

## **Anne Claire Le Bodic, ESIP President's Welcoming Speech**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> ESIP Annual Forum (October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – Brussels)**

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and esteemed participants,

It is with great pleasure and honour that I welcome you all to the new annual forum of the European Social Insurance Platform. I am delighted to see so many familiar faces and new participants gathered here today and deeply honoured to stand before such a diverse gathering of individuals who play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Europe's social model.

This annual forum serves as a crucial platform for dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of best practices among policymakers, experts, researchers, and practitioners from across the continent. Your presence here today underscores the importance of this mission, and I am confident that the discussions and insights shared during our time together will contribute significantly to the enhancement of our collective reflection on the future of European social security systems. By ensuring a substantial social investment, we are and should remain an essential factor of well-being for European citizens, a key to social cohesion and a prerequisite for an inclusive economic growth. Debates on the economic governance and its possible completion by a social dimension reflect the acknowledgement of this role by policymakers.

Our theme for this year's conference, "Europe's Social Security Systems and the Changing World of Work," could not be more timely or relevant. As we convene here today, our continent and the world at large are undergoing profound transformations in the way we work, live, and interact. These changes, driven by demographic shifts, technological advancements, and environmental challenges, require us to adapt and evolve our social security systems to meet the needs of citizens while remaining sustainable.

These megatrends have or will have a direct impact on employment and labour markets, but also on work and workers. As social security institutions, we will have to take both dimensions into consideration. Our role is to support the design of a modern, inclusive social model, providing for certainty and hope in times of unpredictability.

Next to being a necessity, at least when considering the environmental crisis, these evolutions bear numerous opportunities. The transition to the green and digital economy has the potential to create millions of jobs in Europe, some of which we cannot imagine yet. Although probably more traditional,

jobs will also have to be massively created in the care sector due to the demographic curb, with an increase of 8 million of Europeans in need of care expected by 2050.

This will require that the adequate skills are available on the market, meaning enormous needs in terms of training or retraining. Although we should consider it as a social investment, the cost of measures to support these transitions in the labour market will be considerable, and our institutions have a major role to play in this context. More than ever, they will have to accompany active labour market policies to make them as inclusive as possible. People facing less linear careers or difficulties to retrain will also need adequate support and safety nets. This will have to take place in a context where an assumed higher number of career breaks and the possibility that parts of the newly created employments could be less skilled and less paid will put pressure on the level of social contributions.

In this matter, the works impulsed by the Spanish Presidency and to be hopefully operationalised by the Belgian Presidency next year on access to social protection for all are warmly welcome. Our first panel will show and discuss concrete examples of policies and mechanisms aiming at filling gaps in social coverage, encompassing new and/or precarious forms of work.

These changes also force us to imagine tomorrow's workplaces from the angle of health and safety at work. Mental health issues are on the rise everywhere in Europe, and work-related phenomena such as precarious work, remote work, exposure to climatic events or automatization and digitalization bear mental health challenges with them. They also lead every one of us to revisit their relationship to work. In this regard, we consider the Commission's initiative and the Council's conclusions as a clear invitation to all stakeholders to engage together in further works on this matter.

As social security institutions, it is our responsibility to support the prevention and mitigation of workplace related risks associated with these changes. It is also our role to contribute to the full inclusion of people suffering of mental health diseases and troubles, including in the labour market. Our afternoon panellists will therefore present examples of our engagement in implementing innovative solutions to tackle work-related mental health issues.

And as social security institutions are themselves workplaces, they do not escape these changes. Digitalisation has been at work for many years now, and with the appropriate commitment and investments of the institutions in charge, it has brought tangible results in facilitating social security coordination, but also directly for citizens and businesses. Keeping up with the pace of technological change and integrating new priorities and needs however require constant adaptations and adequate financing. In this context, it is important that the European Commission recently published its vision on

the digitalisation of social security coordination. Political coherence and ambition are a necessity. Equally necessary is to hear and take into account the expectations of the users and the experience of the practitioners on the ground. This is why I would like to thank the participants in the second panel for offering a reality-check of how policies translate into tangible reality.

Whereas as an individual, I might find these changes ahead of us vertiginous, to say the least, as a professional representing social security institution, I see reasons to be optimistic.

We, social security institutions, are more than ever needed. And we are adaptable. In recent times, we have proven our reactivity when faced with massive crises which were less anticipated than the ones we will be discussing today. Ad-hoc solutions to put in place short time works schemes, to establish specific support to workers and businesses, to issue and introduce sick leave notices have been designed and implemented within weeks, when not days, during the Covid crisis. More recently, we have been able to give flesh and bones to the concept of temporary protection for millions of Ukrainian refugees, offering access to health, childhood support and employment placement services amongst others.

This reactivity and solidarity have only been possible in that extent because there has been political will at European level, an absolute commitment of all stakeholders involved, and creative solutions coupled with adequate tools and means. Approaching the current changes at the same – European – level and with the same mindset is probably at the same a key to success. As social security institutions, we are committed to play our part and ready to be engaged at all stages of policymaking, from design to evaluation.

I am confident that this forum will be an excellent opportunity to discuss these challenges, our role as social security institutions in times of permacrisis and our vision of an ambitious, meaningful European framework on this matter. It will help us, together with our partners, to build upon the ideas and proposals we put forward in the ESIP Memorandum published before this summer.

Not everything is in our hands though, and I am therefore delighted to see many representatives from the European (and international!) institutions in the room. The messages you will hear today could be an integral part of an ambitious, consistent social agenda for the next term. You can count on ESIP and its members to be partners in the realization this ambition. We believe that it is crucial to make the most of our expertise to ensure that political vision translates into concrete outcomes for European citizens.

I thank you and wish us all fruitful discussions.

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