

# Researching Social Europe On the Move

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## 9. Researching social Europe on the move

**Caroline De la Porte and Ilaria Madama**

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### INTRODUCTION

From the 1990s onwards, developments occurring at the supra-national level have prompted a lively scholarly debate about the nature and impact of social Europe, which has evolved together with changes in the regulation and governance of the social sphere within the European Union (EU) multilevel setting. While domestic politics and processes remain determinants for social policy, the result of decades of furthering European integration is that member states have become increasingly semi-sovereign with regard to their welfare states and labour markets (Ferrera, 2005; Pierson & Leibfried, 2005).

In the early phase of the integration process, when it was only through regulation that the EU influenced welfare states and labour markets, research tended to focus extensively on social rights for mobile EU citizens (Börner, 2020). Relying on the principle of equal treatment within the framework of the coordination of social security regimes, this literature primarily emphasized the role of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in interpreting the legislative provisions of social policy (cf. Leibfreid, 2005; Martinsen, 2015). In this period and up to the 1990s, EU initiatives in the social sphere have been conceived as ‘encapsulated federalism’, that is, a strong direct impact of the EU but limited to narrow areas – i.e., gender equality and health and safety at work – that were not connected with the core redistributive function of welfare states (Streeck, 1995). Other scholars, however, have argued that even many early initiatives often embodied market-correcting goals and had far-reaching consequences, enhancing equality and with it fundamental social rights for citizens in the EU, even beyond mobile citizens (Falkner, 1998, 2010).

Later, following the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, new forms of indirect and direct mechanisms of governance have come into play, and through hard and soft policy coordination, the EU has started to influence core redistributive areas, such as pensions and health care, unemployment schemes, and labour market regulation (Radaelli, 2000; Zeitlin & Pochet, 2005; Graziano & Vink,

2007). In this phase, and especially from the early 2000s, a new bulk of studies dealing more specifically with the open method of coordination (OMC) and its influence on domestic labour market and social policy reform flourished (De la Porte & Pochet, 2002; Heidenreich & Zeitlin, 2009; Barcevičius et al., 2014).

The onset of the financial crisis prompted a renewed interest in the indirect influence of the EU on welfare states, via the newly strengthened Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) governance procedures (Costamagna, 2013; De la Porte & Heins, 2016); whereas research on soft coordination processes entered a new phase, by investigating more deeply the interplay between EU policy and funding instruments and their influence on member states' policies, shedding light on the functioning of hybrid governance modes (Jessoula, 2015; Jessoula & Madama, 2019). Overall, in the past few years, scholars interested in the interactions between the EU and member states in social policy have focused on multiple different issues, including EMU governance and its consequences on pensions and labour market reforms, policy coordination and funding, and regulatory initiatives led by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

More recently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated a new stream of studies interested in EU responses to the unprecedented crises scenario, in particular via the new fiscal instruments that are likely to relate to welfare states, and novel social and labour market programmes, such as support to short-term work schemes, as well as recovery and resilience funds (Armingeon et al., 2021; De la Porte & Jensen, 2021).

Drawing from these partly intertwined branches of the literature, this chapter aims to investigate the long-term trajectory of scholarly research on social Europe, roughly from the 1990s to its current state, identifying key emerging topics. To this end, we propose a preliminary periodization in the uneven path of social Europe, distinguishing four main phases: the early phase until the mid-1990s; the EMU and the Lisbon era (mid-1990s–2008); the Great Recession decade (2008–2019); and finally the current times led by the COVID-19 pandemic, whose transformations are likely to dominate the research agenda in the future. In what follows, for each broad phase we identify key developments, together with the prevailing modes of governance in core social policy fields, and provide a discussion of the major findings of the academic debate.

