

Regional Disparities in Spanish Social Services: An Empirical Assessment Through the European Pillar of Social Rights

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Abstract

Our study aims to develop the set of key indicators proposed by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan for Spain's 17 autonomous regions, presenting results for the year 2023. Additionally, the article examines whether significant regional differences exist among the Action Plan's main indicators, controlling the level of development of the public social services system in each autonomous community. An indicator framework was constructed for each of the 17 Spanish autonomous communities (units of analysis), including (a) the intensity of protection provided by public social services, measured through the Social Services Development Index, and (b) the three main dimensions of the EPSR, assessed through 17 variables. Data sources for these indicators were drawn from official Spanish institutions as well as social organizations. The statistical analysis model employed a combination of parametric and non-parametric procedures to ensure methodological robustness and data triangulation. Results indicate that lifelong learning and employment rates in Spanish regions remain below the European targets set for 2030. Conversely, digital skills among the adult population and the percentage of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) have either surpassed or are close to European standards. The study concludes that regions with a “strong” public social services system exhibit significantly lower risks of poverty and social exclusion among the general population, as well as expanded opportunities for young people.

Keywords

European Pillar of Social Rights; regional analysis; social policies; social services; Spain

1. Introduction

Processes of transformation and change in our societies never come one at a time. A given set of social circumstances at a certain time is usually shaped by broader, cyclical social dynamics. Crises tend to overlap, as we can also see in Southern Europe. In most cases citizens become aware that they are dealing with a crisis after catastrophic events reveal people's fragility within manufactured systems and structures. The collapse of the international financial system, much like a colossal pyramid scheme, coincided with an unprecedented level of private debt in Spain. Systematic failures to enact electoral programs and the corruption of political parties generated political instability in the governance of institutions, triggering the surge of what has been called "anti-politics." A decade of cutbacks in social and health spending worsened the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, further straining public health systems in unimaginable ways (Fronek & Smith Rotabi-Casares, 2021). The rains of 29 October 2024 in Spain, which devastated 78 municipalities in three different regions of the country, killing 232 people and generating billions of euros in damages, were an environmental and human catastrophe handled by regional governments that deny climate change and have no interest in investing to prevent and address the consequences of a phenomenon whose existence they do not acknowledge.

Decades of "polycrisis" are leaving a generational scar that it is difficult to manage socially: more inequality, more poverty (even among the employed), fewer opportunities to exercise rights, weaker protection systems, and a notable increase in vulnerability for environmental reasons. Hence, it is essential to design global political strategies for economic and social development, as well as expand protection to assist people in situations of greater vulnerability and promote changes in economic, political, and social systems that lead to social justice and peoples' rights. Established in 2017 and 2021 respectively, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its Action Plan establish a global framework of a legal nature—what has been called the European social model—guiding the actions of governments and social dialogue in the fields of labor, equal opportunities, and social protection and inclusion. The Action Plan set three measurable goals associated with the main indicators for the EU as a whole: (a) reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and exclusion by 15 million and manage (b) for at least 60% of the adult population to participate in training activities annually and (c) at least 78% of the population ages 20 to 64 to be employed.

To follow its evolution and progress, a framework of social indicators (main and secondary) was established and can be found in Eurostat (2025). The Social Scoreboard features key indicators on social inclusion and employment in the EU and their status, but does not establish the "acceptable" goals and objectives at the regional level, nor are these indicators linked to the development of specific policies. The data is interesting because it shows, in a disaggregated way, the trends in the EPSR's social indicators, but it does not include the expected result; that is, as it does not include the goal each country or region is supposed to achieve, it is difficult to measure how far or close it is to its objective.

This article proceeds based on a critical analysis of the social impacts of the last crises in Spain, their mechanisms and political responses, and envisions the EPSR as the legal framework guiding the European social model at a global level after the start of the economic recovery. This work refers to and elaborates on the main social indicators table for Spain's 17 regions, citing state statistical sources and identifying, by region, the degree to which the public social services system is developed. The article shows that there is a relationship between the degree of social services development and some EPSR indicators, explaining their meaning and impact on social policies.

