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Spring 2025

Working paper

Beyond market vs. social citizenship:  
structural transformations and the building of  
a pan-European labour market

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This Working paper has been published in the context of the EUqualis - Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (n°10104782) of the Institut d'études européennes - Université libre de Bruxelles



# Beyond market vs. social citizenship: structural transformations and the building of a pan- European labour market

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## Abstract

This paper aims to shed new light on the scientific controversies surrounding European citizenship by moving beyond the unproductive dichotomy between social and market citizenship. Instead, we propose that EU citizenship is fundamentally socio-economic in nature, predating its formal introduction in the Treaty of Maastricht. The paper argues that the policies designed to develop this citizenship are responses to perceived economic imperatives arising from structural transformations such as deindustrialization, globalization, demographic shifts, digitalization, and climate change. These policies produce interconnected effects of recommodification and decommodification.

To substantiate this claim, we examine three empirical domains. First, we revisit the 1990s to explore how the rise of 'Social Europe' coincided with a push for supply-side policies through the flexicurity and activation paradigms. Second, we analyze the 'Skills' agenda, a cornerstone of the envisioned pan-European labor market since the 2000s, which has facilitated versatile adaptation to evolving market demands over time. Finally, we assess the European Pillar of Social Rights, which can be seen as an attempt to address some shortcomings of an increasingly integrated pan-European labor market.

Together, these developments anchor EU citizenship in a primarily functional—rather than normative—rationale and highlight its relative disconnection from political participation and a sense of belonging.

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## Introduction

From the aftermath of WW2 onwards, the European Economic Community (EEC), and later the European Union (EU), have embodied and advanced a form of market liberalisation and integration beyond national boundaries against the background of broader economic globalization. The EEC spearheaded the trans-nationalisation of – a limited set of – social rights. At the origins, coordination mechanisms and legal instruments were essentially focused on facilitating the mobility of workers from economically depressed areas (especially in Italy) to dynamic regions (in Germany, France or Benelux countries) in need of labour. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this phenomenon became embedded in the creation of a European citizenship status with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. The treaty marked the symbolic passage from a merely economic community to a political union endowed with a common currency. As a result, the issue of transnational social rights became part of a broader debate about the possibility, conditions, and substance of a pan-European form of citizenship that would mimic the building of national citizenship around a Marshallian model of civic, political and social rights. The adoption of the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers in 1989 reflects a political agreement on expanding social rights as a necessary corollary to market integration and, certainly for federalist elites, as a core component and prefiguration of a novel form of supranational citizenship yet to come.

Over thirty years on, and despite an abundant literature on the topic, it seems more difficult than ever to grasp the substance of European social citizenship and its significance in practical – as opposed to normative – terms. For developments in the EU seem to have gone in two opposite directions. On one hand, the EU citizenship status has borne relatively little fruit. Though it has some impact on individual rights and administrative practices, it has mainly remained under the radar of public awareness. States and national boundaries remain the cornerstone of citizenship from a legal, political and societal point of view. If the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) has used the citizenship provisions in many instances, the status remains void of solid normative foundations in terms of for instance justice, solidarity, or democracy (Kochenov, 2013; Unger, 2022). On the other hand, the social dimension of transnational citizenship has continuously been substantiated with new procedures and instruments, forging an expanding set of social rights. This, however, has

above all pursued market expansion and liberalisation (e.g. Crespy, 2016, chap. 2), sometimes at the expense of the collective social rights entrenched in national polities. The belief in the market imperative of competitiveness and fiscal discipline came to a head with the great recession ensuing from the 2008 financial crisis. Since the mid-2010s, the EU institutions have re-engaged with an agenda promoting social re-regulation and the expansion of social rights. This has been depicted by many observers as the great ‘comeback of European social entrepreneurship (e.g. Corti and Vesan, 2022).

Overall, it is evident that the social dimension, on the one hand, and civic-political dimensions of European citizenship (Goodman, 2023), on the other, have largely remained disconnected. Initial hopes that the Treaty of Maastricht would provide a critical constitutional juncture (Maas, 2007) have remained unfulfilled. At the same time, this literature identifies the tangible and significant effects of the EU, reshaping citizenship in important ways, either by extending and transnationalizing rights, debasing national rights, or stratifying citizenship (Bruzelius et. al, 2017). Citizenship can be defined as an institutionalised relationship between individuals and the political authorities that grant them rights and resources. In theory, citizenship rests on participation and belonging at an individual level and generates loyalty and legitimacy at the system level. In practice, this is only likely to be the case in highly differentiated and skewed ways across social groups and territories. Furthermore, a large body of literature has shown that the integrative economic and social effects of EU citizenship are unequal across social groups and territories (e.g. Standing, 2011; Huguée, Pénissat and Spire, 2017; Schweyher, 2021).

