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# **The European Union's identity crisis**

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**Research Paper No. 3**

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## Introduction

*“Growth must become Europe’s number one economic priority” (Sapir, 2006:370).*

*“Dysfunctional labour market and social policies are not only a threat to globalization and the single market, they also endanger the currency union. Any European country is bound to suffer from structural changes if its markets are inflexible” (Sapir, 2006:370).*

*“The modernisation of labour markets and labour mobility need to be encouraged to allow greater adaptability to change by breaking down existing barriers” (European Council, 2001:16).*

In the early 21st century, ideas like the aforementioned have started constructing a picture of the rapid changes European Union’s (EU) citizens would need to adapt to. Sapir (2006) asserts that this adaptation would be necessary in order to create a more competitive and sustainable market to survive the threat of globalisation. In the face of this challenge, European labour market and social policies must go through a phase of modernisation (Sapir, 2006). This modernisation can be translated nowadays through the concepts of flexicurity, activation and partnership which have been conceptualised in the Lisbon Strategy (Confédération Européenne des Cadres, 2006, 2007; Wilthagen, 2007).

These concepts can be seen as tools for optimising the adjustment of the illadapted social-protection systems to market forces (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual, 2005). Whether or not this is the right response to globalisation remains arguable. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the policies followed mark an ideological shift in the European Union as they are against the founding values that the Union was built on.

This paper addresses the EU’s contemporary approach towards creating a more competitive market, arguing that this approach constitutes one of the main obstacles towards social progress in Europe. Furthermore, this ideological ‘shift’ towards a reductionist approach to social protection endangers some of the most fundamental European social protections and more generally its core values. As social progress and existing social rights cover a vast number of rights, for the sake of brevity, this paper retains its focus on the direct detrimental effects of the economic reforms on employment rights, unemployment, pensions and the collateral damage in failing to tackle social exclusion and poverty.

To accomplish this, the paper is structured into four sections. Whilst the first section introduces and conceptualises the European Social Model (ESM), the following section analyses the alignment of social and economic policies through emphasising on the concept of flexicurity. The third section consists of an in-depth analysis of how these reforms lead to a minimalistic approach towards social rights. Followed by the fourth section, the focus is drawn on how these reforms demonstrate an ideological shift in European values. Thereafter, the implications and conclusion are presented.

## **The European Social Model**

The first thing to clarify is what social Europe means. In other words, what values are being endangered through these social reforming policies? Social Europe, can be defined as many different things like the European trade unions, legislations policies and the European Social Model. This paper will focus on the latter for it constitutes the main 'platform' on which formal European policies are based. Until the late 1970's, social policies at least in Western Europe had followed a protectionist approach. This approach held an antagonistic relation to the markets and it's constant creation of risks, inequality, poverty, and growth (Hansen & Triantafillou, 2011). In response to market consequences, welfarestates have sought to protect their citizens through labour-market regulations and 'smoothen' the imbalances between labour and employers by promoting full employment (Crouch, 1999). Moreover, they provided social security against poverty, disabilities and ageing (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The project of a European social model was first formulated in the late 1980's by Jacques Delors as an alternative to America's pure capitalist market. This alternative option reflected the core values and a vision for the European Union's future. The ESM has acquired a variety of definitions throughout its creation by academics. Firstly, it can be seen as a common European struggle to confront and promote a variety of social issues such as social-protection, equality, labor law worker's rights, full employment, poverty and antidiscrimination (Servais, 2001; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2003). Similarly, other academics see ESM as a welfare-state that promotes the social regulation of the market (Scharpf, 2002). Contrary to the first one, in the second definition, ESM appears as a way of 'bridging' the antagonistic relation between the market and social rights. In other words, economic growth could be combined to social cohesion (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual, 2005). Sweden, UK and Germany's models were considered to be successful examples of this 'fusion' of economic efficiency and social justice. The third group of academics questions the actual existence of ESM as it perceives social policies as fragmented and very diverse within Europe (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Jepsen & Serrano Pascual, 2005; Sapir, 2006).