2. From *Austericide* to the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism: Social Transformations in Southern European Countries

2.1. *The Impact of Austerity Policies (2011–2020) in Southern Europe*

The impact of the 2008 financial and economic crisis was very uneven across the EU, varying regionally. The countries of southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece) had to deal with the consequences of the collapse of the international financial system proceeding from different starting lines, but with a common denominator: the sovereign debt crisis in a context of economic contraction and drastic reduction in GDP, which made it necessary to intervene and bail out their economies. Governments accepted the debt crisis management measures put forward by the EU, which involved structural adjustments, namely reductions in public spending to guarantee the payment of at least debt servicing and wage restraint. The aim was fiscal consolidation (reduction of the deficit through cuts in public spending) and bank restructuring (credit flowing to the productive economy) to generate economic growth, create employment, and reduce debt.

The “suits” were tailor-made; the economies of Greece and Portugal were financially bailed out and the measures were heavily policed by what was dubbed the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund). Spain received a partial bailout of its financial system. These governments adjusted the application of the measures following their different ideological orientations, social conflicts, political traditions, and transformations in the internal party system.

What was the impact of these austerity measures on Southern European citizens? From a critical perspective, some authors argue that these austerity measures did not generate economic growth (or debt reductions), but resulted in longer periods of economic contraction (Diani & Kousis, 2014; Tulumello et al., 2020). A long time would pass before job creation could be considered constant (especially among young people) due to the lack of public investment (Marques & Hörisch, 2020) and, in the case of Spain, to labor market deregulation policies that made hiring and dismissals precarious and limited wages (Fernández-Albertos & Kuo, 2016). Meanwhile, the lack of public investment in strategic knowledge-based sectors, for example, inhibited the transformation of local low-added-value production models (Méndez et al., 2016).

It seems irrefutable that, during the application of austerity measures, social inequalities, poverty, and social exclusion increased significantly (González-Pérez, 2018; Pineira-Mantiñán et al., 2018; Pinto & Guerreiro, 2016), especially affecting people in situations of previous vulnerability, but also families with greater care burdens, whose structures and stability were greatly affected (López-Andreu & Verd, 2020; López Peláez & Gómez Ciriano, 2019; Verde-Diego et al., 2020). Closely linked to situations of impoverishment and exclusion was the housing crisis, especially in large cities, where evictions and gentrification were not halted during the application of austerity measures (Lestegás et al., 2018; Pato & Pereira, 2016).

Simultaneously, the state cut investment in social protection systems as part of its austerity measures. Health and education were the systems that suffered the most cuts, directly affecting the quality of services (Matsaganis, 2020) and the well-being and rights of citizens, especially the most vulnerable (Del Pino & Ramos, 2018), generating, in the long term, a notable increase in social and territorial inequalities (Del Pino & Pavolini, 2015). Access to social benefits and services also suffered, which negatively impacted social cohesion and the protection of the most vulnerable sectors of society (Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019;

Mateo-Pérez et al., 2015). According to Noguera (2019), the impact on younger generations was particularly intense, due to the near-complete absence of social benefit coverage.

Discontent grew among citizens, eroding trust in public institutions and generating changes in party systems. Despite attempts by governments to convince the population of the benefits of austerity (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015), citizens perceived governments and international organizations as responsible for the crisis, which weakened democratic legitimacy and fueled Euroscepticism (Freire et al., 2014). Citizen protests generated a social climate of repulsion towards austerity and cuts (Altiparmakis & Lorenzini, 2018; Della Porta, 2012; Martínez-Román & Mateo-Pérez, 2015), subsequently facilitating the emergence of political parties that capitalized on social discontent (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2017). The crisis of traditional parties and cases of corruption contributed to aggravating citizens' disillusionment with institutional political action (Fortes & Urquizu, 2015), bolstering right-wing and far-right-wing populist movements, which now wield significant electoral and government power.

The question that citizens continue to ask today is whether or not there was an alternative to austerity, if a scenario characterized by departures from the Troika's suggestions for the countries of Southern Europe may have been possible. According to some authors, such as León and Pavolini (2020), the answer is yes. In fact, there were differences in the way the cutbacks were applied in Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain (Ioakimidis et al., 2014). The most important social impacts occurred in Greece and Spain, countries whose governments radicalized both their spending cuts and their discourse. In any case, the austerity policies implemented in Southern Europe not only prolonged the economic crisis but also exacerbated social inequalities and generated profound political unrest. The effects of these measures have reconfigured welfare systems, social dynamics, and politics in the regions.