## THE EARLY PHASE: MARKET MAKING THROUGH SOCIAL SECURITY COORDINATION AND FREE MOVEMENT

In the early phase of European integration, due to the lack of competences at the supra-national level to decide upon national social security – the design

of social security systems, including access and level of generosity of social benefits and services, were decided at the national level – the EU developed legislation in narrow areas, captured by the notion of ‘encapsulated federalism’ (Streeck, 1995: 400), a concept which reflects the strong impact of the EU in areas such as gender equality and health and safety at work, that are not connected with the core redistributive function of welfare states. At the same time, market making facilitated the freedom of movement of workers, whereby social security systems were coordinated, enabling mobile workers to be protected by the social security systems of their host countries. From the 1970s onwards, the CJEU’s interpretation of various principles, such as equality of treatment (access to benefits), exportability (the right for individual workers to export social benefits), and additionality (the right to add periods of social security, especially pensions), has led to wide-ranging consequences for national social security systems for mobile EU citizens. This has resulted in the extension of the material scope of coordination of social security over time, ranging from areas such as family allowances to student grants. This led Pierson and Leibfried (2005) to assess that welfare states had become ‘semi-sovereign’; the CJEU has had a prominent role in interpreting core EU principles, especially regarding access to social rights and the social security of workers in host countries (Bell, 2012; Martinsen, 2015).

Parallel to the growing jurisprudence, the literature addressing the role of the CJEU in social policy integration flourished. While some scholars warned against the risk of overestimation (Wincott, 2001), others have emphasized the crucial role played by the CJEU as an ‘engine of integration’ (Leibfried & Pierson, 2000; Kelemen, 2012). The CJEU’s expansive jurisprudence has been identified as a step towards making Europe more social (Caporaso & Tarrow, 2009). Other scholars have been sceptical about the role of the CJEU for the same reasons, arguing that it is political and activist (Rasmussen, 1986). What is clear is that ‘free movement and increasing competition have prompted court cases and thus expanded the bite of European law on national social provisions’ (Leibfried & Pierson, 2000: 270). From a different perspective, the asymmetry in the balance between judicial powers and political decision making in the EU multilevel polity prompted a debate about the possible impact of the CJEU’s activism on the political autonomy and democratic legitimacy of member states (cf. Scharpf, 2009).

More recently, the literature on the role of the CJEU in incrementally interpreting social policy principles has taken another turn. In contrast to an emphasis on the view of the CJEU as political and activist (Rasmussen, 1986; Leibfried, 2005), there has been a shift to focus on the limitations of its activity (Davies, 2014; Martinsen, 2015), emphasizing the possible deep political and social tensions driven by the expansion of citizenship rights (Geddes & Hadj-Abdou, 2016). While free movement has been a cornerstone

of European integration and is celebrated as one of the major achievements of the integration process, the rise of Euroscepticism and of anti-EU sentiment has largely revolved around intra-EU migration and cross-border access to national welfare systems. Recent studies examine the weight of net contributors and benefit recipients among migrants in their host countries, finding that EU migrants are net contributors, not net beneficiaries, of welfare states. This is not surprising, since the large part of citizens living in countries other than their country of origin are workers, whose reason to move to another country is to work (cf. Martinsen & Pons Rotger, 2017).

## EMU AND THE LISBON ERA: BETWEEN HARD AND SOFT POLICY COORDINATION

Since the institutionalization of EMU in 1992, it has become evident that the influence of EU action on welfare states and labour markets takes place not only through regulation but also via other modes of governance. From the 1990s onwards, the EU has, in fact, started to influence core redistributive areas – such as pensions and health care, unemployment schemes, and labour market regulation – more pervasively through hard and soft policy coordination.

On the side of hard, yet indirect, policy coordination, one key pillar has come with the adoption of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) in 1997, developed to ensure continuous member state compliance with EMU aims. In the framework of EU policies of budgetary restraint, entailing benchmarks and surveillance, member states are required to run budgets that do not jeopardize the functioning of EMU. As social spending makes up the biggest share of public expenditure, the pressure on national welfare states exerted by the SGP has been considerable, especially during economic recessions. Scholarly research has documented the impact of EMU on welfare state reform, especially in the case of states whose public budgets were deemed to be perilous for macroeconomic stability (De la Porte & Natali, 2014). For countries under the ‘excessive deficit procedure’, through EMU, the EU acquired indirect influence on core redistributive areas, notably pensions, whereas in the field of labour market policy, deregulation and flexibilization were promoted as a way to boost growth. In this respect, the main mechanism of influence in EMU governance has been defined as ‘EU-facilitated learning, in the shadow of coercion’ (De la Porte, 2017: 146).

