

# Towards Social Europe? Obstacles and opportunities in the multi-level governance of welfare states

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## Abstract

Social Europe, or the social dimension of the European Union (EU), has been receiving increasing attention in academic debates. This special issue introduction discusses Social Europe through the analytical framework of multi-level governance while asking, perhaps controversially, whether Social Europe has the potential to become a fully-fledged welfare state. This introduction also summarises the articles included in this special issue which focus on different governance levels, including EU institutions, member states, national parties, economic sectors, workers and the general public. On this basis, the introduction identifies sources of challenges and opportunities for Social Europe from various levels of governance. We conclude that the needs and demands become more diverse when we move from European institutions to the citizens. Notably, obstacles from one governance level often carry over to another governance level. Consequently, it becomes much more difficult to design welfare policies on the EU level that work for everyone. While a more evolved EU-level welfare state may be possible in the future, substantial obstacles make it difficult to achieve in the short run. Hence, future research

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should examine the multi-level structure of Social Europe in more detail to better grasp what Social Europe can and cannot deliver and why. Such research is not only relevant in the European Union but also in other multi-level governance systems across the world.

#### KEYWORDS

crisis, European Union, multi-level governance, Social Europe, welfare states

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

National welfare states have long been in crisis. This is linked not only to trends such as demographic ageing, technological change, and fiscal retrenchment but also to exogenous shocks such as the Great Recession, the Covid-19 pandemic, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As such, many argue that national welfare states are only partly equipped to address the growing and multifaceted socioeconomic problems of today, such as growing inequality and climate change (Ferrera et al., 2023; Im, de la Porte, et al., 2023).

Looking at the European Union (EU) context, some national welfare states are better equipped than others to confront challenges and crises. Research already shows that, partly due to the Great Recession, Member States with different welfare and industrial relations regimes have diverged after the last accession rounds in 2004, 2007 and 2013 on key economic and social outcomes, such as economic growth and inequality (Clegg & Durazzi, 2023; O'Reilly et al., 2018). With incoming challenges like the Green Transition (Im, 2023; Zimmermann & Graziano, 2020), one may wonder if the Member States will further diverge in the near future. Arguably, this is where Social Europe or the social dimension of the EU comes in. Social Europe has been established and evolved over the past decades to (1) foster better socioeconomic outcomes for European citizens, to (2) address divergence in social trends across and within EU Member States, to (3) reduce the risk of socioeconomic shocks & buffer union-wide crises through coordinated policies, and to (4) increase the democratic legitimacy of the EU and thereby counter anti-democratic and anti-EU movements.

In principle, Social Europe can complement national welfare states by co-stimulating economic growth, progress and innovation and by improving social outcomes across member states. Through flagship initiatives like the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), guiding instruments like the Social Investment Package (2013) or the Youth Guarantee (2020), legislation like the Minimum Wages Directive (2022) and massive funding instruments such as the Next Generation EU (2021) and the Just Transition Mechanism (2021), the EU can support, influence and direct the social policies and legislations of member states (Armingeon et al., 2022; De la Porte et al., 2023). Put differently, Social Europe may reduce divergence in Member States' social and economic outcomes by supporting their capacity to respond to structural transformations and challenges or sudden crises. Despite this potential, Social Europe has often been criticised as lacking teeth because of its frequent soft law character (Falkner, 2019; Jordan et al., 2021) as exemplified by the Open Method of Coordination in Employment (De la Porte & Pochet, 2012). After almost two decades of standstill, recent trends, however, suggest that the EU may be willing to fulfil this potential with hard law initiatives—if the European Commission considers it to be in their interest to do so (Copeland, 2022; Im, Larsen, & Pircher, 2023). Nevertheless, this shift away from soft law initiatives remains slow and uneven also due to resistance by different political actors, and in particular Member States and partly business representatives. Thus, the potential of Social Europe to become a fully-fledged welfare state remains uncertain.