Against this background, this paper leaves out the political and civic dimension of citizenship to focus on the dialectical relationship between the economic (market-based) dimension and the social (rights-based) dimension of EU citizenship. Our objective is to shed light on the political and historic dynamics that have shaped the contours of what we call EU socio-economic citizenship since the late 1980s. This implies: a) taking stock of the interdisciplinary literature (history, political science, law, sociology) and overcoming the opposition between the notions of market citizenship and social citizenship; b) recasting European citizenship as intrinsically socio-economic, anchored in a functional imperative, namely the building of an integrated pan-European<sup>1</sup> labour market, implying both decommodifying and recommodifying effects; c) putting forward new terrains of investigation that can lend empirical support to this claim. We argue that the contours of EU

socio-economic citizenship (in terms of tangible policies and rights) depend on the construction of a political imperative ensuing from the structural transformations of Europe's changing political economy (globalization, demographic aging, digitalisation, climate change). The unification of a pan-European labour market has consistently featured as a response to these transformations, thus providing a powerful functionalist rationale behind the rise of the EU as a regulator and provider of socio-economic rights.

The paper starts with a synthetic and critical review of the central dichotomy in the literature, opposing a social citizenship to market citizenship as two contrasted models. By turning to history, we show that the social and economic functions of citizenships are inherently linked and follow the economic and political imperatives of constructing a single market, and, to a lesser extent, a polity. In section two, we argue that the process by which the contours of this citizenship are reshaped are deeply entangled with how political and social actors respond to the economic imperatives and structural transformations associated with market integration in Europe and wider global capitalism. To do so, we draw on the period of the 1990s, the 'golden age of social democracy' and it show how reflects in part a compromise over labour supply and increased international competition sparked by the neoliberal shift. Secondly, we look at the European Skills Agenda as a response to the ongoing impacts of that shift and in particular the processes of de-industrialisation and digitalisation of the labour markets across Europe.

## **Market vs. Social Citizenship: a useful dichotomy?**

Implicitly or explicitly, the bulk of the literature on European citizenship is articulated around two ideal types: at one (generally negative) pole of the normative spectrum, we find the notion of market citizenship, a truncated version of citizenship epitomizing a utilitarian relationship tying individual citizens and the EU and grounded on individual participation in work and consumption activities partly regulated at supranational level. On the (positive) side of the spectrum, social citizenship often goes hand in hand with a political and participatory dimension to be found in national states and a desired horizon related to EU polity building. Reflecting on key contributions selected from an abundant body of literature, this section reviews insights and shortcomings to argue that the market vs. social citizenship dichotomy should be overcome to better grasp the nature of EU citizenship on empirical – more than normative – grounds.

## Market Citizenship vs. Social Citizenship

Almost every discussion on citizenship, including at European scale (Börner, 2020; Amelina, 2020; Goodman, 2023), refers to or employs Marshall's (1949/1992) conceptualization of the three dimensions of citizenship, i.e. a set of political, economic, and social rights. Given the primacy of market considerations, EU citizenship has conversely been criticised as market citizenship (Kochenov, 2013) substantially altering national citizenship (Kostakopoulou, 1999). Anchored in the four freedoms as well as non-discrimination conceived as fundamental rights, the EU regime has gradually materialised as a liberal form of citizenship providing opportunities and rights to individuals beyond borders (Unger 2022), including by opening welfare states to non-nationals and, in some cases, recasting the rights for nationals themselves.

Social citizenship remains an ambiguous concept in contributions focused on the EU. For example, Seelaib-Kaiser and Bruzelius (2020: 1533) define social citizenship as minimum income rights while Bloemrad et. al (2019: 78) apply a larger understanding where social citizenship consists of 'the responsibilities that the state has to its citizens, including "the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security'. Betzeld and Bothfeld (2001: 3) stress the redistributive dimension of social citizenship which consists of 'welfare provision including social rights and the principles of redistribution' as well as its processual nature (20). For Taylor-Gooby (2009: 5), social citizenship thus concerns

'rights and duties in relation to benefits and services designed to meet social needs and enhance capabilities set in the context of the cultural beliefs and assumptions that influence their practical operation.'

These definitions primarily revolve around the vertical relationship between the state and the individual. However, the horizontal relationship between employers and employees may also be seen as the defining ground for social citizenship (employee involvement, collective action, etc.) (Mückenberger et. al, 1996).