On the side of soft, non-binding forms of policy coordination, the reference to the ‘European Social Model’ became prominent in this phase (Jepsen & Pascual, 2005). Meant as a complement to monetarism, flexibilization of labour markets, and maintaining stable public finances, the label refers to the fact that although welfare states are organized within the boundaries of national

borders, the EU level plays a role in promoting social benchmarking and policy coordination – to maintain, but also to foster the modernization of welfare policies. Concretely – in the wake of the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 – the EU developed new forms of institutionalized policy coordination. In particular, the European Employment Strategy, which mimicked EMU governance but with no hard sanctions, focused on the social side of the labour market and employment policies, for example, encouraging not only increases in employment rates, but also in job quality. Parallel to this, the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 marked a further milestone for social Europe extending policy coordination to other areas – like pensions, health care, and combatting poverty – via OMC processes. This ensure policies in these areas would not only be economically sustainable, but also socially sustainable, entailing broad access to social rights. While being expected to move towards commonly agreed EU policies and benchmarks (Lopez-Santana, 2007), in line with the principle of subsidiarity and the non-binding nature of commitments, in this coordination framework, member states set their own aims and quantitative targets.

Prompted by such developments, and with an analytical focus on the potential, and the limits, of policy coordination mechanisms based on non-binding indicators, the intense academic debate that followed has produced contrasting assessments of the effectiveness of OMC processes to boost national social policy developments and adaptation in line with common objectives and/or supra-national guidelines and recommendations (cf. Armstrong, 2006; Jessoula & Madama, 2019). Some authors have emphasized the weakness of the social OMCs, suggesting that both their non-binding nature and lack of sanctions have hampered the attainment of commonly agreed objectives (i.e., Barbier, 2005). In contrast, others have interpreted the lack of coercion as a fruitful condition for the unfolding of experimentations and policy learning, while respecting member state heterogeneity and sovereignty (for a review, cf. Heidenreich, 2009; Heidenreich & Zeitlin, 2009). Turning to causal mechanisms at play, through which soft governance processes may affect institutional change at the national level, the literature has identified a number of key factors (cf. Jessoula & Madama, 2019). Mutual learning and socialization processes, jointly with soft sanctions in the form of ‘naming, shaming, and faming’ got resonance (Kok, 2004). Most studies rely on some form of actor-centred institutionalism; and thus, some studies underline the importance of national political actors’ uses of the various European resources (cf. Jacquot & Woll, 2003; Armstrong, 2006; Graziano et al., 2011), by emphasizing the importance of domestic politics as a key filter for the EU’s influence on member states’ policy trajectories. Although mediated by other factors – including national elite and public attitudes towards Europe and the degree of policy fit/misfit (Graziano et al., 2011) – the use of European resources by national political and social actors has been the means through which OMCs have influenced member states

(Zeitlin, 2009: 231). Yet, as noted by Amandine Crespy (2020), the processes have been highly bureaucratic, and thus not embedded in national public spheres. The areas where the OMC has had some – even if indirect – influence include social investment type policies, in particular childcare and active labour market policy (see Chapter 8 by Bonoli, this volume). Thus, the OMC has supported the activation turn of welfare states, although mainly through ideas and socialization, and especially when they are in line with the political agendas in member states. Yet, implementation of OMC policies are uneven across member states, to a great extent shaped by welfare state configuration (De la Porte & Pochet, 2012).

