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THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL POLICY IN EUROPE

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Research Article

Abstract

Social policy in the European Union (EU) remains sidelined in the debates on the future of Europe. In the last decade, EU has faced numerous crises having significant repercussions for its social policies, including immigration waves, the Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. As an area of direct concern to EU citizens, with its features on employment, education/training, non-discrimination and equality bearing crucial implications for their daily lives, social policy should be re-considered from an angle that encompasses the citizens' perspective and effectively addresses the major challenges it faces in the new global order. The main objective of this study is to explore the implications of these challenges for EU social policy, which in turn, has a key role in shaping the future of the EU.

Keywords: *Social Policy, Citizens, Immigration, Covid-19, Brexit.*

Avrupa'da Sosyal Politika'nın Geleceği

Öz

Avrupa Birliği (AB) sosyal politikası, Avrupa'nın geleceği ile ilgili tartışmalarda hak ettiği ilgiyi göremeyen ve gölgede kalan bir konudur. Geçtiğimiz on yılda AB, göç dalgaları, Brexit ve Covid-19 pandemisi gibi sosyal politikalarını önemli ölçüde etkileyen çok sayıda krizle karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Bu bağlamda, istihdam, eğitim, ayrımcılıkla mücadele ve eşitlik ile ilgili unsurları AB vatandaşlarının günlük yaşamlarını doğrudan etkileyen AB sosyal politikası, vatandaşların perspektiflerini de içerecek ve yeni küresel düzende Birliğin karşılaştığı başlıca engel ve zorluklara cevap verecek şekilde farklı bir açıdan ve yeniden ele alınmalıdır. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, sosyal politikanın AB'nin geleceğini şekillendirmekte kilit bir rol oynadığı anlayışından hareketle, son dönemdeki krizlerin AB sosyal politikasına etkilerini incelemek ve AB'nin geleceği ile ilgili tartışmalara sosyal politika tartışmaları açısından katkıda bulunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sosyal Politika, Vatandaşlar, Göç, Covid-19, Brexit.*

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Introduction

Social policy in the European Union (EU) is a peculiar topic that attracts less attention than it deserves, and that remains sidelined in many debates concerning European integration, Europeanization and the future of Europe. Its significance lies primarily in its direct relevance for the lives of EU citizens, in terms of its power to shape their employment, education and training opportunities, as well as its more general impact on their welfare and wellbeing. Compared to many other policy areas governed by the EU, social policy comes to the fore as an important area of contestation between the EU and member states, as it is primarily a national domain,[1] implemented by national actors, through national institutions and national funding. While EU action on social policy has been inevitable throughout the integration process, it has always been met by hesitation and reluctance by member states, some more than others, which has considerably limited the EU's room for maneuver on the issue. More importantly, however, is the fact that social policy is a major test case of the so-called 'democratic deficit' of the EU, meaning, among other things, that the Union has difficulties to convince the citizens across the member states that what it does is for their good, and have direct implications for their daily lives. In simple terms, citizens cannot understand the EU, and thus do not identify with it, seeing it rather as a distant business done by technocrats and bureaucrats, adopting policies that do not require their support.[2] The importance of this debate for social policy is that the democratic deficit is found by several scholars to emanate mainly from the failure to develop a European welfare state, or to give the EU a stronger role in the redistribution of income, since this would increase the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of its citizens just as it provided an essential source of democratic legitimacy for the nation state in the course of the integration of national markets, through social security, education health and welfare services, acting as symbols of national solidarity.[3]

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[1] James S. Mosher and David M. Trubek, "Alternative approaches to governance in the EU: EU social policy and European Employment Strategy," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41, no 1 (2003): 63-88.

[2] Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU? A response to Majone and Moravcsik," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no 3 (2006): 533-562.

[3] See Giandomenico Majone, "Europe's 'democratic deficit': The question of Standards," *European Law Journal* 4, no 1 (1998): 5-28.

A last but not least significance of social policy for the future of the EU, which is taken as the key starting point for this study, stems from the fact that the Union, along with the rest of the world, has encountered numerous crises which have tremendous implications for the social dimension of the European integration project. This is because the latter has increasingly been suffering from a divide that it has itself created, namely, that between the 'winners' and 'losers' of European integration,[4] i.e., those who are well-educated, young and highly-skilled, able to travel and come into frequent contact with other Europeans, versus those who tend to be less educated, less skilled and older populations, who live in their close communities. It is this divide that shows the tremendous importance of social policies for determining the future direction of the EU, as well as their potential to distinguish the Union at the world stage by offering its citizens a higher quality of life and welfare compared to other regional integration projects.

Despite its strong implications for the future of the EU, social policy is a field relatively sidelined by the predominant emphasis on the economic, legal and political aspects of the European project. Social policy has been constantly changing and evolving since the inception of the EU, gaining numerous dimensions and diverse meanings. Perceived as the "natural outcome" of economic integration, thus not requiring any specific interventions, in the Rome Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, social policy in the EU in the 21st century is a continuously expanding body encompassing a remarkable legal framework on employment, labour conditions, gender equality and non-discrimination, as well as comprehensive cooperation and coordination processes in matters of poverty, health, social protection and social inclusion, to name a few. In this process, a widespread network consisting of, along with the EU institutions like the European Commission and Court of Justice of the European Communities, member states' relevant bodies, as well as local, national and supra-national policy-makers, bureaucrats, activists and academics have played a significant role.[5]

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[4] Neil Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*. Oxford: OUP, 2008: 2.

[5] Ayşe İdil Aybars, "Sosyal Politika," in *Avrupa Birliği: Tarihçe, Teoriler, Kurumlar ve Politikalar*, 4th Edition, Editors Belgin Akçay and İlke Göçmen, 549-572. Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık, 2023.

