

## **The Social Policy of the European Union**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims at briefly analyzing the social policy of the European Union (EU), in terms of its place, purpose and objectives in the general EU policies, as well as from the legal and practical points of view. The main objectives of the employment and social policy in the EU member states are promoting full employment of people able to work, improving living and working conditions, and harmonizing frameworks for working and growth. Therefore, several measures are implemented in all domains of economic policies. The European social model combines economic dynamism with social justice. Population and workforce ageing, as well as other changes in the society will create a continuous and growing pressure on social protection systems. This paper contributes to an ongoing dialogue by discussing unemployment and social policies from both a psychological point of view, as well as from the perspective of economic theory and practice.*

**Keywords:** European Union, social policy, social protection, social security, Economic and Social Committee, social dialogue, social cohesion, European social model.

### ***1. Introduction***

The term social policy indicates a set of public policies aiming at ensuring social protection and welfare. From an academic point of view, the term social policy denotes a multidisciplinary field which makes use of concepts and methods belonging to economics, political sciences, sociology, social assistance, psychology, management, philosophy and law.

Social policies study phenomena beyond governmental actions and policies: besides social services, the policy studies a wide range of social and economic phenomena related to individual, family or community welfare. Therefore, the three main areas of interest when studying social policy include:

- Administrative practices and social service policies, including medical services, social security insurance, education, employment and professional training, community services, housing;
- Social problems including crime, disability, unemployment, mental health, old age;
- Discrimination and disadvantages based on race, ethnic group, poverty and economic inequity.

An effective social protection system is not only a moral and politic request, but also an economic one. The polarization of society in rich and poor is an organic phenomenon specific to societies which are based on private property.

Social protection is developed based on several aspects:

- The *social factor* involves that a community manifests itself by means of its shared problems;
- The *economic and social factor* (economic agents and society) manifests itself in the form of specifications regarding the workplace, work conditions and duration;
- The *means of implementing social protection* are based on programs with objectives, deadlines, outcomes and practical results for various social categories.

These social protection policies reveal not only the social realities of a certain timeframe, the necessary resources and the way in which resources are distributed, but also the efficiency of the implemented measures.

Therefore, social policy represents an aggregate meant to regulate economic, social and political conflicts. A successful social policy is based on a principle which states that the welfare of society is based on the welfare of each and every individual. The concept of the state's social policy is materialized in its objectives, applicability range, precise measures, as well as in the decisions and effects.

The structure of social policies is based on several objectives:

- The creation and implementation of a social protection system which includes a wide array of measures regarding insurance, pensions, unemployment aids;
- The establishment of a minimal guaranteed salary which should be inter-professional;
- The directed intervention regarding income distribution and transfer policy;
- The right to work and the role of unions in elaborating social policies;
- The duration of workdays and the housing issue;
- The issues regarding spare time and cultural policies.

Social policies use welfare economy in order to evaluate the content of social programs in the light of fulfilling individual needs.

## ***2. The place and the role of social policy in the community policies***

Social policies are sets of public policies which aim at ensuring social protection and welfare. Social policies can be studied from various perspectives, revealing the area covered by the policy, the organization of objectives based on the goals in a certain timeframe, and the administrative framework in which the socio-economic decision is applied.

However, the main concerns of social policy are defined in terms of the field of action: the coverage of social protection, the question whether it includes the entire population or is limited to defavorized groups and the degree in which the state can and should intervene in the housing policy.

The most convenient manner of studying social policy involves the description of the component policies and the institutions which serve and form the social service system. The study of social policies can be projected in the fields of politics and ethics when examining the attitude of political decision makers towards social conflicts, but also when seeking the causes on inequity in economic evaluated societies.