To date, the literature on Social Europe often theorises and examines the positions of political actors by paying particular attention to the support for Social Europe (Eick, 2024a). On the contrary, research on the opposition to

Social Europe, recently coined as ‘welfare Euroscepticism’ (Eick & Leruth, 2024) is largely missing. This special issue (introduction) contends that it is equally essential to examine opposition to Social Europe and the forms by which it may unfold. This is because opposition, perhaps more than support, determines the types of tensions that unfold around Social Europe’s multi-level governance structure. Hence, opposition, more than support, limits Social Europe’s true potential. For example, the EU relies on unanimity voting in sensitive policy areas, which is difficult to achieve with the 27 member states pursuing different interests and having different needs and demands (e.g., Pircher et al., 2024). Similarly, the EU-level social partners who are key actors when it comes to shaping Social Europe often disagree profoundly on overall aims, focus or instruments regarding specific policy initiatives (e.g., Im et al., 2024; Sørensen et al., 2022). This is evident in the fact that they have only seldomly made use of their right under Article 154 TFEU to negotiate agreements in the field of social policy among themselves and thereby replacing the so-called ordinary legislative procedure where the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council are the main actors (e.g., Falkner, 2019). Furthermore, citizens from different sociodemographic groups, regions and countries may have different or even clashing expectations of European-wide social policies (e.g., Eick, 2024a; Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2023). In addition, we are witnessing an unprecedented rise of radical right and Eurosceptic parties across the continent, which presents another source of tension around Social Europe despite the EU’s efforts at social integration (Vesan & Corti, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this special issue aims to identify and distinguish obstacles and opportunities within the multi-level governance framework of Social Europe. It does so by adopting an encompassing approach in line with the multi-level governance framework in which Social Europe is situated. The articles of this special issue analyse obstacles and opportunities around Social Europe across a wide range of governance levels, including EU institutions, Member States, national parties, sectors of the economy, workers, and the public. Consequently, this special issue aims to provide an integrated understanding of the barriers to realising welfare policies on the EU level and the limits to which Social Europe can support the challenges that national welfare states face. This special issue thus addresses three interconnected questions which we will deliberate on after having introduced the articles of this special issue:

1. How do different governance levels shape Social Europe?
2. What are the obstacles and opportunities for Social Europe on these different governance levels and across countries?
3. How can tensions regarding the scope and direction of Social Europe be reconciled?

## 2 | OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles in this special issue draw on a range of academic disciplines, including sociology, political science, law, and industrial relations, and use a variety of data sources such as documents, interviews, surveys, and macro-level data. With respect to the order of the articles, we start with the EU institutions and end with the citizens.

Focusing on EU institutions, Sophie Dura examines how strategic agency shaped the European Pillar of Social Rights. Leveraging an actor-centred perspective and applying process-tracing based on 15 interviews with policy experts, the article shows that the European Pillar of Social Rights builds on but also critically modifies previous initiatives present within the broader EU governance framework, notably the European Employment Strategy, the Lisbon Strategy and the Open Method of Coordination. The analyses show that these differences can be traced back to the strategic agency of three key political actors: Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, his special adviser Allan Larsson and parliamentary rapporteur Maria João Rodrigues. It is argued that there is concrete evidence that these actors contributed to the adoption process not only through their long-held political views but also by bringing to bear their own critical reflections on previous EU social policy initiatives.

The article by Agnieszka Piasna focuses on another set of EU institutions—the EU social partners—and examines their attempts to develop EU-wide solutions to improve working conditions in the platform economy. In the context

of the disruptive impact of digital labour platforms on work and employment and their avoidance of an employer role, the article adopts the actor approach to examine the role that platforms themselves play. The aim of the article is to understand the implications this has for social partners involved in the process, as well as for social dialogue and collective bargaining more broadly. The analysis shows how the prerogatives of the social partners are negatively affected by the blurring of the role of the employer and the redefinition of traditional categories of actors in social policy.

Using aggregated EU-SILC data, Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak, Irena Kotowska, Iga Magda, Magdalena Smyk-Szymańska, Paweł Strzelecki, and Karolina Bolesta examine the impact of formal and informal childcare on labour market gender gaps. Focusing on these social investment strategies promoted by the EU, the authors take an inter-generational perspective on the Member-State level. The paper highlights how relevant pre-existing formal-informal care arrangements are for reducing labour market inequalities by gender. The paper suggests that progress in early childhood and care policies may increase the labour market participation of both mothers and grandmothers as it provides evidence that insufficient access to formal childcare leads to its substitution by informal care provided, among others, by women in pre-retirement age.