The EU has been involved in many innovative efforts in social policy, having tremendous implications for its member states and beyond. It has actively pursued various social policy agendas since its inception, distinguishing it as a unique body at the global stage, and bringing to the fore its emphasis on 'human wellbeing' and 'welfare.' On the other hand, social policy in the EU, or the so-called 'EU social policy' has seldom put its mark in major academic and policy debates surrounding European integration, Europeanization, as well as the future of the Union, and many scholars have characterized it as 'weak,' 'inconsistent,' and 'fragmented,' no more than a 'facilitator' of the economic integration process.[6] While this has been linked to the general reluctance of the member states to pursue further integration in this area, due to the 'sensitive' nature of social policy, to be 'jealously guarded' by the member states,[7] this lack of emphasis is still surprising as social policy is a field with direct repercussions on the future of Europe, having tremendous importance for the citizens and the way they perceive the Union, as a number of recent examples clearly demonstrate. Indeed, several authors have emphasized that a more active role for the EU in social policy and the establishment of EU-wide social standards, meaning a social union, would be crucial to rescue the European project.[8]

This study focuses on three such recent examples, or more accurately, crises, that have significant potential to affect the future direction of EU social policies, namely the immigration waves sparked by the so-called 'refugee crisis', the Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. The main reason for the selection of these three main challenges as the focus is that they bear direct implications for the socio-economic conditions, wellbeing and perceptions of the citizens, who are the major subject of social policies, who have major power – that is usually undermined – to shape the future of the EU, but who are mainly sidelined in the European studies literature. The

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[6] See Paul Pierson, "Fragmented Welfare States: Federal Institutions and the Development of Social Policy," *Governance* 8, no 4 (1995): 449-478; Wolfgang Streeck, "Neo-Voluntarism: A New European Social Policy Regime?" European Law Journal 1, no 1 (1995): 31-59; Robert R. Geyer, *Exploring European Social Policy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

[7] Maurizio Ferrera et al., "Open Coordination against Poverty: the new EU 'social inclusion' process," *Journal of European Social Policy,* 12, no 3 (2002): 227-239.

[8] See Jürgen Gerhards et al, "Do European citizens support the idea of a European welfare state? Evidence from a comparative survey conducted in three EU member states," *International Sociology* 31, no 6 (2016): 677-700.

latter tends to be overly preoccupied with macro-level legal, political and economic discussions, leaving less, if any, room for the perspectives of the citizens, which are shaped by the opportunities (not) provided by the European integration in the areas of employment, health, social cohesion and equality. In other words, all the three crises seem to have sparked by the tensions, in the social realm, emanating from the difficulty for the 'losers' of European integration, i.e., those who have not reaped the benefits of the integration project, to identify with the EU and to grasp its meaning in their daily lives. It is here that the EU has a crucial role to play, particularly by strengthening its social policies and underlining the importance of the citizens in the European project.

This paper first outlines the main turning points of the development of EU social policy, so as to reveal its main strengths and weaknesses in terms of appealing to, and responding to the needs of, EU citizens. It then turns to the importance of the citizens perspective in the social policy realm, which has been largely neglected in the course of the evolution of EU social policy. Building on this background, the paper focuses on three recent crises putting considerable strains on EU social policy and directly affecting citizens across member states, with a view to exploring their particular repercussions for the future of the EU, namely, the refugee crisis, the Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. It examines the implications of these crises for the citizens' perceived gains and losses from European integration, with a view to underlining their significance for the future of the European project.

I. EU Social Policy: A Historical Overview

When today's European Union (EU) was established as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 by six member states,[9] its main aim was to ensure economic integration amongst the founding members and to establish a common market with a view to preventing any future wars and promoting peace in the continent. The EEC Treaty, which was built on this understanding, did not include clear and concise social policy goals. By the 1970s, however, the need for a more proactive stance on social policies started to be increasingly pronounced, along with the understanding that free and unregulated competition of market forces was unacceptable and, indeed, contrary to long-term interests of the member states. In the years that followed, this understanding has paved the way for the idea that the social

[9] Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg

dimension is an integral part of the European integration and a complementary element of economic policies.[10]

Still, the economic emphasis in the foundation of the EEC has continued until today, albeit acquiring different dimensions and meanings over the course of almost 70 years. Several scholars underline that, while the economic and monetary policies of the Union are well-established and have a sound basis, its social policies lag remarkably behind and fall short of the qualities and standards of most of the established welfare states, which are the constituent members of the Union of today.[11] Accordingly, EU social policy provisions today are heavily focused on economic growth and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, mostly confined to measures in the field of employment and labour market. On the other hand, in fields such as gender equality, non-discrimination and health and safety at work, a comprehensive binding legal framework has been built over the years through the 'Community method of integration,' which has led to significant improvements in the legislations of the member states. Furthermore, particularly since the turn of the century, 'sensitive' issues where member states wish to retain their sovereignty, including education and training, health care, social protection and social inclusion, have also been incorporated in the EU framework through the Open Method of Coordination (see below).[12] It would be useful to briefly look at the evolution of social policy understanding of today's EU so as to assess the current approach and the implications for the future of the EU debate.

From its inception in the 1950s up until 1970s, the EEC pursued a 'market logic' in its approach to social policy, where, as indicated above, the latter did not obtain a central status.[13] The EEC Treaty signed in 1957 was built on the understanding that economic integration would automatically lead to social progress. Accordingly, if companies in the founding member states could freely compete under equal conditions, resources could be

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[10] Linda Hantrais, Social Policy in the European Union. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[11] Bruno Palier and Philippe Pochet, "Toward a European Social Policy – At Last?" in Editors Nicolas Jabko and Craig Parsons, *The State of the European Union: With US or Against US? European Trends in American Perspective*. Oxford: OUP, 2005: 253–273.