Usually, most social policy researchers reach a unanimous conclusion: social policies concentrate on relieving the so-called social pains and have objectives which are accepted as bold values. These policies are analyzed in terms of their success in achieving their goals and are designed from a political viewpoint. (Zamfir 1999:108)

Social policy researchers have long debated the importance of the analysis of society and of social institutions in designing social policies. The general conclusion states that, should the analysis be performed with respect to personal political and ethical beliefs, the analysis is not useful to the researchers of the domain. Moreover, such a biased analysis is prejudicial to objectiveness.

The study of social policies offers a broader view on the relationships between politics and society. Drafting a social policy is a political process due to the fact that this area cannot be analyzed independently, without referring to other public activities. Social policies should be regarded as results of other policies. This represents a cumulative process which should be understood not only because one policy creates opportunities for other policies, but also because it requires other political answers. In order to better understand the issue of social policy, we must direct our attention towards the results of political science. An important aspect when studying social policy is the examination of its implementation. The current impact of any policy on the public is dependent on the manner of interpreting and applying that particular policy.

The interpretation of a policy reveals its contents and limits. Bureaucracy is a characteristic in such cases. The complexity and difficulty of applying social policy objectives, correlated with a delay in implementing the policies, generate negative response and may even lead to social tension (for example, the delay of indexing in cases of galloping inflation, or the failure in meeting the health budget). In such situations, revealing the determination ratio between social-economic conditions and social policy is of utmost importance.

Some authors (Zamfir and Stoica 2006:139) consider that the study of social policies sometimes requires going beyond the conventional borders of social activity. However, the study of the effects and the understanding of the practical implications are of utmost importance and cannot be performed without the aid provided by related domains. Those who request the study of social policies are or expect to be involved in the social area. Moreover, such a study can contribute to the understanding of the decisions and actions in other related sectors such as protecting abandoned children or supporting the ageing population.

The needs of social policy researchers refer to knowing and understanding the social system, due to the fact that social workers are highly involved in their area of activity. Partly due to this reason, the study of social administration is closely connected to the problems of social policies and is therefore considered responsible for the cases in which reality proves the failure of certain implemented policies.

Another important aspect is that not all economies and countries can afford generous redistribution programs which, despite their high social effectiveness, have extremely high costs. This situation is also faced by Romania which has relatively low budget resources and a high percentage of poverty among its population. In this particular case, a compromise solution can be adopted in the form of ensuring social benefits for those people who perform community work or activities. (Preda 2002:78)

### ***3. The competence of the European Union in the domain of social policy. Legal framework***

According to *The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU), the member states and the European Union (EU) have joint competence regarding the social policy of the EU. Article 4, paragraph 2b of TFEU states that one of the goals of the EU is represented by the creation of a highly competitive social market economy which aims at the full occupation of the workforce and at social progress. Therefore, at a European level, we witness the development of a social law system which contains the legal norms adopted by the European organizations regarding work relations and social security (Ținca 2002:3).

The role of the EU in the process of designing a social policy is either to ensure national policies, or to initiate measures which are to be applied according to methods established by each member state. Social policy and workforce occupation are important community objectives which have been transformed into legal instruments by the EU institutions. The European Social Law was defined in Article 4, paragraph 2 of TFEU as a component of the international Labor Law which includes regulations of the Council of Europe and of the EU institutions (Popescu 1998:299). The Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> issued the following documents: *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (Rome, November 4, 1950); *European Social Charter* (Turin, October 18, 1916); *European Code of Social Security* (April 16, 1964); *European Convention on the Social Protection of Farmers* (May 6, 1974); *European Convention on the Legal status of Migrant Workers* (November 24, 1977).

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<sup>1</sup>The Treaty of London establishing the Council of Europe was signed by 10 European states on May 5, 1949.

The Western European Union<sup>2</sup> adopted the *Convention concerning frontier workers* (April 17, 1950) and the *Convention concerning internships* (April 17, 1950).

