

The European Social Model



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Definition

The European Social Model is a political view based on the Welfare State which emerged from the “social democratic consensus,” where the values of equal opportunities, redistribution, and solidarity are shared. The key element of the model is a shared view regarding values and the Welfare State as a political structure, but there is a lack of consensus when implementing specific programs and policies.

Overview

The concept of the European Social Model (ESM) was first introduced by the European Commission president Jacques Delors in the mid-1980s. The formulation of this concept sought to underline the values of equality, redistribution, and optimization of resources, as well as to outline a political model of the Welfare State, which is present in most countries of the old European continent. According to Moreno (2012), it is a model that was established in opposition to the North

American model which fosters mercantile individualism and to the Chinese model which rewards social dumping.

Based on the formulation by Delors, the ESM concept has been adapted to the different treaties approved by the European Union (EU). Regarding these agreements, it is important to highlight first the Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights adopted in 1989. This document was signed by all Member States (MS) except for the United Kingdom. This charter laid down the basic principles for the protection of EU workers and established one of the main principles which would underlie all community policy actions: the principle of subsidiarity, through which Union policies *complement* the MS actions in this field. This vision was also sanctioned and reinforced by both the Amsterdam treaty (1997) and the Lisbon treaty (2007), which was approved after the proposal for a European Constitution failed (EU 2010).

One of the first official definitions of the European Social Model appeared in the EC’s “White Paper on Social Policy” (1994). This report provided a set of common values which are inherent in democracy: individual freedom, equal opportunities, social dialogue, social security, and the creation of opportunities for the weakest members of society. These values are part of the shared view about the ESM. In the particular context of older adults, these values appear in different policies regarding public retirement pension systems.

Recently, however, in the European context of 2008 debt crisis and postcrisis austerity effects, community leaders themselves have questioned this concept and the model on which it is based. At the beginning of his term of office in 2012, ECB president Mario Draghi stated in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* that the ESM had vanished (Hermann 2017). Also fuelling the debate, but in the opposite direction, in a parliamentary debate in 2015, EC president Jean Claude Juncker advocated the need to re-establish a European Pillar of Social Rights (Weiss 2017).

All these facts clearly expose an obvious and defining element of the European Social Model: a shared view of values and Welfare State as a political structure, but the lack of political and academic consensus concerning the concept and the vagueness with which the ESM is formulated (Jepsen and Serrano Pascual 2005; Offe 2003). This lack of a definition means that there are different visions regarding the realization of the European Social Model, including its very existence, all of which are still valid today.

Key Research Findings

The foundation of the ESM is a set of values and a shared vision of these very values. Given this reality, Ferrera (2018) argues that starting from a common definition of what solidarity actually implies, and also understanding it jointly, the European Social Model can be a political project that legitimates EU policies, and by extension the entire European project. Based on the results of a survey carried out in different countries, Ferrera identified the elements that should make up solidarity and the weight each element has in the five large EU countries: community building, risk, social care programs, mobility, and migration support. Defining solidarity-based policies implies identifying which benefits should be included in the ESM, as well as to whom they should be targeted and on the basis of which policies they should be shaped. Based on this definition, Ferrera (2018) proposes four metaphors for the European Social Model: the EU as a “common home,” an “apartment building,” a “playground,”

or a “sinking ship.” Each of these perspectives takes into account different visions of solidarity and reciprocity between countries. This concept will be explained further in the next sections.

The European Social Model is, therefore, far from having a definition agreed by consensus. Furthermore, one of its main characteristics is precisely its open character and the constant debate still existing today regarding its definition. The following section describes the main perspectives from which this debate can be approached and the key aspects to analyzing it, following different classifications put forward by the literature (Guillen et al. 2016; Jepsen and Serrano Pascual 2005; Offe 2003). By combining the different visions and classifications of the concept, it can be categorized according to three different visions.

