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The European Union and social policy

Jonathan Hobson and Harry Cowen

Objectives:

- To outline the history of the European Union and the key stages of legislation that have been part of its development.
- To examine the different structures and processes of the European Union, and the ways in which citizens, states and politicians contribute to the decision-making processes.
- To assess some of the challenges that the European Union faces, including the threat of the eurozone crisis and issues with nationalism and Euroscepticism.
- To evaluate some of the key areas of social policy in which the European Union is involved.

1. Chapter overview

The European Union (EU) is the foremost example of a global-regional political, social and economic bloc. Notwithstanding the potential exit of the UK, politically the EU represents the collective will of its 28 member states, and has a parliament of 751 MEPs elected every five years who sit in a decision-making process alongside representatives from national governments and commissioners. Socially, the EU has a population of over half a billion citizens for whom it supports freedom of movement within its borders. Its Social Fund has over € 80 billion for investment in communities between 2014 and 2020. Economically, the EU is a significantly powerful trading block; by GDP, it is the second largest economy in the world, second only to China. Internally, 19 EU member states and over 340 million people use a single currency, the Euro.

Although the EU is an effective and powerful international body, there are a range of critical perspectives on its role and functions. For instance, despite having an elected parliament and representatives from elected member states, there are those that see the EU as a large, faceless bureaucratic entity that dictates rules and supersedes national sovereignty. Whilst its economic policies have remained overtly driven by neoliberalism, as can be seen in the responses to the financial crisis in Greece, the EU has been far more socially orientated than any other contending regional bloc, in 2012 even receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. On the one hand, the EU is keen to champion freedom of movement of labour and of human rights; yet on the other the EU is also portrayed as 'fortress Europe' in its immigration policies. Finally, whilst there have been ongoing claims of the EU having little in the way of its own social policies except for labour legislation, leaving social policy formulation to the nation-state governments with its own role as basic support and co-ordination; its growing social policy inventory now covers a wide area.

This chapter outlines the development and role of the European Union as the world's largest multi-state governance organisation. The chapter first explores the origins and development of the EU, including the key points of growth in membership and in policy. In the chapter's next section, we explore the structure of the EU, including questions around how far we can consider the EU to be a democratic body and the ways in which the EU makes social policy. Following this, the chapter explores some of the difficulties the EU has faced in recent years, focusing particularly on the Eurozone crisis and the growth of nationalism and Euroscepticism, including the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK. The chapter then looks specifically at several aspects of European social policy, including the importance of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and social policy directed at families, the elderly and disabled people, and around education and training. The chapter finishes with a brief look at the future of the European Union in a changing world and then summarises the key learning.

Controversy and debate: The EU as a decision-making body

Some of the biggest criticisms of the European Union over the years have been that it primarily represents the interests of the market and is an extension of the neoliberal policies that underpin much of the global economy. Critics argue that the citizens of member states have very little say in the decision-making process, and that democracy can't really work at this supranational level.

On the other hand, proponents of the European Union claim it to be a great success, ushering in one of the longest periods of peace in modern Europe and providing its 500 million or so citizens with a chance to shape the social and political agenda above the level of the nation state through representation at the European Parliament. They point to the EU's successes in social policy, in supporting regional and local communities, and in fostering cooperation across the continent.

Do you think that the European Union offers a chance for citizens to genuinely shape the decisions that affect their own future, or is the European Union an unrepresentative bureaucracy making decisions on behalf of member states?

2. The origins and growth of the European Union

The origins of the European Union

One may trace the EU's beginnings back to the Second World War. The idea of the continent's integration was mooted as a preventative measure against further war and human devastation. The European Community was formed in 1950 by the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, and comprised France, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and Italy. Ever since, the European organisation has witnessed constant competition among key nations for political leadership so as to hold on to their own national interests.

In the 1960s, France's President General de Gaulle, in the pursuit of French power, was opposed to the idea of federalism which was supported by the majority of the other member states. Hence, he blocked attempts by Britain to join the organisation (delayed until 1973). Jacques Delors' presidency of the European Commission moved it towards federalism, adopting the idea of institutional reform, a European single market and a single currency in the form of the euro. The United Kingdom government, under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher (personally vociferous over the U.K's share of the budget) declared its own opposition to much of Delors' programme. A whole series of reforms has shaped the impressive growth of the European bloc up to the present day. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Atomic Community (Euratom) were inaugurated by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. In 1958 the Treaty of Rome created the European Economic Community (the EEC), largely a trading bloc and still containing the same constituent members as in 1951. The organisation was enlarged when Ireland, Denmark and the U.K. joined in 1973, followed by Greece in 1981, Spain and Portugal in 1986 and Sweden, Finland and Austria in 1995. In the first decade of the twenty-first century twelve more countries drawn from Central and Eastern Europe acceded. The present European Union was formed in 1991 by the Treaty of Maastricht, with the aim of strengthening the inter-relationships of the member states both politically and economically.

One of the key developments in the growth of the European Union was the development and adoption in 1999 of a single currency and the structures to manage this: the Euro and the European Central Bank. The Eurozone is an economic and monetary union (EMU) of nineteen EU member states that have adopted the euro as their currency: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. The European Central Bank, based in Germany, exercises overarching responsibility for monetary policy. EU member states not yet part of the euro are required to adopt the Euro as their official currency when they meet the required conditions; this is apart from Denmark and the UK who have an opt-out on the Euro and are not obliged to join. New countries wishing to join the EU must agree to adopt the Euro as their official currency once they meet the monetary conditions.

Finally, the Treaty of Lisbon gave the EU 'full legal personality' and the ability to sign international treaties, join international organisations, and restructured the decision-making process thus giving

EU citizens enhanced participation and protection (European Parliament, 2018). Ratified in 2007 and effective from 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon replaces the European Constitution which the referenda in the Netherlands and France had rejected in 2005. A predominant goal was to accelerate decision making in the now greatly expanded Union:

- It amended, but did not replace, the earlier treaties, enabling more effective decision-making within a massive organisation of 28 nations and a sharper focus than previously upon the ways international competition and globalisation were affecting the total bloc per se.
- For the first time, it included the national parliaments in the formulation of new legislation. They were now able to assess the extent to which European Union proposals conformed to the 'subsidiarity principle' (which states that the EU should only take action where the latter adds value).
- The Treaty introduced a new majority voting system for the Council's national ministers. Thus, any new legislation now must have, as a minimum, the support of sixty-five per cent of the Union's population.
- "Enhanced co-operation" rulings enabled individual member states working closer together without the involvement of those reluctant to take part.
- The Charter of Fundamental Rights was finally incorporated into European law, and collated those rights enjoyed by European Union citizens to date; such rights were also applied to each of the member states (Europa.eu).
- Within the rapid changes in the world outside the boundaries of the European Union, the Lisbon Treaty was a call for the Union to look outwards. The EU's negotiations, slowly built up over half a century to protect its economic and political barriers, had come under pressure from the forces of globalisation which, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, had eased the cross-border movements of work and trade.