[12] Aybars, 2023.

[13] Mark Kleinman, *A European Welfare State? European Union Social Policy in Context.* Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002.

efficiently redistributed and economic growth could continue without interruption, which would automatically lead to the harmonization of the social systems of the member states towards higher standards.[14] In this sense, the founding Treaty left social policy to national welfare states,[15] with the exception of two major areas, namely, equal pay for women and men,[16] and the implications of the freedom of movement principle.[17] The EEC Treaty, therefore, reflected a preoccupation with the prevention of factors that distort competition, which would render specific interventions on redistribution unnecessary. Redistributive elements were seen as the primary responsibility of the member states, and provisions on equal pay for equal work, increasing living standards and social cohesion were made as long as they supported the overall objective of economic integration. The social policy that was the outcome of this process was, thus, market-oriented, unambitious and narrowly framed.

This market logic persisted at least until the mid-1970s, when conditions of economic recession and the first enlargement of the EEC towards the UK, Ireland and Denmark triggered a growing emphasis on the importance of the social dimension and the need to adopt a more progressive stance in this respect. The 1970s saw the adoption of numerous Directives on equality between women and men, health and safety at work and various fields of labour law, which entailed binding legal obligations for all member states through the so-called "Community method of integration." It is important to note that Directives have, at least up until the turn of the

[14] Only 12 out of the 248 Articles of the EEC Treaty contained provisions on social policies (Articles 117-128), and even those were conceived with a preoccupation to prevent all elements to distort competition. See Hantrais, 2007.

[15] Palier and Pochet, 2005: 255.

[16] During the negotiations preceding the adoption of the Treaty, the French government insisted for the inclusion of a clause on equal pay for women and men, as France already had such a clause in its constitution, and this would place the country in an economically disadvantaged position. The consensus reached with other founding governments led to the incorporation of a vague social policy title in the Treaty, with no foreseen mechanisms and commitments to reach the objectives.

[17] Articles 48-51 and 52-58 contained measures to facilitate the free movement of persons, services and capital throughout the Community, as a key rationale behind the European project, which put its mark on social policies that remained limited to provisions that supported free movement of labour at least until late 1960s. See Palier and Pochet, 2005.

century, been the most favoured legal instruments deployed by the Community in the area of social policy. Identifying clear goals and targets for legislation, which have usually been defined as minimum standards so as to facilitate agreement among member states, but leaving the most effective form and method of implementation to member states, Directives have been widely used in various fields of social policy, particularly equal employment opportunities for women and men and working conditions, creating an effective legal framework for the protection of work-related rights at the EU level.

By the mid-1980s, the 'social dimension' started to be increasingly pronounced within the Community, due to increasing pressure for a regulatory social policy. The idea of a 'social space' (*espace social*) initiated by the Commission President of the time, Jacques Delors, placed employment at the heart of Community social policy, paving the way for an increasing dialogue between the social partners, as well as an emphasis on cooperation and consultation processes on matters pertaining to social security. Social policy in this second period gained ground as a field to be developed on an equal footing with economic, monetary and industrial policies, and increasingly started to be seen as the pre-condition of economic integration.

The Single European Act (SEA), adopted in 1986 by the then 12 member states and representing the first major revision of the Treaty, incorporated important initiatives to facilitate and speed up social policy-making processes. By expanding the area of application of qualified majority to several areas of social policy, it provided a significant opportunity to overcome the deadlocks in social policy due to the reluctance of some member states to proceed in this field. The Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, seen by many as the social aspect of the SEA, was accepted by all member states except the UK in 1989. While the Charter made reference to 'citizens' rather than 'workers' in its early versions, the resistance by member states' governments led the document to focus on workers in its final form, and to remain as a non-binding official declaration in the end.[18] The Charter is a significant building block of the Union's approach to social policy, which illustrates its preoccupation with workers rather than citizens, and also demonstrates the limitations imposed by the conflicting interests of the member states, shaping the future progress of the field.

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[18] Hantrais, 2007.

The unfavourable economic and political context of the time (particularly enhanced by the Thatcher and Reagan governments) rendered the achievement of the objective of the harmonization of social policies increasingly difficult. This paved the way, towards the end of the 1980s, for a Community strategy to identify lowest-common-denominator solutions, i.e., minimum standards to be acceptable across all member states.[19] With the accession of Greece in 1981, and Spain and Portugal in 1986, social policies reached once again the point of stagnation. The 1980s, therefore, mostly witnessed fierce debates on the prevention of 'social dumping' in some member states to create advantages for competition by lowering social protection standards, as well as the need to achieve common rules and standards for all member states so as to enhance a healthy competitive environment. Also in this period, member states' concern with losing their sovereignty in the field of social policies started to be increasingly pronounced.

Social policies entered the 1990s in this climate, where social policy started to be increasingly conceptualized as 'employment-anchored.'[20] The EU Treaty signed in Maastricht in 1992 represented a significant turning point for EU social policy, mainly due to the Agreement on Social Policy annexed to it, while the fact that it was not incorporated into the Treaty but annexed as a separate protocol (due to the UK's insistence) was an important sign about the difficulty to reach consensus among member states in the social field. The Agreement, removing all references to the harmonization of social systems in the EEC Treaty, set specific objectives on the development of employment, better living and working conditions, social protection, social dialogue and human resources, with a view to supporting high and sustainable employment and struggle against social exclusion. It is particularly significant that all these targets were to be attained by measures taking account of the diversity of national practices. Thus, instead of 'harmonization', 'diversity' started to be emphasized in social policies by the 1990s, enhanced by the 'subsidiarity' provision of the Maastricht Treaty.[21]

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[19] Palier and Pochet, 2005.