After the decade of *austericide*, millions of people witnessed their situations of vulnerability become structural, and the social well-being of several generations disappeared, in part due to the political decisions of governments that cut social spending, weakening and dismantling public protection systems. What the EU saw was the de facto end of the European social model as it had been historically understood until that time.

2.2. The EPSR and Social Services

The EPSR was announced by the European Parliament at the Gothenburg Summit of 2017 to strengthen social and labor rights in the EU by promoting equity and social convergence among member states (European Commission, 2017). That year, according to the World Bank (2025), the economy of the EU grew by 2.8% year-on-year: Portugal grew by 3.3%, Spain by 2.9%, Italy by 1.6%, and Greece by 1.5%. For Southern European countries, the recession seemed to be behind them, but austerity measures would continue to be implemented through strict fiscal discipline until March 2020. At that time, the EU allowed increases in public deficits and debt to cope with health and social protection expenses derived from the Covid-19 pandemic and implemented financial tools to cover them. Since April 2024, the EU has featured new economic governance models whose fiscal rules are the same as those from the 2011–2019 period: Public deficits must be less than 3% and public debt must not exceed 60% of GDP (Unión Europea, 2024).

The EPSR embraced the objective of strengthening the battered European social model, responding to the economic and social challenges of the moment derived from the impact of the financial crisis (Gómez Urquijo,

2021) and the consequences of structural adjustments. The EPSR set forth 20 key principles organized in three dimensions: equal opportunities and access to the labor market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Although it is a non-binding framework, it served as a guide for the formulation of national policies and the marshalling of European funds for social investment (Dura, 2024). The EPSR Action Plan was established in 2021 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2021). The Action Plan was a European Commission initiative that set forth a series of actions that the entity promised to adopt during its term, building on actions already undertaken since the announcement of the EPSR in 2017.

For some authors, such as Corti and Vesan (2023), the EPSR is having a significant impact on the redefinition of the welfare state in Southern European countries, especially in Spain, Italy, and Greece, where economic crises strained social safety nets. With the support of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Social Fund Plus, and ERDF Funds, structural reforms are being promoted that include the modernization of the labor market, investment in education, and the improvement of social protection systems that will at some point clash with the new fiscal rules.

According to Hemerijck (2022), the shift from an austerity strategy to a social investment one has been central to the reorientation of social policies. The EPSR has promoted the expansion of labor rights, the implementation of guaranteed minimum incomes, and the improvement of pension systems, which, at least in theory, has made it possible to strengthen the social fabric and social cohesion. Gómez Urquijo (2021) writes that the EPSR has helped consolidate and expand post-austerity social services in Spain, especially in areas such as care for dependent persons, subsidized housing, and guaranteed minimum incomes. However, these conclusions require more up-to-date studies of the impact of investment on citizens, especially on the most vulnerable individuals and groups, considering the context of regional inequalities.

3. Objectives, Hypothesis, and Methodology

3.1. Objectives and Hypothesis

This work has the general objective of examining the system of the main indicators proposed in the EPSR Action Plan for Spain's 17 autonomous communities, presenting the main results for 2023. This data may serve as a starting point for a subsequent trend analysis advancing the application of EPSR principles. Additionally, we aim to verify whether there are significant regional differences between the Action Plan's main indicators by controlling the degree of development of the public social services system. Identifying what those differences are, and where they are occurring, could help shape programs and policies in social services regionally.

We hypothesise that the main EPSR monitoring indicators in Spain's 17 regions will not meet the targets set by the EU for 2030, and these differences will be greater in regions that have less developed public social services system.

3.2. Methodology

The EPSR Action Plan sets out three objectives related to employment, skills, and social protection. To determine states' progress, or lack thereof, and their degree of compliance with the goals set by the EU, the Action Plan includes a scoreboard that analyzes trends and performance. This enables the Commission to monitor progress towards the implementation of the Pillar's principles as part of the framework established for the coordination of policies and instruments in the context of the European Semester (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2021). The Action Plan distinguishes between main (17) and secondary (31) indicators, grouped into three dimensions: equal opportunities (six main indicators), fair working conditions (four), and social protection and inclusion (seven). The 17 main indicators are those analyzed in this article.

