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The future of EU social policy: Depth or breadth?

The European pillar of social rights (EPSR) was launched in 2017 by the Juncker Commission with the leitmotiv of ‘upwards social convergence’ for all EU citizens. The von der Leyen Commission has pursued and even strengthened the social agenda, including a strong emphasis on gender equality. The achievements of the EPSR – including EU directives on work-life balance, predictable and transparent working conditions, minimum wages and platform work – are more progressive socially than expected. Furthermore, the post-pandemic recovery and resilience fund has also yielded investments in health and early childhood education and care; this has especially benefitted countries that had poor or outdated infrastructures.

These accomplishments illustrate that the EU is capable of addressing class-based and gender inequalities between and within EU countries. More ideas to strengthen the social agenda are currently on the agenda – including a minimum income directive. Thus, it seems like an EU social paradise is being created. Yet, these progressive initiatives, with the aim of providing more and better rights for women and men, should be assessed in member state institutions, sectors and companies. This assessment is important to maintain and even enhance the legitimacy of the EU in the social policy area. Otherwise, the very purpose of the EPSR – to equalise rights for EU citizens – could be undermined.

If we examine, for instance, the directive on work-life balance, the most constraining provision is two months of well-paid parental leave per parent. This is progressive from the perspective of gender, because it targets fathers and second carers, since mothers already take the largest shares of paid and unpaid leave. However, this provision cannot be successful in outcome, unless it is implemented in a comparable way across member states.

Many member states have implemented the directive in line with its intentions, which come with a high level of compensation of leave for primary and secondary carers to take leave. However, there are some shortcomings. Firstly, some member states provide low levels of compensation, which could undermine the purpose of the directive. Secondly, some member states have only included fathers, but they have excluded other second carers, such as in same-sex couples. Thirdly, in some countries, information about new rights for

fathers/second carers has not been sufficiently communicated and/or the administrative application procedures are opaque and complex, which could dissuade fathers or second carers from using their new rights. Preliminary evidence suggests that it is countries with strong resources, as well as openness regarding same-sex couples and LGBTQ+ people, that have most comprehensively implemented the directive. Thus, there could be inequality between member states in the implementation of the new social rights.

When we look at the directive of minimum wages, this, too, requires implementation in member states, at the sector level and in companies. Furthermore, the strongest aspect of this directive from an institutional perspective focuses on social partners. Strengthening of trade unions is an essential aspect of improving and guaranteeing worker rights. And, following the directive, member states should illustrate efforts to address this provision regularly in reports. Yet, this provision is not constraining, in the sense that there are no fixed targets or timelines for strengthening unions. Thus, here, too, there is a risk that the provisions are not implemented equally across countries.

Thus, EU directives are but the starting point for upwards social convergence. The implementation and following through not only on binding provisions, but also on the intention of directives, should be monitored carefully by stakeholders and policymakers at the EU and national levels of governance. All of this should be contextualised in the current political situation, which is shifting to the right, given the insecurity in Europe. Under these circumstances, it is even more important that the EU and member states actually deliver on social rights. This is important for the legitimisation of governments nationally and at the EU level. Thus, the depth of Social Europe – that is, actually reaching citizens – should be prioritised over the breadth of Social Europe. Thus, a more thorough implementation and focus on rights actually reaching citizens should be prioritised. This would de facto show the EU's power in terms of upwards social convergence.