[20] Julia S. O'Connor, "Employment-anchored social policy, gender equality and the open method of policy coordination in the European union," *European Societies* 7, no 1 (2005): 27-52.

[21] According to the subsidiarity principle, the Union can only intervene (through binding legislation) in cases where the objectives of the stated action cannot be effectively reached by the member states.

The adoption of this principle has, in the field of social policy, considerably limited the EU's room for maneuver in terms of adopting legally binding measures, except for a limited number of issues. The subsidiarity principle was in fact an important sign of the ongoing reluctance of member states to the formation of a supra-national social policy that would threaten their own national sovereignty.

Still, in the following years the rationale of social policy considerably moved from 'an obstacle to economic integration' to 'a productive force facilitating change and progress' through the numerous initiatives of the European Commission.[22] The emphasis on the social dimension concerned its importance for the EU-level response on common social challenges such as the Economic and Monetary Union, demographic change and ageing society, and the enlargement process. Social policy's effective role in the new millennium in ensuring, for all, access to employment, better working conditions and equal opportunities, and a quality of life for a participatory and healthy society, started to be increasingly pronounced. The Amsterdam Treaty signed in 1997 incorporated the Agreement on Social Policy into the main body of the Treaty, with the UK's withdrawal of its opt-out, as Title XI on Social Policy, Education, Vocational Training and Youth. Parallel to the concern caused by increasing unemployment at the EU level, 'high level of employment and social protection' was put in the second place in Article 2 stating the Union's priorities. The new Article 13 expanded the grounds of measures to combat discrimination to include sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age, or sexual orientation.

Perhaps more importantly, the Treaty incorporated a newly added Title VIII on Employment (Articles 125-130), stipulating the responsibilities of the Union and the member states and underlining the importance of cooperation and coordination processes in matters of employment. While limiting the role of the Union to 'supporting and complementing' member state action in these processes, this Title also entailed the Council and the Commission the duty to monitor, establish guiding principles and examine measures developed by the member states, thereby giving the first signals of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to be shortly introduced in the field of employment and social policy.

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[22] For a discussion on the developments of this period, including the Green and White Papers on social policy and the action programmes, see Aybars, 2023.

Adopted in 2000, the Nice Treaty brought new decision-making procedures, which had important implications for social policies. The Treaty proposed a re-weighing of the votes in order to ensure that smaller member states' impact would be proportionate to their population, and expanded qualified majority to anti-discrimination measures, mobility and economic and social cohesion. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, finalized in the Nice Summit of 2000, expanded the boundaries of social policy from workplace to issues of work-life balance, protection and care of children and the elderly, social assistance, housing and preventive health care services. The objective of the Charter was to underline the Union's commitment to the values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity, and its respect for the diversity of cultures and traditions. Nevertheless, like the Social Charter, it did not obtain a binding status and remained as an official declaration until it was put in force by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009.

While it raised significant expectations as to the expansion of social policy at the EU level, the Lisbon Treaty remained limited in terms of the expansion of areas subject to qualified majority voting desek mi? demeden de anlaşılır mı? and the increase of EU powers on social policy.[23] The Treaty clearly stipulated that the Union can only act within the framework of the competences defined for it by the member states, and social policy is an area of 'shared competence' as set out in its Article 4. Accordingly, member states are free to issue their own regulations as long as the EU does not legislate. On the other hand, employment policies are specified as an area of 'coordination', whereby the Union can support and complement member state action on issues such as the amelioration of working environment so as to protect the health and safety, working conditions, consultation and information of workers, integration of individuals who remain outside of the labour market, equal labour market opportunities for women and men, and combat against social exclusion. The European Council, on the other hand, can issue directives, through unanimity, containing minimum standards on areas such as the social security and protection of employees, protection of employees whose labour contract is terminated, representation and collective protection of the interests of employees and employers, and working conditions of third country nationals. Lisbon Treaty also stipulates that OMC can be used in social policies, enhancing cooperation amongst member states through initiatives aiming to promote the exchange of knowledge, encourage

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[23] Isabelle Schömann, "The Lisbon Treaty: A More Social Europe At Last?" *ETUI Policy Brief, European Social Policy*, No: 1/2010, 2010.

innovative approaches and evaluate experiences. The Lisbon Treaty, which constitutes the EU's legal framework today, clearly identified the boundaries of the Union's role in social policy and underlined, in many social policy areas, its 'coordination' and 'cooperation' role.

This is in tandem with the new governance method for employment and social policies, officially introduced by the Lisbon Summit of 2000, establishing a 'soft' alternative to the Community method. As the latter's limitations were increasingly being felt in terms of securing agreement in a Union of 15 member states, preparing for the largest round of enlargement in history towards the Central and Eastern European Countries in the 2000s, and as the rising levels of unemployment and economic volatility across member states signaled the need for a new Union-wide approach, the European Employment Strategy (EES) was launched in Luxembourg in 1997.[24] This was followed by the Lisbon Summit of 2000, introducing the new method to be used in the EU employment and social policies of the new millennium as the 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC), seeing it as the main tool to reach the strategic targets set by the EU to "become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion"[25] by the year 2010.