In the light of globalisation and its consequences, ESM and European citizens will have to adapt to modernisation in order to respond to the limited financing of the social-protection (European Commission, 2003:5). In terms of the first definition, ESM is being threatened and challenged by these changes. On the contrary, for the second definition, ESM is the way to deal with these challenges.

This paper perceives ESM as an approach and a vision rather than an existing project. This approach is in favor of the protection of social rights and a social regulation of the market. Instead of seeing ESM as a rigid project it interprets it as an ongoing struggle for more social-protection. That way it is similar to the first group of definitions, with one difference: ESM can never be realised as it is a struggle. Moreover, it signifies the ideological difference between the EU and the rest of the world.

## **Aligning Social & Economic Policies: The Concept of Flexicurity**

### The concept

By the early 2000's, the Lisbon Strategy has sought to establish a new, modernised way in order to respond to the rapid changes of globalisation. Although this response can be identified through the introduction of many concepts like flexicurity, activation, employability and partnership, this paper focuses on flexicurity. Flexicurity constitutes one of the most radical reforms which directly affects employment rights, unemployment and pensions. Indirectly it also affects issues such as social exclusion and poverty.

One of the Lisbon Strategy goals was to make Europe the most competitive knowledge based economy by 2010. In order for this to happen, innovative policies that lead to higher productivity were needed. This shift towards modernisation was mainly influenced by the Nordic model and especially Denmark. Denmark's 'Golden Triangle' was the 'proof' that national welfare can survive along a competitive market with the right policy mix (Hansen & Triantafillou, 2011; Esping-Andersen et al., 2001; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Merkel, 2002).

In this perceived situation between rapid change and necessity, flexicurity was introduced as a panacea. Although flexicurity existed since the early 2000's, it was not until 2006 that the European Commission started promoting the concept in various reports and policy papers related to the Lisbon strategy (Confédération Européenne des Cadres, 2006, 2007; Wilthagen, 2007).

Flexicurity consists of the awkward combination of flexibility and security which instead of being opposites, can be mutually reinforcing with the right policy mix (Wilthagen and Tros, 2004). On the one hand, it enhances the flexibility of

labour markets, work organisation and labour relations and on the other it enhances security, such as employment and social security, for weaker groups in and out of the labour market (Wilthagen and Tros, 2004:169; Muffels et al., 2008; see also Klammer, 2004). The goal of these reforms is to create a more competitive market, leading to growth and more security. In practice, flexicurity can be translated into five interrelated national policy objectives: 1. Flexible and secure contracts; 2. Active labour-market policies; 3. Life-long learning; 4. Modernise social security provisions to increase labour-market mobility; and 5. Social dialogue (Bekker and Wilthagen, 2008). Thus, EU members have to “use their National Reform Programmes to report explicitly on their flexicurity strategies” (Confédération Européenne des Cadres, 2007:12).

### **The effects and the side-effects**

Although flexicurity seems appealing at first, a closer examination of this shift towards ‘soft’ regulations and flexibility instead of ‘rigid’ systems relating to EU industrial relations (Sisson and Marginson, 2001) have grave implications for social policies and their realisation through the ESM.