Abrahamson (2006) cautions against the widespread usage of Marshall's conceptualization and invites to rethink citizenship in light of globalization, increased labour mobility and a supranational level of political and economic governance. This is because Marshall's three-tier model reflects the expansion of British citizenship from the 18th to the 20th century. The development of citizenship in the EU has followed a markedly different trajectory as

market-building took precedence over polity-building. As a result, civic and political rights, on the one hand, and social rights on the other, are largely decoupled from one another, and the envisaged imbrication of the different dimensions remains largely absent (cf. democratic deficit). Because it has tangible effects, EU citizenship should be considered as ‘nested’ Faist (2001) rather than residual. In turn, thick forms of (financial) solidarity are not likely to emerge at EU level (Faist, 2001). Instead, social citizenship is increasingly multi-level (from the local to the European) sometimes resulting in conflicts of jurisdiction (Joerges, 2017). This perception of citizenship has led to ongoing controversy about which role the EU should play vis-à-vis social citizenship (Claasen et al., 2019). In this vein, a more recent stream of research has systematically stressed how the social policy agenda of the EU has displayed a logic of ‘catching-up’ on market expansion (Crespy, 2022: 5-9) to gradually flesh out the body of rights and resources it grants to citizens. This is particularly true over the past years, in which, many argue, EU social policy has made a great come back (Vesan and Corti, 2023). The launch of the EPSR in 2017 and the ensuing regulatory agenda, the set-up of Next Generation EU in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the new funds created under the auspices of the EU’s just transition agenda have all led to expanded rights and resources. This turn has (arguably) led to a more ‘inclusive’, ‘universal’ and ‘capacitating’ – as opposed to a stratifying – form of EU citizenship by granting citizens a set of normative, instrumental and enforcement power resources (Huguenot-Noël and Corti, 2023).

## **The Making of European Worker-Citizens in Historical Perspective**

Historically, national citizenship has always been embedded in economic relations as well as instrumentalised by political projects (Le Goff 2019). The gradual and functional granting of social rights in the EU both across borders and to workers crossing those borders suggests a similar pattern. As scholars inspired by Rokkanian and Hirschmanian perspectives convincingly argue, if EU integration is the latest form of territorial and political restructuring of Europe, it has relied on creating new exit possibilities for production, consumption, and work (Bartolini, 2005). National ‘boundaries of welfare’ (Ferrera, 2005) have disrupted by these new economic mechanisms. In contrast, channels for political voice or the cultivation of political loyalty at the European level, such as the European Parliament election or the European Citizen Initiative, have remained limited and



and weak resulting in a persisting asymmetry between expanding socio-economic rights and the atrophic political dimension of European citizenship (Magnette, 1999). Admitting that the socio-economic dimension and the political dimension of European citizenship may, in some ways, be connected (Kostakopoulou, 2005), it appears that political citizenship remains essentially national, whereas pan-European citizenship has essentially developed on socio-economic grounds. Furthermore, we do not see the social and the economic dimensions of such citizenship as in contradiction with one another, but rather as the two sides of the same coin. Shifting the focus from a legal to a political perspective, the inception, consolidation and reshaping of the Single Market has provided for the fundamental dynamic shaping European socioeconomic citizenship.

This entanglement goes back to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The provisions for 'fair competition' set by the Treaty of Paris (1951) included wage levels and granted the ECSC High Authority the power to fine firms engaging in wage dumping (Gray, 2004: 56). The Treaty of Rome's (1957) Title III on Social Policy included Article 117 which established the 'necessity' of improving the 'living and working conditions of labour', and Article 118 which gave a role for the Commission in promoting collaboration among member states in various areas of employment and related social policy. This treaty also established the oldest of nowadays numerous European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), the European Social Fund (ESF). Initially focused on the unemployed, its scope has since been expanded to the entire labour force (Tomé, 2011). Thus, to respond to the changing structure of European political economies, the European Communities have mobilized public assistance to affected workers in finding new employment from the earliest days of European integration. However, it was not until the economic crises of the 1970s that the EEC took up a more decisive role regarding socio-economic citizenship – most notably in terms of gender pay equality and the establishment of the first social partnership at the European level (Goetschty, 1999; Gray, 2004). By the late 1970s, there was appetite among the social democratic left to push the social role of the EEC further (Andry, 2019). However, these efforts were left to founder until the Presidency of the European Commission of Jacques Delors, between 1985 and 1995, which saw the European role in shaping employment and social policy return to the agenda. As explored below, the 1990s leave an ambiguous legacy with push for e.g. for a European Social Charter, or the rise of the European Social Dialogue, but also the triumph of supply-side policies. The 2000s-2010s illustrate how the attempts to de-commodify European

citizenship backlashed. Whereas the 2004 so-called Citizenship Directive establishes non-discrimination in the granting of social benefits to non-nationals, the CJEU jurisprudence on contentious cases soon, as well as practices by street bureaucrats, soon led to a re-introduction of restrictions based on work and legal residence (Mantou and Minderhoud, 2023).

