

A (MORE) SOCIAL EUROPE? CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

 EUROPEUM
INSTITUT PRO EVROPSKOU POLITIKU
INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN POLICY



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About the project

The YouthEU project is supported by the European Commission through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) and aims to address the sources of Euroscepticism among youth (high school and first-time voters) in the most Eurosceptic societies in the EU and among the EU candidate countries¹. The project also provides an opportunity for experts and policymakers to gain insight into the attitudes of young people towards the EU and European integration while creating a platform through which the youth can discuss and exchange their views of the EU and learn about the European project.

The YouthEU incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches to educating and empowering youth on the EU and their role as European citizens through webinars, workshops and engagement with EU stakeholders in Brussels. The project delivered 40 webinars in 4 countries, which engaged more than 800 participants. Out of those, 15 participants were chosen to take part in each of the national rounds. During the national rounds, students discussed what they consider as priorities for the EU and ultimately, 24 students from 4 participating countries were selected to travel to Brussels for a three-day study trip. Each country brought the outcomes from the national rounds that took place earlier in their capital cities respectively. After the first discussion, they set the main priorities that were formed into 4 pillars (climate, society, democracy, and the future of the EU). These were later on introduced during the general session and presented to MEP and EU delegates. During all of the abovementioned activities, students discussed how they perceive the EU and what they consider the biggest challenges to its prosperous future.

¹ Eurobarometer (2019). <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2255>

Issues raised by the students during the Brussels round of the project

Participants of the EU Youth Program in Brussels identified several areas in which the EU and its member states currently face challenges, and in which EU legislation should advance to optimally benefit every strata of society. Among other things, the students highlighted the importance of **fair working conditions** across all EU member states in order to strengthen the single market. This includes tackling structural **youth unemployment** (especially in southern European states such as Spain, Portugal and Italy), and introducing a national **minimum wage** in all member states to ensure fair compensation and adequate working and living conditions. Furthermore, the **creation of new jobs** has been identified as a key priority to combat unemployment and strengthen the economy. The students also discussed the observed **brain drain outside of the EU**, which could potentially destabilize and weaken non-EU countries over the long term.

Another area that has been identified as important by the students when it comes to strengthening Social Europe is **gender equality and social inclusiveness**. They addressed the challenge of unequal opportunities for different sections of society, and how this can potentially jeopardize the democratic system of the EU.

Finally, the participants highlighted the importance of **approaching the countries of the Global South in an ethical and fair manner**, ranging from fair product chains, migration, technology to sustainable infrastructure.

Proposals suggested by the students during the Brussels round of the project

The social dimension of the European Union is a vital part of European integration. Europe's evolution after WWII has been closely tied to the principle of solidarity and cohesion—that is, economic growth should not take place at the expense of social well-being or labor and social standards. With regards to youth unemployment, the participants of the EU Youth Program proposed continuous

professional training and education for young people under 25, and they called for European solidarity to make sure young people receive good quality job offers with good prospects and fair compensation. They also requested to equip people with the right skills to manage future challenges and to sustain societies' standards of living. At large, the participants of the EU Youth Program want the EU

institutions to create more sustainable jobs to manage current and future challenges, such as the Green Transition.

When it comes to gender equality and social inclusiveness, the students proposed equal representation of men and women in assemblies and governments to give women more political power to co-create a fair environment for everyone. Furthermore, it

was suggested to expand the offer of daycare centers and pre-schools to support working parents.

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Good relations with the countries of the Global South are strategically and geopolitically important to the European Union, in particular with respect to the increasing economic involvement of the ideological competitor China in these countries. The students urged the EU institutions to provide the countries of the Global South with financial support for climate protection measures and to help them adapt to and limit global warming. These investments would not only accelerate the much-needed global Green Transition and increase economic stimulation but also limit future migration flows from the Global South to Europe. Fighting climate change in countries of the Global South by financially supporting them is hence in the vital geopolitical interest of the European Union. However, the students pointed out that this cooperation has to be a 'partnership on equal terms'. Some countries of the Global South have been and will continuously be hit

harder by climate change, induced to a large extent by centuries-long over-consumption and colonial exploitation through Western countries. Climate justice in this sense needs to address the historical and structural disparity between regions by forcing those countries that have benefited in the past to (financially) contribute more and consume less in the future.

Elaborations of the students' proposals

The students discussed the concept of Social Europe, which is widely used as a term for EU social policy within the single market, but several of their suggestions spill over to the realm of EU foreign policy and trade policy. This distinction is important; the EU has different powers in these policy sectors. Whereas trade relations belong to the exclusive powers (which means that only the EU as a whole can act and enact legal measures), social policy or foreign policy can be categorized as shared powers and relies also on the action of EU member states.

This reality determines whether the EU can take effective action in the areas mentioned by the students. One might argue that if the EU does not have strong powers in certain policy fields, the solution would be to create these powers at the EU level. This is, however, not how European integration works. The division of labor between the member states and the EU follows a legal logic of subsidiarity and proportionality, and thus it is not possible to award the EU with additional powers based solely on impressions and political convictions. Furthermore, the consent-based culture in the EU prohibits to a large extent the extension of powers to the EU – there is always a state that would voice objections, as we have witnessed in the case of harmonization of corporate taxes or QMV in Foreign Affairs.

