

2016 has been a year full of challenges for the European Union. The migrants' crisis reached its peak, the risk of losing a Member State became a reality after Brexit and policymakers became aware of the unsustainability of the *status quo* in the EU. As unveiled in March **2017** by the European Commission's publication of the five scenarios, the EU seemed to be stuck at a crossroad, uncertain about its future. Yet, 2016 has been also the year of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, the new ambitious political initiative, launched by President Juncker in September 2015, aimed at fostering an "upward convergence" of social rights, starting with the **Eurozone**. From its inception, the EC has maintained political momentum at the supranational level and promoted debates in several Member States, its overarching aim being to tackle the legitimacy crisis of the European integration process. In this regard, the proposal for a reinforcement of the social dimension of the EU came as a response to the need to address the multiple crises affecting the EU.

The latest volume ([*Social policy in the EU: state of play 2017*](#)) published by the **European Social Observatory (OSE)** and the **European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)** starts exactly with an analysis of the above-mentioned crises, and presents a proposal for "differentiated integration" as a possible institutional path to overcome the present deadlock. Against this background, the European Pillar of Social Rights is presented as a possible reconciliation scenario within the EU. Its efficiency, however, would depend on the willingness of the Member States to deliver concrete policy proposals and to involve their social partners in the implementation process.



The presentation of the volume has been at the centre of a high-level conference organized by OSE and ETUI at the **EESC** in **Brussels**. The debate was divided in two sessions, following the outline of the volume: “The future of the European Union” and “Development in EU socio-economic governance and the European Pillar of Social Rights”. Both panels were opened by a keynote speech, given by the authors of the two chapters, and were followed a discussion between representatives of the social partners and representatives of the Commission.

Sebastiano Sabato, OSE, kicked off the discussion by proposing three questions: has the EU response to the multiple-crises that have affected the Union been effective and sufficient? What are possible ways forward for the EU’s social dimension? With respect to the Social Pillar, can we speak of a concrete political shift from austerity to investment?

High-level debate

Mario Telò, Emeritus President, **Institut d’études européennes, ULB**, gave the first

keynote speech. In particular, he highlighted the fact that, despite the economic recovery and growth of the EU, many problems still affect the Union—e.g. the persistence of social inequalities, the asymmetries between Member States and the lack of a political system able to take concrete decisions and act efficiently in crisis situations. In this regard, **Telò identified a process of differentiated integration as the only solution to the political and institutional gridlock which hampers the Union.** Namely, he highlighted the necessity of a multi-speed Europe, which consists in an enhanced process of voluntary cooperation between Member States. This solution would be compatible with the idea of a social Europe, i.e. an EU able to act in response to the most urgent social problems. Telò commented that the recent proposals enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (which was not unanimously agreed upon by Member States) may find a window of opportunity if, for example, a smaller group of **9-15 countries** enhanced their level of cooperation on specific objectives. However, this ambitious multi-speed Europe scenario necessitates not only an enhanced cooperation amongst member states, but also requires the involvement of social partners (namely, trade unions), the only movements able to determine an overall vision for the Union.



Amandine Crespy, Institute for European Studies (IEE) and Centre d’Etude de la Vie Politique (CEVIPOL), ULB, focused her keynote speech on the latest development of the

EU's economic governance in order to assess the concrete feasibility and desirability of a new social dimension in the EU. In particular, her analysis relied on the specific role of the Country Specific Recommendations and highlighted that, despite Juncker's attempt to address the criticism of an excessive focus on austerity, "the promotion of social investment has remained weak and constrained by the orthodox conception of competitiveness". In so doing, the EU's strategy failed to address "the persistent economic imbalance across the Member States and their painful social consequences". In this regard, **she also highlighted how the EFSI plan failed in its attempt to boost fair economic growth given the small number of new projects that have been financed under the program.** Against this background, Crespy accepted Telò's proposal for a differentiated integration. However, she warned that no further voluntary integration will work if Member States will not address such macro-economic asymmetries. In order to do so thereof, Crespy proposed three "necessary" steps: the creation of a **European Unemployment Scheme**, the stepping up of the EU's own resources and the creation of the **Eurobonds**.

In light of the suggestions given by the keynote speakers, two representatives of the **European Commission** intervened in the panels. Namely, **Cosmin Dobran**, Head of Unit, **Employment, Education and Social Affairs**, Secretariat General, European Commission, and **Jeroen Jutte**, Head of Unit, **DG EMPL**, European Commission. They highlighted the positive economic trends and the high rate of employment in the European Union. At the same time, however, **they recognised that several challenges have yet to be addressed, particularly social cohesion in Europe.** Specifically, Dobran said, "Europe needs more fairness". In this regard, they stressed that the Proclamation of the Social Pillar represents a political commitment not only for European institutions but also for Member States. In particular, they stated that the Commission is highly committed to guaranteeing that concrete proposals will be implemented in the framework of the Social Pillar, mentioning the proposal for a Work-Life balance directive, the revision of the Written Statement Directive and of the Working Time Directive. Moreover, they said that the EPSR would become part of the European Semester and of the CSRs.

Several social partners intervened in the debate. **Kelig Puyet**, Director, **Platform of European Social NGOs**, and **Freek Spinnewijn**, Director, **European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA)**, recognised the concrete effort of the Commission to involve them in the consultation process and highlighted the fact that the proposals that emerged during the consultation were subsequently included in the Commission's proposal .

Some tensions emerged between **Maxime Cerutti**, Director, **Social Affairs Department, BusinessEurope**, and **Katja Lehto-Komulainen**, Deputy General Secretary, **European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC**. On the one hand, the former stressed that the EPSR should be limited to the Proclamation and that the priority of the Commission consists in boosting employment in the EU, facilitating the mobility of workers and requiring Member States to implement structural reforms. On the other hand, the latter interpreted the Social Pillar as a first step that needs a subsequent “**Social Action Plan**” in order to tackle the problems that hamper the EU and must be accompanied by a reform of the governance of the monetary union.

Following up on the interventions on the future of the Social Pillar, and asking whether it will contribute to rebalance the EU’s economic and social priorities, **Bart Vanhercke** concluded the debate by offering a threefold interpretation of the Social Pillar. Firstly, the EPSR could be of use in re-launching EU initiatives in the social domain. Secondly, the Social Pillar could be able to influence Member States’ policies. Thirdly, in terms of policy choices, the Pillar could be taken into account by economically-oriented players. “It is, however, essential”, concluded Vanhercke, “that the EPSR is accompanied by a detailed roadmap for its implementation, as there is the risk that, without Juncker, the EPSR will remain a paper tiger”.

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Authors: Francesco Corti