



Social Europe: a paradigm shift. What challenges ahead? (2014-2024)

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Outline



- 1) A revival of Social Europe under the Juncker Commission (2015-2019).
- 2) The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission I in times of crises.
- 3) What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

1) A revival of Social Europe under the Juncker Commission (2015-2019).



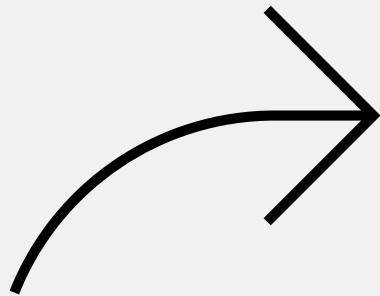
A revival of Social Europe under the Juncker Commission (2015-2019).

In a post-crisis context, dominated by Brexit discussions, Juncker's Commission - a revival and a real paradigm shift of the EU's social dimension (2014-2019) - proposes a 'triple A' Social Europe

- ✓ Set-up of a **renewed paradigm** for Social Europe - **the European Pillar of Social Rights** - the last chance to save the idea of Social Europe
 - A high-profile political reaffirmation of a broad set of social rights and principles (Garben 2019)
- ✓ The Pillar promptly empowered Commission to develop a new EU social agenda (incl. through Semester: integration of EPSR)
- ✓ Relaunched European Social Dialogue in 2015 + involvement of social partners in the European Semester
- ✓ New 'ESF+' even more aligned with the European Semester; greater earmarking of funds for measures fostering social inclusion, and needs to support the implementation of the EPSR

In most cases, long and difficult negotiations with Member States and refusal from employers to negotiate

A revival of Social Europe under the Juncker Commission (2015-2019).



- The Juncker Commission as a ‘politicising bricoleur’ (Copeland 2022)
 - ✓ ‘bricoleur’ - revisited and revised existing tools with the aim of generating change and building an integration moment in Social Europe
 - Proposing completely new policies was regarded as a high-risk strategy that would most likely fail and should wait until a political and policy momentum is established
 - Upgrading previous acquis
 - ✓ Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers (revision of the Maternity Leave Directive (1992) and Parental Leave Directive;1996) adopted in 2019)
 - ✓ Posting of Workers Directive (revision of a directive of 1996; adopted in 2018)
 - ✓ Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions (April 2016 revision of the existing Written Statement 1991 directive) adopted in 2019
 - ✓ European Labour Authority (January 2018) it was to replace and reorganize seven existing EU bodies and pool their operational resources into one permanent structure (Established in 2019)
- The only ‘original’ initiative:
- ✓ 2019 Council Recommendation on Access to Social Protection for Workers and the Self-Employed (January 2018) adopted in November 2019
 - ✓ Initial idea to have a directive – the COM could have found a legal basis but strong resistance from the employers and some MS

The role of the Juncker Commission as 'politicising bricoleur' (2015-2019)

❖ 'Politicizing' in the sense that the Commission exercised social acuity, built broad coalitions to mobilize for change and deployed a distinctive discursive strategy.

- The Juncker Commission - unique as being the first to be appointed through the 'Spitzenkandidaten Procedure' (2009 Lisbon Treaty; the largest political group in the EP nominates the COM President).
- In his opening statement to the European Parliament, 'A new start for Europe', Juncker claimed his Commission would be bold and political: 'indeed, it will be highly political'.
- Commission - need to occupy the centre ground by unifying the centre-left and centre-right.
 - ✓ Juncker and Marianne Thyssen Christian- Democrats but centre-left on employment and social policy concerns - smooth relations between both the EPP and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the Parliament, as well as the European Council.
- Shift of the debate from the language of social retrenchment developed during the Barroso Commission to more rights-based language (Vesan and Pansardi, 2021).

❖ Revival but some dark clouds in the sky: social dialogue.

✓ The case of the European Public Service Unions (EPSU) against the Commission: determining a bigger role for the Commission in the future of European social dialogue?

2) The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.



The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

- ❖ A strong social Europe for just transitions (von der Leyen 2019), an ambitious agenda
- ❖ Von der Leyen (a Christian-Democrat) and Nicolas Schmit (Commissioner for employment – social-democrat)
 - The paradigm of the Three transitions: **green, digitalisation and demographic change**
 - Continuation with the Juncker Commission and going much further on creating new rights
 - Overarching frameworks: the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- ✓ Confirming the Pillar's continued importance, the EPSR Action Plan was adopted in 2021 with the ambition of turning the EPSR principles into concrete actions and setting three targets to be achieved by 2030.
- ✓ High-level group on social protection.