## **Socioeconomic Citizenship: a tool to accompany Europe's modernization**

Building on our synthetic review of the multi-faceted research on European citizenship, we submit that the progressive materialization of European socioeconomic citizenship can be conceived essentially as an elite-driven process to respond to the perceived imperatives stemming from structural transformations of Europe's economy.

In their recent endeavour to reconceptualise the rationale behind the increasing involvement of the EU in the provision of social rights, Vandenbroucke et al. (2021) distinguish three types of justifications: a) functional arguments, emphasising the necessity of social rights for the viability of the Single Market and the Monetary Union; b) legitimacy arguments, highlighting the necessity of social rights for polity building, that is sustain the political project of unifying Europe; and c) normative arguments regarding EU's self-ascribed social objectives and a commitment to social justice. They argue that, due to controversies surrounding legitimacy and normative considerations among European decision makers, functional justifications have predominantly prevailed. This reflects the idea that the social dimension of EU citizenship was justified and construed, from the outset, as an add-on to the Single Market (Copeland and Daly, 2015), with economic freedoms enjoying the fundamental rights status, in contrast with the more timid recognition of social rights (De Schutter, 2019).

From this perspective, social rights advancement appears more as a practical and political necessity to deepen market integration, aligning with the perceived constraints of global financial capitalism (Rosamond and Hay, 2002).

In brief, European citizenship has had economic and social foundations long before the creation of the EU citizenship status with the Treaty of Maastricht. Rather than for normative purposes, we argue, the contours of such socio-economic citizenship have evolved to accompany constructed imperatives on the adaptation of European societies to structural economic transformations. This has translated into an increasing number of mechanisms,

norms and resources that serve to integrate individual worker-citizens into a common space, essentially conceived as a European labour market.

This process is not uni-directional and can imply both recommodifying and decommodifying effects. However, historical records emphasize the recommodification of labour through initiatives positing an ideal European citizen adaptable to market demands, i.e. European workers who are ‘flexible’ and ‘hypermobile’ enough to shift from workplace to workplace, sector to sector, region to region and country to country in line with market demand (Gray, 2004; Courtois, 2018). At the same time, the unification of a pan-European labour market has implied to protect, expand or create social rights at European scale, not least in connection with mobility across national borders. Increasingly, the logic of granting social rights Europe wide has also expanded to non-movers.

In the rest of the paper, we sketch three terrains of investigation that lend empirical support to the outlined conception of European socioeconomic citizenship, with the aim to connect broad transformation of Europe’s political economy with the changing contours of European socioeconomic citizenship and the politics thereof in a historical perspective. Firstly, we revisit the alleged ‘golden age of social Europe’ in the 1990s and look at how it reflects in part a compromise over labour supply and increased international competition sparked by the neoliberal shift. Secondly, we investigate how, under the motto of adapting to the rise of the “knowledge economy”, the European Skills Agenda took off from the 2000s onwards as a response de-industrialisation and digitalisation. Finally, we scrutinize the initiatives taken under the banner of the EPSR since 2017 and show that they aim to address the regulatory challenges such as accelerating digitalisation, migration, and climate change.

## **Deindustrialisation, Globalization and the Reshaping of Labour Supply in the ‘Golden Age’ of Social Europe**

Echoing previous assessments (notably Crespy and Menz, 2015; Ramirez-Perez, 2021, Andry, 2022) this section taps into the critique of the thesis that the 1990s, notably due to Jacques Delors’ leadership, should be regarded as a ‘golden age’ for European social citizenship. Instead, the ambivalence generated by the combination of increased social policy activism at EU level and important recommodifying trends should be understood, in the light of an – barely emerging – European socioeconomic citizenship, as a contested attempt at addressing the constraints of global capitalism.

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The 1990s marked a period of dramatic economic and political transformation. By the close of this decade the EU had begun to include social and employment policy within its legal frameworks through the 'Social Protocol' of the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the Employment Chapter of the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the development of the European Employment Strategy and Open Method of Coordination (2000). At the same time, the European institutions took on a more decisive role in areas such as gender equality and workers' rights through a series of directives on: Pregnancy (1992); Parental Leave (1996); European Works Councils (1994); Posted Workers (1996); on part-time work (1997); fixed term work (1999). However, while this period is often thought of as the 'golden age' of Social Europe an examination of the content of these measures suggests the development of a form of European citizenship pulled in both re- and de-commodifying directions. In other words, one that bears the marks of the political and social contests over how to respond to the economic conjuncture in which it was formed.

