

Do policy issues matter in the election campaigns? Social challenges facing the European Union

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Summary

Social Europe or „more social Europe” is probably the most common catch word for those forces who intend to **bring the EU closer to its citizens** in the fight against populism, nationalism or EU-scepticism. It is a widely shared assumption that in order to reverse destructive waves in the EU and declining support for the Community, European citizens, „left alone” and having become losers of the financial and economic crisis and other global forces should receive benefits by way of the development of the EU social dimension.

In order to do so the **European Union has a lot on its plate to offer** – with special regard to the newly established European Pillar of Social Rights or the new Cohesion Policy under elaboration. On the other hand, **European citizens also have corresponding expectations indeed**, by ranking employment and social issues high on the agenda ahead of the European elections.

However, for the time being, the possible political responses to these outlined expectations aren't very convincing. Compared to assumptions, **relatively little can be heard about social issues** in the course of the campaign. If this yet to change, then besides the “classical” topic of **employment**, the **new rising issues are that of wages**, which are not the subject of any hard community legislation – yet.

It is possible that the picture of social promises and intentions becomes more patterned and colourful by the time of the European elections. If this doesn't then perhaps that is because the crisis has been fading from memory or other issues come forward with a louder voice such as migration, Brexit, you name it. It remains still a question, whether one of the most important challenges to European citizens will or will not be able to generate outstanding attention to social issues from the competing political forces. And if it does, **how will it be reflected in election results** and in the longer term, in the development of European social policy?

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Ever since the first European community was set up the vast majority of its citizens have supported the project of European integration. Economic and **social cohesion** has been probably the strongest factor behind this public support. At times of declining support for the community enhancing its social dimension has always well served as an effective counterbalancing solution. As a matter of fact, this was exactly the pattern the development

of the social dimension followed, in a sort of forced way, all the time in the community originally economic in nature. As an example the European employment policy was born after the crisis of the 90s, while anti poverty policy is the consequence of the 2008 crisis.

On the basis of these experiences, today is high time to enhance, or at least promise to enhance the social dimension of the EU. And indeed, Social Europe or „more social Europe”, is a sort of a catch word in efforts to bring the EU closer to its citizens in the fight against populism, nationalism or E-scepticism. It is a widely shared assumption that in order to reverse destructive waves in the EU and declining support for the Community, European citizens, „left alone” and having become losers of the financial and economic crisis and other global forces should receive benefits by way of the development of the EU social dimension ¹.

Recent Community social achievements to be offered

The outgoing European Commission started its term with promises of more social Europe by qualifying the EU with a “Social Triple A” within five years, taking into account the existing limitations in this area, namely that the EU’s role within the social context has been restricted to complement and coordinate national measures. The mid-term Social Summit held in 2017 in Gothenburg was a milestone in the “qualifying” process. The agreed proclamation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** aiming at the systematic development of social protection for citizens, equal opportunities, inclusive growth and investment in sustainable jobs is based on a belief that strong social welfare protections and economic competitiveness can work hand-in-hand. The European Commission has taken concrete initiatives to put the 20 principles of the Pillar into practice at European level, which can improve the social situation of millions of Europeans significantly.²

The implementation of the Pillar’s long-term objectives has already started, but there is obviously a long road ahead. It is sure, that new legislative measures negotiated already under the Pillar are certainly better than the old ones, covering more or new areas of the social dimension. Such new legislation, an example from among many, is the regulation on the establishment of a new European institution, the European Labour Authority, to facilitate access for citizens to information on their rights and obligations as well as to relevant services and also to support cooperation between EU countries in the cross-border enforcement of relevant Union law. Another good example is the directive on transparent and predictable working conditions aiming to set new rights for all workers, particularly addressing insufficient protection for workers in more precarious jobs³.

¹ „Europe Union needs to provide social protection, to reach out to the people, to protect workers, to invest in better jobs and more opportunities. This is how Europe can gain back citizens’ trust. Failure to address this, is one of the root causes of the current wave of populism and nationalism.”