The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

- Strengthening Social Europe in the context of two crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s war of aggression on Ukraine and ensuing energy crisis
- Unprecedented solidarity ultimately resulted in unprecedented EU initiatives, deemed impossible until then
- The SURE mechanism - a ‘quantum leap’ in EU social policy (Anderson and Heins 2022)
- Member States overcame two historic taboos of European integration
 - ✓ opposition to large-scale EU common debt issuance
 - ✓ staunch opposition to explicit fiscal transfers between countries

1

2

3

The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

- Pillar acquis stands out quantitatively and qualitatively compared to the legislative initiatives flowing from the Social Action Programme (1974), the Single European Act (1987) or the Maastricht Social Policy Agreement (1992).
- Notably, three key directives setting minimum standards and two in areas that were unthinkable before:
- **Directive on adequate minimum wages (2023); Principle 6**
 - ✓ Historic victory for European workers (Müller and Schulten 2023): key obligation to set up criteria for min wage adequacy addressing the challenges of adequate min wage (left to the national level) and coverage of collective bargaining
- **Directive on working conditions in the platform economy; Principle 5**
 - ✓ Hardly fought and watered down? A rebuttable legal presumption of employment at national level and The burden of proof lies with the platform; Important measures on algorithmic management
- **Pay Transparency Directive (2023); Principle 2:** Rights to information on pay; access to compensation; anti-discrimination

The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

❖ Several Soft Law initiatives:

Recommendations

- ✓ Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care (2022); Principle 18
- ✓ Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care (2022); Principle 11
- ✓ Council Recommendation on Minimum Income (2023); Principle 14
- ✓ Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (2020); Principle1
- ✓ Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation 2021; Principle 3

Revamping collective bargaining

- ✓ Resolution of the European Parliament calling for a revision of the European Works Council Directive to strengthen the information and consultation rights of EWCs
- ✓ Guidelines on the application of Union competition law to collective agreements regarding the working conditions of solo self- employed persons (2022); Principle 8
- ✓ Proposal for a Recommendation on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union; Principle 8

The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

❖ Other initiatives – stepping-stones for further law initiatives?

- ✓ Gender Equality Strategy
- ✓ Care strategy
- ✓ European Skills Agenda; Principle 1
- ✓ EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025; Principle 3
- ✓ LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025; Principle 3
- ✓ Youth Employment Support; Principle 4
- ✓ Reinforced Youth Guarantee; Principle 4
- ✓ Effective Active Support to Employment; Principle 4
- ✓ Action Plan for the Social Economy; Principle 4
- ✓ Evaluation of the Quality Framework for Traineeships; Principle 4
- ✓ EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027; Principle 10
- ✓ Legal proposals to reduce workers' exposure to hazardous chemicals, including asbestos; Principle 10
- ✓ Green Paper on Ageing; Principle 15
- ✓ Europe's Beating Cancer Plan; Principle 16
- ✓ Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030; Principle 17
- ✓ European Platform on Combating Homelessness; Principle 19

The ambitious social agenda of the von der Leyen Commission in times of crises.

- ❖ **European Commission, a key policy entrepreneur...**
- ❖ **The role of politics**
 - ✓ European Parliament, a key actor in agenda-setting and policy shaping, joint entrepreneurship EP+Commission
 - ✓ EP majority for encompassing a positive integration approach consisting of S&D, Greens, THE LEFT and “socially minded” camp of the EPP
- ❖ **Very ambitious social presidencies of Spain and Belgium**
 - ✓ Informal group of MS on social investment within the framework of the EU economic governance reform
- ❖ **The culminating point: la Hulpe declaration (April 2024)**
 - ✓ The Belgian presidency wanted to influence the next strategic agenda of the Union and counterbalance the narrative on competitiveness