Box xx.x: Treaties of the European Union

1951 *Treaty of Paris*: set up of ECSC and Euratom

1958 *Treaty of Rome*: formation of EEC

1992 *Treaty of Maastricht*: launch of EU and beginnings of social policy; established economic and monetary union

1997 *Treaty of Amsterdam*: enhanced the status of social policy and citizenship rights in the EU.

2001 *Treaty of Nice*: prepared the EU for further enlargement; extended Qualified Majority Voting

2007 *Treaty of Lisbon ratified*: replacement of the European Constitution, reflects changes with major enlargement of EU; sets out strategy for Union in context of globalisation.

From the small beginnings, the European Union has become a major global co-ordinated economic and social global bloc, presently incorporating 28 member states. But it is this very growth in the number of participatory states that has led to one of the most controversial debates surrounding the development of the European Union: the tension between enlargement, democratic accountability and national sovereignty.

The Growth of the EU

In the years preceding 2000, debate was lively regarding enlargement of the EU, how the new countries might align their national social legislation with that of other member nations, and institute viable systems of social protection (Hantrais, 2007, p.14). By the year 2000 it was evident that institutional change and reform was called for because of the Union's rapid enlargement (Laursen, 2001). Soon after the turn of the century, the Union prepared for material expansion into Central and Eastern Europe by a comprehensive reform of its institutions, including extension of voting rights. The twelve new members were: Cyprus; the Czech Republic; Estonia; Hungary; Latvia; Lithuania; Malta; Poland; Slovakia and Slovenia (all 2004) and Bulgaria and Romania (2007). With enlargement came a diversity of welfare situations into the Union; it was expected that they would have a heavy bearing on social policy. Most seriously, there was concern that they would import mass poverty, deprivation and unemployment and generally lower standards. However, studies in the early years of the new century demonstrated, however, such fears were proven to be over-generalised (Hantrais, 2007 pp.261-2). For example, according to data from 2003-04, Slovenia and Czech Republic were the lowest 'at-risk-from-poverty' nations. Furthermore, in the sphere of economic policy, the Commission found that the addition of over 100 million new citizens had boosted the additional members' agriculture sector through the Community Agricultural Policy, and strengthened the European Union in international markets. In return, studies such as those carried out by Rapacki and Prochniak (2009, pp. 7) showed that 'EU enlargement significantly contributed to economic growth' of the ten new Central and Eastern European economies.

Member state(s)	Date	European body membership
Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Italy and West Germany.	1952	Join European coal and Steel Community
Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Italy and West Germany.	1958	Join newly formed European Economic Community
Denmark, Ireland and United Kingdom	1973	Join European Economic Community
Greece	1981	Joins European Economic Community
Portugal and Spain	1986	Join European Economic Community
Austria, Finland and Sweden and Spain	1995	Join what has now become the European Union
Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus	2004	Join European Union
Bulgaria and Romania	2007	Join European Union
Croatia	2013	Joins European Union
United Kingdom	2016	Votes to begin process of leaving the European Union

In contrast to some of the early economic success, the enlargement of the EU has also raised the question of weakening democracy in an expanded European Parliament, fuelling the anti-EU campaigns of political parties in several member states, most significantly in the UK, where a public referendum in 2016 produced a narrow majority for leaving the EU.

[Can we insert an updated EU member state map here – possibly with the UK given a different shade]

Stop and Think

What was the impact on both the EU and on the UK of the vote to leave?

In summary, the EU's structure and institutions evolved over a half century, from a relatively minor economic trading bloc to the current regional organisation comprising a vast parliament, executive body and a plethora of committees, with a constitution supported by a series of major treaties regulating a range of policies, including social policy and the processes of economic growth. This growth has not been without challenge, as is demonstrated in the recent referendum in the UK and the rise in nationalism elsewhere in the EU. The next section examines the decision-making processes in the EU, addressing arguments on the nature of governance within the organisation.

3. The structures and processes of the European Union

The Structures of the EU

One of the most important debates on the European Union is around the degree to which it functions for the benefit of its citizens and member states, whether it is an extension of global neoliberal institutions, and/or whether it is an expansionist effort to create a federalised Europe at the expense of national sovereignty. The debates are important when it comes to considering the role and impact of the European Union in social policy, and at the heart of this is the degree to which we can regard the European Union as a democratic institution. We can begin this evaluation by looking at the four major political bodies that make up the EU: The European Council; the European Parliament; the European Commission; and the Council of the European Union.

The European Council

The European Council acts as the representative of the European Union, formulating the agenda for the Union's policies and defining 'the general political direction and priorities of the European Union' (European Union, 2018). Its members include the most senior elected political representatives of the Member States and the head of the European Commission. The European Council is chaired by a president who the Council elects to represent the EU to the rest of the world.

The European Parliament

The member states' citizens elect the 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who sit for five-year terms. The Parliament has three main roles: firstly, it is one of the EU's primary law-making

bodies, along with the Council of the EU and the European Commission. Secondly, it has a supervisory role for all EU institutions, it examines citizens' petitions, and it elects the European Commission President and approves the Commission as a whole. Finally, it has a smaller budgetary role, approving the EU's budget along with the Council of the EU.

The European Commission

The Commission is the central policy-making and executive body of the EU. Sitting in Brussels, it comprises 28 commissioners, one from each member state, who are nominated by the individual member governments for a five-year term. The president of the European Commission is nominated by the European Council, and on successful election selects vice-presidents and commissioners who are each responsible for a particular portfolio. Day-to-day running is organised through 53 (currently) departments run by Directorates-General including issues such as: budgets, Climate Action, Education, Legal services, Trade (European Commission, 2019a).

The Council of the European Union

The Council is the third of the EU's legislative bodies and represents the EU member states. It comprises ministers from governments in each EU country, and it meets to 'discuss, amend and adopt laws, and coordinate policies. The ministers have the authority to commit their governments to the actions agreed on in the meetings' (European Union, 2019).