The Spanish state is administratively divided into 17 regions (autonomous communities) for which all the main indicators proposed by the Action Plan have been identified (see Table 1). The statistical sources consulted are from official state agencies (different studies) and reports from third-sector organizations that use their own survey and statistical data, or official ones. Of the 17 indicators, 14 have 2023 as their reference year, two have 2022, and in one case the last available data is for 2020. Working with data disaggregated by regions makes sense within the structure of public protection systems in Spain since social protection competencies are mostly transferred to the autonomous communities. This structure of the social state means that to gauge the global impact on citizens of social investments, policies, and their instruments, the data must be analyzed in a disaggregated manner.

The social services public system in Spain is delegated to the autonomous communities by 17 different social services laws (in the absence of a coordinating national law) and features different types of professional interventions related to risks to life and the social vulnerability processes that people suffer (Peláez Quero et al., 2024; Peláez Quero & Pastor-Seller, 2025). Together with public health, the education sector, and the pensions system, they are central to the welfare state. Because they are local services, they are the first line of defense against exclusion, attending to the needs and rights of individuals and families in different areas. Assisted people face situations of dependency or disability, (are) children at risk, and/or deal with addictions, gender violence, homelessness, and/or the impact of their own economic situation or that of their families.

In the 40 years since the implementation and development of the public social services system in Spain, significant territorial disparities can be observed (EAPN, 2021). These differences are empirically verifiable (Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales, 2024). The development of social services in each autonomous community can be measured with a synthetic index (IDS-DEC), which includes three dimensions: rights and political decision (8 indicators), economic relevance (3 indicators), and coverage (11 indicators; see Table 1). The IDS-DEC ranges from 0 to 10 (with 0 indicating *no development* and 10 indicating *excellence*). The regions have been grouped according to their social services development into three main categories:

- Weak development (2,37–4,84): Aragon, Cantabria, Valencia, Galicia, Madrid, and Murcia;
- Moderate development (4,86–5,33): Andalusia, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Castile la Mancha, Catalonia, and Extremadura;
- Strong development (5,74–7,44): Asturias, Castile-León, Navarre, the Basque Country, and La Rioja.

For the creation of these groups, the average IDS-DEC value was prioritized, as well as the existence of a homogeneous number of cases in each category. The data correspond to the year 2023.

Table 1. Dimensions, indicators, and sources.

	Dimension	Indicator/variable	Source
EPSR	Equal opportunities (%)	People aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks	INE (2025d)
		Early abandonment of education/training in the population group aged 18–24	
		Inequality (S80/S20)	
		Population without digital skills (aged 16–74)	INE (2020)
		Young people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work.	Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes de España (2022)
	Fair working conditions	Activity rate gender gap (male/female)	INE (2025a)
		Employment rate	INE (2025d)
		Unemployment rate	
		Long-term unemployment rate	
		Growth in gross disposable income per household pc-2021/22 (%)	INE (2025b)
	Social protection and inclusion	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (%; Europe 2030 target)	INE (2025c)
		Children and adolescents at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (%), as per 2022 data	EAPN-ES (2023)
		Poverty reduction after social transfers (excluding pensions; %)	EAPN-ES (2024)
		Employment gap between persons with/without disabilities (activity rate; %)	INE (2023)
		People facing high housing expenses (%)	INE (2025d)
		Children under the age of three in public nurseries (%)	Authors' own calculations, drawing on Educabase (2023)
		Population with unmet health care needs (%)	INE (2025)
DEC	IDS-DEC	Social Services Development Index (0–10 points)	Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024)
	Rights	IDSS (rights) (out of 1.5 points)	
	Economic	IDSS (economic) (out of 3)	
	Coverage	IDSS (coverage) (out of 5.5)	

A data matrix has been developed consisting of 17 cases (autonomous communities—rows) and 21 columns (variables). The descriptive tables were created using Microsoft Excel software. For multivariate statistical analysis, the SPSS V.29 and R program was used.

