



European Pillar of Social Rights as a tool to improve social and employment rights in EU accession candidate countries

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Looking back: The origins of the Pillar

- As the economy and public finances recovered and the harmful social effects of the Troika's policies post-2009 became clear, the then new European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker gave social issues more attention
- In his 2015 State of the Union address, he floated a vague idea for a new 'European Pillar of Social Rights', surprising even many within his Commission
- The European Commission published the [Pillar's final structure in 2017](#), and the governments of all Member States proclaimed it (gave it political support) at the Gothenburg Social Summit.

The Pillar: Structure, scope and implementation

- The Pillar sets out 20 principles for fair labour markets and welfare systems:

1. Education	8. Social dialogue	15. Old-age income and pensions
2. Gender equality	9. Work-life balance	16. Health care
3. Equal opportunities	10. Health and safety at work	17. Inclusion of people with disabilities
4. Support for employment	11. Childcare	18. Long-term care
5. Secure and adaptable employment	12. Social protection	19. Housing and assistance for the homeless
6. Wages	13. Unemployment benefits	20. Access to essential services
7. Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals	14. Minimum income	

The Pillar: Structure, scope and implementation

- Despite its striking presentation, the Pillar is essentially a political declaration. It creates no individually enforceable rights in court for individual workers.
- Its purpose is to 'serve as a compass for a renewed process of convergence towards better working and living conditions across Europe.'
- It has no legally binding framework because it also covers areas where the EU has no powers.
- Implementation therefore depends on the goodwill, ownership and commitment of the relevant actors, especially the EU institutions and the Member States.
- The European Commission started to increasingly monitor progress in the implementation of the individual principles of the Pillar in the different EU Member States in the context of a Social Scoreboard in the annual European Semester cycle, notably through its
 - Annual Sustainable Growth Survey (ASGS) and draft Joint Employment Report (JER), issued each year in November
 - individual Country Reports, issued every year in February
 - draft Country-specific recommendations (CSR), issued for every Member State each year in June

The Pillar: Implementation in EU accession candidates

- While the European Semester is a lobby vehicle that trade unions can use at the national level to push for progress to achieve the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, it only applies to EU Member States and not to accession candidate countries.
- Despite this, the Pillar plays a role in the accession process, including for Serbia – as a framework for policy convergence, monitoring & reform recommendations. This is of course distinct from requiring a candidate to transpose all 20 principles as if the Pillar were a directive.
- In the [Western Balkans Ministers' Declaration on improving social policy in the Western Balkans of November 6 2018](#), they confirm that they will use the Pillar to guide alignment of their labour markets & welfare systems with the EU
- The European Commission's [2021 Pillar Action Plan](#) states specifically:
 - “The Pillar is a guiding tool for ... enlargement partners, defining the high level of social standards for which the EU stands.”
 - “In the enlargement countries, the updated Social Scoreboard will be used in the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) process to monitor progress on the implementation of the Pillar”

The Pillar: Implementation in EU accession candidates

- At least in the Serbian accession process, employment and social protection reforms are in the meantime no longer governed under the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) but under the so-called Reform Agenda
 - The Reform Agenda includes a consultation stream for trade unions and NGOs. Is thus an important hook and tool for trade unions to push for Pillar-like EU social standards during the accession process.
 - Next to this, the Serbian National Convention on the European Union (NCEU) for Accession Negotiation Chapters 2 (Free movement of workers) and 19 (Social policy and employment) has a [working group](#) which holds consultative meetings with NGOs, trade unions, employers' organisations and experts to review labour-law alignment and employment policy and social protection
- Contact the Delegation of the EU to Serbia to get involved: DELEGATION-SERBIA@eeas.europa.eu

The Pillar: Implementation at EU level

- Within the Brussels bubble, the Pillar quickly became a well-known and much-discussed social flagship EU initiative, and the European Semester is well-established too
- The picture is different at national level. A Eurobarometer survey found that only 30% of citizens had heard of the Pillar. Even fewer knew about its content or potential. The European Semester stays, too, stays too unknown and too technical and remote for many national actors
- While the European Commission launched measures in areas within EU competence, many Member States neither followed the European Semester's recommendations sufficiently nor acted specifically to implement the Pillar.
- This problem persists to this day. Trade union advocacy work on the Pillar – at national level most notably through the European Semester – remains all the more important, also in the area of health services and health care. Its potential political leverage remains underestimated by many.

The Pillar: Implementation at EU level

- Between 2019 and 2025, among others:
 - Work-Life Balance Directive (2019)
 - Women on Boards Directive (2022)
 - Minimum Wage Directive (2022)
 - Pay Transparency Directive (2023)
 - Platform Work Directive (2024)
 - Revision of the Carcinogens Directive (2019, 2022, 2024)
- Currently under negotiation:
 - Revision of the Public Procurement Directives
 - Fair labour mobility proposals (new mandate for the EU Labour Authority, new European Social Security Pass, improved skills portability within the EU)
 - Traineeships Directive
 - Further revision of the Carcinogens Directive
- Expected later this year:
 - Proposal on the right to disconnect
 - Proposed Quality Jobs Act (subcontracting chains, AI/algorithms, just transitions, health and safety at work)



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