A first example of flexicurity’s failure to keep the balance between flexibility and security on employment rights is the Italian case. During the 1990’s, in an effort to create a more flexible market, tackle unemployment and facilitate labourmarket participation of disadvantaged groups (Burrioni & Keune, 2011), the government undertook a number of radical labour-market reforms (Regalia and Regini, 2004). These reforms were translated in the legalisation of temporary agency work, vocational training contracts and other flexible types of contracts. These measures reduced unemployment, but in return they created other forms of societal problems: i) the wages of temporary and flexible workers were lesser than the permanent ones; ii) Companies could provide irregular work depending on their needs; iii) Short-term contracts rarely led to permanent ones; and vi) Most flexible contracts were involuntary (Burrioni and Keune, 2009; Burrioni et al., 2008). Indeed, instead of addressing the problems of disadvantaged groups, these measures created an opportunity for companies to exploit flexible and temporary contracts in reducing their expenditures. A result of this was the creation of even more uncertainties and insecurities to the precarious workers, leaving them without guarantees of new security measures to counterbalance these effects (Burrioni & Keune, 2011). Instead of creating win-win situations for the market and the labour, these reforms exacerbated social exclusion (Lahusen et. al, 2013). As many academics (Crouch et al, 2005; Burrioni & Keune, 2011) and European institutions like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development have noted, successful attempts to create such beneficial complementarities for both sides are rare. On the contrary uncoordinated reform strategies are quite common (OECD, 2006).

The second problematic aspect of flexicurity is the perception of a homogeneous national labour-market. Although flexicurity is supposed to create benefits for both employers and workers, labour-markets are more complex. They entail different variation of economic sectors, occupational groups and regions. Even in the most successful example of flexicurity, i.e. Denmark, where flexicurity decreased unemployment, analysts 'forget' to depict the other side of the coin. As Dany Lang (2006) argues, a by-product of flexicurity in Denmark was the marginalisation of large strata of the adult population. Around 800,000 people were not integrated in the Danish labour market, unable to go back to active working life (Lang, 2006). On the same note, Larsen (2005) argues that flexicurity's attempt to re-integrate heavily marginalised groups like immigrants was unsuccessful. Another form of heterogeneity can be found in territories within the same nation. For example, in Italy unemployment can greatly vary between different regions. In 2007, while youth unemployment in Lombardia was 12.9, in Calabria it was 31.6 (Burrioni & Keune, 2011). Thus, the uniform reforms of flexicurity have diverse effects in a labour-market by deepening the gap between rich and poor people and surely cannot be considered win-win situations.

These facts only show a fragment of the diversities labour-markets consist of. As shown above, this uniform approach towards different groups of the population is highly problematic. Although it might ameliorate the conditions for some workers, it worsens the situation for others. In this flexible contracts environment, older workers might lose their jobs by replacing them with younger, cheaper workers. On the contrary, young workers who are working on the basis of small flexible contracts face huge difficulties in earning permanent and more secure contracts. Likewise, other elements relevant to security and flexibility (i.e. education, family, and the international competitiveness of firms) which are crucial for job creation are merely addressed by flexicurity (Burrioni & Keune, 2011).

As shown in this section, flexicurity has at least two implications to social protections: i) flexibility and security cannot be balanced, as a flexible labourmarket creates many new insecurities for workers; and ii) this perception of a homogeneous labour-market is problematic as some disadvantaged groups within the society are further marginalised. Thus, in a direct or an indirect way, flexicurity affects social-protection policies and fails to conceptualise the reality of the labour-market. Within this approach the role of the welfare-state is not to counterbalance these insecurities, rather to prepare individuals for the transformations they will have to adapt (Daly, 2012).

### **Towards a Minimalistic Approach to Social Policies**

This section focuses on the minimalistic approach the EU's policy platforms, Lisbon Strategy and its successor Europe 2020, take towards social policies. This growth-led approach is underplaying social progress as it fails to address poverty and those who are at-risk-of-poverty.

## The Lisbon Strategy

As highlighted before, Lisbon Strategy has marked a new beginning for the modernisation of the European Social Model. In a way to create a more efficient market, social expenditures had to be reduced and social-protections had to gradually reform to investments in human resources, skills and competences (Hansen & Triantafillou, 2011). Instead of a protective welfare-state, these reforms emphasised on the need for a more productive one, able to increase labour-market active participation while reducing citizen's dependency to it (Hudson and Kü hner, 2009). Thus, social policies became subordinate to and dependent on economic success (Burroni & Keune, 2011).