The heterogeneity of the data sources used, as well as their availability, constitutes a limitation of this study. Only official sources and reports derived from them were employed, but not all indicators are published with

the same frequency, methodological rigor, or level of territorial disaggregation. These asymmetries in data availability and quality may affect regional comparability and should be considered when interpreting the results. The data matrix is available to the scientific community as a Supplementary File on the article's website.

4. Results

4.1. Main EPSR Indicators in Spain

Tables 2 and 3 present the main indicators for the 17 regions of Spain in terms of equal opportunities, decent working conditions, and social protection and inclusion found in the EPSR Action Plan.

The Action Plan sets concrete targets for 2030 in six indicators and for all the EU countries. Regarding lifelong learning (EO1) the data for the Spanish regions falls far short of the European target for 2030 (EO1EU = 60%). However, when looking at the digital skills of the adult population (EO4) and the percentage of young people who neither study nor work (EO5), the data for the Spanish regions have exceeded or are very close to the European standard for 2030 (EO4 = 20%; EO5 = 9%). Regarding the employment rate (FWC1), the data for the regions of Spain again, falls far short of the European target (78%), in some cases exceeding 30 points

Table 2. Main EPSR indicators in Spain: Equal opportunities and fair working conditions.

Region	EO1	EO2	EO3	EO4	EO5	EO6	FWC1	FWC2	FWC3	FWC4
Andalusia	15.1	16.9	1.8	14.7	10.8	5.9	46.8	18.2	6.2	5.8
Aragon	16.2	10.8	2.4	9.9	7.9	4.3	53.6	8.6	3.0	5.1
Asturias	16.1	10.5	1.7	13.2	6.0	5.4	44.0	12.1	5.7	5.8
Balearic Islands	14.0	18.0	1.0	15.6	9.8	5.1	57.1	10.3	2.1	11.5
Canary Islands	15.6	14.7	1.5	14.1	8.1	5.3	50.2	16.1	6.7	8.7
Cantabria	18.4	7.3	1.8	10.5	8.4	4.6	50.4	8.1	2.6	5.7
Castile-Leon	16.1	10.3	1.7	11.5	9.4	5.1	48.8	9.7	3.5	4.9
Castile L. M.	14.1	16.6	1.4	12.6	12.4	5.0	50.8	13.2	4.7	5.7
Catalonia	14.1	14.8	1.6	13.1	8.3	5.0	55.8	9.3	3.1	5.8
Com. of Valencia	18.0	15.0	1.2	12.9	9.0	5.6	51.6	12.8	4.2	6.3
Extremadura	15.7	9.9	2.5	13.5	11.5	4.6	46.0	17.4	6.6	5.1
Galicia	16.0	9.1	2.0	11.2	7.6	4.4	47.8	9.7	3.4	6.2
Madrid	16.7	11.4	0.8	10.8	8.2	5.3	57.0	10.0	3.8	6.5
Murcia	15.8	19.2	1.3	13.8	12.9	4.5	52.0	12.8	3.6	5.1
Navarre	18.0	6.5	1.3	11.6	8.0	5.5	52.9	9.9	3.1	6.1
Basque Country	18.2	6.7	2.6	8.8	7.6	5.0	52.5	7.7	3.1	6.6
La Rioja	13.5	9.7	2.5	12.0	9.9	4.6	53.4	9.4	2.7	5.6
EPSR 2030 Goal	60	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	20	9	N.T.D.	78	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.

Notes: EO1: percentage of people aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks; EO2: early dropout (%) from education/training in the 18–24 population age group; EO3: percentage of population without digital skills (ages 16 to 74, as per 2020); EO4: percentage of young people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work (as of 2022); EO5: activity rate gender gap (%; men/women); EO6: Inequality (S80/S20); FWC1: employment rate; FWC2: unemployment rate; FWC3: long-term unemployment rate; FWC4: percentage of growth in gross disposable income per household pc-2021/22; N.T.D.: no target defined.

(Asturias, Extremadura, Galicia, Castile-León). For social protection and inclusion indicators, the Action Plan notes that it is important to continue increasing the number of children under the age of three in daycare, but does not set a measurable goal.

Table 3. Main EPSR indicators in Spain: Social protection and inclusion.