## THE GREAT RECESSION DECADE: ENTRENCHING HARD AND SOFT REGULATION THROUGH HYBRID GOVERNANCE

With the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, the EU agenda shifted dramatically to austerity policies and EMU governance became more constraining. Changes entailed reinforced *ex ante* monitoring and *ex post* surveillance of member states' economies and budgets, of which pensions and health care are important components. These new initiatives tightened the monetarist policy aims and increased the actual EU-level authority to enforce policy in member states. Hard coordination has also been enhanced by more focus on public debt, which has been high on the agenda due to the sovereign debt crisis that affected countries severely hit by the Great Recession. Meanwhile, EU social policies remained soft but were more directly linked to funding programs. 'Europe 2020', that replaced the Lisbon Strategy, became the new overarching institutional setting for the coordination of economic and social processes at the EU level (Sabato & Vanhercke, 2017).

Drawing from these changes which deeply reshaped the institutional framework, the literature started to consider not only the impact of soft social OMCs but also the joint effects of the EMU criteria and softer recommendations, as well as tougher types of conditionality on welfare reforms (Hassenteufel & Palier, 2014; Pavolini et al., 2014; Sacchi, 2014; Theodoropoulou, 2014; Moury et al, 2021). Thus, there was a shift from focusing on individual OMCs and their impact to considering the impact of joint EU processes on welfare states, including pensions and labour market policy (especially through EMU constraint), but also childcare and family policies (through softer social processes).

Many reforms were undertaken during this period, although mostly decided through domestic politics, were conditioned by EU budgetary constraints, particularly EU policy advice in country-specific recommendations and/or excessive deficit procedures (De la Porte & Natali, 2014; Hassenteufel & Palier,

2014; Pavolini et al., 2014). Prominently, research on the influence of EMU's monetarist regime and the convergence criteria has shown that the EU has helped to put pension reform high on the domestic agenda, and that the indirect pressure of EU-induced learning via the strengthened SGP, with iterative monitoring and surveillance backed up by strong enforcement mechanisms, has had a tangible impact on the direction of the reforms. Although it is through domestic politics that decisions about pension reform were made, a country's economic vulnerability has been an important condition enabling decision making (De la Porte & Natali, 2014; Hassenteufel & Palier, 2014). Domestic actors made decisions in the shadow of financial markets and the threat of negative ratings by credit-rating agencies, which represented important intervening factors in reform politics (Pavolini et al., 2014; Sacchi, 2014; Dukelow, 2015; Moury et al., 2021). Even in countries subject to the agreements signed with the 'Troika',<sup>1</sup> domestic politicians were able to negotiate which reforms to pursue. Yet, some were considered fundamental structural reforms, especially labour market flexibilization and pension reforms (Theodoropoulou, 2014; Crespy & Vanheuverzwijn, 2019; Moury et al., 2021).

During this phase, assessments about the salience of the social dimension in the European Semester framework offered two opposite readings: some studies have emphasized the gradual 'socialization' of the Semester (cf. Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018), whereas others have pointed to the persistent asymmetry and unbalance in favour of the economic dimension (e.g., Copeland & Daly, 2014; De la Porte & Heins, 2016; Maricut & Puetter, 2018). These views, however, are not mutually exclusive (Jessoula & Madama, 2019). On the one hand, the governance mechanisms in the social (policy) domain remain structurally and legally weaker than in 'core' EU policy fields. On the other hand, in the anti-poverty domain some evidence suggests that after a weak start, supra-national institutions – especially the Commission – have become more vocal, through adapting their strategies and recommendations to member states' domestic conditions and policy priorities; and in some cases the Commission has actually acted as a 'social policy advocate' in order to, at least partly, orient member state anti-poverty strategies (cf. Eihmanis, 2018; Jessoula & Madama, 2019).

Overall, the literature on the OMC became increasingly specialized from 2000 to 2020, looking for causal mechanisms and evidence of change. But the crux of interest, i.e., policy learning and welfare state reform, has remained central throughout. In the literature on the OMC, small-n analyses using qualitative methodology and data have focused on conditions of OMC influence, including institutional capability (Ferrera & Sacchi, 2005), political priorities, and receptiveness of each member state to aims in one policy area (Jessoula & Madama, 2019). Case study-based research using qualitative methods and data theorizes and analyses mechanisms of influence, mainly focusing on socializa-