The OMC, at least in its early phase, was commonly seen as a 'carefully coordinated process,' identifying indicators in nationally-sensitive issues, setting national and EU-wide targets, enhancing periodical reporting and allowing for multi-lateral monitoring of social and employment issues,[26] aiming to disseminate good practices and to entail a learning process for all actors involved. The innovative dimension of the method has been found in its non-binding, 'soft' character, recognizing the diversity of the social systems of the member states, thus allowing them to develop their tailor-made solutions and learn from others, without facing formal sanctions. Rather than establishing a single binding framework, the method aims to provide a platform where member states can work, at their own pace and in

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[24] Caroline De La Porte, "Is the Open Method of Coordination Appropriate for Organising Activities at European Level in Sensitive Policy Areas?" *European Law Journal* 8 no. 1 (2002): 38–58.

[25] Lisbon European Council, 23-24 March 2000, Presidency Conclusions. Available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

[26] De La Porte, 2002: 38.

line with their own national realities, to attain the common objectives, taking into account the diversity of values and regulations. While the first and most comprehensive application of the OMC to date has been the EES, by the 2000s, the method started to be used in a variety of social policy areas, where member states have traditionally been reluctant to transfer their sovereignty to the Union, including poverty and social exclusion, pensions, education and social protection.[27]

While the OMC has constituted the principal method of organization of EU social policy in the new millennium,[28] it has not completely replaced the Community method, whereby the Union continues to spread minimum standards in social policy across member states through binding measures. Since the turn of the millennium, new directives have been adopted, or existing ones have been re-cast, in areas such as gender equality, working conditions and non-discrimination. Still, it would not be wrong to argue that the main principles of 'harmonization' and 'subsidiarity,' which marked the social policy of the Union for a long time, have been replaced by 'coordination' and 'cooperation' in recent years, where the binding legal framework has given its place to 'soft' governance tools and quantified objectives, and the limited but crucial social rights that have been the subject of EU social policy for a long time have been left behind in favour of 'widening' action areas, but not allowing a simultaneous 'deepening' of social policy concerns.

What this overview reveals is that, while the social policy provisions of the Union have evolved and broadened in scope over time, the economic rationale in the establishment of the EEC has continued up to today, which has put its mark on social policies as targeting workers, rather than citizens. Indeed, citizens have been mostly absent from the debates surrounding the subsequent motives to enlarge social policy. Social policy measures have, moreover, primarily been adopted so as to remove elements that distort economic competition amongst the member states, rather than being pursued to evoke a positive integration process and targeting the removal of welfare state barriers across the national governments. Finally, the expansion of social policy at the EU level has been constantly curtailed by the member states, which displayed a strong inclination to guard their national provisions

[27] For a discussion on the evolution of the OMC since 2000 onwards, see Aybars, 2023.

[28] Palier and Pochet, 2005: 268.

in an era increasingly marked by social and economic tensions. What this has amounted to is a careful, sometimes reluctant, and fragmented approach to social policies, which has not integrated citizens as its main constituent elements. The social policy scene at the EU-level, moreover, continues to shrink in the face of numerous crises, including economic recession, financial crises, demographic change, non-stop immigration waves, Brexit, as well as the latest health crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, which have important repercussions for the ways the citizens perceive the Union, and to which we now turn.

II. Citizens and EU Social Policy

As evidenced above, today's EU was established in 1957 primarily as an economic integration project in a continent devastated by two world wars, with the thought that the interdependency of the member states' economies would prevent them, in the future, to wage war against each other, and with the aim to promote peace and prosperity across the continent. While the economic and political dimensions of the European integration project have been widely debated in the European studies literature and beyond, its social aspect remains much less discussed in all accounts. Several authors have argued for a re-consideration of the citizens role in the European integration process, claiming that they are the missing part of the puzzle bearing the direct consequences of the integration, and that they need to be specifically targeted in any attempt to discuss the future of the Union as they increasingly feel alienated from the bureaucratic and technocratic character of the European integration, taking place somewhere far away called Brussels.

Ernst Haas wrote, as early as 1958, that the European project was to succeed if it could move from being a concern of governments to that of citizens: "the task of a federation must be intimately related to the crucial social relations and issues of its people, e.g., defense, economic policy, foreign affairs or social welfare."[29] Fligstein, half a century later, observes that, despite the successes of economic and political integration, most Europeans are unaware of what is going on in Brussels, or even "how connected Europeans have become." [30] While this points to the famous

[29] Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Economic and Social Forces 1950-1957*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958: 35.

[30] Fligstein, 2008.

'democratic deficit' problem whereby the citizens do not relate the high-level politics of Brussels to their daily lives, it has crucial implications for social policies. Fligstein goes on to argue that the European integration has created its own winners and losers, i.e., those who are able to benefit from the opportunities provided by economic and political integration as opposed to those who suffer from its consequences, and points to a clash between the two, which has tremendous potential to affect the future direction of the EU. The winners, accordingly, are overwhelmingly from the middle and upper-middle classes, well-educated, young and highly-skilled, usually holding high-level jobs, able to travel and come into frequent contact with other Europeans. The losers, on the other hand, tend to be less educated, less skilled and older populations, who live in their close communities and who therefore have much less chances of interaction. In between are those who are located in the middle range of education and skills distributions, who show a more positive outlook to European integration as it has offered new opportunities to work and go to school in other countries, but who tend to count on their governments to protect them from the negative effects of too much market competition. It is this divide that has the potential to put the citizens in individual countries against each other and push their national governments in different directions,[31] as several examples have recently demonstrated. It is now to these examples that we turn, namely, the immigration waves sparked by the so-called 'refugee crisis', the Brexit, and Covid-19 pandemic, which illustrate how this major divide is influential in triggering a negative response to the EU from the citizens, and how the EU could respond, not least by strengthening and renewing its commitment to social policies.

