

Redefining Vulnerability: A New Social “Philosophy” of European Union During COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Social policy is based, since its inception, on a certain “philosophy” regarding the desirable social model, encompassing religious, political and social values, as well as appropriate objectives and tools for protecting vulnerable target groups. This philosophy differs both geographically and historically. Thus, European social policies have a specific axiological foundation comparing to social models developed on other continents. Even if relatively stable, this foundation is continuously redefined and, therefore, the European social model is an evolving concept. Our paper analyses how social vulnerability and vulnerable groups are redefined within the European social policies, during Covid-19 pandemic. If in recent decades the European social policies have tried to implement more selective and means-tested social protection, the approach to social protection during the pandemic is different, there are indications of increasing the universalisation of social benefits for covering new vulnerabilities. In our analysis, the pandemic accentuated some pre-existing trends to redefine the predilect target groups and their social protection: larger decommodification, protection for atypical employment, social security schemes covering new risks, and instruments for a new work-life balance. At the same time, European social protection policies tend towards synergy with actions in the fields of digitalisation and ecology. Are these changes temporary or will they last even after the pandemic? Of course, it is difficult to make predictions, but we believe that some of them anticipate possible structural reforms of more humane, less biopolitical European social protection policies. Our analysis is based on data from social statistics, official documents and public speeches.

Keywords: European Social Model, COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Protection, Vulnerability.

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I. INTRODUCTION

We aim to analyse in this paper the impact of the pandemic on social protection perspectives within the European Union (EU), both at supranational and national levels, with a focus on the critical assessment of measures taken in favour of the most vulnerable individuals and groups.

We intend to answer the following research questions: Which are the new vulnerabilities? Which are the most vulnerable groups in the pandemic context? Which is the role of EU in fighting vulnerability during the pandemic? Our assumptions are: The pandemic deepens the old vulnerabilities but creates new ones, as well. The most vulnerable groups are those most deprived, both economically and educationally. The pandemic has determined and justified the growing competences of the European Union, which has been preparing to deal with the pandemic since January 2020. The main aspect was the reduction of the social costs of the pandemic, such as job loss, declining income, unemployment, and poverty. Social evolution during the pandemic also highlighted less anticipated social costs, related to the physical and psychological well-being of workers, strained family relationships and social isolation.

The European Union and Member States' response to these challenges outlines new concepts of the social protection and social vulnerability, highlighted at the Porto Social Summit (7 May 2021). During the classical welfare state, social protection played an instrumental role mostly, reducing the conflicts between labour and capital and maintaining social solidarity. Social protection was predominantly passive and in-cash. Due to the high costs and low effectiveness, in the last decade of the last century, the welfare states were reformed, towards a more selective, means-tested social protection, based on activation and workfare.

The approach to social protection during the pandemic is different, there are indications of increasing the universalisation of social benefits. Compared to the previous economic crisis, the response is no longer based on austerity measures. The universal basic income has been re-debated and experimented in some Member States (e.g., Finland, Spain, and United Kingdom) as a non-stigmatizing social protection tool,

but, as we will show, insufficiently adjusted to the European social and cultural context. Also, in our analysis, the pandemic accentuated some pre-existing trends to redefine the predilect target groups and their social protection: larger decommodification, protection for atypical employment, social security schemes covering new risks, and instruments for a new work-life balance. At the same time, European social protection policies tend towards synergy with actions in the fields of digitalisation and ecology.

Are these changes temporary or will they last even after the pandemic? Of course, it is difficult to make predictions, but we believe that some of them anticipate possible structural reforms of more humane, less biopolitical European social protection policies. Foucault (1976) has invented the concept of “biopolitics” for explaining the birth of public policy in the modern age, through this fundamental principle: the social and political control - often by punitive means - of the human body and population. We are indebted to this great philosopher not only for the concept of biopolitics, which is very fertile for analysing and understanding the functioning of the social policy; but, also, for comprehending the correlation between practices and knowledge (Foucault, 1990). Therefore, we could approach the social policy from a philosophical perspective and interpret its evolution by the correlation with the history of thought.

For achieving our research goals, we have used data from social statistics, official documents and public speeches.