The priorities of the EU social policy reflect an orientation towards quality:

- High level of workforce occupation (involves creating and promoting new jobs);
- Work quality in the form of better jobs and an improved life/work balance (involves better employment policies, reasonable wages, and a work organization which meets the needs of both companies, and employees);
- Quality of the social policy in the form of a high social protection degree, appropriate social services, as well as ensuring the fundamental rights;
- Quality of industrial relationships which should be able to adapt to industrial change and to reflect the impact of know-how (new technologies and research) in the economic progress.

These priorities reflect the needs of the European society and represent milestones of the new social policy. The priorities are supported by specifically designed instruments and lines of work. Reaching the set priorities is a major challenge for any social policy and requires a structure based on specific objectives and a set of precise and adequate measures. Therefore, since the first two priorities (workforce occupation and work quality) relate to the dynamics of the work market and to the professional area, they are discussed together. The common lines of work for these priorities involve:

- Creating more and better jobs in order to increase the general employment rate up to 70% and the women employment rate up to 60%;
- Ensuring change management and adapting to the new work environment (represented by a society based on knowledge and technological development) by means of proper and effective informing of both employers and employees in order to balance flexibility and job stability;
- Seizing the opportunities offered by a knowledge based society by promoting lifelong learning, by introducing new forms of work organization and by increasing the employment chances of disabled people;
- Promoting workforce mobility by implementing free workforce movement, by eliminating geographical barriers, and by developing mechanisms which ease mobility (including the use of new technologies).

The priority regarding the improvement of the quality of the social policy is supported by measures aiming at various domains affecting social life and has a strong relationship with the professional life. The lines of work which address this priority involve:

- Improving and modernizing social protection up to a point in which it ensures secure incomes, secure and durable pension systems, and a performing and developed health system;
- Promoting social inclusion with the objective of preventing and eradicating poverty;
- Promoting the participation of all members of society in the economic and social life;
- Promoting gender equality by including women in the economic, scientific, social, political, and civic life;
- Enhancing fundamental rights and combating discrimination by ensuring the development and observance of fundamental social rights.

The priority of promoting quality in industrial relationships is the newest priority domain and aims at enhancing social dialogue, as well as promoting competition and solidarity at a European level.

The EU promotes social policy based on three distinct levels of interest:

- Social: all member states should acknowledge the responsibility for the social needs of their citizens, as well as the idea of a European Social Model;
- Economic: promoting competition and avoiding distortions caused by different social levels (for example, by increasing the level of general and vocational education or by increasing the mobility of employees);
- Political: the citizens of the EU would not accept political and economic integration without an active social policy. Social policy is mainly the responsibility of each member state.

As far as social policy is concerned, *The Treaty of Amsterdam* has a crucial role in ensuring the coherence of the legislation by including provisions regarding the social domain which were available in other documents.

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<sup>2</sup> The Western European Union was established by the by the Treaty of Brussels on March 17, 1948.

The treaty shows that certain domains are to be regulated by means of special legislation in the form of directives. Such directives are elaborated after consultation with the social partners reunited in the Economic and Social Committee and are approved unanimously using the co-decision procedure which involves the Council and the European Parliament.

The domains for which this procedure is applied are related to health and workplace security, work conditions, informing and consulting workers, gender equality in work market opportunities, and workplace treatment. The same procedure is used by the Council when adopting measures for combating social exclusion. Moreover, the Council must unanimously adopt regulations in the domains of: social security and social protection of workers; protection of workers facing the termination of their individual labor contracts; representing and defending the collective interests of employees and employers; employment conditions for citizens of third-party states; financial contribution for promoting employment and the creation of new jobs.

Similar to the fundamental rights and freedoms, the EU social policy is described by fundamental principles such as: the right to work, equality of chances, prohibiting discrimination, work protection, and social protection. These areas reveal a high degree of convergence in legislation as far as the two European structures are concerned. The domain is subject to regulations issued by the International Labour Organization which shares the main objectives. The social domain exceeds the issues regarding the right to work and extends over social policies and related areas. The issue of a European social space was especially debated in France after François Mitterand was elected President in May 1981.