3) What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ **Two dominant paradigms under the Von der Leyen Commission II: competitiveness and security**
 - ✓ The High-Level Report on the EU's competitiveness (Mario Draghi) suggests the return of narratives that leave little scope for the EU's social dimension?
 - ✓ The High-Level Report on the future of the Single Market (Enrico Letta) – anchored in the idea of a ‘Single Market that includes a genuine social dimension that guarantees social justice and cohesion’.
 - ✓ Multidimensional security issues will be a political priority - under what conditions will there be room for a progressive – including social and labour market policy – programme in such an uncertain, risky and conflict-ridden world?
- ❖ **Discursive reaffirmation of the salient role of the European Social Model and the key paradigm of the Pillar – what actions?**
 - ✓ ‘unique social market economy, which gives Europe many advantages over competitors

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- Commission von der Leyen II – ‘Europe’s choice’ (political guidelines 2024–2029) and mission letter to Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness
 - ❖ Articulated around the notion of **social and intergenerational fairness**
 - ✓ Main initiatives related to **quality jobs, skills and housing**
 - ✓ New Action Plan on the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
- **Instruments and initiatives (interrelated areas)**
 - ✓ Quality Jobs Roadmap
 - ✓ First-ever European Affordable Housing Plan - jointly with the European Investment Bank including effective roll-out of the Social Climate Fund for energy-efficient housing
 - ✓ New Pact for European Social Dialogue – key importance of working together with social partners
 - ✓ Impact of digitalisation – the right to disconnect
 - ✓ First-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (including strengthening of the Child Guarantee)

What perspectives and challenges
for Social Europe under von der
Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ **A large framework – what narrative and what kind of actions?**
 - ✓ Some questions around the title of the new social commissioner Mînzatu Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness
 - What about jobs and rights?
 - A Commissioner for two DGs – EMPL and EAC and Executive –Vice President – can interconnect several areas, especially related to investing in human capital and skills

- ❖ **A framework heavily based on the ‘stock’ and ‘flow’ functions of the Welfare State (Hemerijck (2017, 2024))**
 - Notably, human capital development through upgrading and creating new skills, closing labour gaps and fostering quality jobs
 - Strongly linked to the need to boost competitiveness

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ What about the 'buffer' function of the Welfare States – social protection and safety nets ?
 - Poverty alleviation (Anti-Poverty Plan)
- Access to social protection ? No initiatives foreseen ?
 - Monitoring of the 2019 Recommendation on access to social protection, the 2022 Recommendation on affordable high-quality long-term care and the 2023 Recommendation on Minimum Income – need for more indicators and data
 - The Idea of a European Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme (political guidelines of VdL I) – no longer on the agenda
 - What about a permanent SURE mechanism or a similar instrument?
 - The Coordination of Social Security Systems (EC 883/2004) – negotiations stuck for seven years

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

What place for the Just Transition?

- ✓ Through the issue of housing effective roll-out of the Social Climate Fund
- ✓ Skills and quality jobs - significantly increase our funding for a just transition across the next long-term budget

Tackling the social consequences of the green transition (Sabato and Vanhille 2024)

- ✓ An EU framework for a just transition has emerged, i.e. a set of policy orientations, legislation and funding provided by the EU and aimed at ensuring that the EU can make the most of the opportunities deriving from the green transition while addressing the social challenges.
- ✓ Eco-social policy measures emerging from EU initiatives - an emphasis on social investment/activation perspective and on vulnerabilities related to energy and transport.
- ✓ Enhancing of the 2022 Recommendation on just transition?

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ **Setting minimum standards in social protection in light of the green transition**
 - ✓ Significantly less attention is devoted to the buffering function of the welfare state (social protection policies).
 - ✓ Further reflection on how to link green transition policies and welfare policies more closely, in particular social protection and inclusion policies (the role of the EU Semester).
 - ✓ Just transition issues to be taken into account in national social protection schemes (e.g. healthcare, job retention schemes...and indicators - AROPE?).

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ **Social consequences of the digital transition**
- ❖ **Right to disconnect – largely debated**
 - ✓ Labour rights and social security situation of platform workers, the genuine participation of social partners in managing the digital transition, and algorithmic management with a human face (prevent the rise of an underclass of platform workers, Ponce del Castillo 2022)
 - ✓ The question of Transparency of social protection systems (access to information, digitalisation of applications, automation of granting benefits – what about a separate comprehensive instrument? (e.g. a recommendation or a directive on transparency of social security systems) (Shoukens, Spasova et al. 2024)
 - setting minimum standards - guidelines/principles on the relations between insured persons and administrations, management of digital tools, etc.
 - ✓ Importance in the era of digitalisation - bureaucratise/the usage of algorithms in social protection systems can turn into a dystopia (UN 2019)