The European Social Model as a Banner: A Shared View in the EU Stars

The value of symbols lies in their capacity to bring people together and through which a reality can be interpreted. The European flag, anthem, and other symbols, upon which the European reality has been built, play this role. Indeed, the first definition arising from the debate on the ESM shares this view. The ESM is the recognition of a shared identity, an idea about values, and a welfare model shared by different countries.

Based on this perspective, the ESM is therefore a shared view on how to build the Welfare State, together with the principles and values associated with it. It is a project that goes hand in hand with the ideas of Keynes (1970), Beveridge (1942), Marshall (1997), and so many others and was conceived to reduce the vulnerability of the working class and as a capitalist response to the communist alternative project during the lengthy period of the Cold War. Thus, the Welfare State has for many years played the same role as the Erasmus Programme currently does, i.e., providing a shared identity for the European project. Speaking about older adults, social security or retirement pension system plays this specific role (See ► “Social Security in Europe”). Additionally, according to this perspective, the welfare

contribution to the European project is the foundation for the ESM.

The European Social Model(s): The Worlds of Welfare

As mentioned above, one of the main features of the ESM is its broad consensus on the idea of a Welfare State and its implementation. This notion, which is mostly European, clashes with other models of welfare implementation, such as the North American model which is based on individual ethics and where individuals receive hardly any state protection (See ► [“Welfare Estates”](#)).

Nevertheless, beyond the consensus regarding the idea of a Welfare State, quite a few authors have underlined the huge differences among the various welfare models which shape social protection in the different European societies. One of the most famous classifications of Welfare States is the one proposed by Esping-Andersen (1993) who, depending on the de commodification, employment, and social stratification criteria, classified states into three kinds of regimes: liberal (e.g., the United Kingdom), conservative (e.g., Germany), and social democratic (e.g., Sweden). A few years later, the “Latin Rim” countries or Mediterranean countries of southern Europe were added to this classification, but these countries did not fit into the previously described classification due to their characteristics and evolution (Moreno and Mari-Klose 2013; Ferrera 2010). The differences regarding these models lie in the access to resources and services, in their scope, and in their definition. And given that they create different types of society, a single model cannot be created. These welfare models offer different answers in the form of public policies for older adults, as will be explained in more detail in [European Social Model and Programs for Older Adults](#)’ section. The importance of family tradition and the path dependence make the response offered to older adults vary by country, within the shared values of the ESM.

This perspective is closely related to Ferrera’s metaphor of the apartment building (2018): i.e., although there are common services, each apartment (states) constitutes a unit in itself, with a

different welfare model and different implementation. They may share an entrance and common ideas in the neighbor meetings, but inside each home, each member develops the projects it considers to be more convenient.

Despite the fact that there are numerous studies that have debated the existence of Welfare States in Asia and Latin America (Haggard and Kaufman 2008), there is a general consensus regarding the identification of Europe with the Welfare State. However, the implementation of the Welfare State is, to say the very least, clearly different in each country. Consequently, are shared views regarding the values of a Welfare State sufficient to have an agreed-upon definition of the European social model? We will leave this question open for further debate.

The European Social Model as a Basic Transnational Project

The view of the ESM as a basic transnational project is supported by those who defend that the European Social Model has its origin in the idea of a Welfare State, but they seek a Welfare State at a European level, and this transnational axis could give sense to the EU. Advocates of this perspective seek greater political (and therefore social) integration and believe that the European Social Model could be a very useful tool in playing a legitimizing role in the Union, i.e., the cement that would bring cohesion to the whole building (Mau 2005).

According to Ferrera’s classification, this vision would be the “common home,” which is based on the concept of community that is attributed to the Welfare State while also wanting to delve deeper into it. The specific programs for mobility available to older adults share this view of the “common home,” and they use older adults volunteering and travel as tools for constructing this view (Erlinghagen and Hank 2006).

However, and as a counterpoint to this vision, we must not forget that the treaties have established that the Union *complements* the MS social policies and, therefore, we are still far from this approach being implemented. The Euro project and the weakness revealed during the last 2008 debt crisis have also shown that what brings the

EU together, more than the elements of protection which define the Welfare State, are, in fact, the commercial and financial projects.

