

Speakings by Commissioner Thyssen on the 2019 European Semester Winter Package

Ladies and gentlemen,

We keep breaking the record for the number of people in employment; almost 240 million people have a job in the European Union. At the same time unemployment is now the lowest it has ever been this century, at 6.6% in December 2018.

This positive trend has improved the wellbeing of many people.

However, we still see that growth in Europe is not benefitting all citizens in the same way.

Our main task for the years ahead is to continue improving the living and working conditions in all countries, in all regions and for all citizens.

The European Pillar of Social Rights is meant to drive this agenda forward. And I am glad that in these days we see, how the principles of the Pillar are translated into concrete results, be it on Work-Life Balance, on transparent and predictable working conditions or on the European Labour Authority. We managed to achieve agreements on all these key files in the past weeks.

In our Country Reports today – you will see that our focus is on reform and choosing the right investment priorities.

Out of these investment priorities, we also identify those that could be supported by EU funds.

These should guide programming decisions for the Cohesion Funds in the 2021-2027 EU budget.

This way we will strengthen the link between the European Semester and EU funding.

The policy objectives we have in mind are clear:

- Moving to a smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation;
- a greener, low-carbon Europe;
- a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility and regional ICT connectivity;
- a more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights; and
- a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated

development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives.

On the basis of our policy assessments in the Member States, we make the link between the analysis and the investments needs.

Investing in skills must be our top priority if we are to maintain our competitiveness and social cohesion.

We see the need to shift up a gear.

Because of demographic change and technological developments reshaping the labour market.

Because of skills shortages and mismatches.

We need a skilled workforce to make a successful transition to the digitalised and carbon neutral economy.

Equipped with the right skills, people will embrace new opportunities and will less likely feel left behind.

We need to invest in people so that they can make the most out of their working lives and fully participate in society. And to sustain growth and boost convergence across Europe.

That's why the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights is access to education, training and life-long learning.

We have put this to practice through the Skills Agenda and Upskilling pathways recommendation.

And we are publishing today, two years after adopting this initiative, a stocktaking report of Member States' implementation plans. We see that some countries are putting this challenge at the top of their political agenda. And different pilot actions are being put in place, with support from the European Social Fund.

But good as these opportunities are, their scope does not match the scale of the challenge, with 61 million adults who are low qualified. Too many adults in Europe do not have basic reading, writing or digital skills across Europe. We have to offer them a second chance in education and training and the Upskilling Pathways initiative offers exactly that.

We need to raise the level of the ambition and we need to have in place sustainable and adequate financing mechanisms, matching the size of this challenge.

For effective reforms, we must do this with the full involvement of social partners. Thank you.