We begin with a conceptual analysis, in order to identify the origin and evolution of the concepts of vulnerable and vulnerability. Our focus is social vulnerability. Further, we investigate the main European policy approaches for reducing social vulnerability. We underline the specificity of the European social model regarding the social policies aimed at the vulnerable. Finally, we analyse how COVID – 19 pandemic creates new risks of social vulnerability, especially for workers, and how EU and the Member States protect the vulnerable during this crisis. The conclusion highlights the correlation between the practices and the new thought and conceptual framework of European social policies.

II. THE VULNERABLE AND VULNERABILITY: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

The study of vulnerable and vulnerability has a long tradition based on the positivist research paradigm and quantitative research style. The dominant model of analysis in this field uses mostly economic, demographic and statistic methods (Smeeding *et al.*, 1988). The focus is put on socio-demographic factors, income distribution, poverty and Government expenditure.

Very frequently, the life-cycle model is considered having an important role in explaining vulnerability (Smeeding, 2016), correlating the degree of vulnerability with defined life stages.

The development of the computer science contributed to the spread of cross-nationally and longitudinal studies regarding vulnerability. Mattei Dogan’s analysis and evaluation of these studies show very clearly their limitations, despite the huge quantity of data (Dogan, 2010). Therefore, their comparative approach raises sensitive issues, both scientifically and ethically.

However, in our view, the comparative studies have played an important part in developing awareness regarding inequality, social injustice, exclusion and discrimination. The role of international organisations was also very important, in collecting, analysing and publicise data on vulnerable and vulnerability, contributing to the progress of knowledge in this specific field.

The concept of vulnerability could be operationalised in many dimensions: physical, economic, social, environmental, cultural etc. (Brown *et al.*, 2017). In all situations, it could mean: risk of exposure to crises, stress and shocks; risk of inadequate capacities to cope with all these; and risk of severe consequences arising in these circumstances (Watts & Bohle, 1993).

We can find, also, a very rich literature regarding the policies intended to reduce social vulnerability and fight its causal factors. In an Enlightenment perspective, education is the engine for intergenerational mobility and inequality reduction. The welfare states have devised and implemented social programmes and policy measures for combating social vulnerability and increasing access to employment, education, health, and social protection.

We can explain the growing scientific and public interest concerning the concept of vulnerability if we consider the recent social evolutions and the “zeitgeist” of our present era. Our society is a narcissist and anxious one, being more and more complex and difficult to understand. The concepts trying to capture this social stage are very numerous: risk (Beck, 2001), hazard (Cutter Bryan *et al.*, 2003), stress, crisis, uncertainty, insecurity, precariousness (Standing, 2011). Misztal (2011) connects vulnerability with the “politics of fear”.

In our view, the new trends in studying philosophy of the vulnerable and the vulnerability are the following ones (they need further analysis and argumentation, of course): replacing the “objectivity” and “neutrality” with empathy and involvement; replacing the quantitative methods and positivist approach with interactive and participant methods; replacing the macrosocial studies with microsocial ones; replacing the sectoral approach with intersectionality of risks and vulnerable groups (Kuran *et al.*, 2020). A more

recent trend is linking vulnerability to (lack of) resilience, another popular concept.

These new trends contributed to the obsolescence of the life-cycle model because the “traditional” stages of the life course are amalgamated nowadays and they do not respect the “traditional” sequence: socialisation and education during childhood and adolescence; work and family founding during adulthood; retirement and “empty nest” during old age.

We may also observe the widening boundaries of the concept of vulnerability, for covering more and more situations and social groups. Almost all the population becomes vulnerable. Therefore, we could have a new perspective, which is no longer based on measurement of the degrees of vulnerability, but on new meanings of the concept.

III. POLICY APPROACHES TO VULNERABILITY IN EU

The birth of social policies in the modern era is connected with numerous (economic, structural, cultural) factors: the need to control the social disruptions provoked by the social change, to maintain the social peace, the humanisation of mentalities, the modern economy and democracy. The welfare state represents a new type of social policy, created after the World War 2, in order to help the after-war reconstruction, where the Government was the most important actor.

The research on welfare states identifies different typologies, the most influential ones being, in our opinion, those conceived by Titmuss (1958) and Esping-Andersen (1990). There is, also, a “classical” opposition between the American social model and the European social model in approaching the vulnerable.

The specificity of European social model is that social expenditure is not seen as a waste but as a tool to strengthen competitiveness. Thus, European social model is based on the paradigm of social investment and redistribution (Morel *et al.*, 2009).