Region	SPI1	SPI2	SPI3	SPI4	SPI5	SPI6	SPI7
Andalusia	37.5	43.3	19.0	46.1	8.7	14.3	2.6
Aragon	20.4	26.2	25.0	45.3	7.6	17.5	2.6
Asturias	25.0	40.1	22.0	43.2	6.5	18.3	3.1
Balearic Islands	20.6	27.0	26.0	45.6	14.5	15.4	1.1
Canary Islands	33.8	47.8	28.0	47.8	8.6	10.6	2.2
Cantabria	22.0	21.3	33.0	31.9	6.8	19.3	2.3
Castile-Leon	22.4	26.8	21.0	37.0	6.9	17.6	2.4
Castile L.M.	31.7	38.9	22.0	39.4	6.7	18.1	2.5
Catalonia	21.2	27.5	25.0	44.2	9.6	21.7	2.5
Com. of Valencia	29.6	32.2	24.0	42.1	8.8	15.0	2.8
Extremadura	32.8	38.9	27.0	39.6	4.7	25.9	1.7
Galicia	25.5	24.7	23.0	46.8	4.8	21.9	2.3
Madrid	19.4	23.4	21.0	41.4	9.1	20.9	2.7
Murcia	30.5	41.3	29.0	39.2	6.0	8.7	1.7
Navarre	17.2	25.2	18.0	40.2	9.1	21.2	3.0
Basque Country	15.5	20.4	29.0	33.2	5.9	21.9	1.9
La Rioja	21.8	21.0	17.0	40.9	5.5	18.7	3.4
EPSR 2030 Goal	Reduce by 15 million people (EU-wide)	Increase coverage (no specific %)	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.

Notes: SPI1: percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2030 target); SPI2: percentage of children and adolescents at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (as per 2022); SPI3: percentage of poverty reduction after social transfers (excluding pensions); SPI4: employment gap between persons with/without disabilities (% activity rate); SPI5: percentage of people facing high housing costs; SPI6: percentage of children under the age of three in public nurseries; SPI7: percentage of the population with unmet health care needs; N.T.D.: no target defined.

4.2. The Regional Development of Social Services in Spain and the EPSR

The average degree of social services development in Spain, according to the IDS-DEC, is 5.2 points out of 10 ($n = 17$; $SD = 1.2$; Rank = 5.1). According to the Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024), this average value could be considered to reflect a “moderate level of development,” according to its scale. At the regional level, nine regions are below the state average and eight are above it, but none manage to achieve an *excellent* rating (starting at 7.5 points). Based on the average data in the regions, “weak” development of the public social services system has been assigned to averages between 2.4 and 4.84; “moderate” development has been assigned when the average value ranges from 4.85 to 5.33; “strong” development has been assigned when it ranges from 5.34 to 7.44.

The general model (Table 4) indicates that among the regions that have “strong,” “moderate,” and “weak” social services systems there are significant differences in the main EPSR indicators: continuous training, abandonment of adult education/training systems, young people who neither study nor work, unemployment rate, and risk of poverty and exclusion.

Table 4. Homogeneity of variances, general ANOVA model, and results of the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Variables	Homogeneity of variance (Levene's test)		ANOVA		Kruskal-Wallis	
	Levene	Sig.	F	Sig.	Chi-Squared	Sig.
EO1	1.441	0.27	4.216	0.037*	7.72	0.021*
EO2	1.279	0.309	5.237	0.02*	6.437	0.04*
EO3	0.476	0.631	.731	0.499	1.381	0.501
EO4	0.299	0.746	5.915	0.014*	7.387	0.025*
EO5	0.074	0.929	1.724	0.214	3.251	0.197
EO6	0.912	0.424	1.186	0.334	2.162	0.339
FWC1	0.699	0.513	.275	0.764	0.365	0.833
FWC2	4.855	0.025**	4.411	0.033*	5.077	0.079
FWC3	4.631	0.029**	1.998	0.172	1.995	0.369
FWC4	7.691	0.006**	1.304	0.302	0.447	0.8
SPI1	1.94	0.18	3.913	0.045*	4.426	0.109
SPI2	0.123	0.885	2.961	0.085	5.531	0.063
SPI3	0.184	0.834	1.593	0.238	2.782	0.249
SPI4	0.201	0.82	1.762	0.208	3.014	0.222
SPI5	0.908	0.426	1.200	0.33	1.236	0.539
SPI6	1.639	0.229	0.4	0.678	1.005	0.605
SPI7	0.895	0.431	2.083	0.161	3.251	0.197

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; statistically significant differences in a 95.5% confidence interval; the differences between at least one of the groups are statistically significant; ** $p < 0.05$, the variances are not homogeneous.