tion, policy learning, and with these, the diffusion of ideas, framing of policy issues, and policy transfer (Lopez-Santana, 2007). This literature – focusing on processes – primarily uses actor-centred institutionalism to examine why, how, and with what consequences governments and non-governmental organizations strategically use the OMC. The findings examine how policy-specific OMCs have led to successful policy change (Büchs, 2007; Armstrong, 2010; Barčevicius et al., 2014). In this respect, the conceptualization of ‘hybrid governance’ modes (Armstrong, 2010; Jessoula, 2015; Bekker, 2017) – combining supra-national/national hard targets, governance tools relying on iterated interactions between EU institutions and national actors, and financial resources linked to the EU’s targets and national strategies – such as ‘Europe 2020’ are deemed to be able to prompt a wider impact of the EU, also in social policy (Jessoula, 2015; Jessoula & Madama, 2019). In contrast, analyses by economists, using quantitative data, have focused on whether EMU governance, which is legally binding, is effective in terms of outcomes (Efstathiou & Wolf, 2019). Their findings are generally more pessimistic.

Finally, the research on social Europe in the aftermath of the financial crisis saw the emergence of a wider debate on the nature of the EU’s polity and the deep legitimacy challenges ahead. Many commentators, not only scholars but also public intellectuals, have acknowledged that Europe had come to a crossroads, which required fundamental choices to tackle the risk of disintegration (cf. Dinan et al., 2017; Ferrera, 2017; Vandenbroucke et al., 2017). Drawing from the EU’s social deficit diagnosis (Armingeon & Baccaro, 2012; Ferrera, 2017), improving the EU’s social dimension was deemed to be a route to enhance the EU’s legitimacy by public intellectuals (Ferrera, 2017). In line with these arguments, Jessoula and Madama (2019) claim that within a wider relaunch of the social dimension of the EU – or, the ‘European Social Union’ to use the effective definition coined by Vandenbroucke (2015) – strengthening the anti-poverty component of the EU toolkit could serve, then, not merely a normative rationale backed by social justice principles, but also a political rationale worth pursuing, considering that ‘the poor’, low-skilled, and less-educated Europeans are generally less supportive of the integration project and more likely to be Eurosceptic. Yet, there is not unilateral support for deepening the EU’s social dimension. In particular, small richer countries in the North are hesitant about more EU social integration, as evidenced in their sceptical stance on Next Generation EU (NGEU) (De la Porte & Jensen, 2021). However, countries at the periphery of Europe that were hit hard by the financial crisis tend to welcome a more social Europe. It is in this context that EPSR was launched.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF THE DEBATE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A REINVIGORATION OF THE REGULATORY TURN OF EU SOCIAL POLICY?

The EPSR marks a new period for EU social policy, where the EU explicitly aims to improve the social situation for individual citizens, despite having limited competencies at the social–labour market nexus. This is leading to various different research agendas, as the EPSR builds on the EU’s social policy legacy, comprising a regulatory framework in labour law, equality of treatment, and health and safety at work, as well as soft policy coordination (previously OMCs), centred on social investment.<sup>2</sup> The EPSR covers diverse areas, ranging from gender equality, where the EU has a strong legal base, through areas that are between welfare states and labour markets, which represent a legal grey zone between the national and EU levels (such as paid parental leave), to areas of exclusive national decision making, notably social protection, governed at the EU level through social benchmarking and policy coordination, now integrated in the European Semester. The emphasis on formal rights in the discourse of the EPSR, in particular via EU-level regulation, contrasts sharply with the Lisbon era, when the main EU-level instrument to tackle policy challenges was voluntary policy coordination (OMC) (De la Porte & Palier, forthcoming). As the EPSR comprehensively covers policies related to labour markets and welfare states, there is an interest in the extent to which the different rights, whether derived from nation states or the EU level, are taken up by citizens, in an approach focusing on the normative, instrumental, and enforcement aspects of EU social rights (Vandenbroucke et al., 2021). Relying on a novel resource-based conceptualization of social rights, this strand of research has brought evidence about existing multilevel interactions between the European, national, and regional plans in the construction of social rights, shedding light on the complex intersection between binding provisions, financing, and soft coordination processes, whose European dimension has become relevant and pertinent for all citizens, not just mobile ones (Ferrera et al., 2021; Vandenbroucke et al., 2021).