III. The 'Refugee Crisis'

It is generally argued that few issues have divided Europe as much as the inflow of immigrants in recent years.[32] The so-called 'Syrian refugee crisis' halted in 2015, when refugees escaping from the war in Syria moved in unprecedented numbers to Europe in request of asylum. In 2015 and 2016, 1.3 million people have filed application for asylum in the EU, the overwhelming majority of whom were Syrians. While the numbers of

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[31] Fligstein, 2008.

[32] Christian S. Czymara, "Attitudes toward Refugees in Contemporary Europe: A Longitudinal Perspective on Cross-National Differences," *Social Forces* 99 no. 3 (2021): 1306–1333.

asylum applications were almost halved after the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, dealing with refugee resettlement at the borders of Europe, the social, economic and political consequences for EU countries are widely debated[33] and have significant social policy implications. This point becomes clearer through a closer look at the limited number of studies on the perceptions and attitudes of EU citizens towards immigrants.

Although not conducted within the particular context posed by the latest Syrian refugee crisis, studies on attitudes and perceptions towards immigrants underline the close association between positive and tolerant attitudes with high income and economic security, high socio-economic status, high educational attainment, high skill levels, and youth.[34] These findings are resonated in studies on the refugee influx after 2015, which also underline that economic prosperity, high occupational status, high income,[35] and high education[36] translate into more supportive attitudes and perceptions of citizens of EU member states towards these groups. The inverse trend can be observed for those with insufficient income, facing disadvantages,[37] with precarious economic backgrounds,[38] and less education.[39] While other explanations have also been provided, the main argument is that negative attitudes primarily emanate from feelings of social and economic insecurity, leading to the perception of immigrants as 'economic competitors,'[40] and

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[33] Czymara, 2021: 1307.

[34] For a detailed discussion of previous studies, see Mindaugas Butkus et al., "Socio-Demographic Factors Influencing Attitude towards Refugees: An Analysis of Data from European Social Survey," *Globalization and its socio-economic consequences: 16th International Scientific Conference*, 5th–6th October 2016. Zilina: University of Zilina, 2016.

[35] Lamis Abdelaaty and Liza G. Steele, "Explaining Attitudes Toward Refugees and Immigrants in Europe," *Political Studies* 70 no. 1 (2022): 110–130.

[36] Katja Albada et al., "Polarization in attitudes towards refugees and migrants in the Netherlands," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51 (2021): 627– 643.

[37] Butkus et al., 2016.

[38] Sebastian Koos and Verena Seibel, "Solidarity with refugees across Europe. A comparative analysis of public support for helping forced migrants," *European Societies* 21, no. 5 (2019): 704-728.

[39] Albada et al., 2021.

[40] Abdelaaty and Steele, 2022.

thus as a threat to individual or collective economic wellbeing,[41] availability of employment and education/training possibilities.

A further point can be made about the interlinkage between strong social policies and host community perceptions of refugees. It has been argued, for instance, that inclusive policies which contribute to refugee wellbeing in areas such as health, education and employment are associated with more positive attitudes towards immigrants.[42] It should be underlined that the views towards refugees highly differ across EU member states, along with the integration efforts of national governments and the level of social benefits provided to migrants, as well as national political institutions,[43] such as the welfare state.[44] What is more important, however, is that the refugee influx has caused a solidarity crisis in the EU, in some cases leading to the erosion of social cohesion,[45] and polarization,[46] which is also driven by a distrust in the more general EU politics and institutions.[47] The fact that there is no agreement on policy paths to follow and the very limited EU capacity to address the migratory pressures due to the resistance of member state governments[48] points to an increasing politicization, whereby the broadening of EU integration towards core state powers (including those that directly touch upon the welfare state) creates political conflicts, both domestically and at the EU level.[49] It has been argued that the refugee crisis has raised significant questions on the role of the EU as a promoter of human rights in the world, and even led to the questioning of the

41 Czymara, 2021.

42 Elizabeth Ferris, ″Making Sense of Public Policy on Refugee Integration,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 690, no.1, (2020): 200-224

43 Czymara, 2021.

44 Koos and Seibel, 2019.

45 Conrad Ziller and Sara Wallace Goodman, “Local Government Efficiency and Anti-Immigrant Violence,” *Journal of Politics* 82 no.3 (2020): 895-907.

46 Albada et al., 2021.

47 Czymara, 2021: 1327.

48 Felix Biermann (et al), “Political (non-)reform in the euro crisis and the refugee crisis: a liberal intergovernmentalist explanation,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no.2 (2019): 246–266.

49 Jonathan Zeitlin (et al), “Introduction: the European Union beyond the polycrisis? Integration and politicization in an age of shifting cleavages,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no.7 (2019): 963–976.

EU integration project itself, due to the lack of a concerted approach to deal with the crisis.[50]

The issue of national-level differences and erosion of EU-wide solidarity has certainly implications for the debates on European integration and the future of the EU. Indeed, it has been argued that the politicization over the issue, opening up space for mobilizing national publics against the EU and its institutions, has the potential to lead to the disintegration of the EU itself.[51] On the other hand, the fact that stronger support exists for refugees in countries with a comprehensive welfare state, and by individuals with higher socio-economic conditions,[52] points to the importance of an EU-wide re-consideration of social policies so as to make them more inclusive and expansive.

IV. The 'Brexit'

The historical decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU as a result of the referendum held on 23 June 2016, with a no vote of 51,9%, which resulted in 2020 in the first-ever exit of a member state in its more than half-a-century history, constituted another crisis for the Union with important social implications. The so-called Brexit sparked a heated debate about 'why' people voted for Brexit, mostly pointing to public concerns over immigration,[53] which is closely related to the point discussed above. Accordingly, anxiety over immigration in the UK public can be traced back to the 2004 EU enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe,[54] which raised concerns about economic and cultural implications of this process. By the time of the referendum, these concerns had reached new heights with the refugee crisis started in 2015, leading UK citizens to rank immigration as the most important issue of the country, and immigration to become the most salient issue of the public debate throughout the referendum, driven by the populist right and anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP).[55]

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[50] Arne Niemann and Natascha Zaun, "EU Refugee Policies and Politics in Times of Crisis: Theoreticaland Empirical Perspectives," *JCMS* 56, no. 1 (2018): 3-22.