Throughout this decade, member states found themselves grappling with severe economic downturns as they sought to adapt themselves to the imperatives of what has become dubbed globalisation and neoliberalism. Finance capital and certain sectors of industry had become highly mobile and free to engage in 'regime shopping' for the 'most business-friendly tax and regulatory environments' (Gray, 2004: 1). Consequently, nation-states faced increased competition from their peers which precluded the effectiveness of the Keynesian strategies of the post-war period. Furthermore, policies such as counter-cyclical spending and public employment of the out-of-work were cast as ideationally obsolete by supranational organisations such as the OECD and World Bank who promoted monetarism and active labour market policies in their stead (Cahill and Konings, 2017). In Europe, the development of the European Monetary Union and the fiscal restraint it entailed imposed an additional barrier to previous Keynesian responses to recession and increased unemployment (Rhodes, 1992; Goetschy, 1999; Gray, 2004; Van Rie and Marx, 2011). This mix of competition and fiscal rectitude combined with the impact of new technologies and automation, outsourcing and de-industrialisation all combined to provoke a sharp spike in unemployment. Furthermore, these trends also led to pressure for a re-regulation of labour markets to allow for greater use of part-time, temporary and other atypical forms of contracts by employers.

These economic challenges were the background for the shifts in the contours of European socio-economic citizenship. The form they took was the result of a contest between

contending political and social actors typically divided into two competing camps as identified at the outset of this period by Rhodes (1992: 35):

‘...a loosely linked coalition of the British government, European employers and multinational companies (MNCs) has been ranged against the labour movement, the Commission and other Member States from the outset over the desirability of new statutory rights’

The first of these camps can be argued as focusing on reforms that sought to increase labour supply. ‘Activation’ of as much of the potential workforce as possible was to be achieved through deregulation of employment protection legislation and increased conditionality of unemployment benefits and other income supports. This coalition saw these policies as a response to the problem of ‘Euroclerosis’ which understood the economic malaise experienced across the EU as driven by ‘structural rigidities’ (Van Rie and Marx, 2011:336-337). This diagnosis was supported by the OECD in its influential Jobs Study of 1994 (Van Rie and Marx, 2011).

Social Democrat and other left-wing parties, trade unions, and activist groups were critical of this push but internally divided in terms of just what form of alternative they wanted (Gray, 2004; Bailey, 2005; Preece, 2007). Political trends favoured this camp with Delors as President of the European Commission, increased transnational cooperation of Social Democratic parties through PES, and favourable electoral conditions ensuring that by the end of this decade social democratic parties were leading or participating in government in most member states (Ladrech, 2003: 118; Lightfoot, 2003; Moschonas, 2002). Further pressure for a social agenda came from a wave of protests and strikes across Europe – most notably in France (Goetschy, 1999; Taylor and Mathers, 2002). The Employment Charter of the Amsterdam Treaty and the development of the European Employment Strategy, launched in 1997, reflected a ‘Third Way’ compromise position with neoliberalism as advocated by the UK Labour Party under Blair and others in the Social Democratic movement (Moschonas, 2002; Gray, 2004). At the same time, the contemporary literature reveals other visions of Social Europe debated in this movement – most notably a ‘European Keynesian’ approach which sought to scale up the traditional social democracy policy approaches to the European level (Gray, 2004; Bailey, 2005; Preece, 2007). The epistemic as well as political debates surrounding the concept of ‘flexicurity’ (Keune and Jespen, 2007; Caune, 2014), seen by some as a progressive modernising route and by others as the Trojan horse of deregulation – are illustrative of the ambiguity.

The contest and compromises of this period helped shape the contours of a European socio-economic citizenship that had by the time of Lisbon Summit in 2000 had taken on ‘strikingly two-sided character’ with a ‘clearly neoliberal’ aspect that moved away from social dialogue and set hard targets for labour supply sitting at odds with a focus on ‘social exclusion’ at the Stockholm Summit in 2001 (Gray, 2004:71) The forms of measures that became central to the EES, its focus on reductions in quantitative measures of unemployment and relative lack of concern for quality for employment led Goetschy (1999: 136) to conclude that ‘the demand for a disposable workforce and flexible labour markets is taken for granted; its ideological content is no longer perceived’.

In a nutshell, the 1990s appear as a paradoxical vantage point. On one hand, the period witnesses a leap in the competences, procedures, and policies of the EU on social policy and rights, under the Delorsian impulsion and the motto of ‘Social Europe’. With the inception of the European citizenship in the Treaty of Maastricht replacing the Economic Community with a political ‘Union’, European citizenship seemed to embark on the road towards polity building, implying the consolidation of political and social citizenship. By the end of the decade, however, this picture had faded. It was clear that the EU, and its economic and monetary union, had strongly mediated the economic imperatives. While the European social dialogue initiated by Delors had stalled, the European Employment Strategy had mainly served to Europeanise workfare rather than providing Europeans with new social rights. Amid sporadic contestation, European socioeconomic citizenship proved mainly a vector of recommodification rather than a decommodification of European citizen workers.