Thus far, the EPSR has, first, been examined from a normative perspective, where it is presented as a milestone for proponents of social Europe, including academics. It is seen as providing the EU with a novel, highly symbolic social manifesto, and a possible key step towards a fully fledged social union (Ferrera, 2019; Vandenbroucke, 2019). Politically, high hopes are placed on the EPSR to address the dualizations and inequalities that have crystallized since Lisbon. Some studies have mainly focused on the politics behind the decision making of the EPSR, especially the role of the European Commission

(Vesan et al., 2021), or the political tensions underlying the EPSR (Corti & Vesan, 2020).

Second, there is a focus on specific initiatives in the EPSR, with a growing interest in specific soft programmes, including (co-)funding initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee (Vesan & Lizzi, 2017; Tosun et al., 2019; Ferrera et al., 2021), and the Fund for the Most Deprived (Madama, 2016; Greiss et al., 2021).

Third, there is a revival of scholarly interest in the regulatory dimension of social Europe, because of legislative initiatives. EU social regulation is seen as a threat that could potentially undermine national institutions, especially where regulation is the prerogative of the social partners, as in the Nordic countries. Regulatory tensions could also emerge regarding the financing of new social rights because EU social regulation aimed at upward social convergence entails a financial cost. These tensions with regard to subsidiarity and financial constraints can be captured by the notion of an 'EU regulatory welfare state'. The EU as a regulatory welfare state can impinge upon national modes of policymaking at the welfare state–labour market nexus (Obinger et al., 2005; De la Porte et al., 2020), where top-down regulation without redistribution can impose significant costs at a lower level of governance (member state level) (Levi-Faur, 2014). This cost – or financial constraint – must in practice be carried by the (welfare) state, employers and employees (in collective agreements), or social insurance schemes (Falkner & Leiber, 2004; De la Porte et al., 2020). On the work–life balance directive, there is also a focus on earmarked parental leave from a feminist perspective, as a means of de-gendering gender roles; and some studies focus on issues, such as carer days and flexible work (Waddington & Bell, 2021), that are particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research is likely to focus on other directives as well, in particular the Commission's proposed minimum wage directive, which is seen as particularly controversial, for instance in the Nordics where there is no statutory minimum wage. Yet, other countries and unions, especially at the periphery of the EU, welcome the initiative. But the high hopes for social Europe may work out differently on the ground, due to distinct political priorities as well as differences in financial resources and institutional capabilities.

Another focus related to social rights that is receiving attention from scholars is on how EU legislation has created differentiated citizen regimes, *de jure* and *de facto*. For instance, there has been a focus on posted workers, temporarily posted for a job in another country but with working conditions and wages that are below the standards in host countries (Arnholtz, 2021). Even beyond posted workers, there is a focus on workers from Eastern Europe that are self-employed or seasonally employed, undertaking jobs in Western Europe, who are exposed in terms of their occupation. The condition of such

workers, especially in terms of health exposure, has been tougher during the COVID-19 pandemic (Szelewa & Polakoski, forthcoming). Another related line of research focuses on how EU migrant workers are included or excluded from citizenship rights in host societies via administrative hurdles (Bruzelius, 2021).

