

The EU 2020 Strategy and the “Social Pillar”: Can they deliver on social inclusion?

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Abstract

In 2010, amidst the financial and sovereign debt crisis, the launching of a novel European Strategy for “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” signalled a significant step in the European coordination strategies for tackling poverty and social exclusion. Crucial in this respect is the unprecedented prominence accorded to a quantified goal in poverty reduction across the EU, to be achieved by 2020, along a supranational governance process that sets the ambitious aim of bringing the social field within the framework of EU financial and economic governance. In parallel, the proclamation of a “European Pillar of Social Rights” by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, in November 2017, indicates a cautious reaction to the detrimental effects caused by the Euro crisis management and the growing Euroscepticism across member states.

We scrutinize the EU targets and tools in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and critically examine the political dynamics behind them with a focus on the conflicts and opposing normative visions of poverty and social exclusion among member states and EU bodies. We trace how this new “Strategy” has fared so far and what are the expectations for its effectiveness within the set time frame. In the light of this discussion the following questions are raised: Does the “Pillar” provide any (albeit weak) signs of a paradigm shift, by the European Commission, away from neoliberal austerity? Can it bolster the social dimension of EU governance and deliver tangible consequences for social rights in the long term? Or will it turn out to be another symbolic measure? The current public debate on these issues is briefly reviewed. The conclusion reflects upon some crucial policy commitments, at both the national and EU level, which are required for making a substantial impact on social inclusion.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Maria Petmesidou (Ph.D. Oxford University) is Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at Democritus University (Greece), and Fellow of CROP/ISSC (Comparative Research on Poverty/International Social Science Council). She has published extensively on social policy and welfare reform in Greece and Southern Europe. Most recently she co-edited the books: *Economic crisis and austerity in Southern Europe: threat or opportunity for a sustainable welfare state?* (London: Routledge, 2015) and *Child poverty and youth (un)employment and social inclusion* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2016). Her most recent publications include also: “Welfare Reform in Greece: a major crisis, crippling debt conditions and stark challenges ahead” (in P. Taylor-Gooby, et al. eds *After austerity. Welfare state transformation in Europe after the Great Recession*, OUP); “Can the European Union 2020 Strategy deliver on social inclusion? (CROP Working Paper Series on Global Challenges, No 2, June 2017); (with M. González-Menéndez) “Policy transfer and innovation for building resilient bridges to labour market” (in J. O’Reilly, et al. eds *Youth labour in transition*, OUP (forthcoming 2018). In the last four years she coordinated research on health care reform in Greece (funded by the Observatory on Economic and Social Developments of the Labour Institute of the Greek General Confederation of Labour, 2014-2015) and on policy learning and transfer in the field of youth employment policies (funded under the EC FP7 programme, 2014-2017).