## **The Knowledge Economy and the Rise of the European Skills Agenda from the 2000s**

This section proposes to shed light on a mainly overlooked dimension of the EU policy in the social realm, namely the wide range of initiatives, tools and measures pertaining to training, skills, lifelong learning, and higher education. This area reflects the oscillation between the recommodifying and decommodifying trends in the materialization of European socioeconomic citizenship. The EU, alongside other international organizations such as the OECD, has been at the forefront of promoting social investment in its Member States, i.e. social policy spending focusing on the ‘creation, mobilization, and maintenance



of human capital’ (Jenson and Mahon, 2022: 112). Indeed, from around the 1960s onwards, human capital theory developed from a descriptive theory to a normative one. From the 2000s onwards, it then became increasingly prescriptive ‘with advocates arguing that post-secondary education should be increasingly concentrated on and then restricted to programmes thought to have most economic benefit’ (Moodie and Wheelahan, 2023: 61). The EU agenda on skills, we argue, is a further reflection of how the consistent building of socioeconomic citizenship, implying a number of rights or ‘power resources’ (Ferrera, Madama and Corti, 2021) serves to unify a European labour market characterized by spatial and occupational mobility. This policy has been conceived as a response to the structural transformation of Europe’s economy and the related political imperatives, from the knowledge economy to the ‘twin transition’, i.e. green and digital transformations of the economy.

At the Lisbon Summit in 2000, the EU adopted a comprehensive reform agenda towards becoming ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council, 2000). Despite being largely regarded as a failure, the Lisbon Strategy spelled out the necessity for EU countries to coordinate their social and economic policymaking, particularly concerning employment, and gave rise to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Under the leadership of Romano Prodi (1999-2004), the Commission portrayed globalization and the ensuing structural economic transformations as a great opportunity for the revival of Social Europe, combining a neoliberal workfare logic with assertions of the importance of social rights ‘with the burden of responsibilities falling on the EU and its Member State governments’ (Hager, 2009: 118). Five years later, under Barroso, ‘the aura of optimism framing the Lisbon Agenda under the Prodi Commission was replaced by a strong discursive mediation of crisis’ (Hager, 2009: 119). Social objectives were sidelined as competitiveness and job creation through growth were perceived to be threatened by crises and global instability. While promoting mobility [notably by ensuring portability of social rights (Regulation 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems)] and equal treatment and non-discrimination, lawmaking arguably decreased in comparison to the 1990s as soft governance gained ground. Social policy coordination at EU level increasingly relied on benchmarking practices with the Lisbon Strategy setting a series of targets in relation to education and training. Menz (2015: 50) argues that



‘economic governance was redefined as optimizing the level of preparation of the domestic workforce regarding the exigencies of highly internationally mobile capital. In that sense, active labour market policy that retrained, upskilled, and enticed employees into the labour market was preferred to redistributive and protective social policy with attendant consequences for policy developments at the EU level.’

Beyond the Lisbon Strategy, numerous recent policy initiatives (the 2016 Skills Agenda, the EPSR or the 2020 Pact for Skills) place the development and maintenance of human capital at their centre. The EPSR Action Plan was published by the European Commission in 2021 to spell out which EU programs and instruments are drawn upon to implement the EPSR. It reaffirms this orientation with some of the financially most significant EU programs and funds revolving around skills: the ESF+, ERASMUS+, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or the Just Transition Fund (JTF). Reskilling and upskilling also constituted one of the flagship components of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF), i.e. one of the seven overarching objectives of the recovery exercise. Yet, the EU institutions’ agenda has gone beyond the ‘knowledge economy’ which put predominant emphasis on high skills, tertiary education and mobility as a means to enhance competences (Brine, 2006). The discursive construction around the ‘twin transition’ suggests a shift away from tertiary education and a revalorisation of vocational education and training. For example, the issue of reskilling has become a major theme in the policies of the green transition to ensure the transition of workers from carbon dependent sectors (notably coal mines or the automotive industry) towards ‘green jobs’.

Whether tertiary or vocational, initial or continuous, training, through the prism of social investment, has become a key social policy (Solga, 2014). At EU level, the integration of a common labour market and a common educational space has thus increasingly become a joint objective. Lisbon and Bologna [the Bologna process initiated in 1999 harmonizes tertiary education and prioritizes competences for the labour market] converge in the OMC (Garben, 2011) and Mitchell (2006: 396) finds that:

‘Most of the contemporary international agreements and EU programs now focus on strategies of skills-based training designed to forge all students (both native born and immigrants) into European citizenship via an increasingly cross-border intra-EU labour market.’