<https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/Debate-on-the-State-of-The-European-Union-2018-No-lessons-learned/>

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social_priorities_juncker_commission_en.pdf

³ <https://merce.hu/2019/02/05/szocialis-europa-ellenzelben/>

Probably more complex in its social effect is the **new Cohesion Policy** under development, which is intended to guide and regulate the EU's main investment policy in the next programming period of 2021-2027. The new Cohesion Policy is to support a smarter, greener, more connected and more social Europe. The very concrete expression of solidarity is especially represented by the objective of a **more social Europe**, which is not only devoted to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, but in addition is also to be implemented in such a way, that it has a special focus on the development of lagging regions and assists disadvantaged groups to be better positioned by targeted investment in employment, social, educational and healthcare, including infrastructure.⁴

Expectations of European citizens to social affairs

The expectations of European citizens – let's just look at the most recent survey's results - are really well **covering social issues** among the most pressing ones.

The „Mandate for Change“ by **Friends of Europe** is based on a citizens' poll conducted in late 2018, and suggests a renewed social contract by returning to the old goals of social progress, sustainable development, balanced economic growth and the well being of Europeans, as declared in the Maastricht Treaty. All these are needed „to put the emotion back into why Europe still matters to us now“, to ensure that the EU remains a beacon of hope.⁵ Social issues, more precisely **jobs**, rank second among the top issues that the EU must focus on, right after the issue of peace, highest on the list, and before the third area of climate change. Policy suggestions singled out extend from „making money smarter with a social purpose“ till „developing Europe-wide healthcare and social protection framework“ – offering ideas for campaign slogans in case of need.

The results of a recent **Eurobarometer** survey attest to a somewhat similar high ranking of social issues. On the question of what should be on the agenda ahead of the European election, citizens picked/chose terrorism as the most pressing topic of discussion, ahead of **youth unemployment** and immigration, while another social issue, **EU citizens' social protection** came into the sixth place, right after economic growth and environmental matters. These results widely differ among countries. Fighting youth unemployment and support for economic growth are the top concerns in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Croatia. Dutch, Swedish and Danish citizens describe “the social protection of citizens” as their top concern.⁶

Political responses to social expectations during the European elections campaign

The **possible responses to these outlined expectations** are still in a relatively vague phase, the campaign has not yet reached its full speed. It is still not a fully answered question as to

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2019-european-semester-country-reports_en

⁵ <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/publication/europematters-message-citizens>

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/european-elections-most-important-issues-facing-the-eu/>

how much (to what extent) and what kind of political forces will campaign with social Europe in the hope of receiving additional votes?

What looked sure at the onset, and can already be seen, is that progressive left forces, above all the **Europe's social democrats (S&D)**, still the second-largest political group in the European Parliament, do campaign with European social issues. In the need to find ways to boost their standing with their traditional working class electorate, S&D, as reflected in their campaign document on Social Europe⁷, prioritises issues of **employment, income** and taxation, and aims at imbuing European economic policy with a more 'social' dimension⁸, by declaring employment and social policies as a real social investment, not only perceived as cost. Under their main slogan of **fighting against inequalities and for social progress** for all Europeans, S&D believes that it is time for a rapid wage increase together with extending social protection to everyone in Europe, irrespective of their type of contract and employment situation.

The programme of the **European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)** for the European elections is similar in terms of objectives and its complex nature. The ETUC aims with the program to contribute to convincing voters that "the EU can be forced for good and positive change is possible" as recent social achievements illustrate. In the campaign document entitled 'A fairer Europe for workers', ETUC argues for a **new social contract for Europe**, based on democracy and social justice, quality jobs and higher wages, and socially just transitions to a low-carbon and digital economy in which no one is left behind.⁹

Both referred documents are most probably in use widely across Europe among the affiliated national parties of the member states as it well happens in Hungary too. The **Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP)** in its European election programme¹⁰ in the fight against so called illiberal and populist forces wishes to have a Union that **places people and social Europe in the centre**; which provides citizens with social and physical security, by ensuring extensive rights and services to them. With respect to rights and services, HSP is for introducing a European minimum wage and a European minimum pension, initiate the creation of the European Labour Code and the establishment of a uniform EU unemployment insurance scheme. Cohesion Funds should directly support the citizens by financing a targeted human investment plan in Europe.

The Hungarian social-liberal political party, the **Democratic Coalition**, is also campaigning with the idea of introducing a European minimum wage and a European minimum pension, attributed to a more closely integrated federal type Union ("European United States"), which is another of their objectives.