European social policies are being established as the EU enlarges, expressing the need to legitimise the EU in front of its own citizens, convincing them that they live in one of the best social models in the world. The European social model thus becomes a powerful polemical and propagandistic tool. The European social model is based on specific social values: solidarity, inclusion, equal opportunities, economic and social cohesion, social dialogue (European Commission, 2010).

The European social model is not a static concept, it has been redefined from one stage to another of European construction, based on two main factors, in our opinion: the successive enlargements of the EU and the paradigm shifts in public policies (the transition from the Keynesian paradigm to the neoliberal in the late 1980s) (Hall, 1993).

Therefore, in the beginning, the European social policies were rather pragmatic and utilitarian, searching the social peace based on social dialogue between social partners. The targeted vulnerable groups were mainly the elderly and the unemployed, protected especially by social security schemes, based on social solidarity. Consequently, the social protection was mainly passive and in-cash.

The new millennium completed a veritable paradigm shift in European social policies. The welfare states are less generous and try to reduce the social expenditure through activation and workfare, extension of working life duration, privatisation of social services, introduction of the new public management principles. The vulnerable groups are redefined because the social risks are redefined. Children, youth, women, and immigrants are the main target-groups in the European strategies after 2000, because they represent a profitable investment (Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002).

The international context and macrosocial change contributed to create new inequalities and deepen the old ones. Inequality is seen in the neoliberal paradigm as an incentive for competitiveness and prosperity. Still, inequality could determine low social trust, social fragmentation and negative social moods (frustration, alienation and anomie) (Rosanvallon, 1995; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Wickham, 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). All this could increase violence and malfunctions of democracy. For instance, the populist movements became stronger across Europe.

The labour market has experienced important transformations: employment has become more flexible, non-standard and/or precarious jobs are more frequent and the careers are interrupted and less secure. These mutations produce new vulnerable groups, especially atypical (non-standard) workers, long term unemployed and NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training): “At a cross-EU average rate of 16.7%, the share of young people between 20 and 24 years of age who are not in school, employment or training is certainly still above the pre-crisis level (2008: 15%)” (Schraad-Tischler *et al.*, 2018: 9).

A new challenge is the technological change, for instance, the increasingly use of robots, which creates concerns about job losses (Eichengreen, 2018).

Global heating and climate change increase vulnerability to disasters. EU has established the European Solidarity Fund in order to fight disasters, including COVID 19, as a major health emergency. We could say EU set its policy for protecting the vulnerable on solidarity, cooperation and trust.

To meet all these challenges, EU promoted new regulations and sectoral strategies oriented to these new vulnerable groups: the directives regarding the parental leave and the covering of the atypical workers by the social security schemes, the flexicurity strategies, Youth Guarantee, and strategies for improving the access to knowledge, education and digital skills.

An important event in this context was the European “Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth”, 17-20 November 2017, in Gothenburg, Sweden (twenty years after the previous Nice Social Summit). Here, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was proclaimed, strengthening of the social dimension of the EU by providing social protection for all (European Commission, 2017), but, especially, for certain vulnerable social groups, such as the non-standard and self-employed workers, who are more exposed to economic uncertainty and social risks (European Commission, 2017). Previous welfare instruments and programmes have proven to be ineffective and stigmatising. Apparently, EU needs a new vision for protecting the vulnerable and the EU is looking for new approaches in order to combat vulnerability.

The EPSR delivers 20 principles and rights in three fields: equal opportunities and access to labour market; fair working conditions; social protection and inclusion. The latter field refers to: childcare and support to children; social protection; unemployment benefits; minimum income; old age income and pensions; healthcare; inclusion of people with disabilities; long-term care; housing and assistance for the homeless; access to essential services (European Commission, 2017:19-23). Also, the Commission invited all European institutions, Member States and social partners to debate and find new instruments for addressing the new social risks and challenges, including the universal basic income.

IV. REDEFINING THE VULNERABLE IN EU DURING COVID- PANDEMIC: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated certain existing risks: precarity of work, work-life imbalance, uncertainty, instability, as well as decreasing incomes, family tensions, mental health problems, and social dependence. In the same time, it created new risks. Therefore, the pandemic deepens the vulnerability of some groups and communities but it has created new vulnerable groups, as well. Recent researches (Karaye *et al.*, 2020) mapped the most vulnerable groups throughout Europe (minorities, disabled) but the vulnerability is mitigated by factors, such as access to information, the quality of social fabric, social capital, solidarity and social trust.

