propose for the implementation, theme by theme, of our objectives which certainly all have an economic impact. Of course, there are national competences, but also European ones. The EU could provide guidelines to coordinate their implementation. He confirmed that FERPA remains at their disposal to cooperate in order to be able to live in dignity, in a more inclusive Europe.

Mr. VOLDERS, in closing, expressed his agreement with the Secretary General. For him, the horizon of 2040 seems credible for the implementation of the minimum pension. But it is necessary to have an authority and especially the right authority. He reaffirmed his agreement to another meeting on our priorities, which was confirmed by his colleague Mr SILVA. He added that the Action Plan of the European Socle of Social Rights was a good support for our Manifesto.

Jessica MONTIEL thanked Mr. Volders and Mr. Da Silva on behalf of the Secretary General of FERPA and the members of the Steering Committee and stressed that FERPA will make the relevant contacts with the European Commission as suggested and that we will keep in touch for a possible follow-up.

Henri