Steven Ballantyne and Lorenzo Mascioli explore the social agenda of Cohesion Policy—the EU's policy platform for regional and local development. The article identifies the emergence of diverse morphologies of subsidiarity, which the authors refer to as 'spaces of subsidiarity' in the delivery of Cohesion Policy projects for quality employment and labour mobility delivered in Italy, Portugal, and Spain during the 2010s. The authors account for variation in the relative incidence of territorial levels (i.e., national, regional, and local) and sectors of society (i.e., public, private, and third sector) which generate distinct spaces of subsidiarity both between and within countries. These results suggest that different spaces of subsidiarity have important implications for policy outputs and outcomes and may help to explain the heterogeneous impact of Cohesion Policy across the EU.

Zhen Im's article delves into the level of national parties. Im explores parties' support and opposition to one aspect of Social Europe which has remained underexplored in this literature—EU-level social regulations—using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2006, 2009, 2014, 2019). The analysis shows substantial variation in parties' position on Social Europe both within and across party families. In particular, socialist and green parties support EU-level social regulations the most, whereas radical right parties oppose them the most. Centre-right parties' support is much more mixed. Lastly, the article does not find systematic evidence that national economic conditions influence parties' support for EU-level social regulations. In the context of increasing political polarisation in Member States, parties from different party families may respond to similar economic conditions differently. Taken together, the author posits that national parties will exercise a substantial influence on the trajectory of Social Europe through their participation in national governments and in the European Parliament.

Janine Leschke and Laura Scheele's article considers tensions in Social Europe at the economic sector level. The authors ask how well food delivery platform workers across four EU countries are informed about essential aspects of their work, including rights protection, working time and schedules or earnings. They do so by drawing on information provided to riders during the application process, including via websites and FAQs, scrutiny of contracts, service agreements and collective bargaining agreements, where relevant. The analysis shows that it mattered most whether or not a platform hired their workers as dependent employees or used independent contractors (solo self-employed). For those platforms using dependent employment, the country legacy of non-standard forms of employment was also an important factor. Differences and similarities in such information seem to be more strongly bound to firm-level decisions than to the welfare and industrial relations regimes in which the platform companies operate. This finding emphasises that particularly hard-law Social Europe initiatives are bound to face both opposition and support beyond the member state level with business interests playing an important role both for the national and supranational level.

The article by David de Kort and Sonja Bekker provides an analysis on yet another level—workers in the domestic cleaning care sector in the Netherlands. Many of the part-time domestic workers fall under a particular type of labour law, which gives them fewer social protection rights and renders households and the workers themselves

responsible for covering those rights. This legislation has been criticised for institutionalising differential treatment of domestic workers, which goes against ideas and norms propagated in initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and equal treatment provisions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 domestic workers in the Netherlands, the article shows that the actual access to social protection greatly varies among different workers and over different employment relationships of individual workers but generally falls below par. The findings indicate that this is partly due to the Dutch policy option underestimating domestic workers' wariness of placing demands on the households they work for, which raises questions about the desirability of non-mediated employment relationships in the sector.

The final article by Gianna Eick uses focus group discussions in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain (134 participants in total) to understand better what citizens think about Social Europe. The article argues that the public opinion research on Social Europe needs qualitative research to uncover some of the arguments and motivations lying behind the currently dominant quantitative survey findings. Through the qualitative data analysis Eick reveals that the public may be more welfare Eurosceptic than previously assumed. This is because during the discussions multi-faceted welfare Eurosceptic attitudes appeared. While the participants may support the general idea of a Social Europe, they are highly critical about how it actually works. In particular, the analysis reveals that the public is sceptical towards harmonising social policies on the EU level and redistributive financial instruments on the EU level. Three overarching and partly overlapping concerns appear to drive public welfare Euroscepticism: economic concerns, cultural concerns, and democratic concerns. The results emphasise the public's preferences for more conditional redistributive policies and the need to make Social Europe more visible to the public.