In the constitutive treaties of the European Communities, the social policy only referred to the intervention of the *European Social Fund* (established in 1960) in two directions: offering states financial support for the requalification of unemployed citizens and offering the Communities competence to ensure social progress (this only involved an acknowledgement, not an obligation for the Communities to act as such). The Communities had the competence to regulate health protection and social security of foreign workers. The Community contributes to the development of a quality education environment by encouraging the cooperation between member states and, when necessary, by supporting and supplementing their actions. Despite this fact, the Community fully respects the responsibility of member states as far as the learning content and the organization of the educational system are concerned, as well as in the case of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Taking this situation into account, the Council adopted the first social action program on January 21, 1972, following the principles established by the Paris Summit in 1972. The objectives of this program were to reduce unemployment as close to 0 as possible, to increase the participation of social partners in the decision making process, and to improve living and working conditions.

The steps in developing social community regulations and the European social space were represented by the *Single European Act* (February 1986), the *Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers* (December 1989) and the *Maastricht Treaty* (February 1992). The *Maastricht Treaty* created opposite views regarding the extension of community competences in the social area: France supported the initiative, while Great Britain was against it. The appending protocol regarding this area is signed by 11 states which are provided minimal prescriptions to be progressively applied to the national social policy. Great Britain does not participate in the Council meetings which discuss related issues.

Based on the need to ensure economic development, the community Social Law progressively evolved in the EU based on a complex construction which is under permanent development. The EU member states acknowledged that economic development is not possible without ensuring a proper legal system and have therefore promoted the development of social law principles in the treaties drafted since 1990. These social law principles have a complexity which can be compared to the legislation of the Council of Europe (to which they initially make reference to); this complexity has the purpose of future developments towards a distinct legal domain.

The legal grounds for defining and applying community social policies are in the provisions of the *Treaty Establishing the European Community* (TEC), regarding the free movement of persons (Articles 39-42) and the right of establishment (Articles 43-48) in the context of the free market. The main topics of the social reform described in the community regulations involve:

- The reform of the social assistance system by migrating from universal eligibility programs to programs which target specific population groups;

- The reform of the pension system (reestablishing equity among generations and reestablishing the financial balance of the public pensions system);
- The reformed Pay-as-You-Go (PAYG) system should ensure capitalization pension plans in order to achieve a sustainable integrated system, should ensure the conservation of the contribution value and of the replacement income levels, and should contribute to economic growth;
- The employment and unemployment protection policies should become massively active;
- The labor legislation should be harmonized with the EU norms regarding work relations and work safety;
- The combating of poverty using social aid as a main instrument;
- The reform of the institutionalized child protection system should be continued by means of appropriate financial and human resources in order to ensure the functioning of public institutions, as well as by supporting partnerships with NGOs; the priorities in the domain are family assistance and family reintegration activities, placement in specialized care centers, adoption facilitation or foster family integration.

At this point, the social policy of the EU is fairly structured and is represented by a significant number of objectives and regulations regarding work and social security. The recent development of the EU social policy is due to the social development strategy adopted by the Council of Europe in Lisbon in 2000. The *Lisbon Agenda* indicated extremely clear social objectives, such as an employment ratio of 70% by 2010, an abundant and competitive job offer, and a high level of social cohesion. This Agenda restates the necessity of a permanent connection between the economic and the social progress in the EU and therefore rebalances the economic policy and the social one in order to ensure the further development of the EU.

Following the European Council in March 2004, the social policy of the EU developed in new directions: supporting the urgent need to accelerate the economic growth rate and to create more and better jobs; improving work productivity as a significant indicator of stable economic growth; continuously improving work quality by focusing resources towards ensuring safety and training. From this perspective, the EU manifests a constant desire and effort to invest in human capital, to ensure a better implementation of state-of-the-art technologies, especially in services, and to stimulate infrastructure research and development.