In brief, the ‘Skills agenda’ is a telling illustration of the functionalist rationale driving European socio-economic citizenship. Throughout different economic and historical

configurations, boosting European citizens' skills has consistently been constructed as a policy response to address structural transformations of the European economy.

## **Digitalisation, migrations, climate change: regulating of a pan-European labour market under constraints in the 2020s**

The launch of the EPSR in 2017 and its related Action Plan in 2021 are widely perceived as emblematic of a notable rebalancing of the EU's social and economic dimensions (Vanhercke et al., 2018; Garben, 2019; Keune & Pochet, 2023). Scrutinizing the flurry of recent – hard law and soft law – initiatives taken at EU level, scholars in the field have argued that the EPSR contributed to significantly enhance European social citizenship by creating 'new power resources' (Ferrera et al., 2023), thus taking an 'inclusive turn, driven by more 'universalising' and 'capacitating' initiatives' (Corti and Huguenot-Noël, 2023). Rather than contradict this thesis, we suggest that the EPSR can be seen not so much as the result of a normatively driven political move to expand social rights or enhance citizenship, but rather as a response to today's functional imperatives in the face of great transformations. More than ever before, accelerating transnational issues such a migration, digitalization, and climate change, seem to jeopardize the institutional foundations of a European labour market. Enhancing the employability or mobility of the workforce is no longer sufficient, as the EU seeks to strengthen its capacity to regulate or correct failures of the labour market pertaining to core issues such as remuneration, the legal status of workers, or the control of influx through migrations.

The first objective of the EPSR is to establish a cohesive and sustainable labour market at European scale. After focussing on 'inclusion' or 'participation' in the labour market as the key tool to combat poverty, there has been a notable shift in perspective, recognizing that mere employment is not always sufficient to prevent poverty, particularly amid social and wage dumping, the proliferation of low-paid jobs, rising in-work poverty rates and precarious employment (European Parliament, 2020). The directive on Adequate Minimum Wages in the European Union<sup>2</sup>, aiming at rectifying disparities in minimum wage setting and coverage across member states and eventually seeking an increase in wages, is an obvious illustration of that reckoning. Because the EU does not have legal competences pertaining to remuneration, the directive proposal was highly contested, above all by

Scandinavian Member States. Far from setting the level of minimum wages, though, the directive requires that Member States introduce an explicit methodology relying on tangible indicators, as opposed to discretionary political decisions, to set the level of minimum wages either through law or collective bargaining.

A second objective of the EPSR is to safeguard key labour market institutions and legal frameworks in response to the rise of deregulated and unprotected self-employment, notably in platform work. This objective is pursued through initiatives such as the Council Recommendation on Access to Social Protection for Workers and the Self-employed and the Directive on Platform Work. While the first focuses on ensuring formal and effective access to social protection for all workers (European Commission, 2023a), including those in non-standard employment, the latter aims to improve working conditions for platform workers by accurately classifying their employment status and fostering fairness and transparency in algorithmic management practices (European Commission, 2021). Interestingly however, the initial focus remained solely on skills, as pointed out in the von der Leyen political guidelines (2019) which set out to improve working conditions of platform workers through ‘skills and education’.

The third objective of the EPSR includes overseeing the influx of foreign labour supply. This is achieved through initiatives such as the Skills and Talent Mobility Package. This package includes ongoing negotiations on revising the Single Permit Directive and Long-term Residents Directive, with the aim of simplifying legal migration processes. In addition, this package proposes a regulation on the EU Talent Pool, with the aim of establishing an online platform which will facilitate the recruitment of non-EU jobseekers and foster Talent Partnerships with non-EU countries to promote legal migration opportunities (European Commission, 2023c). The purpose here is clearly to ensure a sufficient labour supply.

As argued by Keune & Pochet (2023), these initiatives mainly aim at mitigating the negative social impacts of ongoing economic restructuring, often emphasizing social investment and supply-side measures, rather than challenging the inherent market-oriented and growth-centric nature of the EU’s economic model. In fact, since its inception the EPSR has been geared towards addressing the socio-economic transformations driven by the imperatives of transitioning towards a green and digital economy, which brought about structural labour and skills shortages across various sectors, necessitating specific skill sets and prompting economic and labour market restructuring (European Commission, 2023b). In addition, the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic have driven the need to address labour and skills

shortages, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare.

In addressing these challenges, we observe some disagreements leading to hard fought compromises among political and social actors in the formulation of policy initiatives, yet no significant protest or contentious action repertoires.