### 3 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND OUTLOOK

This special issue provides important insights into the obstacles and opportunities in the multi-level governance of welfare states, exemplified by the potential of Social Europe initiatives to pave the way for a fully-fledged welfare state. By extension, it also underlines the limits to which Social Europe can complement national welfare states to overcome their limitations in addressing structural transformations like demographic ageing, technological change and the Green Transition. To be clear, this special issue is not about whether a fully-fledged welfare state on the EU level is desirable or not. Rather, it considers whether it is feasible or not. It does so by identifying sources of opportunities, challenges and tensions in interests and demands for Social Europe from the various levels of governance and by theorising their impact on the future of Social Europe.

Necessarily, the articles in this special issue only show a narrow excerpt of reality. For example by focusing on specific policy proposals, policy areas or countries. The articles do, however, encompass multiple levels of governance. Overall, the articles paint a mixed picture. Based on the results from some of the higher governance levels, one could assume that it is feasible to create more ambitious EU-level social policies or even an EU-level welfare state. On the contrary, results from the lower governance levels suggest that such policies are not feasible or may even be counterproductive for increasing equality and integration across the continent. In essence, the further we go down from the EU level (e.g., EU Commission) and to the individual levels (e.g., citizens), the more diverse the needs and demands become. Consequently, it is difficult it becomes to design and agree on policies in the interests for all individuals across the different Member States in the EU. These tensions also often reach across different governance levels and affect different political actors in different ways.

These findings underline the need to be clear-eyed about what Social Europe can and cannot achieve. Although a more institutionalised EU-level welfare state may be feasible in the future, it appears difficult to attain in the short run. If it is pursued, it will likely be led from the top by EU institutions, and especially by the European Commission. Following this line of thought, the European Pillar of Social Rights, in particular, has clearly shifted social policy making in the EU and might be a first step towards an EU welfare state. However, doing so runs the risk of backlash, such as elevated Euroscepticism from the bottom. Another obstacle is the fact that EU

welfare policies are currently not fully delivering (or perceived to be delivering) on what they promise. For example, in terms of diminishing inequality. If the impact of this bottom-up backlash finds its way to peak EU institutions (e.g., the European Parliament through European elections), then even the push for more Social Europe by the European Commission may be constrained.

In sum, this special issue provides rich and layered insights into its three guiding questions. First, *how do different governance levels shape Social Europe?* The articles in this special issue focused on various governance levels ranging from EU institutions to member states, national parties, economic sector, workers and the general public. However, the analyses showed nuances—namely, that there are more levels or different actors within these levels that are involved in shaping Social Europe.

For example, Ballantyne and Mascioli demonstrate that sub-national actors strongly influence the interpretation and implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy. Their findings underscore the need to pay attention to subnational institutions and actors, and not just national ones thus chiming with recent calls in political science to focus on sub-national levels (e.g., Ejrnæs et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Additionally, de Kort and Bekker show divisions in social protection access among workers in the domestic work sector. If such divisions yield different political demands for Social Europe, they highlight the need to revisit labour market segmentation as a potential source of influence on Social Europe at the level of workers in particular sectors.

Second, *what are the obstacles and opportunities for Social Europe on these different governance levels and across countries?* The articles in this special issue demonstrated that there are a range of obstacles and opportunities at every governance level limiting the feasibility of Social Europe turning into a fully-fledged welfare state.

For example, Leschke and Scheele show that firms are very heterogeneous actors, even if only focusing on specific sub-sectors of the economy. Beyond lobbying governments and EU institutions on EU legislation, firms (employers), as part of EU-level social partners, also shape EU policies directly through mandatory consultations or autonomous collective bargaining. Finally, there are not only diverse interests between unions and employers but also heterogeneous interests due to internal competitions (e.g., platform-platform; platform-traditional business sector). Another example is from Eick who argues that the public supports more generous social policies, but not necessarily from the EU. Furthermore, the public is often selective regarding who should get access to these policies. These issues are particularly related to the polarisation when it comes to welfare chauvinism, or the exclusion of migrants and refugees from social rights (see also Eick, 2024b). This brings up questions about inclusion and who is seen as deserving of EU support. It also demonstrates that national political parties offer obstacles and opportunities for the development of Social Europe. A sizable share of political parties supports Social Europe, but a significant share also opposes it. Crucially, there are political parties with other views on whether social inequality ought to be addressed. They also differ on whether or not it should be ameliorated through regulations. Even if they do agree that social inequality ought to be addressed through regulations, they also differ on whether the EU or Member States should decide on these regulations. In short, the form by which Social Europe eventually takes (whether as a fully-fledged welfare state or not, or something in between) will also depend on the electoral fortunes of different political parties.

