

The Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Era of Polycrisis

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Abstract

This thematic issue focuses on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) amid a context of polycrisis. It examines how overlapping global disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic or current geopolitical instability have shaped structural inequalities across Europe, including among the most vulnerable groups, challenging the European social model. This editorial emphasizes how the different articles in this issue address EPSR’s three core dimensions (equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion) in a context of growing tensions between achieving societal ambitions and the dual digital and green transition, and growing concerns over the EU’s increased investment in security and defence, which may undermine social policy commitments. The editors synthesize contributions from the issue, which offer empirical and theoretical insights into labour market activation, digital inclusion, and welfare adequacy. The editorial calls for integrated policy strategies to ensure that social rights remain central to EU governance through 2030 and beyond.

Keywords

digital transition; equal opportunities; European Pillar of Social Rights; fair working conditions; green transition; social protection

1. Introduction

The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, compounded by the geopolitical instability triggered by the war in Ukraine or the subsequent high inflation rates, has created a multifaceted crisis across Europe. These overlapping disruptions have tested the resilience of national economies and social systems. However, these

systemic shocks are not new. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Europe has experienced a succession of major disruptions (economic, social, and political), leading some (e.g., Henig & Knight, 2023) to acknowledge that contemporary societies are facing a historical moment of permanent emergency or polycrisis. This situation has produced asymmetric impacts, including from a territorial perspective, by deepening the divide between different regions of Europe, most notably between the North and South and the East and West (Simões, 2022). Southern and Eastern regions, already grappling with structural vulnerabilities, have suffered from additional austerity measures, labour market volatility, and weakened welfare systems. In contrast, Northern and Central European countries have generally demonstrated greater institutional resilience and faster recovery trajectories. However, even in these more robust economies, the pathways to recovery remain uncertain and uneven (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019).

The successive and global crises of the past 20 years directly question the European social model (ESM). The ESM is a framework that aims at promoting inclusive growth, social cohesion, and equal opportunities across EU member states. Specifically, the ESM stems from key principles, including fair working conditions, access to education and healthcare, and the need to reduce poverty and inequality while ensuring sustainable development and social justice.

The ESM has evolved over decades, rooted in post-World War II welfare state traditions that stressed solidarity, equality, and social protection. Its modern form was shaped significantly by the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 at the Gothenburg Summit, which established 20 guiding principles for fair labour markets and inclusive welfare systems. The 2021 Porto Social Summit marked a major milestone for the EPSR, setting ambitious commitments and targets for 2030, including reducing poverty by 15 million people (European Commission, 2021).

1.1. The EPSR: A Snapshot

The EPSR vision is anchored on 20 principles (e.g., gender equality, secure and adaptable employment, access to social care) stemming from the Porto Social Commitment and the Porto Declaration (European Council, 2021). Such principles are split into three dimensions: equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Each of these dimensions relies on an agreed set of headline and secondary indicators, providing, therefore, a framework for monitoring the progress of the social cohesion and social inclusion ambitions across the EU until 2030.

The EPSR's equal opportunities dimension highlights the importance of inclusive education and training systems. Between 2012 and 2024, the EU has made notable progress in some areas of this dimension. These include the reduction of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) by 4.80% to 11.10%, or an increase of tertiary education attainment by 10.20% to 44.70%. However, these aggregate improvements mask significant regional disparities. Southern and Eastern European countries continue to report higher rates of early school leaving from education and training and NEETs, which in turn have cascading effects on other EPSR indicators such as income inequality, labour market participation, and gender equity. Moreover, the expansion of tertiary education has introduced new challenges, including the risk of overqualification and a growing mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands (Simões, 2022).

The fair working conditions dimension stresses the importance of accessing decent and meaningful jobs. Important advancements have been achieved in this area as well. The employment rate among those aged 20–64 in 2024 landed on 75.80%, an increase of 8.90% since 2021. In the same period, the long-term unemployment rate in the labour force aged 15–74 fell 3.00%, from 4.90% to 1.90%. Still, the transition from education to stable employment often remains prolonged and uncertain, with many young people cycling through temporary contracts, internships, or informal work arrangements, particularly in rural areas (Simões, 2025). The widespread nature of precarious employment is an additional concern due to its pervasive social implications, as it undermines individuals' ability to access housing or participate fully in society (Carmo & d'Avelar, 2021). Importantly, the prevalence of in-work poverty, preventing upward social mobility or leading to significant scarring effects, further complicates the picture (Mussida & Sciulli, 2025). Thus, access to employment alone is not a sufficient safeguard against economic vulnerability.

The social protection and inclusion dimension of the EPSR focuses on the role of the state in mitigating inequality and ensuring a decent standard of living for all. The figures show some overall improvements in this domain. As an example, the rate of at-risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024 was 21.00%, compared to 24.00% in 2012. Moreover, the share of children aged less than three years old in formal childcare has increased from 27.10% to 39.20% in the same period. However, these developments contrast with a deadlock on the inclusion of disabled workers in the labour market, a steady increase of self-reported unmet needs for medical care since 2016, or the fact that the reduction of poverty and social exclusion rates (at a yearly average rate of .25%) is modest, to say the least (Eurostat, 2025).

2. Looking Into 2030: The Main Challenges Faced by the EPSR

Nearly five years after the Porto Summit, the EPSR finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. The EU is currently grappling with the challenge of reconciling the demands of the dual transition (digital and green) with its longstanding commitments to social inclusion and cohesion. This balancing act is inherently complex and fraught with tensions. The digital transition, while offering opportunities for innovation and efficiency, also introduces significant risks, particularly through the deployment of artificial intelligence, which is expected to reduce or fundamentally change labour demand in specific sectors. Simultaneously, the green transition, essential for environmental sustainability, entails considerable socio-economic disruptions. These include the displacement of workers in carbon-intensive industries and the widening of social inequalities due to the substantial reskilling or upskilling requirements imposed on the labour force, especially among individuals from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds.