[51] Zeitlin et al, 2019: 965.

[52] Koos and Seibel, 2019.

[53] Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo, "Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 450–464.

[54] James Dennison and Andrew Geddes, "Brexit and the perils of 'Europeanised' migration," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 8 (2018): 1137-1153.

[55] Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017: 451.

There is almost consensus that Brexit is the outcome of the track record of Euroscepticism of Britons, culminated in the post-2004 era with the increasing public concern on the EU's free movement principle.[56] More important for the purposes of this paper, several studies have since shown that the 'Leave' vote was significantly higher in 'left behind' areas, which have long suffered from industrial decline and cuts in public services,[57] with higher number of pensioners, low-skilled workers and less-well educated citizens.[58] Class was found to be among the major factors, whereby those holding professional occupations and higher educational qualifications supported 'Remain,' as opposed to those in manual and routine white-collar occupations and those with low levels of education.[59] It has been underlined that, while the EU should certainly not to be blamed because of the conditions of increasing poverty and alienation suffered by the working class in those areas,[60] and it had indeed provided significant funding to these deprived regions, "'Europe' was successfully presented as a scapegoat for the anger of the losers from social and economic transformation, whose disaffection has often been captured by racists and demagogues."[61]

Furthermore, the 'Leave' vote was concentrated amongst those who perceive the immigrants to be a burden on the welfare state and to be bad for the national economy.[62] It has been argued that lower-skilled workers constituted a group worthy of attention, as they tend to believe that "immigration – particularly of other low skilled workers – was likely to have a range of negative economic consequences on jobs for British citizens, on government accounts, social spending and on the national and local economy

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[56] Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1148.

[57] Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman, "What about the workers? The implications of Brexit for British and European labour," *Competition & Change* 21, no. 3 (2017): 169-184.

[58] Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, "The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: An aggregate-level analysis of the result," *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2016): 323–332.

[59] Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017.

[60] It is important to note that the Brexit vote was equally driven by populist concerns about the national welfare system itself, mostly in response to continuous austerity-informed reforms of the welfare state since at least 2010 onwards. For details, see Thiemo Fetzer, "Austerity Caused Brexit," *The CAGE Background Briefing Series*, No. 96, 2019.

[61] Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017: 172.

[62] Goodwin and Milazzo 2017: 458.

more generally."[63] This was partly triggered by the persuasion of the 'Leave' campaign led by UKIP that immigration was putting significant pressure on public services, which led voters to perceive it as a real threat to the economy, culture and the welfare state. Another important element was the age division, where almost three-quarters of those 25 and under supported 'Remain,' as opposed to overwhelming majority of those over 65, who voted for 'Leave.'[64]

What all these point to, once again, is the so-called 'losers' of European integration, whose economic marginalization shaped by lack of educational qualification, low incomes and bleak economic prospects led to their 'Leave' vote, along with their anti-immigration attitudes.[65] More importantly, this picture suggests the crucial need for a renewal of commitment on the part of the EU to social policy in order to capitalize on the past achievements of a common approach and to prevent further waves of resentment and discontent with the result of more countries wishing to leave the Union.

V. Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a further recent challenge to the EU and its member states, having crucial repercussions for the EU and national social policies. Indeed, it is argued to have posed an unprecedented challenge that tested the meaning of European integration and the EU's place in the global economic and political order.[66] It has a different character than the first two crises discussed above, as the latter have rather significant implications on the citizens' attitudes and perceptions of social policies and welfare state. The pandemic, on the other hand, has provided a test case for the future direction of the EU, impinged by stronger solidarity and cooperation in social policies and implying significant lessons for its institutional structure. A first distinguishing feature of this crisis was its 'force majeure' character, i.e., that it was "nobody's fault," as it did not emanate from any policy failure.[67] A second was its direct, rather than indirect, effects on the welfare systems of almost all countries in the world,

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[63] Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1144-1145.

[64] Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017: 171.

[65] Goodwin and Milazzo 2017: 457.

[66] Lucia Quaglia and Amy Verdun, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30, no. 4 (2023): 599-611.

[67] Quaglia and Verdun, 2023: 600.

including the EU member states. Starting as a public health emergency turning into a substantive socio-economic crisis, it had tremendous implications for the health care, education, employment and social protection systems EU-wide, involving:

> "large-scale state interventions in the economy, soaring levels of unemployment, ballooning public debts, disruptions of production and supply chains, overloads of public health systems, repeated lockdowns, disruptions of education systems, limitations of personal liberties, and worsening social inequalities."[68]

The third and most important distinguishing feature of this crisis is the capacity of the EU to act, this time, in solidarity and cooperation, bringing to the fore new ways of joint problem-solving, and having repercussions for the EU institutional structure. In the first days of the outburst of the pandemic, with the virus spreading fast implying an unprecedented health crisis, the EU appeared to be incapable, slow and ignored by member states, "as core tenets of EU integration such as open borders and the prohibition of export bans were flouted. Amidst panic, national interests dominated."[69] Accordingly, public authorities in the member states, in line with their national interests, responded quickly by introducing various restrictions and lockdowns and applying other measures such as temporary export controls. As health policy has traditionally been a national competence, this should not come as a surprise. Moreover, the 'Eurobond' crisis sparked by Italy in the early months of the pandemic signaled a new solidarity crisis at the EU level, this time around the resistance of some member states to halt the government debts via a pooling of resources amongst Eurozone countries.[70] However, the unfolding of the crisis witnessed the member states rapidly starting to work together, the EU coordinating "the repatriation of stranded citizens, … reopening the borders for medical and critical goods, initiating joint procurement processes for medical and protective equipment, deploying health personnel, and releasing new funds for urgent health care spending."[71]

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[68] Quaglia and Verdun, 2023: 600.