All these policies had one goal: to create growth through a more efficient market. This in return would create even more social investments, leading the way towards social progress. However, between 2000 and 2008, when the Eurozone crisis started, empirical data depicts a different picture. Although EU market experienced more growth, social progress and especially people at-risk-of-poverty have increased or remained stable in most EU members (Cantillon, 2011). Even within the rich EU members like Sweden and Germany, between

2004-2008, the percentage of people at-risk-of-poverty has increased by 3% (Cantillon, 2011). Accordingly, in the EU the percentage of people at-risk-ofpoverty within the unemployed has risen from 40% to 45% in the same period (Eurostat, 2010).

These striking examples question the taken for granted relation between growth and social progress. Is this social regression related to the radical reforms in social policies? Within a decade, 1998-2008, the general trend to social protection had undertaken a downward adjustment to 'fit' in a more efficient market. Firstly, although unemployed people were entitled to benefits, social investment strategy has tightened the eligibility criteria (Atkinson, 2010; Weishaupt, 2010). Secondly, unemployment and other benefits decreased at the same period (Cantillon, 2011). Thirdly, although growth had created more jobs, they consisted of 'low quality' jobs like part-time, temporary and vocational jobs with lower wages. Lastly, the rise in employment has failed to reach workless households that were more in need of employment (Cantillon, 2011).

These empirical data only reaffirm that the shift from passive social-protection to social investments is problematic and an ineffective response to social progress. More importantly, it clearly shows that more economic growth does not go hand-in-hand with more equality, opportunities, and help for those trapped in the poverty cycle. Contrary, the results show a minimalistic approach with less job securities, less benefits, 'low quality' jobs and more poverty.

## Europe 2020

Against the background of the consequences of the ongoing crisis for many EU countries, Europe 2020 embedding the same policies like Lisbon Strategy, aims to lift 20 million Europeans from poverty. Although it is early to judge this strategy, it is important to note that Europe 2020 considers social investments as a crucial tool towards social progress.

Although Europe 2020 has set very important 'concrete' targets aiming at 17 percent less poverty, 75 percent employment and 10 percent less school dropout rates, the means by which it aims to achieve these targets are problematic. Social investment approach remains the tool to address social issues and promote social progress (Daly, 2012).

Firstly, in relation to employment and poverty, it targets jobless households as a way to address the latter. Thus, it does not problematise unemployment per se, but its distribution (Daly, 2012). Moreover, as some academics have argued (Copeland and Daly, 2012), there is little association between households' joblessness and relative income poverty.

Secondly, Europe 2020 lays emphasis on improving the quality and functioning of social services, although this does not directly address poverty (Cantillon, 2011).

Thirdly, it epitomises the need for retrenched welfare benefits of shorter duration but with an increased targeting (Daly, 2012). Lastly, in an attempt to tackle the rising numbers of youth unemployment in almost all EU members, Europe 2020 focuses on the importance of mobility, flexibility, education and matching people' skills to the market (Lahusen et. al, 2013).

As a response to the deterioration of social security by the Eurozone crisis but very similar to Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 seeks to address pressing social issues by continuing the same approach towards them. Of course, these policies in the midst of the crisis are always subject to terms and conditions. That is if growth, the EU's current priority, leaves some space for the social reforms (Daly, 2012). As Mary Daly (2012:283) very explicitly argues, "In this light, the poverty initiatives of Europe 2020 smack of minimalism...The EU reform programme has liberal overtones also in terms of the way that Europe 2020 is subordinated to the economic governance measures". Europe 2020 is only projecting the current tendency in EU and the European Commission to downplay social-protection by prioritising the economic agenda (Rogowski, 2008).

### **An Ideological Shift Towards Social Rights?**

This section discusses the problematic ideological shift toward social rights that seems to have occurred in EU. This ideological shift can be seen when

examining how social issues were framed in the past and how they are framed in the last two decades. This is seminal for social policies as the way EU frames social issues determines the relevant policies that will follow. More importantly though, this ideological shift goes against the founding values on which the EU was built on. As highlighted in section 2, until the late 1970's EU had followed a protectionist approach against the market that laid emphasis on social protections like full-employment, poverty, disabilities, ageing and labour law workers' rights (Esping-Andersen, 1990). As such, EU values epitomised on the social regulation of the market.