Relating to the EU evolution regarding social policy, theoreticians presented the idea of a community social contract which would basically represent a firm commitment to occupy as much as possible of the workforce, to ensure a high social protection level as a factor of social stability and solidarity, to ensure appropriate social protection of workers' rights, including gender equality and eliminating social discrimination, as well as to promote an active and constant dialogue between social partners at all levels, from companies, to the decision makers in the EU. The effectiveness of such a community social contract is to be evaluated by analyzing the degree in which the social partners take part in implementing the firm commitments of the contract. The European integration project regained importance by means of the steps in the social policy sector in a timeframe of political and economic liberalism at an EU level. However, there were four major aspects in favor of a common EU social policy:

- Free movement of workers

In order to ensure the full functionality of this principle, the transfer of workers' rights beyond national borders was needed so that people who choose to work in a foreign country do not lose the social security they would benefit from if working in their home country. This labor mobility is maybe the only important social security measure in the *Treaty of Rome* (Articles 48-51), stating that workers will benefit from the social rights of the host country. At that moment, in the 1960s, this was not an issue of social policies above the national level; it was merely a coordination of national social security systems in order to reduce incompatibilities.

- Social dumping and social tourism

These aspects represent major risks of life standard inequities in member states. Such situations appeared in the developed countries in North-Western Europe in the 1960s and intensified in the 1970s-1980s as a consequence of the free movement of workers in the EU. These countries were faced with a large number of workers from Southern Europe because countries with lower levels of social protection were able to export their internal workforce surplus by means of the so-called social tourism. The accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1980s increased the worries of the wealthier countries in North-Western Europe which, by means of their representatives in the European Commission, pressured the implementation of a reasonable social policy at an EU level.

The accession of more Eastern European states is likely to produce a new tendency of social dumping, should the measures for reducing the existing socio-economic inequalities not be adopted in the necessary timeframe.

- Economic efficiency

This represented a significant factor in developing the social policy of the EU. The specific services of the social policy, besides representing a form of political rightfulness for the industrial-capitalist system, ensure healthier and better educated workforce which, in turn, determines a growth in economic efficiency. This neo-Marxist inspired argument managed to influence the decision makers in Western Europe and led to an increased budget which managed to improve performance in education and medicine.

- Social cohesion

According to the *Treaty of Amsterdam* (1997), social cohesion is the most recent concept of the social policy which supports a much broader policy of the EU: the cohesion policy. The cohesion policy is funded from the so-called structural funds: *European Regional Development Fund* (ERDF), *European Social Fund* (ESF), and *European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund* (EAGGF). Today, structural funds represent over 1/3 of the total EU budget, while in 1975 they were limited to 5%. In 2009, the total amount of allotted structural funds reached 27.4 billion euro. The motivation behind community financing is to reduce the existing and rather important differences between various regions of Europe.

Evaluations of the *Lisbon Agenda* design and implementation have revealed a series of issues which led to the unsatisfactory achievement of several initial objectives:

- The lack of an adequate implementation program for the member states;
- The lack of total political support at a national level;
- The large number of established objectives and goals;
- The poor monitoring of member states;
- The insufficient distinction between goals and means;
- The insufficient correlation between the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda and the objectives of economic convergence.

These issues were considered when developing a new European strategy, the Europe 2020 strategy.

The legal framework of the community social policy is represented by Articles 145-151 of *The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* - TFEU (ex Articles 136-145 of the *Treaty Establishing the European Community* - TEC), while articles 145-150 of TFEU (ex Articles 125-130 of TEC) include regulations regarding employment. The general provisions in the mentioned articles are rounded by other provisions of the same Treaties or by acts adopted by the European organizations: Article 3 of the *Treaty on European Union* - TEU regarding the general objectives of the Union; Article 19 of TFEU (ex Article 12 TEC) which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of nationality; Article 19 of TFEU (ex Article 13 TEC) regarding the right of the EU institutions to take measures for combating any form of discrimination.