[69] Eleanor Brooks et al., "Covid-19 and European Union health policy: from crisis to collective action," in Bart Vanhercke et al. (Eds.) *Social policy in the European Union: state of play 2020*. Brussels: ETUI, 2021: 33

[70] Alde Party, "Italy's insistence on Eurobonds is dividing Europe," 20 April 2020. Available at: https://www.aldeparty.eu/italy_s_insistence_on_eurobonds_is_dividing_europe

[71] Brooks et al, 2021: 33.

The Commission, meanwhile, proposed a 'European Health Union' through various legislative measures to increase the role of the EU in the field of health and strengthen its emergency capacities.[72] All this point to a window of opportunity for a deeper 'health integration,'[73] which would be writ large as further integration in social policies.

On the other hand, looking deeper into the socio-economic impacts of the crisis reveals a pattern that is similar to those crises preceding the pandemic. Studies have demonstrated that the crisis resulted in inequalities across different fields, including the economic performances of the member states, employment statuses of individuals, and gender inequalities.[74] Several studies have pointed to increasing inequality and poverty levels across the EU as the negative social outcomes of Covid-19 and measures put in place to mitigate its impacts, which disproportionately hit the poor and the vulnerable, jeopardizing the 2030 target of reducing the number of the poor by 20 million.[75] The crisis hit hardest those on non-standard contracts, including temporary and part-time workers, as well as self-employed, particularly in lower-income countries, where social protection benefits were less available and less generous.[76] It has also been underlined that the majority of these workers were women and young people.[77] The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on – particularly lower-educated and lower-income – women has been a particular concern, mainly due to the increasing need for care work as a result of school closures, as well as the impact of the crisis on the 'feminised' jobs and non-standard forms of employment in the health and social care sectors.[78] The pandemic has thus underlined significant differences across countries, sectors and social groups in terms of its impacts, reflecting differences in socio-economic structures

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[72] Quaglia and Verdun, 2023.

[73] Brooks et al, 2021: 33.

[74] Bart Vanhercke et al., "Conclusions: Facing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic: domestic and EU responses," in Bart Vanhercke et al., (Eds.) *Social policy in the European Union: state of play 2020*. Brussels: ETUI, 2021

[75] Vanhercke et al., 2021: 159.

[76] Martin Myant, "The economic and social consequences of Covid-19," in Bart Vanhercke et al., (Eds.) *Social policy in the European Union: state of play 2020*. Brussels: ETUI, 2021.

[77] Vanhercke et al., 2021.

[78] Jill Rubery and Isabel Tavora, "The Covid-19 crisis and gender equality: risks and opportunities," in Bart Vanhercke et al., (Eds.) *Social policy in the European Union: state of play 2020*. Brussels: ETUI, 2021

and policy responses, "with lower-income countries generally providing less protection against negative social effects," and thus deepening the already existing divergences within the EU.[79] All this went together with a rapid decline in public trust in the EU, found to be "not well structured for rapidly responding to a crisis," with its slow decision-making and limited budget.[80]

Conclusion

What the long history of European integration in social policy, as well as the full-fledged crises that the EU has faced in social field in the last decade, demonstrate is a crucial need to reconsider social policy from a new perspective, one that capitalizes on the gains of social policy integration of the last 70 years and that reflects on its major shortcomings in terms of inclusiveness and credibility in the eyes of EU citizens. The Reflection Paper by the European Commission to project on the future of EU social policy in the aftermath of Brexit in 2017 is a noteworthy attempt in this respect, outlining the specific challenges and opportunities faced by the Union in the current context, and bringing to the fore three different scenarios for the future direction of the EU in this area.[81] Acknowledging the significance of rapid population changes, increasing diversity in society, new work patterns (which have undergone further crucial changes with the pandemic), and the need to modernize the welfare systems to meet these new social risks, the Paper underlines that jobs and social policies constitute a top priority for the citizens across the EU, expecting both the EU and their national, regional and local governments to take more action in this field.

Therefore, from the three scenarios of (i) limiting the 'social dimension' to free movement; (ii) allowing the member states that want to do more to do more in the social field; and (iii) EU-27 deepening the social dimension together, the Commission appears to opt for the third, underlining the fundamental place of social values in the European project since its inception, as well as the need to address today's major challenges (some of which have been discussed above, and certainly going beyond them in an ever-changing social environment) collectively. This means using all the instruments that the EU has at its hand, including legislation, cooperation,

[79] Myant, 2021: 67.

[80] Myant, 2021: 61.

[81] European Commission, *Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe*. COM(2017)206, 2017. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe_en

guidance and funding, in order to promote equal rights for all citizens across the member states, to make European economies more resilient to shocks, and to strengthen Europe's international standing by responding to challenges together.

Needless to say, it is crucial that the EU pursues, in all its social dimension, the objective of enhancing the identification of its citizens with, and their support to, the European project, if it aims to tackle the gap between the 'winners' and 'losers' that the latter has so far caused. The three recent crises examined above carry the risk of deepening this gap, and resulting in further inequalities, if the social dimension is not brought, once again, to the fore. Alternatively, they also demonstrate the potential of the EU to bring its project closer to the citizens and demarcate the need for collective action, from which all will benefit and to which all will contribute.

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