

'Solidarity at a time of Crisis'

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(Check Against Delivery)

Minister Yannis Vrotsis, on behalf of Social Platform, the European network of 47 social NGO's - thank you very much for joining us here today and for sharing your ambitions and perspectives for the Greek Presidency.

We recognize, as do you, that the Greek presidency takes place against a backdrop of circumstances that are both challenging and unique. The people of Greece have suffered hard in the last years and the social impact of the financial and economic crisis can be felt no harder than in your country.

The measures that have been placed on your country to resolve the crisis have been in many ways crippling and hard to bare. They have called into question the notion of solidarity between member states in the EU and our common goal of well-being for all. Under your presidency of the EU we hope that you will re-introduce a true understanding of solidarity, not just as an abstract value of the EU but also as a principle that guides policies, especially in the discussions you foresee on the EMU and in the areas of migration and in the European Semester.

It is often said that the EU does not have competency over social policies but Article 3 of the treaty makes it clear that we should have an EU that is socially cohesive, so we must work together to achieve that.

This is key as we also know that there is increasing evidence of social contagion, increasing evidence of the impact of austerity on our social protection systems and our social and public services and where the current economic situation is being used as a structural excuse to reduce rights or where the social impact of the crisis gives rise to increasing xenophobia, racism, gender inequalities and discrimination. We must reverse this trend and avoid the crisis becoming a justification for the weakening and ultimate erosion of fundamental economic and social rights.

Your Presidency will also be the setting for the European Parliament elections and our understanding of solidarity, as well as our general understanding of the role of the European Union - will be challenged once again. We hope that the Greek Presidency will contribute to the need for Europe to be seen as a positive asset to the lives of people all across our continent.

Yet for many, not only here in Greece, that ideal seems a long way away. With rising poverty, exclusion, inequalities and unemployment and a miss-representation of the contribution of migration and EU mobility we face a time of distrust and disenchantment. However, under your leadership you have the opportunity to reinforce the social dimension of the EMU, to reinforce the inclusive growth pillar of Europe 2020, to reinforce the need for social investment rather than fiscal consolidation of social and health care services, to initiate policies on migration that show true solidarity both among member states but also to those who come to Europe looking for solidarity and to ensure that citizens, both young and old, know that the European Union is working for them both economically and socially. Because of the experience of Greece you are in a unique position to be able to address the real issues of poverty and exclusion in Europe. This is your opportunity to say things other Member States don't say based on your experience. Be ambitious and bold.

We cannot wait for proposed growth, action needs to be taken to address increasing poverty and exclusion now. We also need to see alternatives to austerity now – we cannot wait for incremental growth and hope that this in turn produces the results you hope for.

It is also clear to Social Platform and other civil society actors that there must be the engagement of civil society in all processes concerning poverty and exclusion. Effective partnership is a pre-requisite for quality policies and impactful policies.

In his work 'Politics' Aristotle wrote that "*The city-state is not a mere aggregate of persons but a union of them.*" A true European Union must be built on solidarity, justice and participation and as you embark on your Presidency we ask you to build your presidency in that way.