However, although Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020 policies' do not ignore European social problems, they re-situated the focus of responsibility from the welfare-state to the individuals (Serrano Pascual, 2009). Even more, instead of seeking market-correcting mechanisms to protect the citizens, they epitomise their efforts in correcting and aligning social policies to the markets (Hansen & Triantafillou, 2011; Serrano Pascual, 2009). This discourse does not leave even the slightest room to question the actual source of the problem which is the unstable markets in the first place. As Alvaro Serrano Pascual (2009:68) argues, "its [market's] supremacy alone remains unquestioned and unquestionable, such that,...political regulation in this sphere appears unjustified and contrary to reason". As a result, in the absence of the protectionist welfare-state, Europeans are left alone to deal with everyday hardships and are being subjected every day to market forces. While this approach makes citizens less dependent on the welfare-state, they leave them dependent on the markets (Serrano Pascual, 2009). Thus, the welfare-state is projecting itself as sovereign but at the same time unable to deal with the 'natural' rapid changes that globalisation poses.

To clarify things, it is not argued that globalisation does not force EU member states to adapt to new situations. This situation is real. The problem lies in the fact that instead of addressing these threats by political regulations to protect Europeans, welfare-states reform social policies as they are perceived as interferences to a more efficient market. Indeed, this ideological shift towards social policies is reflected through concepts like flexicurity and social investment instead of social redistribution, activation and modernisation. All these concepts and approaches are reformulating social problems in order to fit to a more competitive market. However, as section 3 and 4 illustrated, these policies fail to address the roots of these social issues and they even exacerbate them in many cases.

Thus, these policies not only alter the meaning of social rights, like the case of flexicurity where security will be provided by a sustainable market, but they also project them as beneficial to people. This ideological shift has led a number of academics to argue that neoliberal discourses have actually dominated EU policies (Apeldoorn, 2003; Beland, 2007) and others like Mary Daly (2012:280) arguing that these policies "leave it [EU] with at best a mixed philosophical

approach, at worst a confused and inoperable one.” Nevertheless, even more significant than defining what sort of ideology is being followed, is that these policies affect millions of people every day and ‘push’ thousands at-risk-ofpoverty.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that EU’s approach towards a more efficient and competitive market through labour-market reforms exacerbates social policies and marks an important ideological shift within the Union. While the first section consisted of a description of what the ESM is, the second analysed the concept of flexicurity and provided examples of its negative implications to workers. The third section carried the argument forward by giving empirical data on the minimalistic approach towards social policies and their hindrance to social progress. The last section detached from the concepts to show that these policies signify an important negative ideological shift towards social policies and the core EU values that favours the markets.

The last two decades along with the economic crisis have managed to change the actual meaning of social policies. That is to counterbalance the effects of the markets to citizens, to provide more securities to vulnerable people and create a more equal society reaching even the most disadvantaged groups of the European population. To make things worse, the staggering result of Great Britain’s referendum along with the huge migration flows and the reappearance of Nationalism in Europe, have brought the EU to the point of total disintegration. Today, for many European citizens, the EU only signifies a deep technocratic and bureaucratic organisation that has no future. It remains questionable how an organisation can have a future when it does not hold on to the values that was built on in the first place.

In the past Europe was projecting itself as a special place in the world where access to health, education, quality of life and quality of work were leading to a sustainable civil society (European Commission, 2005). This was the European choice reflected in EU treaties, it’s action and legislations in accordance with the European Convention of Human Rights (European Commission, 2005). Europe was different because member states were devoted to large parts of their GDP towards public spending in comparison with America, China or Japan (European Commission, 2005). However, it is the same values that EU projected as the fundamental differences between other places in the world, that are being endangered today not by globalisation but by the European Union itself.

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