Alongside these four main political bodies there are other important EU bodies that help to manage financial and legal issues. These include:

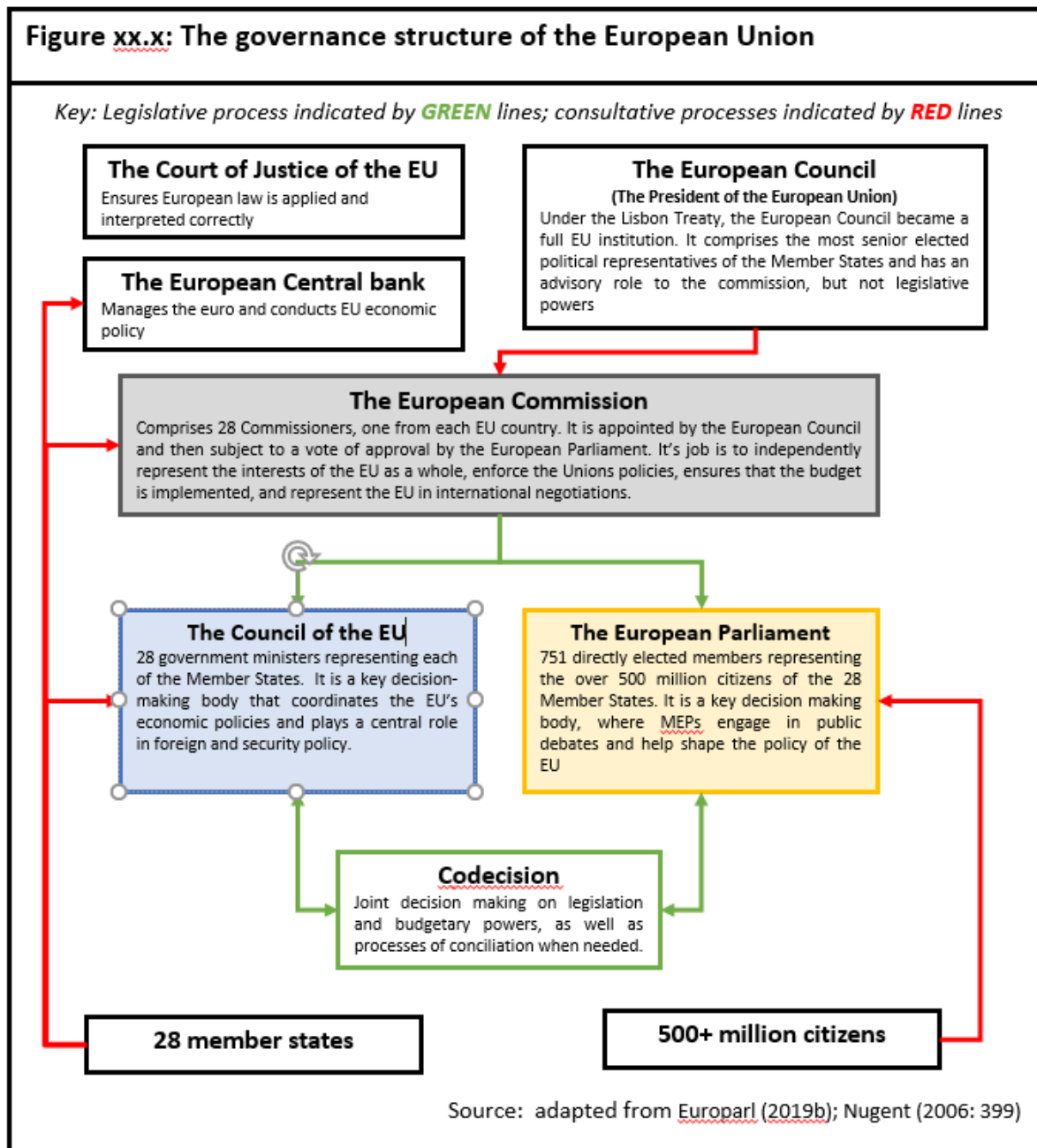
The Court of Justice of the European Union

The Court is at the top of the Union's legal system, required by the EU treaties to make certain that the European Union's law, made up of legislation and the cumulative treaties passed by the particular bodies, is respected. Based in Luxembourg, the Court of Justice rules on cases pertaining to freedom, justice and security. One judge, appointed for a six-year term, is provided by each member state. The Court adjudicates over the European Commission's actions against a member state or by one state against another state, where it is claimed that a treaty obligation has not been fulfilled. Most of the cases, however, stem from claims by companies or individuals against governments or other companies or individuals, initially heard in the courts of the appropriate member state, and then dealt with by the Court of Justice as the final court on matters of interpretation.

The European Central Bank

The European Central Bank, set up in 1999 under the Maastricht Treaty, carries out the European Union's monetary policy and manages the euro, largely by attempting to maintain the euro's purchasing power (and hence price stability in the euro area). As discussed later in this chapter, the stability of the euro zone and the impacts of the global financial crisis have put strain on the European Union and had significant consequences for the welfare of many European citizens and for related social policy.

Figure XX.X shows how these institutions work together as the key governance institutions of the European Union:



Other European bodies

There are a variety of other bodies also associated with the European Union, whose role is to manage the increasingly complicated aspects of multinational governance and legislation. Some of the most important of these are:

- European Court of Auditors (ECA), who 'check EU funds are collected and used correctly, and help improve EU financial management'

