



#IEE60

## CARTE BLANCHE

Réflexion collective '60 ans en 6000 signes' dans le cadre du soixantième anniversaire de l'IEE-ULB

En 2024, l'Institut d'études européennes de l'ULB (IEE-ULB) a soixante ans ! Pour scander cette année anniversaire et très « européenne », il convie ses membres à réfléchir à des questions fondatrices de l'intégration européenne en 1964 et toujours d'actualité en 2024. Dans une forme courte et accessible, nos chercheurs proposent un portrait en mosaïque de l'Europe, entre continuités et mutations. Les auteurs sont libres de leurs propos qui ne représentent pas une position officielle de l'IEE-ULB.

### Will Social Europe finally happen?

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*Struggles around Social Europe persist. While recent initiatives guided by the European Pillar of Social Rights reflect renewed commitment, substance must follow. Whether or not the Belgian presidency can leave a positive mark has yet to be proven.*

*Les luttes autour de l'Europe sociale persistent. Si les récentes initiatives guidées par le socle européen des droits sociaux témoignent d'un engagement renouvelé, la substance doit suivre. Il reste à prouver que la présidence belge peut laisser une trace positive.*

In 2009, Francois Denord and Antoine Schwartz published a book entitled “Social Europe won't happen”. Contrary to the narrative that European integration is driven by the quest for peace and prosperity for all, the authors put forward a sober contre-récit: The EU's construction around the single market with its institutionalized dynamics of liberalization and its blatant democratic deficit will prevent the advent of Social Europe.

Yet – like it or not and despite somewhat delimited competences – the EU has become an important arena for the three primary dimensions of social policy: rights, regulation and, redistribution. This is despite the fact that the desirability of Social Europe has been questioned over the entire course of European integration. Left parties (or more accurately, those to the left of Social Democrats) as well as labour unions, particularly in Scandinavian countries, have for long vigorously opposed EU activity in social affairs. It is not difficult to see the reasons why: Firstly, justified with the requirements imposed by monetary integration, the EU's macroeconomic regulatory framework has exerted pressure on member states to cut back social spending in the name of competitiveness and budgetary rigour. In the aftermath of the financial and sovereign debt crisis, such cutbacks were particularly violent in Southern European countries. If Social Europe ever carried the connotation of upward convergence in living standards for Greek citizens, after austerity-prone reforms imposed by the Troika, Social Europe – if anything – suggested disastrous welfare cuts and widespread social hardship. Secondly, and further into history still, European integration has always been strongly shaped by the Court of Justice which destabilized rather than stabilized the 20th European social model. Put differently, as the Court prioritized market-making over market-correcting, historic social achievements such as the right to collective action were sometimes conceived as obstacles to the EU's constitutional core: the free movement of goods, services, capital, and workers.



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However, the past couple of years indicate the tide for Social Europe may be turning: An impressive number of initiatives in the social field have recently been adopted or are currently being negotiated. There seems to be a renewed commitment, or rather, a long-awaited realization, that the EU must embrace social justice. Perhaps most importantly, social policy is no longer understood merely as lavish expenditure but as a productive factor. The EU is all too familiar with this type of market-based reasoning. “If you want a productive economy, you need to invest in people!” resonates with policymakers in Brussels and beyond.

The renewed commitment to Social Europe is articulated through the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) adopted in 2017. This document, initially criticized as a largely toothless declaration of intentions, has become a genuine compass of EU action. Embraced by all EU institutions and member states, it doesn't just guide EU policy ideationally, it also provides political clout to actors demanding changes to existing policy or calls for new initiatives to realign EU activity with the Pillar's objectives. For example, when the Covid-19 recovery fund was negotiated, the European Parliament successfully pushed for member states' reform programs complying with and contributing to the achievement of EPSR objectives. Legislative initiatives, too, radiate around the EPSR's principles. In recent years, the EU has put forward initiatives on minimum wages, work-life-balance, and platform work, to name just a few. Given its historical track record on social, this is impressive. Nevertheless, the substance of these initiatives needs to be continuously scrutinized. While the minimum wage directive sounds great, it is in a fact not much more than a recommendation to member states. The same may be true for the EU directive on platform work. Hailed as a clear sign that the EU is tackling the challenges of precarious workers, the directive has yet to prove its efficacy. With platform companies aggressively lobbying policymakers, parliamentarians, and heads of governments (think UberFiles), the compromise may prove ineffective. France's role in 'watering down' the platform work text was particularly destructive; Jacques Delors would roll over in his grave.

The ongoing Belgian presidency has put social high on the agenda. In fact, this is almost a historical continuity over 60 years of European integration: Belgium, both its government and its citizens (think Éliane Vogel-Polsky), have repeatedly placed social issues at the heart of the European project and contributed to notable advances. The current presidency has announced three priority areas to continue this Belgian legacy: consolidating the EPSR as the compass of the EU social agenda, combatting social dumping and fair labour mobility, and strengthening the social dimension of the EU economic governance framework. The latter one is the bottleneck for the true advent of a more Social Europe. Tight budgetary frameworks systemically curtail member states' possibility to seriously pursue social investment. This needs to change if the EU wants to get rid of being perceived as potential threat to national solidarity systems. Although a preliminary agreement of December 2023 foresees a more country-specific approach, the Maastricht debt criteria remain unchanged at this stage pursuing austerity for years to come.

Through politics, the EU's (neo-)liberal *esprit* can be transformed if substantial policies are pursued that lead to tangible improvement in people's lives. We're not there yet but Social Europe is on the horizon.