The TFEU and the provisions regarding free movement of persons and the right of establishment in the EU provide the general framework for the community social policy. The *Social Policy Protocol (Protocol No. 14)* to the *Maastricht Treaty* allowed the member states to apply community regulations in the social domain. The *Social Policy Agreement* which was annexed to Protocol No. 14 defined the community lines of work in the social domain and created the legal framework for negotiation and consultation between social partners at a European level.

The *Treaty of Amsterdam* involved the abolition of *Protocol No. 14* and its inclusion in Articles 136-145 of TEC. Hence, social dialogue was integrated in the community common law and became applicable in the entire EU. The dialogue between social partners is a specific method of the European social policy. The purpose of social dialogue is mentioned in the *European Employment Strategy* and in the *European Employment Pact* adopted by the European Council in 1999 in Cologne.

*The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* was adopted by the European Council, Parliament and Commission in December 7, 2000 and includes provisions regarding civil, political, economic, and social rights. These provisions are rounded by regulations of the community institutions in specific domains of social policy as work legislation, work conditions, employment, gender equality, discrimination, or community social dialogue.

#### **4. The objectives of social policy and the decision mechanism at the community level**

The objectives of the EU social policy<sup>3</sup> are set by the provisions of Article 151 of TFEU (ex Article 136 TEC). According to these provisions, in the light of the social rights, of the rights included in the *European Social Charter* signed on October 18, 1961 in Turin, and of the rights included in the *Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers* signed in 1989, the EU and its member states have the following objectives: promoting workforce occupation, improving living and working conditions, ensuring proper social protection, promoting social dialogue between employers and employees, developing human resources for generating high and durable workforce occupation, and combating social exclusion.

The *Treaty of Lisbon* includes Article 152 of TFEU which provides that the EU acknowledges and promotes the role of social partners at a European level while respecting the diversity of national systems. This eases the dialogue between social partners because it respects their autonomy. *The Tripartite Social Summit for Growth and Employment* contributes to the social dialogue.

In order to achieve the objectives stated in Article 151 of TFEU, the Union supports and supplements the actions of member states in the following domains: improving the work environment in order to protect workforce health and safety; improving work conditions; informing and consulting workforce; integrating excluded persons in the work market; regulating work conditions for citizens of third-party countries which are legal residents in the EU; ensuring gender equality regarding opportunities and wages; combating social marginalization.

The mechanism for adopting regulations regarding the design and application of social policy at the EU level involves the European Parliament and Council. Following the consultation with the Economic and Social Committee, the two institutions adopt regulations based on the ordinary legislative procedure. The same procedure is used by the Council when adopting measures meant to encourage the cooperation between member states by means of initiatives which regard enhancing knowledge, developing information and experience exchange, promoting innovation, and evaluating experiences in order to combat social exclusion.

Based on the proposals of the Commission and after consulting the Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee, the Council unanimously decides in the following domains: social security and social protection of workforce; protection of workforce in case of contract cancellation; collective representation of the interests of employers and employees, including co-administration; employment conditions of citizens of third-party countries which legally reside in the EU; financial contributions aiming at the promotion of employees and the creation of new jobs, without infringing the provisions regarding the social fund.

The legislative initiative in the domain of social policy is held by the Commission. This institution presents proposals following the consultation of social partners regarding a possible community action. The consultation refers both to the opportunity of a legislative proposal in the domain, and to the actual content of that proposal. According to Article 254 of TFEU (ex Article 138 TEC), the Commission has the goal of promoting the consultation of social partners at the EU level. The dialogue between social partners may lead to relationships of contractual nature, including agreements. The Commission functions in close relationship with the member states based on studies, notes and consultations on national or international issues.

Based on these provisions, each member state must apply the principle of pay equity for men and women who perform equal work or work of equal value. The Treaty defines the term pay as the ordinary basic salary and any other paid rights, in cash or in kind, offered to the employee by the employer. Pay equity without gender discrimination involves two aspects: the pay for the same work is established based on the same unit of measurement, and the pay for on-site work is for the same job.