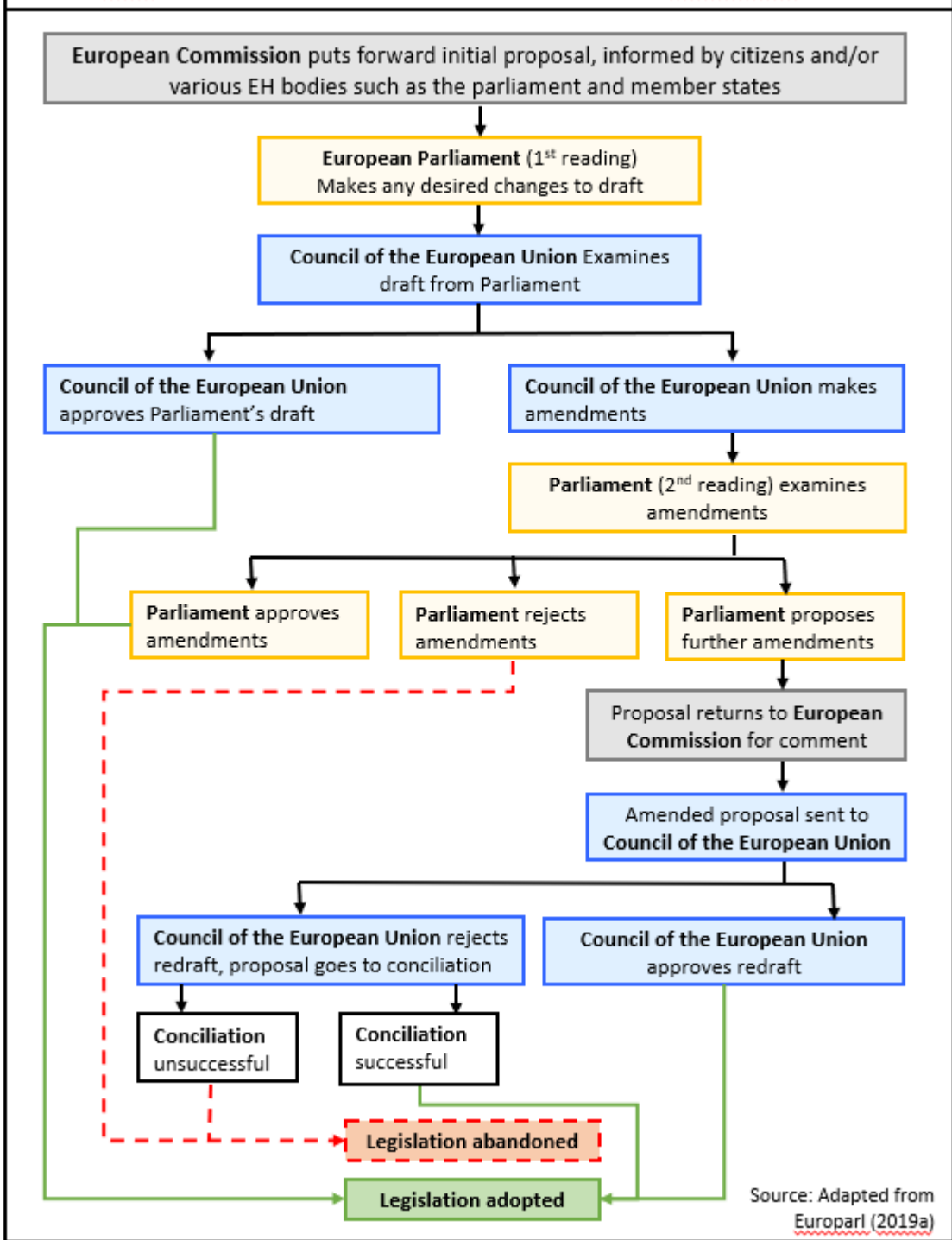
- European External Action Service (EEAS) who Manage 'the EU's diplomatic relations with other countries outside the bloc and conducts EU foreign & security policy
- European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), an advisory body that represents 'employers' and workers' organisations and other interest groups'
- European Investment Bank (EIB), whose role is to provide 'funding for projects that help to achieve EU aims, both within and outside the EU'
- European Ombudsman, that 'Investigates complaints against EU institutions, bodies, offices & agencies'
- European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), which 'Ensures that EU institutions and bodies respect people's right to privacy when processing their personal data'

(European Union, 2018)

Decision making in the EU

As figure XX.X shows, the political organisation and governance of the European Union is a complex process that involves democratically elected MEPs in the Parliament, government ministers from Member States in the Council of the European Union, and commissioners nominated by each member state. Although complex, the decision-making process in the EU is designed so that it reflects the wishes of these three core groups, and in particular the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. These two bodies make EU laws through what is known as the "Ordinary Legislative Procedure", sometimes also called "co-decision". This is where the key bodies can get to scrutinise, adopt and agree legislation. Where agreement is hard to achieve there is a process of 'conciliation', which is essentially a series of guided negotiations between the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. Figure XX.X below details this process.

Figure XX.X : The ordinary legislative procedure - how codecision works



One of the most persistent issues with the European Parliament involves the degree to which it functions as a legitimate supranational body, fulfilling a difficult role as an additional democratic institution, complimenting the national democracies of member states. This has long been a concern for the EU, and the Green Paper on The Future of Democracy in Europe suggests that 'EU institutions lack the legitimacy of their national counterparts and the gap between EU citizens and European institutions seems to be growing' (Council of Europe, 2004, p. 47). Decision making, and democratic processes do not simply translate to supranational contexts; building a functioning governance body is a complex process. Keohane and Nye (2003, p. 390) suggest that in systems of governance, democracy is often 'traded off against other values' and this is reflected in tensions between those portions of the EU that promote democratic legitimacy and those that 'promote output and functional legitimacy' (Council of Europe, 2004, p. 68). One of the ways in which this becomes manifest is in perceptions of purpose and functional visibility for citizens. In a recent survey conducted by Eurobarometer an EU average of 71% felt they were a 'citizen of the EU', although the picture was varied and in the UK the figure was much lower at 58% (European Commission, 2018). The impacts of this varying perception of EU citizenship present a problem for the EU, with growing nationalistic and Eurosceptic movements across the continent.

Further criticism of the European union comes from the political left in the form of debates around the EU's relationship with the underlying neoliberal ideology that has become synonymous with globalisation. Streeten (2001), Hardt and Negri (2001), Callinicos (2003), and Crouch (2004) all argue that an aggressive neoliberal ideology places the needs of the market as first and foremost, with social considerations of democracy secondary. In this hegemonic approach, structures such as the European Parliament allow citizens influence within accepted limits, so long as they do not impinge upon the ability of the market to function. Nevertheless, there are those such Shaw (2002, p. 192) who argue that the European Union, and particularly the democratically elected parliament offers a 'continued resistance' to neoliberal dominance, and a temper to the broader economic focus of the EU as a whole.

In summary, the European Union is a complex, multi-state governance institution that functions not just as a trade and regulatory body but also as a democracy, with over 500 million citizens. Debates on the nature and extent of democratic input are varied and although there remains much support for the EU across member states, there is also a growing movement towards more nationalist politics and scepticism towards the European Union in some countries.

Stop and Think

Is the European Union a democratic body representing its citizens and member states, an extension of global neoliberal institutions, and/or an attempt to create a federalised Europe at the expense of national sovereignty?

4. Crisis and response

As the earlier sections of this chapter have shown, the growth and success of the EU has been tempered by ongoing criticism of its wider role in political, economic and social spheres. There are two events that illustrate this range of perspectives on the nature of the EU and its role as a regional global political structure: the impact and responses to the Eurozone crisis; and the growth of nationalism in member states, typified by the 2016 vote in the UK to leave the European Union - so called 'Brexit'.