The European Union and its Member States were forced to negotiate and re-negotiate what Beck (1992) called the societal risks, combining medicalisation (Elbe, 2011), biopolitics, social protection and economic compensations, in order to avoid economic crisis and electoral loss.

Compared to other crises, the pandemic affects all aspects of personal and collective life, causing, among other things, rising unemployment, inequality, declining incomes, very high health costs, uncertainty, mental problems, and declining quality of education.

The degree of vulnerability (measured as lower employment rates) differs within various occupational groups, the most vulnerable being those with elementary occupations, service workers, and sales workers. “Interestingly, a strong impact is also recorded for legislators, senior officials and managers (–4 per cent) and technicians and associate professionals (–4.3 per cent), which is a pattern markedly different from the global financial crisis of 2009.” (Jestl and Stehrer, 2021:8).

The social costs of the pandemic have been measured and presented in various studies. Thus, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) launched a barometer in three rounds: April 2020, July 2020 and April 2021, which was attended by 190,000 respondents from the 27 states. This barometer shows that 37% of respondents needed help (most often, unemployment benefits, social assistance income, allowances and sick leave). The unemployed and self-employed are the ones who most often resorted to social benefits and retirees the least. The study shows a worrying decline in social capital and trust in institutions. The decline is greatest for governments and lowest for the EU (Table I).

However, the social costs paid by the Member States are unequal. The hardest hit were those with a high atypical employment rate but with social security systems less able to protect atypical workers (Italy, Spain, Greece). Subsequently, temporary social aid schemes have been implemented in the EU, benefiting 42 million atypical workers (Myant, 2021: 60). Due to the fact that most of the states in the EU have comprehensive social protection systems, the social crisis here has been less drastic than the economic one.

The working time and workspace were redefined during pandemic (because of working from home and digitalisation). The two spheres - work and private life - overlap, with consequences for stress and mental health. The tension between life and work was felt especially by mothers with small children. The risk of depression has increased, reaching 64% among young people (Ahrendt *et al.*, 2021, p. 6).

TABLE I: EVOLUTION OF TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS (AVERAGE SCORE OF MAXIMUM 8 POINTS)

Institution	April 2020	April 2021
Government	4.8	3.9

Virtual Media	4.6	4.2
EU	4.5	4.6
Healthcare system	6.4	5.9

Source: own synthesis according to Ahrendt *et al.* (2021, p.14).

TABLE II: REDEFINING EMPLOYMENT - EU 27

Job location	April 2020	April 2021
Home only %	34	24
Home and else %	14	18
Only at work %	52	59
Average share of hours worked at home %	35	36

Source: own synthesis according to Ahrendt *et al.* (2021, p. 4).

The use of time becomes more flexible and the rigid work schedule is no longer respected. Is there less work in the pandemic, more free time? In fact, there is an even greater segregation between blue-collar workers, with activities that cannot be carried out at home, and white-collar workers. The vulnerabilities were different for the two categories of workers: while for the former the pandemic meant the restriction of economic activity, unemployment and anxiety, for the latter it required a rapid and stressful adaptation to new communication technologies and the potential imbalance between work and life (Boz & Tekin-Koru, 2021).

The EU's response to the social crisis caused by the pandemic was aimed to reduce the social vulnerability and the social costs. This response had to take into account important challenges: to be a supranational response, but adapted to quite different national social and political contexts; to be a holistic response, but which also considers the interdependence between sectors.

At first, the EU's response was sectoral (in health, education, inclusion, employment, social security, economic and social cohesion), and only in the third wave of the pandemic became a supranational response, and transnational solidarity strengthened. This response also tends to correlate with Member States' reactions, for example: generalising social minimum income, increasing the amounts of social assistance benefits, protecting workers affected by reduced employment, implementing *kurzarbeit* employment schemes, job retention programmes, short-time work schemes, investing in health and care services.

The pandemic has revalued the social dimension of the EU. Twenty years passed between the Nice Social Summit (1997) and the Gothenburg Social Summit (2017), suggesting less interest in social issues. The Social Summit in Porto, however, took place only 4 years after Gothenburg. European Commissioner for Employment and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, says budget austerity, which has been the EU's main approach to managing the previous economic crisis, is the wrong answer. This approach has led to deteriorating public services, increasing populism, poverty and unemployment: "it is time to give a more social face to the union" (Schmit, 2021). Thus, the EU's response to the pandemic seems to benefit the social ideology of "welfarism" over others, such as neoliberalism or nationalism (Hemerijck & Huguenot-Noël, 2021).

