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### Editorial

Keune, M.; Pochet, P.

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## EDITORIAL

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During the Barroso Commissions (2004–2014) economic goals were deemed of much greater importance than social goals and social policy was largely seen as an obstacle to economic growth, innovation and balanced budgets. As a consequence, in that period, there were few new EU initiatives in the field of social policy while pressure to downscale or decentralise was exerted on national social policies. In recent years, however, the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), the COVID crisis, but also climate change and digitalisation have opened up new space to advance social themes and to expand Social Europe. Accordingly, the discourse of the European institutions has dramatically changed from one of picturing social policies as a cost factor to one of emphasising the need to strengthen social rights in order to tackle successfully the multiple challenges faced by European societies. For example, the EPSR Action Plan states that ‘We need to enhance social rights and to strengthen the European social dimension across all policies of the Union as enshrined in the Treaties. This will ensure that the transition to climate-neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just, and making the European Green Deal and the upcoming 2030 Digital Decade successes for all Europeans.’ It also sets three ambitious goals that should be met by 2030: at least 78 per cent of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment; at least 60 per cent of all adults should be participating in training every year; and a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

These recent ambitions of the EU have resulted in a series of new social initiatives at the EU level, with several others in the making. This resurgence of the social dimension of the EU raises a number of questions that form the basis for this special issue. In what way and to what extent has the EU social dimension indeed been strengthened since the adoption of the EPSR? To what extent are newly adopted social policies actually likely to contribute to improving people’s lives, and in particular the lives of those who face precarious working or living conditions? What explains the broad political support of the centre-left and centre-right for this social turn? Does the increased weight given to social goals and policies mean that there is a rebalancing of the economic and the social dimensions of the EU and that the EU’s economic model is changing? And what can or should be done to substantially strengthen the social dimension of the EU?

The articles in this issue of *Transfer* discuss (some of) these questions, from different perspectives and covering different thematic areas.

In the introductory article, Keune and Pochet confirm that there is a revival of Social Europe and propose a reading of this revival along three structuring axes that capture most measures adopted in recent years in the areas of the labour market, labour relations and social protection. One is a group of measures that are essentially aimed at people on the margins of the labour market who work and/or live in situations of precarity, whether related to their labour market position, the type of employment contract or the lack of social protection. The second is a set of initiatives attempting to revamp, strengthen and integrate the EU’s multi-level industrial relations system by expanding collective bargaining, fostering social dialogue and improving workers’ voice and

workers' rights in multinationals and along supply chains. And the third concerns the development of a series of new financing modalities that are (partially) oriented towards financing social policy.

They also show that we can observe a partial integration of social policy and social objectives in the EU's economic governance. This revival of the EU's social dimension does however not challenge the primacy nor the characteristics of the EU's economic model, with the possible exception of the (temporary) abandonment of austerity and the fostering of public investment. They then speculate that the centre-right and centre-left may continue to come to compromises to support the revival of Social Europe as a result of the lessons of the financial and COVID crises, but only as long as this does not substantially affect the underlying economic model.

Huguenot-Noël and Corti discuss the return of the EU's employment agenda and the question to what extent the EU has the role not only of agenda-setter but also of provider of social rights in the area of employment policies, and what groups are empowered by European employment rights. They show that in recent years the EU not only expanded the scope of its influence over individual social rights but also took an inclusive turn, aiming to expand the scope of welfare provisions beyond 'traditional' beneficiaries, driven by more 'universalising' and 'capacitating' initiatives. They underline, however, that there is still a long way to go before the post-pandemic EU employment agenda is well anchored and benefits everyone. They argue that this will require that in employment policy qualified majority voting and an equal say for the European Parliament become the norm, and that existing governance rules are revised, increasing the power of 'socially oriented' actors vis-à-vis 'economically oriented' actors.

Kilpatrick analyses the legislative developments linked to the EPSR and argues that they beckon such a significant and broad-based burgeoning of Social Europe that it can be characterised as the 'Roaring 20s' for Social Europe. She shows that the 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). To illustrate the expansion and reshaping of Social Europe she discusses two areas in detail: one involves providing adequate incomes through initiatives on minimum pay and income, as well as promoting and protecting national collective bargaining; and the other is how EU labour and social protection is being reshaped by the green transition.

Kilpatrick argues that the expansion of EU social legislation is surprising because of the non-binding, Member State-oriented nature of the Pillar and the established EU competence limits and practices. What has made it possible then to work around competences that threatened to insert a wedge between pronouncements about the Pillar and the EU's capacity to act is in large part, political salience. The EU's actions in the regressive Barroso decade (2004–2014) both undercut the argument that the EU did not act on wages and incomes and increased the political salience of progressive EU action on these minimum floors. And the COVID crisis, the war in Ukraine, Brexit and the changes taking place in the world of work as well as the urgent need for dramatic climate and environmental action, have pushed the EU to act in new unforeseen ways and have reshaped the boundaries and sources of labour and social law and policy, despite there being no increase in its competences.

Copeland explores the ambitious poverty target included in the EPSR Action Plan and analyses the positioning of poverty policy throughout the EU's broader governance hierarchy, as well as the governance arrangements within the field itself. He finds that throughout such governance arrangements, the issue of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion is largely dealt with by intergovernmental agreements and is thereby a third-order priority for the EU, with economic integration first-order and employment policy second-order. Meanwhile, within the field EU governance arrangements are currently being transformed to further encourage the Member States to take

action. While this is a significant development, the overall ability of the EU to reduce the number of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion requires the field to move beyond its current third-order status.

Finally, Crespy and Munta analyse the social ambitions involved in the EU's just transition plans. They discuss what kind of transition model emerges under the auspices of the EU and to what extent this model provides an integrated response to intertwined issues of social justice and the green transition of the economy. They do so by focusing on two key instruments proposed to address social issues arising from the green transition, the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund, examining their objectives, linkages to existing policy instruments and the patterns of political conflict that surround them. They show that both funds have narrow objectives anchored in a reactive investment logic of eco-integration, in this case decarbonising the economy through market-based mechanisms such as carbon pricing, which follows the logic of social investment with a focus on reskilling workers hit by decarbonisation. The EPSR hardly plays any role in these processes.

Crespy and Munta see a European model emerging that revolves around the idea of green growth – through carbon markets and efficient labour markets – rather than putting human health and well-being in a preserved environment at the centre. It can be characterised as a new form of investment state, rather than a genuine eco-social state simultaneously addressing environmental and social problems in a holistic way. They seriously doubt that this approach is sufficient to deal with the inequality that can be expected to arise when climate change worsens and transition policies expand. They then propose a number of ways to make policy more future proof, including enforcing the polluter pays principle, revising the EPSR to include environmental justice and the right to a healthy life and a preserved environment, green taxation and involving national parliaments in drawing up a comprehensive, multi-level just transition strategy.

**Maarten Keune and  
Philippe Pochet**