The Impact and responses to the Eurozone Crisis

In 2008 much of the world suffered a significant financial crisis, the effects of which many countries are still experiencing. Aglietta, (2012, p.15) argues that 'the crisis has struck at the heart of the financial system – the banks – but it is systemic affecting every part of the economy: banks, firms, households, states'. Significantly, and mirroring the initial differential power bases, massive imbalances developed between the member states within the European Union. Whilst the large European banks became global operators, EU policy was only capable of delivering 'half-measures' thanks to a 'deep-seated conservatism' that may be construed as 'disastrous in times of turbulence.' Aglietta also contends that the Eurozone suffers from profound structural faults, attributable to how its initial formation. For example, the French and German banks helped to pour funds into Spain's housing sector, fuelling Spain's own housing bubble which subsequently burst, leaving massive private debt.

The global financial crisis and the later, more specific Eurozone crisis (focused upon the Eurozone member states) were closely connected. In Spain and Italy there had been a sizeable accumulation of debts, but this was scarcely due to the governments' actions. Instead, it was attributable to the activities of the private sector, namely financial companies and the mortgage borrowers who were taking out loans. Interest rates had plummeted in southern European countries when they 'pinned' the euro, encouraging a boom driven by the cumulative debt. Germany had created the Eurozone in 1991 and acted as the EU's driving force from its abundant funds loaned to the southern Mediterranean economies. But this left Spanish and Italian employers with a huge competitive price disadvantage, which is why it became far more prohibitive for the southern Mediterranean nations to export to Germany. The outcome of the resultant cutbacks was to deepen the 2008 recession, so that wage levels declined, unemployment rose, and the debts were increasingly difficult to repay. A critical interpretation of this scenario, which portrays why the Eurozone economies have ended up with this seemingly immovable debt burden, is that in 2007-08 they had spent hundreds of billions of euros in rescuing the banks (Callinicos, 2012).

The 'empirical' explanations testify to the accumulation of debts from the private sector, affecting those southern European economies most in debt to the relatively booming German economy, and also to the linkages with the preceding global crisis. But according to the anti-capitalist critique, the close associations with the earlier crisis in global capitalism, which forced EU members into the unprecedented outflow of euros towards the financial corporate sector, forced the susceptible Eurozone member states into a sovereign debt crisis.

The impact of the global 2008 crisis was powerful in those EU member states categorised as the Mediterranean economies (Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece) by Perrera's and Giddens' modification of Esping-Andersen's capitalist welfare states' model. The subsequent recession hit Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Ireland most severely, each experiencing vast national debt and bankruptcy. Subsequently, Portugal, Ireland, Cyprus and, most significantly, Greece, were all given emergency loans by the EU. Many further European Union economies were pressured by the wealthier Western EU economies, particularly Germany, to employ vast cutbacks in their economic and social infrastructures (commonly termed 'austerity'), not least in social welfare. This resulted in a number of social problems bearing upon social policy, including mass unemployment, poverty and reduced social benefits. These problems were multiplied for the EU states by the ensuing Eurozone crisis.

Greece was the EU state most impacted by the Eurozone crisis. Greece had entered the European Community in accord with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and was allowed to enter the Eurozone, evidently a political decision since its Gross Domestic Product was less than one per cent of Europe's. However, the profile of the Greek state was atypical in the Eurozone: powerful private interests, such as the ship-owners, were not subject to tax; nor were thousands of workers reliant upon the nation's tourist industry. Consequently, the private and public debt grew uncontrollably, a situation only revealed in 2009 by an incoming Papandreou government announcement that the state accounts had been consciously falsified. The crisis affected both the banks and the public sector. Interest rates started to rise, in response to the clear unsustainability of the public debt. This set in train a snowball effect, particularly as both the Greek and European leaders countered the possibility of any Greek default in paying for the latter's debt, in tandem with measures imposed by international fiscal bodies (The European Commission; the European Central Bank; the IMF). In total, Greece received €289bn of loans from the Eurozone, spread across three periods of 'bailout loans'.

The impact of the crisis in Greece was profound. Youth unemployment rose to nearly 50 per cent and 40 per cent of the working age population was left at risk of poverty (FT, 2018). By the time Greece left the bailout programme, in 2018, its economy was growing, and employment was recovering, although still high, with youth unemployment at 35 per cent and general employment a little under 20 per cent (IMF, 2019). Although this suggests some level of success, the bailout programme was not without its harsh critics. In order to receive its loans, Greece was required to undertake a series of reforms to social policy and cuts to public spending. Mavridis (2018, p. 4) shows that 'austerity measures affected socio-economic governmental policy while wages, income and social benefits reduced to a great degree'. For instance, in 2010, cutbacks of 25 per cent were made to public sector wages, complementing huge public-sector spending reductions, regressive tax increases, and pressures for privatisation. By the end of 2011, the accumulation of austerity policies had pushed the national debt up to 160 per cent of GDP, and by 2016 nearly 36% of the population were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In 2017 the IMF recognised that the 'adjustment has taken a heavy toll on society' (IMF, 2017), and as a consequence there was an urgent need to address the rise in poverty and unemployment. By the time Greece was ready to exit the bailout plan in 2018, the impact of austerity measures meant that the debt crisis had 'affected all the basic economic and social aspects of the country such as income, pensions, poverty, unemployment, exclusion, housing, bank savings and the accomplishment of basic daily needs (e.g., regular payment of electricity bills)' (Mavridis, 2018, p. 10).

Stop and Think

To what extent do 'austerity' policies, incurred due to the impact of financial crises on the EU economy, continue to impact on welfare cutbacks and further economic and social inequalities?

Nationalism, Euroscepticism and Brexit

One of the trends facing the European Union in recent years has been a rise in nationalist and far-right political and social movements. In the 2019 Spanish elections, the third in three years, the far-right nationalist party, Vox, took 10% of the vote and 24 seats; the first time since the death of General Franco in 1975 that a far-right group has held seats in that Parliament. Across the European Union other nationalist, anti-immigration and nationalist parties have had success in recent elections, and in two member states they now form majority governments. In the 2019 elections in Poland, the populist and right wing Law and Justice Party retained a majority with 45% of the vote and 235 parliamentary seats. Similarly, in Hungary, the right-wing nationalist Fidesz party achieved a majority with 49% of the 2018 election vote and 134 of 199 seats. Other European states have also seen an increase in votes for such politics. In the 2018 Elections in Italy, the far-right Lega Nord won nearly 18% of the popular vote, resulting in 58 seats in the Senate and 125 seats in the chamber of deputies. In Austria, the Freedom Party won 27% of the vote in the 2017 election, giving them 51 of 183 parliamentary seats. In Denmark, in the 2015 elections, the Danish Peoples party won 21% of the vote and 37 of 179 parliamentary seats on a platform of nationalism and anti-immigration. In France the National Front won 8 seats and 13% of the vote in 2017. In Slovakia, the ultranationalist party won 8% of the votes in 2016 leading to 15 parliamentary seats, and in 2017 in Bulgaria, the nationalist grouping (including the ultranationalist 'Attack') won a combined 9% of the vote and 27 seats.