However, in our opinion, the Porto Summit does not bring anything fundamentally new compared to the one in Gothenburg. It reaffirms the 20 principles of the EPSR and thus gives a clear message about the importance of the social in the EU.

The Next Generation EU Program - The Mechanism for Recovery and Resilience - materialises in 2021. This program is an important step, both in real and symbolic terms, because it overcomes "historical taboos of European integration" (Merler, 2020). The above initiative is complemented by legislative proposals, such as the establishment of a European minimum wage and improving access to social security for atypical workers, including the digital nomads.

An important role in shaping the integrated and coherent response to the pandemic is played by EU cohesion policies. The European Parliament adopted the cohesion package on 23 June 2021.

The pandemic has also accelerated the adaptation of social policies to the quaternary (ICT) economy. Here we can mention the political and legislative changes produced, both at European level and in many Member States, for the protection of new employment statuses and for the development of childcare services, adapted to parental status, according to the Directive on transparency and predictability of working conditions.

Another trend is the decoupling of benefits from the work status of the recipient. At present, most social benefits are conditioned by the recipient's social contributions, but the fluidity and precariousness of employment determine more and more people not to be able to contribute. The discussion on universal basic income was resumed, which could be a non-stigmatizing tool and a simplification of social protection. Several European states have experienced it, without clear conclusions; now the universal basic income is also experienced in Germany.

Finally, we believe that the pandemic leads to a sharper awareness of humanity's relationship with nature

and to the recombination of sectoral policies, such as combining social policy with environmental protection and digitalisation. The European Green Pact is thus a new development strategy - and not a "growth" one, as in the old European strategies - based on ecological social protection against new risks related to the environment and natural disasters. We can talk about eco-social policies or even the ecological social state (Laurent, 2021).

However, the focus on innovation, digitalisation and environmental protection is not without its perverse effects, risking widening the gap between the more developed and the less technologically advanced Member States, especially those in Eastern Europe.

The trend towards increasing EU competences has accelerated the process of integrating sectoral social policies at European level, especially on health and employment. The management of the pandemic called for the strengthening of the EU's social dimension, an increase in its coordinating role and cooperation between states. However, clear common social standards are needed (for example, on atypical workers, the convergence of the minimum wage, or the tools to balance work and personal life).

V. CONCLUSION

Our paper highlighted a new approach, emphasising the connection between practices and the new conceptual framework of European social policies. The analysed changes reflect a new thought regarding vulnerability, more adjusted to the new risks and to the new vulnerable groups.

The approach to the vulnerable during the pandemic of the EU and its Member States has both continuity and important changes. The new vulnerable (atypical workers, service workers, self-employed, NEETs) are added to the old vulnerable (elderly, single parents, minorities, immigrants, long-term unemployed, disabled). During the pandemic, young parents, low-skill workers, atypical workers, and immigrants are among the most vulnerable groups. For them, the European policies offer various measures but are rather disparate or ineffective at the level of different Member States (e.g., implementation of the Youth Guarantee).

Comparing the old and new "philosophy" of EU regarding vulnerability, we observed important changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The old "philosophy" was mostly based on neoliberalism, retrenchment, privatisation of social services, marketisation, austerity, means-tested benefits, contributivity, sectoral policies, and austerity. The new "philosophy" is based on welfarism, development of the public sector, expansion of social expenditure, decommodification, universal benefits, decoupling of social benefits from the work status of the recipient, and recombination of sectoral policies, such as combining social policy with environmental protection and digitalisation. In practice, these "old" and "new" philosophies are sometimes conflicting, but sometimes synergetic.

Still, in our view, the EU needs a more perennial approach to the new risks as well as alternatives to the existing social protection programmes; for instance, transnational European programmes and services, especially in the field of employment policies. The pandemic has accentuated the need to redefine European social policies in order to increase their resilience in "liquid" conditions of instability and uncertainty. This "liquidity" (Bauman, 2000: 7) changes the whole view of social risks (including the consequences of climate change) and of social security systems designed to counteract them and to reduce vulnerability.

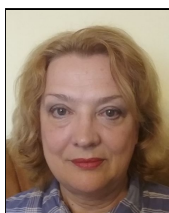
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author declares that she does not have any conflict of interest.

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