Third and finally, *how can tensions regarding the scope and direction of Social Europe be reconciled?* This turned out to be the most challenging question for this special issue, but the general answer is that more transparency and inclusion of different political actors could help (even though this could slow the policy process further down if not organised well). Specifically, there is a need for more solidarity building across the EU since resources are being shared. Dura's contribution shows that regardless of the tensions existing at the EU level about the direction of Social Europe, particular actors can mitigate these tensions to create room for social policy at the EU level. This room can be used by political actors strategically to advance their ideas of Social Europe. Dura shows how political actors purposively shaped key characteristics of the European Pillar of Social Rights—the EU's social flagship initiative—such as its legal status as an interinstitutional proclamation or its formulation as social rights in order to build a successful and influential initiative. However, Piasna's findings demonstrate the limits to which EU-level platforms can overcome these tensions in order to facilitate common ground in advancing a more comprehensive Social Europe.

Chłoń-Domińczak et al. demonstrate, in turn, that the social investment strategy of the EU can be a fruitful way to facilitate mothers' employment and contribute to lowering gender employment and pay gaps.

Having sketched out the extent and variation in support and opposition to Social Europe at different levels, we close with a question that follows from the findings above—how far can Social Europe reach? The special issue contributions hint that Social Europe appears more attainable at higher governance levels (like EU institutions and Member States) than at lower governance levels (like workers or the general public). This is because the closer we get to the lowest governance level, the more diverse the needs and demands get (see related Crespy et al., 2024). This may also explain why EU citizens' frustrations and Euroscepticism seem to be on the rise despite the EU's growing efforts to fight inequality. This rise in frustration and Euroscepticism is best highlighted by the increased electoral support for radical political alternatives (especially radical right parties) across the continent. We posit that these two parallel trends may be explained by the disjuncture in how higher and lower governance levels perceive Social Europe. Whereas higher governance levels tend to agree on Social Europe and pursue it, lower governance levels continue to disagree on it and become aggrieved when Social Europe is pursued—at least to some extent. EU-level platforms like the European Social Dialogue could, in principle, offer a means of reconciling tensions regarding Social Europe between employers and workers.

In sum, this special issue underlines the need to conceptualise and consider Social Europe in a multilevel setting. To date, 'Social Europe' or the social dimension of the EU remains vaguely defined (see Crespy & Menz, 2015; Goetschy, 2006; Pascual & Jepsen, 2006). For example, Leibfried and Pierson (1992) define it as a supranational social market economy, whereas Scharpf (2002) considers it to be the European Social Model. Vandenbroucke (2013) conceptualises it as the European Social Union. Ferrera (2017) considers it to be different social spaces, and Hemerijck (2019) suggests that it is a holding environment for national welfare states. These different definitions could also reflect the time dimension as they may be about what Social Europe was (perceived as) at different points in time. These different definitions also often build on what Social Europe is specific to different governance levels, but few if any of these definitions address what it is to all governance levels. In contrast to these approaches, we posit that to fully understand the trajectory of Social Europe we need to consider Social Europe in its entirety. Hence, this special issue complements existing definitions by positing that:

Social Europe represents the interplay between multifaceted political actors that aim to empower social rights across the EU's multiple governance levels.

Building on this conceptualisation, we suggest that future research should examine the multi-level structure of Social Europe in greater detail to better grasp what Social Europe can and cannot deliver, and why. This includes (1) analysing different governance levels in parallel, (2) exploring the (in-)congruence between the positions of different political actors, (3) interdisciplinary approaches, and (4) multi-method approaches. Also, results will probably differ depending on the specific issues in focus (e.g., content, scope, the reach of a policy proposal and the question of whether it is soft or hard law). Theoretically, it may also be valuable to revisit the conceptualisation of Social Europe to refine it in terms of what it can and cannot deliver, and why. Such research also has implications beyond the EU as it can inform other multi-level governance systems across the world.

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