The discourse around the regulation of the platform workers illustrates these dynamics of political exchange. While trade unions and platform work organizations supported improved protections for platform workers, their stance met with opposition from employers' organizations and platform worker entities, concerned about the potential impact of the new initiative on business models and worker flexibility (Spasova & Marengo, 2023). The legal core of the directive, namely the introduction of an employment presumption leading to the requalification of independent platform workers into employees of the platforms brought about vivid disagreements within the Council and between the Council and the EP. Eventually, a weak compromise was found as the conditions for the employment presumption will be set at the national and not at the European level (Euractiv, 2023).

Similarly, differences in the actors' positions regarding the Skills and Talent package have not led to intense contention. While the ETUC criticizes the proposed EU Talent Pool, concerned about migrant workers' rights and the opportunities afforded across skill levels and sectors (ETUC, 2023), employers' organizations support the initiative, seeing it not only as a means to address labour shortages but also as a tool to foster economic growth and competitiveness (BusinessEurope, 2022; SMEunited, 2024).

Among legislative bodies, the European Parliament has played an important role in promoting amendments of the Single Permit Directive. Its main aim was to facilitate the administrative procedures and promote equal treatment (European Parliament, 2024). Among Member States, while there are differences in their positions, efforts to reconcile divergent perspectives have culminated in provisional agreements, trying to find a balance between facilitating labour migration and safeguarding domestic labour markets (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The initiatives issued within the EPSR framework can be seen as a new stage for of consolidation of European socioeconomic citizenship, where the EU institutions not only focus on enhancing the mobility and employability of labour force but also on granting social rights and correct labour market failures. By doing so, and while rights remain mostly tied to economic activity and work, they aim to create a more 'inclusive' European labour

market with social protection safeguards ensured at EU level (Huguenot-Noël & Corti, 2023). Whether this will effectively be the case will have to be scrutinized once these provisions are enforced.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to contribute to current debates about the promises and pitfalls of a European social citizenship. To do so, we build our reflection on a dense, multifaceted and interdisciplinary body of literature in history, law, political science, and sociology which has developed around several fault lines. On the one hand, the gradual granting of socioeconomic rights to Europeans has preceded and evolved in a dynamic fashion, independently from the political dimension of European citizenship acknowledged by the Maastricht Treaty which has remained of low significance. On the other hand, legal and historical controversies have largely remained normative, stressing the great emancipatory potential of transnational political and social rights, or deploring their weakness, referring to a full, Marshallian type of citizenship as an ideal out of reach. These normative debates have been, more often than not, poorly articulated with empirical insights about the emergence of transnational rights, the obstacles in accessing these rights, and the commodifying and stratifying effects of free movement and market integration. All this, we argue, gives the opposition featured in the literature between market citizenship, essentially a critique, and social citizenship, a model mimicked from national polities, little analytical leverage to understand the EU's reality.

Against this background, and leaving the civic dimension aside, we argue that European citizenship has, from the outset, been socioeconomic in nature. Drawing from the functional rationale driving European integration as a whole, the gradual building of socioeconomic rights and duties at EU level has been motivated by the need to address the structural transformations of Europe's political economy. Since these transformations, including globalization, migrations, climate change, digitalization – have been transnational by nature, the consolidation of a pan-European labour market has been the consistent answer to these challenges, implying both important commodifying and, arguably, more limited de-commodifying effects. The supply side policies, encouraged by the EU institutions, in the 1990s, the rise of the Skills agenda from the 2000s onwards, and the EPSR have been presented as potential empirical terrains to lend empirical support to

our argument. These need to be scrutinized in detail empirically to find out how recommodifying or decommodifying logics are intertwined.

All this has important and fascinating normative and political implications. *Prima facie*, the gradual building of European socioeconomic citizenship seems to be occurring against the background of a limited contention with protest of limited and sporadic nature. This implies that, in contrast with the historical dynamics prominently studied by Tilly, it does not stem from the bottom-up demands and social struggles but is enacted from the top and resulting from political compromises. As the EU is progressing through the 21st century, it is clear that European citizenship is both unlikely to supersede national citizenship or disappear, at least in the medium run. While bringing about limited contestation, the granting of rights from the EU level also entails, it seems, a limited potential for polity legitimation. Furthermore, future possible enlargements of the EU e.g. to the Balkan region or Ukraine and Moldova, would inevitably imply new challenges in terms of decision making and enforcement of protective, decommodifying policies. Whether this can happen without triggering social contention and undermine the Union's legitimacy remains an open question.

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<sup>1</sup> By using the prefix « pan » - as opposed to simply « European », we intend to emphasize two characteristics : first the comprehensive nature of the depicted labour market, possibly exceeding the boundaries of the EU Single market to include for instance members countries of the European Economic Area or further neighbouring countries; second, its unifying purpose in terms of common rules and integration in a single market space.