Compounding these challenges is the increasing prioritization of security and defence investments across the EU. Public discourse has raised concerns that such budgetary shifts will undermine the social role of the state, potentially diminishing its capacity to function as a protective mechanism against poverty and exclusion. There is apprehension that these reallocations could impede efforts to foster lifelong learning, skills development, social protection of vulnerable groups (e.g., children, elderly, minorities), or equitable access to the labour market, core tenets of the EPSR and the broader ESM.

The current challenges posed to meet social cohesion priorities coincide with the EU's ongoing deliberations over a new action plan to reinforce the implementation of the EPSR until 2030. As policymakers navigate this multifaceted landscape, the tension between advancing technological and environmental objectives and

safeguarding social rights underscores the need for integrated, forward-looking strategies. Ensuring that the EPSR remains a central pillar of EU policy will require a renewed commitment to inclusive governance and sustainable development that does not compromise social justice.

3. Contribution of the Thematic Issue for the Public Debate: An Overview

The articles featured in this thematic issue offer a comprehensive examination of contemporary social challenges and policy responses through the lens of the EPSR. Importantly, the contributions offered by the different articles cover the highlighted tensions between the evolving dual transition, European security needs, and social inclusion priorities. The different articles address many of the inquiries originally raised by the editors. How are European countries equipping workers with new skills in the green and digital sectors and still meeting employment and activity rates proposed by the ESPR? Are under-skilled and underqualified citizens being left behind in the EU countries? How exactly are new economies emerging from the green and digital transformations and creating new opportunities for people in more peripheral countries and regions? How can states continue to provide a safety net for their citizens in a context of conflict and rising military demands? To address these and other queries, the articles can be organized around the above-mentioned EPSR's three core dimensions.

The first dimension, *Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market*, is addressed through several contributions that examine the structural and digital barriers to employment. Some of the studies highlight the effectiveness of active labour market policies and digital training programmes in supporting long-term unemployed individuals and NEETs. These articles highlight the importance of tailored interventions, particularly in rural and underserved areas, where digital infrastructure and access to training are uneven. The emphasis on digital competencies and pedagogical alignment in education further reinforces the need for lifelong learning strategies that are inclusive and responsive to technological change. The connections between digital transition and employment structures are also a theme featured in this issue. For instance, the issue covers an analysis of how unemployment benefits can moderate the effects of technology-induced employment shifts, suggesting that robust social safety nets are essential to ensure that digitalization does not exacerbate inequality. Socio-economic mobility associated with the work market is also addressed through an examination of the potential of employment growth to reduce poverty, revealing that job creation alone is insufficient without complementary policies in wage setting and social protection. Together, these contributions advocate for a holistic approach to labour market inclusion, one that integrates education, social policy, and economic planning.

In the realm of *Fair Working Conditions*, the issue delves into the role of the social and solidarity economy, migration, and sustainable employment. The analysis of EU strategic documents reveals the latent potential of the social and solidarity economy to tackle challenges such as unemployment and poverty. However, its integration into mainstream policy remains limited. The representation of migrants within the EPSR framework is critically examined, exposing gaps in inclusivity and the symbolic boundaries that shape public discourse and policy. The transition to green and socially sustainable employment is another issue highlighted in this issue that addresses the fair working conditions dimension of the EPSR, emphasizing the need for institutional reform and targeted training to support vulnerable job seekers. These articles collectively call for a reimagining of work, one that is equitable, inclusive, and attuned to ecological and social imperatives.

The third dimension, *Social Protection and Inclusion*, is perhaps the most deeply explored, with contributions addressing homelessness, minimum income schemes, regional disparities, and resilience to disinformation. The barriers faced by individuals without a fixed address in accessing social rights are scrutinized, revealing the limitations of current legal frameworks and the need for more inclusive registration systems. The experiences of LGBTQ individuals in homelessness further highlight the intersectionality of discrimination and social exclusion. Minimum income protection schemes in different countries (Portugal, Spain, and Italy) are critically assessed, with findings pointing to erosion in coverage and adequacy over time. These studies shed light on how policy design and implementation impact youth transitions, financial independence, and intergenerational equity. Moreover, regional disparities in social services are mapped using EPSR indicators, showing that stronger public systems are correlated with lower poverty and exclusion rates. Finally, the resilience of socially vulnerable populations to disinformation is examined, linking welfare state effectiveness to societal preparedness in the face of geopolitical threats.

Across all three dimensions, the thematic issue reveals a complex interplay between policy ambition and lived reality. While the EPSR provides a visionary framework for social rights in Europe, its implementation is uneven and often constrained by national politics, institutional inertia, and socio-economic disparities. The articles collectively argue for a more integrated and responsive approach, one that bridges gaps between legislation and practice, between digital innovation and social inclusion, and between economic growth and human dignity.

4. Conclusion

This thematic issue situates the debate about the future of the EPSR within the context of some of the most pressing challenges facing EU states in the years to come. Relying on both quantitative analyses of large (inter)national datasets and qualitative accounts of marginalized groups, this thematic issue offers nuanced evidence to inform the upcoming ESPR action plan. Collectively, these studies illustrate the multifaceted nature of social inclusion in Europe and the critical role of the EPSR in guiding policy responses. They reveal that despite some significant achievements, important challenges persist in ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background or location, can access opportunities, enjoy fair working conditions, and benefit from comprehensive social protection. The research calls for coordinated efforts across policy domains to address structural inequalities and support inclusive development in the face of digital, demographic, and ecological transitions.

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