One of things many of these political groups have in common is, to varying degrees, a mobilisation of concerns of migration and a critical view of the nature and role of the European Union, often called 'Euroscepticism.' The country where this has been most pronounced in recent years is the United Kingdom, where in 2016 a public vote saw 51.9% of the turnout vote to leave the European Union. Euroscepticism in Britain has had a long history, and the UK's membership has been controversial since its first application to join in 1961. In 1989, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government refused to sign the EU Social Charter, the only government to do so. The Charter set out thirty general principles embracing health and safety at work, improvements of living conditions, workers' rights, fair wages, rights for elderly and for disabled persons, and gender equality. In 1992 Prime Minister John Major refused on behalf of the Conservative Government to sign the EU's provisions on social policy and other social issues (its 'social chapter'), according to the Maastricht Treaty which set up the new EU, on the grounds that the requirements for workplace conditions would tie the hands of business. Major then opted out of EU social policy completely. When the New Labour government took power in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair signed the social chapter aligned with the Amsterdam Treaty, and the subsequent Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, refused to hold a referendum of the Lisbon Treaty, although he was sensitive to the mounting hostility towards the European constitution.

It was during the early part of the 21st century that the politically right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP) campaigned for a complete withdrawal from the Union, essentially on the grounds of the assumed loss of national sovereignty. In the 2001 and 2009 European elections they returned 12 and then 13 MEPs, however it was the 2014 European Elections in which UKIP made most ground, winning 26.8% of the vote - the largest proportion of votes of any British party in the elections - and returning 24 MEPs (European Parliament, 2014). Nationally, UKIP had some success at local elections in 2015, returning 202 councillors and taking control of one local council. This local electoral success culminated in the 2015 elections when they took 12% of the overall popular vote in the UK, which in the 'first-past-the-post' system translated into one parliamentary seat, in Clacton. It was, ironically, difficulties around the processes of Brexit that led to the collapse in support for UKIP during the 2019 European election where they lost all 24 seats in favour of the new 'Brexit Party', which shared many of the original aims of UKIP and a similar leadership. In the 2019 election the Brexit party became the UK's largest European party, winning 30.5% of the vote and 29 seats.

For the UK Conservative party, the rise of UKIP and more latterly the Brexit Party embodied a growing challenge for a part of their traditional electorate. Consequently, in 2013 under pressure from the Eurosceptic sections of the party, the then prime minister David Cameron made an in/out EU vote the central part of the Conservative election pledge. The Conservative party won the election, and on 23rd Jun, 2016, despite Mr Cameron himself campaigning to remain in the EU and calling a vote to leave a 'leap in the dark' (BBC, 2016), the country narrowly voted to leave. The ensuing three years have been politically tumultuous, and despite triggering Article 50, the legal statute for leaving the EU, the UK moved its leaving date multiple times having failed to negotiate a politically acceptable withdrawal agreement. Indeed, the Conservative government led by Theresa May was subject to the largest ever UK parliamentary defeat, 230 votes, when putting forward its withdrawal proposal. Furthermore, the parliamentary time required to manage the UK's withdrawal is significant, and in April 2019 UK foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt said: 'it's absolutely clear that Brexit paralysis, if it continues for a long time, will be highly damaging to our international standing' (RTE, 2019). The Brexit process has also caused damage to government policy more widely, with associate professor in Social Policy at the London School of Economics, Kitty Stewart, arguing that 'Social policy has been affected by the UK's membership of the EU in multiple ways, and hence will be deeply unsettled by the decision to leave' (London School of Economics, 2019). Professor Stewart identifies areas of social policy particularly at risk of changes, including health provision and social care, in which 'the consequences for service delivery are likely to be much greater than any reduction in service demand'.

In contrast to the political paralysis in the UK during the Brexit process, the European Union has been remarkably united in presenting a unified bargaining position. The selected negotiators, led by Michel Barnier, have collectively represented the other 27 Nation States who have to a large extent supported the single point of negotiation. Furthermore, the Brexit process has had an interesting impact on EU citizens' sentiment towards the Union. A recent survey for the Eurobarometer has shown that positive sentiment towards EU membership has grown since the European elections in 2013, with 61% saying that their country's membership is a good thing (up from 50% in 2013) and 68% believing that on balance their country benefits from EU membership (up from 54% in 2013) (Kantar Public, 2019).

To summarise, the European Union has suffered from a series of crises since its start. The Eurozone crisis is yet one more major financial crisis bearing upon the economic stability of EU member-states, the viability of their social policies and the social well-being of their populations. The crisis, originating in the sovereign debt of a member, Greece, has produced unequal effects within the European Union, with the Mediterranean countries most extensively affected. Similarly, growing nationalism has seen anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic parties gain ground in national and European elections and has led to the complicated Brexit process in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the European Union is still a popular body with many citizens and is an important global power in the 21st Century. In the following section we focus directly on specific social policies, the European Union's approach and the key issues that have confronted its policy makers.

5. Social Policy and the European Union

The EU, of all the global-regional blocs, has the most mature social policy framework. At the same time, its formal definition of social policy is still somewhat narrowly conservative, although now rather outdated, and the limits of the Union's intervention in certain social spheres remain in dispute. The Treaty of Rome in 1957, more of a trade agreement, contained no reference to social policy. The Maastricht Treaty in 1991 occasioned the first developments of social policy in the category of employment and labour relations. The EU's contemporary social policy handles working conditions; improvement of the working environment to protect workers' health and safety; the provision of information and the consultation of workers; equality between women and men in the workplace and the integration of people excluded from the labour market. Whilst the structure of employment services is variable between the EU nations, depending upon the specific political and social culture, consistent efforts have been made to harmonise the separate policies without watering down the higher standards pertaining in the more socially aware welfare states.

Mary Daly, Professor of Sociology at Queen's University Belfast, argues that 'developments in EU social policy are often overlooked' and that the EU has an important role in 'framing and reframing discourses relevant to social policy and social problems' as it works to influence social actors and governments (Daly, 2012, p. 1). European social policy supports and co-ordinates national policies, and passes laws implemented by the Council and Parliament in consultation with each other. In addition, the European Commission encourages member states to co-operate with each other on issues such as social security or training, and the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam gave the Council powers of unilateral action against all forms of discrimination. However, in spite of the overt orientation in the labour policy direction, the EU has made moderate progress towards a more inclusive social welfare policy. The chapter now presents several examples of EU social policy and their impact.

The Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers (The Social Charter) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

In 1989, the Community Charter established the principles underpinning European labour law, protecting social protection, freedom to work, and rights to those without subsistence means, retired people and disabled persons (Eurofound, 2011a). Disquiet, though, was articulated over the possibilities of the newly joined Mediterranean economies, who were poorer on the whole than early EU members (hence enjoying lower labour costs), and who possessed unfair advantages. The rights enshrined in the Community Charter were developed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, ratified with the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009 (although the UK retained a clause that meant it was not forced to implement these rights into UK law). Rights in the charter include:

- workers' rights on information and consultation
- right of collective bargaining
- right of access to placement services
- protection in the event of unjustified dismissal
- fair and just working conditions
- prohibition of child labour and protection of young people at work
- protection from dismissal for a reason connected with maternity and the right to paid maternity leave and to parental leave
- social security and social assistance and entitlement to social security benefits and social services providing protection in cases such as maternity, illness, industrial accidents, dependency or old age, and loss of employment

(See Eurofound 2011b)

The Amsterdam Treaty was also a turning point in the interpretation of social policy, with the further advancement of European citizenship rights: workers now held the right of residence in any EU country; additionally, gender equality became a prime goal. At the commencement of the new century the EU announced anti-discrimination directives on racism, sexual orientation, age, disability and belief in the employment arena.

One long-standing concern has been over the poverty situation and social exclusion. The European Commission pressured the European Council to accept key objectives of more secure income levels, social integration, sustainable pensions and sustainable health care of a high quality. In spite of the Charter of Fundamental Rights for social policies not being actionable in law, the principles have served as a litmus test for refuting unacceptable practices across the member states. Clearly, the European Union does behave as a kind of welfare state. Structural communication takes place between nations and in turn between the nations and the European Commission about pensions, social exclusion and health care, via what is known as the Open Method of Co-ordination (Deacon, 2007).

Family Policy

Family policy figures more prominently than in the past. For instance, the Commission published a report on demographic change in Europe, calling for increased support for families taken up with caring. The Charter of Fundamental Rights began to include articles on 'rights of the child' and "respect for private and family life." A drawback, however, has been that the European Union, because of its strong commitment to respecting national diversity in family policy, found it virtually impossible and indeed undesirable to attempt a co-ordinated EU policy. The European Union's social policy principle has forged a distancing of national approaches towards social protection issues. The Commission was also reluctant to interfere in family matters. Hence, commentaries on EU social policy have tended to chart 'indirect' social policies. The first real European Community reference to family policy, that it should become integral to all Community policies, appeared in the 1980s. The subject was incorporated onto the European Union agenda in 1994, with the signing of the Treaty on European Union, with an objective to develop targeted benefits for certain groups of families in need. However, the rights and benefits remained employment-related; many of the nations were not prepared to recognise the crucial changes that were occurring in the 'family' structure, so that both the EU's Council and the Commission felt unable and unwilling to try to synthesise the discrete policies into an EU-wide family policy.

The EU has encountered conflicts of interest which imply moral and political issues, such as whether policy should support the 'traditional' family (i.e., married couples and their legitimate children) or recognise different family structures such as co-habiting couples and lone parents and other family arrangements. During the early 2000s, the majority of the EU's member governments avoided prohibitive laws, e.g., those legislating against divorce or abortion, and in addition recognised non-traditional family structures. In the early part of the decade the majority of members increased child benefits, but again one encountered a disparity of approaches, such as between Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries, towards families experiencing financial hardship and those on the edge of poverty. In 2018, the European Platform for Investing in Children released a report that examined issues around discriminatory treatment in the context of family leave. It found a mixed picture across member states and recommended that 'authorities give greater focus to policies and programmes that involve facilitating access to childcare and challenging gender stereotypes' (European Commission, 2019b). Given the 'indirect' route pursued by the EU, it is not easy to form an assessment of the Union's or the Commission's impact on the member states' individual family policies, although it is clear that they remain active in trying to create change.

Policy for Older and Disabled Persons

European social policy has undoubtedly undergone an impressive transformation, considering the movements of declining populations on the European continent, accelerated demographic ageing and a notable imbalance between the generations. However, a substantial issue for policy co-ordinators is the dissimilarities in trends and impacts between the member states. For example, in an early part of the 2000s, Greece, Italy, Germany and Austria were the most affected by population decline alongside the ageing of their respective populations. In comparison, by dint of lower longevity rates, the poorer economies of Central and Eastern Europe were more anxious about the fall in their population. Whereas retirement age hardly varies between the European countries, social tensions have appeared

among the different generations. It is for this reason that European documentation is often focused upon the extent to which pensions are adequate, and on the need for inter-generational solidarity (Hantrais, 2007).

In 2010 the European commission set out a 10 year plan, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020. This aimed to bring the EU in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and had eight main areas of action: Accessibility; Participation; Equality; Employment; Education and Training; Social Protection; Health; and External Action. A progress report in 2017 (European Commission, 2019c) identified a series of successful actions against this plan, including the European accessibility act that set standards for products and services where there was judged to be a risk of diversion in user experience, including: computer operating systems, ATMs, services related to passenger transport, banking services, and e-commerce (European commission, 2019d).

Education and Training

On viewing the changes in educational standards in the European Union through the first part of the present century, the statistical picture is a positive one. The EU average 'percentage of persons of age 20-24 having completed at least upper secondary education' rose from 76.6 per cent in 2000 to 83.5 per cent in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019a). The EU average 'percentage of tertiary education attainment, persons of age 30-34' was 22.4 per cent in 2000 and grew to 40.7 per cent in 2018 (Eurostat (2019b)). Since the gestation period of the EU, European Council and Commission pronouncements on education and training have re-emphasised the prominence of the European dimension and the inculcation of how to respect and understand other cultures, hence the variety of programmes in this area. But enhancing opportunities for vocational training has resulted in programmes for encouraging mobility among students. By the early 2000s, all EU member states provided vocational training through the school system, rather than in the workplace. Despite the guidelines, what kind of influence has EU policy been able to wield over the national educational systems? There was a growing acceptance across Europe of the need to cross boundaries, e.g., regarding the recognition of qualifications. However, as with EU social policy per se, it is difficult to gauge the success of these policies at EU level or their impact upon national policy making. The EU's Education Council adopted sixteen core indicators 'for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training' in 2007. "*Education and Training 2020: A Strategic Framework*" (Eurofound, 2009) outlined eight benchmarks defined for 2020, including that "an average of at least 15 per cent of adults should participate in lifelong learning" (synonymous with 'lifetime learning'); 'the share of low-achieving 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 per cent'; 'by 2020, the share of employed graduates (20-34 year olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82 per cent'.

