

# **A Supranational Social Protection Floor for All? The Politics of Minimum Income Protection in the European Union**

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In recent years, increasing problem pressure seemed to have built momentum for substantial steps ahead in the field of minimum income protection at the European Union (EU) level. Among these factors, there were the Global Recession (2008-2010) producing economic slowdown and declining economic output worldwide; the emergence of an EU “democratic legitimation crisis”, which has translated into lower public trust in EU institutions and casted doubts on the whole EU project; the recent outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative consequences on the economy, labour market and citizens’ wellbeing.

In an effort to cope with mounting problem pressure, EU institutions have taken new actions in the social field during the last decade. While the institutional framework in the field of minimum income protection at the supranational level had already been laid down with the principle 14 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017, last year the European Commission adopted a Recommendation on minimum income, which represents a step forward in the implementation of the EPSR and its Action Plan, as well as a new a more inclusive involvement of the EU in the social field.

Against such a backdrop, this paper aims to answer the following research questions. What factors were behind the increased relevance of minimum income initiatives at the supranational political arena since the end of the Lisbon strategy? Despite this increased relevance, why was the formulation of a directive not feasible, while only a Recommendation was issued by the Commission in September 2022? Was it a matter of legal feasibility or political viability?

In order to address these questions this paper looks at the interaction between structure and agency. It assesses both the legal feasibility and the political viability of binding EU’s actions in the field of anti-poverty and social exclusion policies. This paper relies on process tracing to reconstruct the policy trajectory and the underpinning political dynamics of anti-poverty measures and MI at the EU level from the launch of EU2020 until the most recent development. The empirical material that

informs our analysis is drawn from multiple sources, including the careful analysis of EU's documents and main actors' publications, integrated with 13 semi-structured interviews with key informants at the supranational level. Our empirical research reveals that a binding EU's initiative in the field of minimum income protection is actually feasible within the current constitutional framework. However, since policy development ultimately rests on political conditions and incentives, the paper demonstrates that the constellation of actors and power at the supranational level had played a key role in influencing the policy decision at the EU level. That is, despite legal feasibility and increased salience of the poverty issue during the last decade, neither political conditions nor timing seem to be favourable for binding EU's actions in this key policy field.