

Brexit is a wake-up call for a rapprochement with the peoples of Europe



*Brexit is already acting as a stimulus for the EU to rethink its priorities for the future. It especially poses both challenges and opportunities for Social Europe, writes **Konstantinos Alexandris Polomarkakis** (University of Lincoln). The UK's exit represents a window of opportunity, considering the strong opposition by the UK to anything social at EU level in the past. But it also serves as a wake-up call for a rapprochement with the – somewhat neglected and consequently disenchanted – peoples of Europe.*

Further integration of the social dimension of the EU, commonly referred to as Social Europe, has been consistently opposed by the UK. In some instances, though, the UK had no option but to cave in, often after fierce resistance, something that had positive consequences for its industrial relations. Whilst at domestic level [Brexit has put the social acquis in danger](#), the same cannot be conclusively said about the EU. For the latter, the departure of a veto player, might as well open up an array of opportunities, so long as the remaining Member States are on board.

The UK has long been considered as the *enfant terrible* of the EU. The UK–EU relationship has been, for the most part, uneasy at best. The country's accession in 1973 saw the first referendum on EU membership just a couple of years later. The signing of the Single European Act by Margaret Thatcher in 1986 was followed by her condemning speech against the rising European super-state. The 1990s came and opt-outs were secured in the areas of the common currency (the euro) and the Social Chapter. Tony Blair's election victory signalled a brief rapprochement, with the acceptance of the Social Chapter in 1997. The same did not happen as regards the euro, which was opposed by Gordon Brown, who put any plans for its adoption on hold. More opt-outs were secured, this time from the Charter of Fundamental Rights, in the late 2000s. During the 2015 general election campaign, a second membership referendum was included in the manifesto of the Conservative Party. The Conservatives achieved a parliamentary majority; the referendum was held on 23 June 2016; Leave won; the rest is history.

The characteristics of the future UK–EU relations, the economic impact of Brexit, citizens' rights and Northern Ireland have monopolised the discussions that ensued. What is not so well-trodden are the consequences of Brexit for the EU social acquis, commonly referred to as Social Europe. The shaky relationship between the UK and the EU outlined above was even more problematic in relation to social and employment policies, the corollaries of Social Europe, which the UK almost consistently opposed throughout its EU membership.



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The UK opposition to Social Europe can be largely attributed to three overarching reasons. First, the ideological incompatibility between a free-market-based agenda, promoted by the Conservative governments, but to some extent by New Labour too, and upping standards in employment and welfare, something undesirable according to market economics. Second, internal party politics tended to favour the more vocal Eurosceptic circles, whose appeasement could only be achieved with a roll-back of the EU *acquis* to the Member States, also in social affairs. Third, fears of creeping EU interference led to hostility against the Charter of Fundamental Rights and to doubts about the justiciability of its Social Chapter.

Arguably, these numerous rejections often led Social Europe to a stalemate. Could the UK's looming departure act as a liberating event for the area, leading to more robust and integrationist initiatives that actually strengthen the social *acquis*? Although it has been argued that when a persistent objector is no longer at the negotiating table important policy changes will follow, the answer to this question is not so straightforward. Simply put, the possible scenarios lying ahead for the future of EU social integration post-Brexit are many.

That notwithstanding, Brexit certainly acted as a stimulus for the EU to rethink its priorities for the future, manifested by the publication of the White Paper on the Future of Europe in March 2017. A series of Reflection Papers followed, including one dedicated to the future of the social dimension, setting out the possible ways forward for the EU27. Therein, the vision of a stronger Social Europe post-Brexit seemed to have been given the seal of approval.

This wind of change was accompanied by a series of initiatives such as the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), a proposal for a work–life balance Directive and a Directive on transparent and predictable working conditions, as well as for a European Labour Authority and a European Social Security Number.

Even though most of them were already in the making, being part of the Juncker's Commission agenda since 2014, the influx of so many of them at the same time can be – at least partly – attributed to Brexit. Brexit represents a window of opportunity, considering the strong opposition by the UK to anything social at EU level in the past. It also serves as a wake-up call for a rapprochement with the – somewhat neglected and consequently disenchanted – peoples of Europe.

Whilst it is undeniable that the promotion of such welfare-oriented measures is expected to be facilitated post-Brexit, given the manifold reasons behind the UK vetoes on furthering Social Europe, the actual take-up of these measures by the rest of the Member States is open to question. The reforms are still at an early stage, meaning that their – already not very far-reaching – social content may be diluted further, in order to trigger the agreement of the EU27. Although the final outcome is likely to be more social in the absence of the UK demands, it would still come out of a compromise. Formerly quiet Member States, previously hiding behind the UK's skirts, may now have to step up and voice their own anti-welfare views.

After all, the UK was not always alone in opposing the widening of Social Europe. Central and Eastern European Member States may see an enhanced social *acquis* as detrimental to their competitive advantage as liberal regimes are not a unique UK phenomenon, and the rise of hard-line Eurosceptic parties risks jettisoning any further form of integration, including in the social field. Looking at the [challenges](#) to the reforms of the Posted Workers Directive by Hungary and Poland, it seems that this is already happening.

Brexit, although emancipatory for EU social integration given the absence of one of its key opponents from the negotiating table, may not be enough to push a fully fledged vision of Social Europe forward. This is largely due to the existence of the remaining 27 Member States with their own diverse policy preferences, ruling ideologies and attitudes towards the EU. This will certainly pose problems to the realisation of some of the reforms, particularly those of a binding nature, currently under deliberation.

And here lies the tricky bit: if soft, non-binding measures are chosen as the way forward to avoid opposition, a Social Europe *à la carte* would emerge, with divergent standards of protection. This would be a far cry from the coming together imagined by the drafters of the Reflection Paper on the social dimension of Europe. Perseverance is needed to bend any opposition in the area, which – the silver-lining of Brexit – is likely to be of lesser magnitude than that of the UK. Ultimately, further EU social integration could achieve what the EU has been trying to do for so long; to make the European project more relevant to EU citizens. In order to realise that, it is time to reap the few benefits of Brexit: the forthcoming lack of a persistent objector to Social Europe, and the potentially detrimental repercussions of exiting the EU as an example to avoid.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. An earlier version of this work has been published in [Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly Contributors' Blog](#).

[Konstantinos Alexandris Polomarkakis](#) is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Lincoln. His latest article, focusing on the impact of Brexit on Social Europe, is now out in [Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly](#).