

In 2013, Frank Vandenbroucke coined the notion of a European Social Union (ESU) in order to clarify our thinking about the so-called social dimension of the EU. This new expression contains three implicit messages. First, it invites us to propose a clear-cut institutional concept, in contrast to the elusive notion of ‘a Social Europe’. Second, it indicates that we should go beyond the conventional call for ‘a social dimension’ to the EU, as if today’s EU has no social dimension whatsoever. Third, it explicitly suggests that what is needed is not a European Welfare State, but, precisely, a Union founded on two principles. On the one hand, national welfare states should remain responsible for organizing interpersonal redistribution among their citizens; on the other, they should take up the commitment of sustaining forms of tangible solidarity among themselves as collective entities.

The adoption of a *European Pillar of Social Rights* in November 2017 and the elections for a new European Parliament, in May 2019, constitute a unique opportunity to relaunch and enrich the ESU debate. The *Pillar* has marked a point of no return: either it will be a sufficiently convincing and recognizable success, or it will be a high-profile failure. Given the political cost of an eventual failure, those of us who care about the social dimension of European politics should now work on an interpretation of the *Pillar* that maximizes its positive potential. For this initiative to have an impact on EU policy-making, a first condition is that it is sufficiently powerful. It must be connected in a convincing way with functional necessities and broadly accepted aspirations of European integration; and it must fit into a consistent conception of the role the EU should play and the role it should not play in social policy. The idea of a European Social Union can provide a fertile context for the search and specification of such *raison d’être*, by pointing to both possible justifications and practical opportunities.

In order to encourage and facilitate the conceptual and policy link between the *Pillar* and ESU, EuVisions has launched a debate with two introductory contributions by Frank Vandenbroucke and Maurizio Ferrera, followed by comments by various authors. The debate is not purely theoretical. Participants will of course discuss about conceptions and *raisons d’être*, but they also explore their potentials in reference to practical options and concrete proposals. The debate is closed by two rejoinders by Frank Vandenbroucke and Maurizio Ferrera.

To find out more about the European Social Union, visit the [ESU debate page](#)

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