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IDEAS

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**The Future of Social Europe in Question:
Rethinking European Social Citizenship
and Defending Gender Equality.**

POLICY BRIEF

by Stephen Gaffney



Policy Brief on the keynote session of the IDEAS24 conference.



‘On 15 May 2024, Prof. Dr. **Martin Seeleib-Kaiser** of the University of Tübingen, and Prof. Dr. **Zoe Lefkofridi** of the University of Salzburg, delivered two stimulating and topical keynotes at the Interdisciplinary Conference on European Advanced Studies. Both speakers raised a series of pertinent issues crucial to the future of the social dimension of European integration and linked their observations with clear policy measures.

The chair, Prof. Amandine Crespy of the Centre d'études de la vie politique at ULB, opened the session by presenting two indicators which demonstrate the extent to which social inequality remains a critical issue across Europe despite the prosperity of the region: in 2022, 95.3 million, approximately 21% of the EU population, were found to be at-risk of poverty and social exclusion; in 2024, Unicef calculated approximately 20 million children, 1 in 4, are threatened by poverty. She also noted how our understanding of inequality has moved beyond the core issues of income and welfare to become more ‘multifaceted’ – reflecting the growing diversity of European societies. These observations set the scene for the two keynotes which respectively addressed the topics of how we theorise and measure European Social Citizenship, and the growing backlash against gender equality in many EU member states.

Shifting Perspectives on European Social Citizenship

Martin Seelib-Kaiser’s contribution entitled ‘European Social Citizenship in Perspective’ interrogated the status of Social Europe in the contemporary era. The presentation began by grounding the concept of citizenship theoretically, drawing on the work of T.H. Marshall, and that of sociologist and two term European Commissioner, Ralf Dahrendorf, who argued that social rights *‘are the final stone in the arch which holds up the roof of citizenship’*.

From this foundation, Seelib-Kaiser introduced his central argument which called into question the idea whether our contemporary welfare states, or the concept of a European Social Union, can adequately underpin a substantial form of European Social Citizenship. To illustrate this argument, he presented the empirics of two dimensions. Firstly, the high stratification in social rights experienced by European citizens who migrate to another Member State, and the relative lack of impact of EU social minima on their lives. Secondly, the stark variance in terms of social rights and outcomes found both between Member States and at the regional and local levels within these states.



In examining the case of social rights for migrant EU citizens the call was made for a re-think of how to protect those moving from Central and Eastern Europe - both in terms of welfare access and access to the right of free movement. A central point here was the absence of substantive rights when it comes to jobseekers arriving from Central and Eastern Europe to Northwestern and Southern Europe. While the right to export social security payments to facilitate job search in another member-state exists - the huge difference in terms of cost-of-living between regions acts to nullify this right in practice. Furthermore, the inability of recently arrived EU migrants to access temporary shelter and other support services when facing homelessness was raised.

The keynote then moved to disparities found at the inter- and sub- member state levels in terms of income, employment opportunities and social services. Data on disposable incomes, labour market outcomes, hours worked, and access to childcare -all revealed stark inequalities between Northwestern Europe compared to Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. An indicator calculating the share of population below an EU-wide (rather than the typical national measure) median income poverty threshold was also presented. This further illustrated starkly divergent outcomes across Europe. These contrasting outcomes were argued to both undermine the legitimacy of both nation-states and the EU, and call into question the concept of European social citizenship.

In response to these disparities, the recommendation was made to shift the reference point, from the national to the European level, when assessing the realities of social rights within the EU. Furthermore, a call was made for the establishment of European wide minimum social rights to provide both substance and a future to European Citizenship.

Pushing Back against Anti-Gender Equality Backlash

Zoe Lefkofridi's keynote entitled 'Democracy and Gender Equality in Times of Backlash: Pushback Strategies' presented the preliminary findings from the Horizon Europe funded project Push*Back*Lash on which she is principal investigator. The presentation began by noting that while UN Secretary General, António Guterres, declared in February 2020 that the 21st century must be the 'century of women's equality', developments in the years that followed the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic have put this aspiration in jeopardy.

It is in this context, that the Push*Back*Lash project is setting out to investigate forms of 'backlash' against gender equality that have emerged at both citizen and elite levels in many EU member states and their effects upon public debate, democracy, and sustainable development. This backlash takes many forms including the reframing of debates in a polarising manner, the promotion of 'moral panics', the watering down of commitments and institutions, attacks on legitimacy and authority, and a constriction of the



operating space for women's groups and women human rights defenders. Social actors engaging in such behaviour have had various targets including: reproductive rights; sexual education; LGBTQ rights; anti-hate speech legislation; and the academic discipline of Gender Studies itself. Push*Back*Lash aims to investigate these forms of contestation of gender equality in a systematic fashion, and in doing so to develop and test counter-strategies in response.

The presentation put current forms of backlash against gender equality into historical context - with comparison made to reaction against earlier advances made by the feminist movement in the 20th century. However, in more recent years this phenomenon has interlinked in complex ways with the social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the workplace and the community. For example, 'feminised' sectors of the workforce were more exposed to the impact of both the virus and its economic consequences, and this impact was compounded by the persistently unequal distribution of care and emotional labour in the home. Furthermore, an emphasis was placed on the intersectional dimension of backlash against gender equality – i.e. that this phenomena is also entangled with forms of social inequality and discrimination along the lines of racial background, class position, ability status, and other individual and group characteristics. The contribution of the field of disability studies and the 'social model of disability' that refocused public attention towards the 'disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation' was highlighted as a positive example in response to such dynamics.

Fear of the impact of gender equality upon societal power dynamics and economic, cultural and religious factors were identified as the primary motivations for backlash. Knowledge gaps and misconceptions about gender equality and the feminist movement act as accelerating factors. A quartet of policy responses were proposed to tackle this challenge including: investment in research to better understand attacks on gender equality; legislative reform and policy advocacy in this area; investment in education and awareness raising through gender inclusive curricula, empowerment, inclusive language and engagement with men and boys; and grassroots organising to promote and defend feminist ideas and goals.



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