

The 'last chance for social Europe': The European Pillar of Social Rights can only work if integrated into the EU's existing policies

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The European Commission published its proposals for the creation of a European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at the end of April. [Eleanor Brooks](#) writes that it will be crucial to 'mainstream' the EPSR by integrating it into the EU's existing policies, while civil society organisations will need to be afforded a strong role in the Pillar's implementation if it is to meet its aims.



Labelled by some as the 'last chance for social Europe' and the 'last chance saloon' against rising anti-EU sentiment, the European Commission published on 26 April its proposals for a European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The Pillar is a list of 20 principles and rights aimed at earning Europe a 'social triple A' by fostering convergence towards better living and working standards. Principle 14, for instance, gives all citizens the right to 'adequate minimum income benefits', whilst principle 16 establishes a right to 'timely access to affordable, [sic] preventative and curative health care of good quality'.

At face value, it is an ambitious initiative – its rights-based approach is new to social policy, the range of issues included is wide and it is accompanied by a number of [proposals](#), most notably for a [Directive](#) on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers. It makes a strong case for the added value of EU action in the social sphere and speaks clearly to President Jean-Claude Juncker's 'five scenarios' for the future of Europe, in support of the EU 'doing much more together'. But framed primarily as a restatement of existing provisions, lacking legal clout and putting responsibility for implementation in the hands of national governments, is it enough to salvage the notion of a social Europe?

The timing of the Pillar's presentation is not accidental. A series of unprecedented gains for far right political parties, the result of a Euroscepticism which has spread and intensified across the continent over recent years, makes critical the presentation of a European Union that is about more than bail-outs, crisis management and economic governance. The EU has long been hampered in demonstrating its value to citizens by a legal mandate that prioritises economic over social initiatives, but this problem has gained salience in the current political climate. If the EU continues to fail to 'reach' citizens, to combat Eurosceptic narratives or to generate popular support, it is plausible that the UK will not be the last member state to exit the Union.



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Research by [Eurofound](#) – the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions – found that many of the EU’s social partners attribute the UK referendum result to the failure of the European social model and want to see a response which acknowledges this and puts social integration at the top of the EU27’s agenda. If the EPSR is seen as the fulfilment of this recommendation, there might be tentative cause for optimism. The [Rome Declaration](#), signed earlier this year on the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the founding treaties, contained a commitment to building ‘social Europe’ and was clearly designed as a precursor to the Pillar. Furthermore, the election of Emmanuel Macron in France may influence the social agenda – in his [manifesto](#), Macron proclaims commitment to a set of European social rights which establish minimum standards in unemployment protection, wages and healthcare. Though his reforms face [considerable challenges](#), the new President’s election may be enough of an impetus – given the wider context – to translate sentiment into concrete action.

If it is ever to be genuinely realised, however, the EPSR is wholly dependent upon a proliferation of the kind of political will and commitment which (for now, at least) Macron offers. As noted in a [previous EUOPP Blog](#) on the Pillar, its legal form was always going to be its primary weakness.

The final text was published identically in two forms – one a recommendation and one a proposal for an interinstitutional proclamation. Both are non-binding (a reality which will likely smooth the way for the adoption of the latter by the other EU institutions), raising the question of what exactly the Pillar commits member states to and how the principles and rights it enshrines will be enacted. The scoreboard and indicators proposed, and the elaboration contained in the [accompanying staff working document](#), offer a good starting point for assessing member states’ adherence to the principles, but genuine implementation relies upon anchoring of the Pillar within existing EU policy frameworks. As such, two steps can be identified as crucial to its success.

First, the Pillar must be established as a tool for [mainstreaming](#). As indicated by the reference to Article 9 TFEU in its preamble, integration of the Pillar’s principles and rights within other EU policies is already foreseen as the primary mode of its implementation. The [Commission notes](#) the relevance of the EPSR for the European Semester (the EU’s strengthened budgetary oversight framework), the REFIT programme (by which EU legislation is assessed for ‘fitness for purpose’), the EU Structural Funds and a number of other policy frameworks. There are potential benefits here both for the implementation of the Pillar and for the mission to ‘relaunch’ social Europe.

The European Semester has been subject to ongoing ‘[socialisation](#)’ since its inception, in an attempt to balance out its emphasis on financial sustainability and cost-effectiveness. Similarly, the REFIT programme has been widely criticised by civil society organisations concerned about [sweeping deregulation](#) and the watering-down of [health](#) and [environmental](#) standards. Integrating the principles and rights embodied in the EPSR into these frameworks will not only serve as a valuable and much-needed tool for the mainstreaming of social considerations within them, but will be critical to ensuring that the Pillar is not lost among the economic and financial priorities of the Union.

Second, civil society organisations must be centrally involved in the Pillar’s implementation. The staff working document which accompanies the Pillar notes that the tools of its implementation are located at the local, regional and national levels, whilst the EU retains a role in guiding, supporting and monitoring member states’ progress. To ensure the genuine realisation of the Pillar’s principles and rights it will be crucial that civil society organisations are engaged and employed in identifying barriers to full enactment of the Pillar’s principles, developing solutions, informing EU-level guidance and support, and assisting in implementation. This is particularly important because the Pillar is initially intended to ‘apply’ only to Eurozone states, risking an exacerbation of the social inequalities which already exist across the continent. Civil society organisations are [best placed](#) to identify the social reality facing vulnerable groups and the impact of the EU upon its citizens.

A recent [Eurobarometer survey](#) found that more than 70 per cent of Europeans would like to see the EU take more action in the areas of unemployment, environmental protection and health and social security. Yet, somewhat counter-intuitively, President Juncker arrived in office pledging to shape an EU that was ‘[big on big things and small on small things](#)’. Since areas like health, employment protection and work-life balance – all issues that had arguably been labelled as ‘small’ in the Commission’s post-crisis work programme – are so instrumental to the kind of social Europe that citizens want to see, it is crucial that the provisions of the EPSR are fully integrated into the ‘big’ policy frameworks. It might also be time to start defining ‘big’ and ‘small’ in a way which reflects the priorities and needs of Europeans, rather than prevailing political support.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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