⁷ https://www.pes.eu/export/sites/default/galleries/Documents-gallery/Resolutions_PES_Congress_2018.pdf_2063069299.pdf

⁸ <https://www.socialeurope.eu/european-parliament-election>

⁹ <https://www.etuc.org/en/publication/etuc-programme-eu-elections-2019>

¹⁰ https://en.mszp.hu/article/homeland_love_europe_20190220

Moving from left on the European palette of the parties we have to mention briefly the **liberals** (ALDE) as the party also discusses employment, especially by adopting a ‘**job market access**’ rhetoric, with a combination of income policy and the need for investment.¹¹

Greens are picking up social issues as well, such as employment and social Europe, especially in combination with social cohesion. These are voiced beside the classic green issues — the protection of climate and species — and in addition to topics as the rule of law and civil rights¹².

The **centrally positioned new “renaissance” force**, the French President led En Marche is attributed to speaking for strong Social European values represented by President Macron’s call for a European minimum wage that is adapted to each country and collectively discussed yearly.¹³ According to this view, Europe needs to drive forward a project of convergence rather than competition: Europe, where social security was created, needs to introduce a social shield for all workers, guaranteeing the same pay for the same work, and an EU minimum wage, appropriate to each country, negotiated collectively every year.

Some **new alternative forces** are also likely to propagate social goals on the basis of their professional or political beliefs. A possible example is the French Yellow Jacket Movement which decided to campaign on five themes— purchasing power, pensions, immigration, social and fiscal justice, and sovereignty. Three of these can be more or less considered as social issues, though none of them are part of European social policy.¹⁴ Another example is that of the centrist Momentum Movement in Hungary, established in 2015 and representing the new political generation, which intends to spend EU cohesion support exclusively on hospitals, schools and workplaces.¹⁵

At the same time, it is not excluded that some **conservative forces** might come to consider (join in sharing the view, that) that there is a need to “re-fire the engine of a social Europe”¹⁶- as the Irish PM put it, while others, e.g. the German Christian Democrats reject any idea of „social union”. The Europeanisation of social systems and the minimum wage are considered to be the wrong approach by them¹⁷.

It can also be expected that **populists** will come up with social issues mainly on a national basis, ignoring completely whether it is a European issue or not. An example is the French far-right Marine le Pen, who proposes to spend more on homeless people instead of

¹¹ <https://www.socialeurope.eu/european-parliament-election>

¹² Ibid

¹³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-european-parliament-election-calls-for-big-eu-changes-in-european-renaissance/>

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/we-want-to-change-this-europe-yellow-jackets-announce-second-list-for-european-election/>

¹⁵ <https://momentum.hu/esemeny/ne-adjuk-a-jovonket-a-momentum-ep-programbemutatoja/>

¹⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-promise-people-first-at-summit-on-social-rights/>

¹⁷ <https://www.cdu.de/artikel/getting-europe-right>

migrants¹⁸. The Hungarian extreme-right Jobbik Party in its election programme is against inequalities and for the principle of equal wage for equal work with special regard to its geographical implications, i.e. workers in old and new member states should receive the same amount of wages for the same performance.¹⁹ They also call for the implementation of a non-existent but sounds-good European Wage Union²⁰ demanded by the Party already at the time of the last general election.

Closing remarks

The remaining time till the European elections will show if the political forces fighting for the “soul of Europe”²¹ other side than from the Centrum to the left, will line up with social Europe. We will follow the European campaign, will register and collect related documents to make a balance of social issues, claims, promises, whatever, right before the EP election.

Hopefully, the picture of social intentions will become more patterned and colourful by the time of the elections. It remains a question, whether one of the most important challenges to the European citizens will or will not be sufficient to generate outstanding attention to social issues the competing political forces. And if it does, **how will be reflected in election results** and in the longer term in the development of European social policy?

¹⁸ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1068972/france-news-marine-le-pen-Rassemblement-national-european-parliamentary-elections>

¹⁹ <https://www.jobbik.hu/biztonsagos-europat-szabad-magyarorszagot-ep-valasztasi-program-2019>

²⁰ https://index.hu/kulfold/ep/2019/01/08/jobbik_osszefogas_ep-valasztas/

²¹ Frans Timmermans, the lead candidate for the PES, defined these elections as being about ‘the soul of Europe’. <https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/Frans-Timmermans-launches-campaign-to-become-President-of-the-European-Commission-in-Lisbon/>