Following the co-decision procedure and the consultation stages, the European Parliament and Council adopt the measures needed to ensure equality of chances and pay equity between men and women, including the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value. In order to ensure gender equality in the work life, the pay equity principle allows member states to maintain or adopt measures which offer advantages to the under-represented gender in a particular professional sector, as well as to prevent or compensate career disadvantages.

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<sup>3</sup>The CE Treaty establishes the base principles of remuneration (by means of Article 157 TFEU, ex Article 141 TEC)



According to Article 158 of TFEU (ex Article 142 TEC), member states have the obligation of respecting the equality of paid holidays.

The Commission issues a yearly report on the progress of the community social policy. This report is submitted to the European Parliament, to the Council, and to the Economic and Social Committee. In the yearly report, the Commission dedicates a special chapter to the evolution of the social situation in the EU. The Parliament has the possibility to request reports on special issues of the social situation.

Community agreements can be implemented in two ways: based on the procedures and practices of the social partners and of the member states (in domains of national competence) or by means of a Council decision based on a proposal of the Commission, upon the request of the partners (in domains of community competence).

In order to achieve the community social policy objectives, the Commission encourages and promotes cooperation in the domain of social policy, especially regarding employment, work rights and conditions, training, social security, work-related accidents and diseases, work hygiene, rights of association, and collective conventions between employers and employees.

After consulting the Parliament, the Council decides with a simple majority to create a social protection committee with a consultative purpose in order to promote cooperation in the field of social protection between the member states and the Commission. The mission of this committee is to monitor the social situation and the evolution of social protection policies, to ease the information and experience exchange between the member states and the Commission, as well as to prepare reports, notices or other activities which fall in its competence, unsolicited or upon the request of the Commission or the Council.

## **5. Conclusions**

The European Union is defined in the Amsterdam Treaty as a space of freedom, security and welfare. The European construction is first and foremost an economic one and is therefore driven by market dynamics. Economy, however, does not represent a goal in itself. Economy created and emphasized a certain degree of social, regional and environmental imbalance which in the view of the EU should be corrected by means of specific actions and policies. European economic growth can and must be used to reduce inequity and distribution imbalance in the European space.

European citizens expect the community institutions to answer specific issues, to maintain peace and security, to fight unemployment, to combat all forms of crime and organized drug dealing, to reduce poverty, to ensure gender equality, and to protect the environment, the quality and the safety of products. Citizens expect the EU to offer enhanced security and stability, as well as a stronger international engagement while respecting the diversity of national, regional and local identities.

In order to maintain the balance and the participation of the citizens in the European project, the EU must consolidate and increase integration in the social area. Promoting and ensuring quality and appropriate life standards in an active, diverse and healthy society is achieved by means of the employment and social policy. The social policy represents an important component of the policies surrounding the European Single Market. The social policy of the EU covers domains dealing with gender equity, health and work safety, work legislation, social protection and security, specific actions regarding the financial situation of disabled people.

The EU aims at developing a project which will offer its citizens a sense of belonging and identity, as well as prosperity, solidarity and respect for the quality of life. This can be achieved by protecting the environment, developing good quality and accessible services of general interest and ensuring a high level of social protection.

The social policy of the EU is represented by a set of complementary policies which developed and multiplied in time and which aim at the sectors affecting or generating individual and social welfare. The constant preoccupation of the EU for social policies started in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome and in time led to the creation of the so-called European social model.

The social policy agenda reflects the transformation and transition from an approach based on the minimization of the negative social consequences resulted from the structural change, to an approach which is based and centered on quality and aims at modernizing the social system and investing in people.

The quality-centered approach integrates the social policy, the economic policy, and the employment policy. The social policy and its component, the employment policy, cannot be designed and implemented in an isolate environment, without regard to the economic context and in close correlation with the economic policies. An adequate social policy ensures enhanced social life quality and equitable social cohesion.

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