

# On social welfare, views in EU can surprise and emerging markets bring new perspectives

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Public perceptions of "social Europe" signal support for more EU integration, while new welfare regimes abroad highlight a worldwide trend.

More than half of a century of economic and political integration in the

EU has stripped away many taboos about pooling national powers in a third area: [social policy](#).

While [welfare](#) firmly remains the responsibility of Member States, the case for EU institutions to play a stronger role in social matters such as wage rules, pension benefits, unemployment assistance and gender equality has gained ground.

The eurozone crisis and more recent COVID-19 pandemic have reinforced the case by widening economic and social [disparities](#) across the EU.

Horizon Magazine asked two leading researchers in EU-funded projects on social welfare—Sharon Baute of [EUSOCDIV](#) and Erdem Yörük of [EmergingWelfare](#)—to share their main findings.

EUSOCDIV examined public attitudes towards the notion of "social Europe". EmergingWelfare, whose funding came through the European Research Council, looked outside the EU at social security systems in six [emerging economies](#).

Sharon Baute, EUSOCDIV and assistant professor of comparative social policy at the University of Konstanz in Germany. Her research covers social policy, European integration and Euroscepticism, focusing in particular on public attitudes toward the welfare dimension of the EU.

## **What were the project's main findings on public views of "social Europe"?**

Citizens perceive social Europe mainly as solidarity between states rather than between individuals. In countries that have more generous social protection, citizens tend to be less supportive of an EU-level initiative in

this area because they can already rely on an efficient social safety net in their home country.

The less generous national welfare provisions are, the higher the public's expectations regarding the EU's role in the social area. Citizens are expecting their country to benefit from upwards convergence through more EU decision-making.

## **Did the research produce any surprises?**

Yes. We knew that people can attribute blame for economic outcomes to various actors. For instance, they may have certain beliefs about why some people live in poverty or why some countries perform less well than others in terms of economic growth and employment. However, we did not yet know that attributing blame towards the EU itself is associated with a stronger demand for a social Europe.

This is a positive sign as it indicates that criticism towards the EU does not necessarily result in hard Euroscepticism. Instead, it can be mobilised into support for further European integration steps—if these have a strong social dimension.

Generally, it is the lower educated socio-economic status groups who are [more Eurosceptic](#). However, I found that these segments of society are often most in favour of a stronger social Europe.

It seems that they dislike the EU in its current form while being supportive of more European integration in the social area. This shows that [public attitudes](#) are complex and cannot be simplified when debating the future of European integration.

## **How nuanced are views of "social Europe"?**

Europeans have more nuanced opinions on social Europe than is often assumed. Public attitudes towards social Europe cannot be reduced to a single pro-versus-anti social Europe stance. The research shows that attitudes are much more complex than that. Citizens' attitudes really depend on what specific policy principle or instrument is at stake.

Nonetheless, I found similarities in support of certain policies. For instance, there is a universal ranking order on how deserving one considers specific groups in society of European solidarity. In all the countries that were part of the [study](#), disadvantaged children were considered as more deserving of financial support than the poor, who are in turn perceived as more deserving than the unemployed.

## **What degree of public support exists for EU-level initiatives in this area?**

Three broad factors determine the level of public support. First, the policy design itself matters. EU policies that have some form of [conditionality](#)—the principle that benefits are tied to obligations for people to behave responsibly—are generally more popular.

Second, support depends on individual-level characteristics, with lower socio-economic groups and left-wing oriented voters among the strongest advocates of a social Europe.

Third, support depends on the Member State in which citizens live. In this regard, the project revealed an East-West and North-South divide, with citizens in eastern and southern Europe being the most supportive of EU-level initiatives that provide financial assistance to vulnerable groups in society.

Erdem Yörük, EmergingWelfare and associate professor in the

Department of Sociology at Koç University in Turkey. His [focal points](#) include [social movements](#) and welfare.

## **What is the broad context for welfare regimes in Argentina, Brazil, China, India, South Africa and Turkey?**

Before the 2000s, poor people from rural areas or slums were mostly excluded from the welfare state. But after the 2000s, the welfare-state model rapidly expanded to cover these populations. This meant that more disadvantaged people had access to social-assistance benefits for the first time. This was a historical moment.

Emerging-market economies such as Brazil, South Africa and Turkey differ from liberal, corporatist and social-democratic welfare regimes of the Global North in terms of their composition and generosity. In these emerging markets, the welfare state's focus is on social assistance programmes mainly because the poor are the main actors in terms of political grassroots activism and popular support for governments.

## **What are the resulting political challenges?**

Governments in these countries are developing social-welfare programmes not just to combat poverty but also, and mainly, as a political instrument to contain social unrest and to gain popular support.

Citizen movements demand more structural reforms, but they are provided with social assistance. This is what we call demobilisation by substitution.

## **How did you decide which countries to examine?**

Previous studies on welfare regimes have had a mostly Eurocentric view and our aim was to extend it to a global scope. This is the first comparative project on the politics of welfare regimes with a global outlook and I wanted to understand the position of emerging markets.

These emerging markets are characterised by rapid economic development and by huge income and social inequalities. I chose these specific countries to ensure geographical, cultural and historical diversity. I set out to show that, independently of the government party's ideology, independently of geographical and cultural differences, if similar grassroots political paths are taken this leads to similar social-policy outcomes.

## **Are the results relevant for the Global North?**

Absolutely. Rising poverty and radical movements, ethnic or religious for example, are happening in western countries too. Governments are using welfare benefits to deal with problems and most likely what we see in the Global South will occur in the Global North.

Overall, there is a trend towards increased social assistance, as our global [welfare dataset](#) illustrates. Furthermore, different countries that experience similar political needs are learning from each other and are building similar welfare states. So comparisons are really useful to understand the internal dynamics of welfare states too.

### **More information:**

- [EUSOCDIV](#)
- [EmergingWelfare](#)
- [EU-funded social sciences and humanities research](#)

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