

Preface

Outlining this year's 21st edition of *Social policy in the European Union* (EU) back in November 2019, we scheduled chapters on the impact of the European elections on EU social policymaking, on the EU Green Deal, and on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including in terms of gender equality. Other contributions would have dealt with the EU's renewed focus on access to social protection for all and on improving work-life balance. One chapter was to provide a state-of-play of important developments in 2019 enhancing European labour law: transparent and predictable working conditions, the newly established European Labour Authority and the legislative breakthrough on the protection of posted workers, to name just a few.

Then the first wave of the pandemic hit the EU. At the end of February 2020, Italy reported a significant increase in Covid-19 cases, mainly in the northern regions of the country. By March 2020, all EU Member States had reported Covid-19 cases. The pandemic, and the ensuing lockdowns announced in the EU as well as in the wider world, promptly resulted in a significant economic downturn with profound social consequences. The EU reaction, divided as it may have seemed in the initial weeks of the crisis, was aimed at developing coordinated responses to the health crisis, as well as to the upcoming economic and social crisis. Policymaking at EU level took a very different direction from the predominantly intergovernmental response to the 2008–2010 crisis, mostly under the impetus of the newly appointed von der Leyen European Commission.

Given this context, the outline of the book was fundamentally altered. All chapters of *Social policy in the EU: state of play 2020* now consider, to a greater or lesser extent, the consequences of the unfolding public health crisis. Covid-19's hijacking of the book had important implications for the contributors, whom we asked not only to analyse key developments in the EU social agenda during 2019 but also to describe the initial Covid-19-driven EU and domestic policies between January and July 2020, thereby pushing forward the book's time horizon by six months. We are deeply indebted to the authors, all of whom managed to combine both angles and worked industriously in these difficult, extraordinary circumstances.

Chapter 1 by Karen Anderson and Elke Heins provides the general framework for the other contributions, discussing the impact of the 2019 European Parliament elections and the appointment of the new European Commission on EU social and employment policy. While Covid-19 interfered with both the timing and substance of several planned initiatives, the authors point out that the crisis triggered some remarkable developments, such as the SURE mechanism. These are discussed in detail, explicitly considering the main areas of contention among relevant stakeholders. All in all, it would seem that recent developments have prepared the ground for more EU social policy activity.

In Chapter 2, Eleanor Brooks, Anniek de Ruijter and Scott Greer convincingly show that soon after the initial confusion in the weeks after the outbreak of the pandemic – and despite the EU’s limited competences in this area – Member States, under the aegis of the European Commission, quickly started to cooperate to mitigate the spread of the virus. The authors analyse the prospects for future EU health policy in light of the window of opportunity created by the pandemic: while the European Commission is preparing a new narrative in the area of health care in a crisis context, the EU’s involvement in this area remains contested territory and exogenous factors may quickly shift Member States’ perceptions.

The national and EU responses to the pandemic in terms of economic, labour market and social policies are discussed by Martin Myant in Chapter 3. The author presents the complex reality of the dire economic impact on Member States, especially in hard-hit sectors such as tourism and hospitality. The chapter also discusses the initial social consequences (even if they are difficult to quantify at this early stage) and the national responses to them, such as measures to keep those sectors most affected by the crisis afloat. The author critically assesses the EU’s unprecedented support measures, warning against unintended consequences such as a further widening of economic and social divergence across the EU.

‘All crises have gendered impacts and Covid-19 is no exception’ is the starting point of Chapter 4 by Jill Rubery and Isabel Tavora: although both men and women face major risks of losing their jobs, women are more at risk in this crisis compared to previous ones. Their risk of losing income and economic independence has also increased greatly in the pandemic due to school closures making combining wage work with parenting much more difficult. To counter these risks and take advantage of the unprecedented pace of and readiness for change, the authors suggest important ways forward for EU policymaking.

Chapter 5 by Éloi Laurent discusses the main features of the European Green Deal, highlighting its value added as well as its shortcomings, including the commitment to economic efficiency to the detriment of social justice and environmental sustainability. The author then makes the case for a reappraisal of the EGD, calling for a European commitment to robust social-ecological policies embedded in a ‘just transition’ framework. This commitment should be carried out by building a European ‘social-ecological’ state calibrated for the 21st century, able to address current needs without compromising on the future of the EU and its citizens.

In Chapter 6, Sebastiano Sabato and Matteo Mandelli address how the EU has tried to promote sustainable development through its policies, examining the decisions of the von der Leyen Commission to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the European Semester. The authors show that, while the 2020 cycle of the Semester has been made more consistent with the logic of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, major shortcomings in terms of governance have emerged, including the impossibility to cover all 17 UN SDGs through the Semester. The full and coherent integration of the Agenda 2030 in EU policymaking is a complex endeavour, constituting an ongoing governance conundrum for the EU.

The renewed ambition to develop an EU framework for minimum wages is discussed in chapter 7 by Ramón Peña-Casas and Dalila Ghailani, who ask, *is it a solution to the ongoing increase in in-work poverty (IWP) in Europe?* The authors review a large range of social and employment policies with a direct or indirect influence on IWP, concluding that a European minimum wage framework will most likely help reduce in-work poverty but will certainly not be enough. While the recent Commission proposal for a Directive on adequate minimum wages may end up being a very general framework, it does have the great merit of putting the issue squarely on the EU agenda.

The concluding chapter by the editors provides a synthesis of the analyses presented in the chapters, updates them wherever relevant (through November 2020) and situates the key findings in the wider debates on the EU social dimension. The chapter discusses the fate of the European Semester in the light of the new Recovery and Resilience Facility and assesses the wiggle room left for social affairs players in the EU's recovery strategy: clearly, the 'socialisation' of the EU's overarching governance framework is under pressure. It also raises the question of whether the ongoing 'crisisification' of European policymaking may, ultimately, pave the way for further European integration.

The Chronology 2019 by Boris Fronteddu and Denis Bouget summarises the key events in the EU's social, ecological and economic affairs, beginning with the 20th anniversary of the creation of the euro on 1 January and ending with the European Parliament and the Council of the EU reaching informal agreement, on 19 December 2019, on the recast of the 'drinking water' directive. A second chronology by the same authors summarizes the EU response to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic between January and August 2020. What stands out is the impressive number of legislative acts adopted at EU level in this very short period in order to mitigate both the health and the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic.

The European Social Observatory has again worked closely with the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and renowned external scholars to draw up this year's edition of the book. Through this collaborative publication, we aim to contribute to the debate between policymakers, social stakeholders and the research community, while providing accessible information and analysis for practitioners and students of European integration. This year's *Bilan social* in many ways complements the 20th-anniversary issue of the ETUI's *Benchmarking Working Europe*, which provides a state-of-the-art analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the world of work.¹

We look forward to engaging in a dialogue with you over the crucial issues addressed in this volume.

Bart Vanhercke, Slavina Spasova and Boris Fronteddu (OSE)
Nicola Countouris and Philippe Pochet (ETUI)

1. ETUI and ETUC (2020) *Benchmarking working Europe 2020. Covid-19 and the world of work: the impact of a pandemic*, Brussels, ETUI. <https://www.etui.org/publications/benchmarking-working-europe-2020>