One of the main investments and support mechanisms for employment and education in the EU is the European Social Fund (ESF). In the words of the European Commission, the ESF 'invests in people, with a focus on improving employment and education opportunities across the European Union. It also aims to improve the situation of the most vulnerable people at risk of poverty' (European Commission, 2019e). For the period 2014-2020, the EU has allocated over € 80 billion for human capital investment in Member States including € 3.2 billion to the Youth Employment Initiative. Although successful in

supporting many regions across the EU, the ESF has, however, come under criticism for issues around the planning and implementation of funds (European Committee of the Regions, 2018, p. 67)

In summary, in spite of the EU's social policy trajectory being somewhat inconsistent and uneven, it has nevertheless made considerable headway since its early beginnings by formulating appropriate standards and principles for the member states to adopt. In addition: it has inaugurated the social charter which has acceded fundamental social rights to workers; the EU family policy has become more direct, although many member states cling to their traditional family structures; educational and training quality has universally improved with the Union's co-operative measures; and an array of social policies are available for older and disabled persons.

Stop and Think

How much, do you feel, has social policy now become part of mainstream EU policy?

6. The future of the European Union

A major post-war history of Europe since 1945 proclaimed the EU as '(e)mbracing everything from child-care to inter-state legal norms...(This) European approach stood for more than just the bureaucratic practices of the European Union and its member states; by the beginning of the twenty-first century it had become a beacon and example for aspirant EU members and a global challenge to the United States and the competing appeal of the American way of life' (Judt, 2007, p. 7).

Likewise, Hutton (2002, p. 2) deems the EU as the only feasible antidote to American dominance. '(The) quest for European union is one of the great rousing and political projects of our time. It is vital in providing a counterweight to the US and thus offering genuine multilateral leadership in the search for securing global public goods. It is a means of advancing core European values. It is also the way to reanimate our politics and the public realm.'

Such a position was, however, countered by Anderson (2011, p. 66): 'Today's EU, with its pinched spending ... miniscule bureaucracy (around 16,000 officials, excluding translators), absence of independent taxation, and lack of any means of administrative enforcement, could in many ways be regarded as a *ne plus ultra* of the minimal state, beyond the most dramatic imaginings of classical liberalism: less even than the dream of a "night-watchman". Indeed...'the EU is basically about business...overwhelmingly about the promotion of free markets' (Anderson, 2011, p. 67).

Despite these varying perspectives on the EU, it is clear that it has had some successes with social policy, initially though influencing the domestic policy of Member states but increasingly through its

own regulatory framework. As this chapter has shown, however, there remain some significant challenges for the EU as a whole, not least amongst these the growth of nationalist and anti-EU sentiment and, the impact of the Brexit process. The European Committee of the Regions considered challenges the EU is facing in the near future. They include:

- **Demographic change**, in particular: an ageing population; urban-rural divide; remote and sparsely populated areas; the impact of migration on demographic change.
- **Social exclusion and migration**, including the 'multidimensionality of social exclusion and poverty'; the 'overlap of vulnerable groups (women, youth and older population, unemployed, early school leavers, migrants etc.)'; and the reasons for social exclusion
- **Labour market changes**, including issues around automation, skills shortage and mismatch; and the Rise of the platform economy.

These issues are not just considerations for the European Union but reflect the wider changes in society and the pressures in a globalised world. Whether collectively in the EU or individually as states, tackling these issues are some of the biggest challenges for social policy makers in the coming years.

7. Conclusion and Summary

In this chapter you have been introduced to:

- an overview of the European Union's history, its treaties and constitutions;
- a discussion on the decision-making structure of the European union, and the different levels of input for citizens, states and politicians;
- some of the challenges the European Union has faced in its history, including the Eurozone crisis, the rise of Euroscepticism and Brexit;
- the nature and impact of social policy coming from the European union.

From researching these issues, we can formulate a set of conclusions. The European Union's brief history as a complex organisational network of structures, treaties and constitutions is unique. A central concern of the Union revolves around the tensions between democratic accountability and growing nationalism in many member states. These tensions came to a head in 2016, with the UK's vote to begin the process of leaving the EU, and these sentiments are reflected in nationalist politics across the Union. Conversely, amongst other parts of the European population, pro-EU feeling is at a high, with more people recognising the benefits of being a member of a global social, political and economic group. Nevertheless, European social policy, emergent from its traditionally minor role in the spheres of family policy, is having an increasing impact on areas such as policies for older people, those with disabilities, and in providing opportunities for education and training. Notwithstanding the tensions between the Commission and the individual states, and between those who would see the EU reduced to its earlier co-ordinational roles or less, the Union has managed to establish a set of policy directives accepted by a majority of the states and leading to rising standards of equity.

Discussion and review

- To what extent can we consider the European Parliament to be a democratic body?
- Is the European Union a genuine governance body working for its citizens and states, or a protectionist neoliberal body more focused on trade?
- Why are we facing a rise in nationalism across Europe?
- What role does the European Union have in setting the social policy agenda for member states?

Spotlight

With currently 28 member states and over 500 million citizens, the European Union is a powerful global institution. It is unique in the world as a multi-country governance institution in which democratic processes play some role in the decision-making processes. However, as the chapter has shown, there remain some deep misgivings about the role that the European union should play in setting policy and shaping political decisions for member states. Nevertheless, the EU has had some significant impacts on social policy, most notably with the social Charter that has provided important rights for workers, the disadvantaged and those that are at risk of social exclusion. Further policy advancement in areas such as education, rights for the elderly and disabled people, and in education and training show that the EU has had, and continues to have, increasingly significant impact on the lives of its citizens. Even so, although these areas of social policy are undoubtedly important, they are relatively few when considered against the many areas of policy that remain within the remit of individual states.

Further reading

For an overview of the History of the European Union and how it works, see:

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- John McCormick (2017) *Understanding the European Union: A Concise Introduction* 7th edn, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan,
- Daniel Kenealy, John Peterson, Richard Corbett (Eds) (2018) *The European Union: How does it work?* 5th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press

For reading on policy and particularly social policy in the European Union, see:

- Karen Anderson (2015) *Social Policy in the European Union*, Red Globe Press
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For reading on wider issues around democracy and global governance, see:

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Useful websites

The main website for the European Union is a good place to go for further information:

https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

The European Parliament has some useful information on the work of MEPs and the day to day business of the Parliament: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en>

For information on the European Commission and its priorities, you can go here:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/index_en

You can find information on both the European Council and the Council of the European Union here:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/>

The Council of Europe, which is not part of the European Union, also has some useful material on the nature of international cooperation across Europe and beyond:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/home>

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