What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

❖ Europe's neighbourhood and the social dimension

Accession countries facing the same transitions – green, digital and demographic

In the first 100 days, the COM will present pre-enlargement policy reviews focusing on individual sectors such as the rule of law, the Single Market, food security, defense and security, climate and energy and migration, as well as social, economic and territorial convergence more broadly

Within the European Social Policy Analysis Network (ESPAN previously ESPN I and ESPNII) - a network providing expertise to DG EMPL on social protection and social inclusion issues

Studies on social policies in candidate countries and Ukraine

Need for improvement of data and comparable indicators (e.g. inclusion in Eurostat)

To be followed! - LTC and domestic workforce from these countries to the EU

- ✓ Reports on Domestic work including these countries to be published until the end of the year

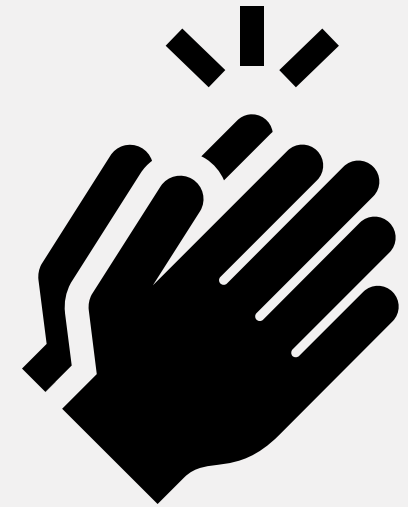
What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

- ❖ Will the EU uphold the renewed social paradigm (shift)? ‘Is this time different?’ (Keune and Pochet (2023)).
 - Politics played as a decisive factor in the paradigm shift of Social Europe (2015-2024)
 - The role of the European Parliament 2024- 2029 – still strongly committed to social issues? Socially committed MEPs – S&D, The Greens and socially minded MEP from EPP
 - Member States will be key to delivering on the principles – so high ambitions from the COM but what about the MS?
 - ✓ Political Majorities in Member States – The role of the future Presidencies of the Council of the EU
 - Trade Unions and socially committed stakeholders, including new actors such as associations of platform workers

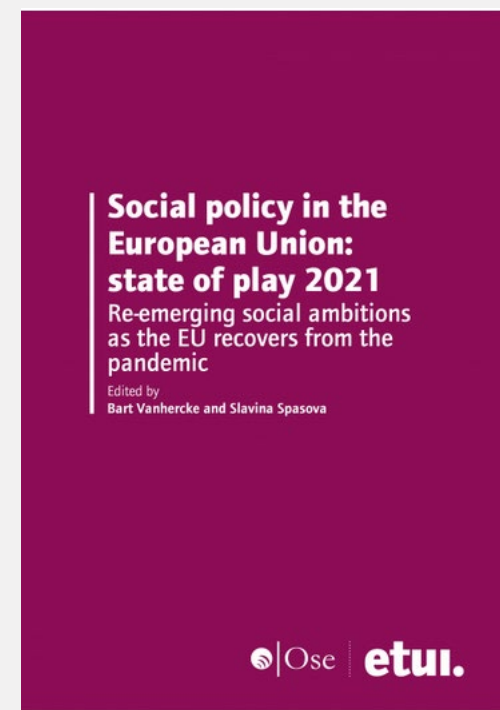
What perspectives and challenges for Social Europe under von der Leyen Commission II?

❖ Last but not least:

- Role of researchers – uploading ideas and striving for a Social European Union...
- Also in its neighbourhood and the accession countries...
- **Wishing the European Centre a Happy Anniversary and many more years of impactful social mission ahead!**



Selected references



.....21 editions! ↻

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[EN](#) | [FR](#) | [DE](#) (PDF)
- **Digitalisation – slowly moving up the social dialogue agenda?**
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Full reports

- **The impact of digitalisation on job quality in the electricity, hospital and public administrations sectors in eight EU countries**
OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No.61, September 2023 [PDF](#)
Statistical Annex
OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No.62, September 2023 [PDF](#)
- **The impact of digitalisation on social dialogue. A comparative cross-country and cross-sectoral analysis**
OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No.60, September 2023 [PDF](#)