Inclusion, unemployment, and equal opportunities

There are, however, topics mentioned by the students where the EU is already active. Firstly, they voiced their support for creating a union of equal opportunities,

combatting youth unemployment, and creating better-quality jobs. In this regard, the European Commission launched the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan in 2017, which aims at limiting poverty and social exclusion as well as increasing the overall employment rate in the EU by 2030. The plan consists of 20 principles, ranging from active employment support to education and life-long learning. The Pillar is meant to be a tool to promote and improve social rights with joint collaboration of not only the EU institutions but also MS, civil society and social partners.

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On the other hand, one must understand that the actual impact EU institutions have in this field is limited. Union-wide social policy is still in its infancy, the political will is limited or fragmented, and its budgetary means are nowhere near the scale the member states can employ while pursuing their own national policy. Secondly, it is rather unlikely that further harmonization of social systems/policies based on cost-sharing within Europe will emerge in the short-/mid-term. Every renewed discussion about money transfer (from the MS level to the EU level) is entrenched in controversy, and thus the main burden for conducting social policy will remain on the EU member states. Without funding, there can be no effective social policy at the EU level.

What the EU can effectively do with regard to equal opportunities and social inclusion is to harmonize access to the EU job market, i.e. to make sure that every EU citizen has the same conditions and can move freely through the Union. This manifests in various regulations and directives determining the interoperability of health care systems, social insurance and regulation of posted workers abroad. Furthermore, the EU supports disadvantaged groups in access to the labor market

on the national level through its cohesion policy. A good example could be EU-funded pre-schools for children in order to encourage parents (mainly mothers) to re-enter the workforce, or requalification courses (targeting the general population). Still, all these programs require money, and the general lack of sufficient EU funding simply cannot substitute national policies.

Finally, the French students suggested an EU minimum wage – something that has become a reality only recently. In September 2022, the Union decided to implement a common frame for calculating minimum wage in a way that it equals 50% of the respective national median salary. As always, however, the devil is hidden in detail. Firstly, the directive sets this goal only in form of a recommendation and thus the exact amount is still determined by national authorities. Secondly, several EU countries (such as Sweden, Denmark and Austria) obtained an opt-out due to not having a national minimum wage in the first place and not being willing to change their norms.

Trade and Foreign policy

Students' idea of an ethical approach to the countries of the Global South is a topic that touches upon several EU policies. Firstly, it relates to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) belonging to the shared competencies. Any decision taken in this realm must be approved unanimously and thus it is difficult for the EU to conduct its policies effectively. One of the very few areas where the Union proved a solid competency is its development aid program, supporting social and economic cohesion in the Global South. The EU aid is part of the Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU's long-term budget. For a seven-year period, it pools together EU resources to multiply their effect.

An ethical approach to the Global South is also closely linked to the EU trade policy. As opposed to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the European Union has exclusive powers in this realm and decides about its next steps with a qualified

majority voting. The Commission is asked by the member states to negotiate new trade deals within the mandate they award the Commission with. After completion of the negotiations, the national governments approve a deal, and the Union signs the treaty as one unit. In the recent year, we have seen a shift towards a more value-based trade policy. The EU tends to transfer not only its commercial norms but also requirements related to climate, environmental or working conditions. A good example might be the recent push for clean standards in mining primary materials for batteries.

Recommendations

Based on the previous chapter, the EU's capacity to be active in the problems identified by the students is, to a large extent, limited. As for the social agenda, the responsibility lies primarily with EU member states, and the main reason for that is a lack of national political will to coordinate these issues at the EU level. Subsequently, this manifests in a lack of legal tools as well as financing.

1. **Pursuing further social policy coordination on the platform of interested states.** We cannot expect that all EU member states will be willing to develop the EU social pillar in the nearest and midterm future. Therefore, the EU has to resort to a "coalition of the willing", and develop closer cooperation on this platform.
2. **Increase funding in the post-2027 MFF to social policy.** Any effective public policy requires funding. The EU budget corresponds to approximately 1,2% of the EU GDP, which is not enough in isolation and decidedly not enough given the deepening strains on the social sphere. The EU should therefore decide on transforming the Next Generation EU fund into a permanent structure, and possibly streamline to social policy.

With regard to the ethical approach to countries of the Global South, the EU can utilize both its commercial policy as well as development aid. The latter proves especially useful in mitigating the disproportionate impact of climate change and exploitation in the Global South

1. **Invest more money in sustainable infrastructure in countries of the Global South:** to limit climate change and accelerate economic growth that includes sustainable and robust jobs.
2. **Partnership on equal terms:** the EU needs to acknowledge its role as a global green transition pioneer and invest much more in countries that are disproportionately affected by climate change without being responsible. This measure is not only a matter of goodwill but also a prevention of future migration flows and restriction of China's influence in the Global South.

For more information about the YouthEU project and organisations involved in its implementation, please visit youtheu.eu.



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