Table 5 shows the results of the analysis of the differences between the groups of the IDS-DEC variable with respect to the EO1, EO2, EO4, and SPI1 variables. The FWC2 variable is excluded from the post-hoc analysis of the ANOVA model (Scheffé) because it does not feature non-homogeneous variance. The SPI1 variable is included precisely because it meets the homogeneity of variance criterion.

In regions where social services have a “strong” degree of development, there is less early abandonment of training in the population group comprised of those between the ages of 18 and 24, fewer young people aged 15 to 29 who neither study nor work, and a much lower percentage of people at risk of poverty and exclusion. In contrast, in regions where the public system of social services is weaker, people aged 25 to 64 receive more training than in the other regions.

Table 5. Analysis of mean differences by groups (Scheffé post-hoc test).

Scheffé	Groups (degree of social services development)		Difference in averages	Sig.
Percentage of people aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks (EO1)	Weak	Moderate	2.08	0.045*
		Strong	0.47	0.837
	Moderate	Weak	–2.08	0.045*
		Strong	–1.61	0.157
	Strong	Weak	–0.47	0.837
		Moderate	1.61	0.157
Percentage of early abandonment of education/training aged 18–24 population group (EO2)	Weak	Moderate	–3.01	0.309
		Strong	3.39	0.263
	Moderate	Weak	3.01	0.309
		Strong	6.41	0.020*
	Strong	Weak	–3.39	0.263
		Moderate	–6.41	0.020*
Percentage of people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work (2022) (EO4)	Weak	Moderate	–2.41	0.032
		Strong	0.09	0.993
	Moderate	Weak	2.41	0.032*
		Strong	2.51	0.034*
	Strong	Weak	–0.09	0.993
		Moderate	–2.51	0.034*
Percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2030 target) (SPI1)	Weak	Moderate	–5.03	0.311
		Strong	4.18	0.469
	Moderate	Weak	5.03	0.311
		Strong	9.22	0.046(*)
	Strong	Weak	–4.18	0.469
		Moderate	–9.22	0.046(*)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; statistically significant differences in a 95.5% confidence interval.

5. Discussion

Policies of austerity and spending cuts led to retrenchment with regards to social policies. The cuts focused on health services, followed by education, but also had a strong impact on social services. The cutback was close to EUR 1.5 billion (Del Pino & Fernández, 2019), such that social services, already unable to cope with the inflationary demand, struggled even more to do so with increasingly dwindling resources.

Thus, the cuts applied to the social services system were significant, with a drop of 0.1% of GDP since 2010 and 0.2% since 2015, not recovering the initial position of 0.5% of GDP until 2020, stabilizing after the Covid-19 pandemic, until the last data from 2023. Third-sector social action organizations took on a particularly relevant role in directly addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. Due to cuts in public funding, many organizations were forced to shoulder responsibilities previously lying with the State and public administrations (Pape et al., 2016), redefining the relationship between citizens and public social protection systems.

Some authors, such as Verde-Diego et al. (2022), expanding on previous work by Pastor-Seller et al. (2019), have shown the impacts of the crisis on the social service system and its professionals. They also speak of a

process of “dismantling” this system in keeping with austerity policies. One observation worth noting is their assertion that the worsening of the system’s conditions and structure was not due so much to the crisis itself, and increases in demand, as it was to political decisions.

The Social Services Development Report by the Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024) details the behavior of investments in social services. It shows that there was a trend towards a reduction in the proportion of GDP spent on social services, although spending increased in absolute and relative terms (for example, per capita spending and spending by local authorities have increased). In any case, the growing trend in the percentage of GDP allocated to Social Services that started in 2014 (when the cutbacks peaked) was interrupted in 2020. There has been no recovery of social spending on social services in response to and in proportion with the economic recovery (nor in the rest of the social protection areas). What is especially serious is limited outlays, half a point below the EU average.