Fourth, there is a new research agenda on how social funds have actually been distributed, and whether they have decreased inequality. Up to now, research has shown that of the recipient regions, those that are richer benefit more from the funds, partly because they can contribute more in terms of co-funding, but also because these countries have weaker institutional capabilities. Thus, they are unlikely to be able to implement them in line with EU intentions (see also Dellmuth, 2021). Consequently, there may be an increase rather than a decrease in inter-EU inequality. There is likely to be further research on this topic, as there are more funding instruments including funds associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this includes the short-term work schemes and the recovery and resilience funds, which have been developed to help member states recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fifth, in conjunction with the EPSR and the EU agenda to develop more EU social policy, there is an emerging body of research on public support for social Europe, carried out through a variety of methodologies, including surveys and survey experiments. The findings are that, at a general level, there is support for EU activity in social policy, yet more fine-grained micro-level analyses suggest that citizens are more sceptical about extensive social policies developed at the EU level (Baute, 2020; Katsanidou et al., 2022). In this respect, some studies investigating mass elites' differences in pro-EU solidaristic attitudes show that citizens are generally more keen on the introduction of EU-wide solidarity mechanisms than elites, even in core countries like Germany, suggesting that pro-European electoral and social constituencies seem to lack political leaders able to give a voice to these silent majorities (Ferrera & Pellegata, 2019). Further, the spread of the populist right and discourses that are hostile to migrants (including EU migrants) has led to a host of studies on whether EU migrants are net contributors or net beneficiaries from the welfare state. The studies, which are juxtaposed claims of the populist right in some countries, show that migrants, overall, are net contributors, rather than net beneficiaries from the welfare states in their host countries (for instance, Martinsen & Pons Rotger, 2017).

Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European solidarity and especially the fiscal components are being examined. The literature so far has documented how the adoption of NGEU was made possible thanks to a shift in the Council, from a position against risk sharing and common public debt to a position where member states supported a common fund to dampen the economic impact of the lockdowns and health crisis caused by the effect of the

COVID-19 pandemic (Bulmer, 2020; Schmidt, 2020; De la Porte & Jensen, 2021). Yet, the fund also sought to repair ‘the economic and political imbalances left over from the Eurozone crisis’, because pre-existing vulnerabilities, rather than the impact of the pandemic, have been key in the allocation of NGEU resources (Armingeon et al., 2021). Irrespective of political tensions underlying the decision (De la Porte & Jensen, 2021), and the continued tensions around issues such as rule-of-law, there is no doubt that this fiscal instrument, especially the grants component, of which the first tranche has already been allocated, on the basis of member state plans, could be a game changer. It enables member states to make investments, including in social policy, which are future-oriented. From a social policy perspective, there is an interest in the extent to which this fiscal instrument could not only support investments in the green economy, but also social policy initiatives, in particular in line with the social investment agenda, i.e., training, childcare, and other policies closely related to labour market investments (Busemeyer et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the long-term trajectory of scholarly research on social Europe, distinguishing four main phases: the early phase until the mid-1990s; the EMU and the Lisbon era (mid-1990s–2008); the Great Recession decade (2008–2019); and the current times led by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the investigation of the transformations occurring in the last phase and their implications are likely to dominate the future research agenda, there is currently a lively scholarly interest in the politics, policies, and distributional implications of EU social rights related to the EPSR and beyond. This includes the impact for different welfare states of the multiple different initiatives emanating from the EPSR, including targeted funding (Youth Guarantee, Fund for the Most Deprived), but also regulatory initiatives (work–life balance directive, proposal for directive on minimum wage). The research on the EPSR builds on previous literature, but in a context where there is more political polarization within countries, and more pronounced political interests between EU countries. The fiscal instruments that have been developed to respond to the economic downturn in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic, including support to short-term work schemes and NGEU, are expected to shape the research agenda on EU social policy in years to come. These issues are being examined using various approaches, to tap into public opinion on EU social policy, the politics of EU social policy at EU level and in member states, as well as the policy and regulatory impact of EU initiatives. Whether new regulatory initiatives under the EPSR and fiscal instruments related to NGEU could lead to upwards social convergence, or at least mitigate social differences, or in contrast, whether inequalities will persist, or perhaps

even be exacerbated by EU social policy, remain open questions: questions which research on the role of Europe is well poised to address.

## NOTES

1. The term ‘Troika’ refers to the three institutions – European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund – which signed bailouts with Eurozone countries in need of financial aid during the financial crisis, relying on the Memoranda of Understanding, a three-year financial aid programme subject to strict conditionality.
2. Social investment entails human capital development throughout the life course, and includes active labour market policy, high-quality early childhood education and care, and education and life-long learning (Kvist, 2014).

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