European Social Model and Programs for Older Adults

The concretion of the European Social Model in policies and programs for older adults depends on the welfare model and the tradition of each one of the countries that make up the European Union (See ► [“Aging Policy Tools”](#)). However, following the common values that derive from the ESM is possible to distinguish three lines of policies for older adults, depending on the different welfare model and country.

The first area of policies emphasizes individual responsibility and the community network through “friendly cities” (AFCC) programs. These kinds of programs are implemented in the United Kingdom (Itulua-Abumere 2013; Buffel 2015; WHO 2015) or in the Mediterranean countries (Da Roit 2007; Martínez-Bujan 2014) and focus on community-based care (See ► [“European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations”](#); ► [“AGE Platform Europe”](#)). The second policy area is the one where social security programs protect older adults after retirement, although they are linked to the work people had before. These programs are developed mostly in central Europe (Anttonen and Sipila 1996; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2010; Broese van Groenou et al. 2016). Finally, the third area is the one implemented in the Nordic countries which stands out for the universality of benefits for older adults in all aspects, from healthcare to housing, although this is being questioned after the last liberalizing reforms that have taken place in those countries by the last conservative administrations (Szebehely and Meagher 2018).

Future Directions of Research

The European Social Model is indeed a fact in today’s European Union and a reality which is verifiable because there is a common base of values and ways of proceeding that define

European social policies. There is still consensus on the welfare model built after the Second World War, which continues to be an essential pillar for all those policies based on or aimed at the social protection of the most vulnerable groups. However, the analysis of the concept leaves many questions open about the realization and future of the model.

One of the issues that limit the definition of a European Social Model is the role of social policies in the EU. As pointed out earlier, the treaties establish that European Union policies must complement national policies in this field. This factor, together with the principle of subsidiarity, has prevented the establishment of a body of comparable social policies in all EU Member States. Will it be possible, in the medium term, for social security or health systems to operate on the basis of uniform criteria throughout the EU? At present this scenario seems remote and distant, but a debate on this issue would help to define more clearly the concept we are referring to.

The second issue concerns the future of the EU itself and its governance model. In a year which is obscured by the uncertainty of everything that Brexit could cause, the classic questions regarding the Union’s democratic deficit (nonlegislative parliament, non-directly elected president) are added to this issue, which also influence the definition of its Social Model. Many questions remain as to whether or not the departure of the United Kingdom (a traditional opponent to further integration measures) from the EU will open up an opportunity and will affect the development of welfare policies.

The third element is a more ideological one: the rise of the extreme right and the questioning of welfare consensus. Elections held in the various EU countries in recent years have shown that, far from retreating, the extreme right is in fact growing stronger over time. The message these groups transmit to citizens is far from what has been called “the welfare consensus,” as these right-wing groups have strong views against immigrants (and their rights) and equality between women and men. To what extent will these groups succeed in changing the main principles on which the ESM is based? Will they have enough

influence or enough power? These are other crucial questions which will also determine the future of the model.

Thus, the European Social Model, which is built according to common principles and values, i.e., on the basis of a shared political structure (Welfare State), is a reality that can be verified at the discursive level. To what extent this reality will be implemented by means of specific action programs will depend on people's good will and what may happen in coming years.

Summary

The European Social Model responds to a set of shared values based on equal opportunities, redistribution, solidarity, and the Welfare State as political structure. This vision is written in the European Union treaties. However, its practical implementation and the programs for older adults that derive from it (such as community-based friendly cities, public retirement pension systems, healthcare, or social security) also differ greatly depending on the state to which reference is made and its previous welfare model. The idea of the European Social Model is shared within the framework of values, but how does this operate in each country's political model? Is it possible to implement it commonly?

Cross-References

- [AGE Platform Europe](#)
- [Aging Policy Tools](#)
- [European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations](#)
- [Social Security in Europe](#)
- [Welfare States](#)

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