This must be understood within the context of the evolution of inequality in Spain. Although the issue of increasing inequality is a global one (with a tendency for high incomes to grow at the expense of medium and medium/low incomes, (Chancel, 2022), in Spain this problem is more acute. The progressive polarization between high- and low-status occupations, and a decline in middle-status ones, is a reality across the continent (Cirillo, 2018), but the rigidity of the Spanish labor market exacerbates this dynamic even more (Consoli & Sánchez-Barrioluego, 2024). This is one of the reasons why Spain is the fifth most unequal country in the EU27, after Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania (Ayala, 2022).

This inequality grows in recessionary cycles, and only decreases slightly during periods of prosperity. In fact, structural inequality is estimated at around 32 points on the Gini coefficient, a situation in which we find ourselves in 2023 (Bandrés Moliné, 2023; Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2023), which, as Ayala and Cantó (2022) indicate, entails a significant risk of inequality becoming chronic in certain social strata, vulnerable to ending up depending on social services.

There are studies that qualify the situation of inequality by considering more than households’ disposable income, including their access to social rights and social benefits. This is what is called expanded disposable income, and it reduces the GINI coefficient by several points. Recent studies (EAPN-ES, 2024) estimate that, if these transfers did not exist, 42.6% of the population would be at risk of poverty (almost eleven million people). In any case, applying the expanded disposable income, and compared to the EU countries most like us (EU15), we would remain in the same position of inequality, but it would be lower and very similar to that of Germany, for example, falling below that of Italy and Great Britain (Bandrés Moliné, 2023).

This is a relevant issue, as it directly affects the capacity of Spanish social protection to reduce inequality through its social transfers. We recognize that Spain is not a benchmark country in terms of its social policies, which are clearly subsidiary (De Lucas, 2020). If we focus on the most vulnerable sectors, the target of social services, we find that the capacity of social transfers in Spain to reduce the risk of poverty is 1.2 points lower than the EU27 average. Moreover, if we look at the impact achieved by social transfers in the EU27, it is 35.29%, compared to 27.66% in Spain (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2023).

The point is that, even though Spain is always below the EU average in terms of social protection spending, due to significant income inequality, social benefits have a greater impact on reducing inequality. Moreover, among

these benefits, social services are the most progressive but their limited volume hampers their redistributive potential (Bandrés Moliné, 2023).

In this way, it is understood that, although social transfers mitigate inequality levels, our country falls far under the EU27 average in terms of its most serious expression—poverty—which in 2023 stood at 21.4% across Europe but at 26.5% in Spain (with the third highest figure, after Romania and Bulgaria). In the EU15, Spain ranks last, behind Greece, at 26.1% (EAPN-ES, 2024).

6. Conclusions

The EPSR can constitute an opportunity to increase the protective effect of Social Services and develop them more consistently throughout Spain. Taking as a reference the main indicators of the EPSR Action Plan, differences are observed between Spain's different regions, especially in the indicators related to equal opportunities and social protection. Regions with more developed public social services systems tend to exhibit lower levels of poverty and social exclusion among the general population, as well as more favorable conditions for young people.

The monitoring of the EPSR Action Plan's main indicators as key elements for the orientation of social policies in Spain calls for analyzing regional differences and the degree to which social services are developed regionally. Investment in public policies and, especially, social services, is essential for the enjoyment of public and social rights. Their implementation and development explain national problems, as well as the major regional differences, not only interpretable based on greater or lesser regional GDPs.

The implementation of the policies necessary to develop the EPSR in Spain faces several challenges. One of the main ones is the fragmentation of competences between the different levels of government, which hinders a uniform application of social policies and coordination (Martinez et al., 2025). The EU having a coordinated social policy framework is indispensable. In addition, the sustainable financing of social services remains a point of debate, especially in the context of high public debt and fiscal constraints (Corti & Vesan, 2023). The coming years will be key in ascertaining the impact of the EPSR on social policies and social protection systems in Spain. On the horizon of the political and economic cycle, the control of public spending and reductions in public debt are, once again, key elements of European economic governance. The rise of political parties condemning policies designed to promote equality, diversity, and social justice (that is, everything that the EPSR represents) is a reality that should not be ignored, as the price that citizens would pay is extremely high.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset and analytical matrix used in this study are openly available in Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15188256>) and provided as supplementary material.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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