

Enhancing the Visibility of Social Europe: A Practical Agenda for ‘The Last Mile’



Ilaria Madama

The contributions in this Forum have addressed many ‘big issues’ about EU citizenship, but have paid much less attention to the ‘catalogue’ of suggestions Ferrera has made in order to “add stuff” to EU citizenship and to make it more visible and salient. I would like to focus on these proposals, all going in the direction of strengthening the social dimension of integration. As widely acknowledged in the literature, social policy institutions have historically served key political functions for state and nation building purposes in Western countries,¹ including in federal systems, where social citizenship – as noted also by Seeleib-Kaiser in this volume – has been used as an element to foster unity.² Within the EU’s multi-level framework, the possibility to exploit the legitimating and credit claiming potential of supranational social programmes for polity-building and maintenance is undermined by two elements: on the one hand, the small size of the EU social budget and, on the other hand, the indirect way of functioning of supranational programmes that makes EU measures and funds scarcely visible to citizens.

According to the 2017 Flash Eurobarometer on *Citizens’ awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy*,³ EU actions to promote social and economic development are largely unknown to respondents, with more than 63

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- ¹ Cf. Flora, P. (1999), ‘Introduction and Interpretation’, in P. Flora, S. Kuhnle & D. Urwin (eds.), *State Formation, Nation-Building and Mass Politics in Europe: The Theory of Stein Rokkan*, 1–91. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press.
- ² Obinger, H., S. Leibfried & F. G. Castles (eds.) (2005), *Federalism and the Welfare State: New World and European Experiences*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- ³ Eurobarometer (2017), Flash Eurobarometer 452. Report: Citizens’ awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/79239>.

per cent never having heard of any EU co-financed project to improve the area they live in.⁴ The average value however conceals significant variation across countries: if 80 per cent of respondents have heard about EU's regional support in Poland, the share drops to 40 per cent in Italy, 27 per cent in France and 25 per cent in Germany, sinking to a modest 16 per cent in Austria and 14 per cent in Denmark⁵.

These figures somehow confirm that little credit goes to the EU directly for its own efforts and spending in the social sphere. This does not come as a surprise. A broad strand of implementation studies has documented how the translation of higher level policies and goals into street-level actions is subject to a 'variety of disjunctive influences'.⁶ This issue becomes even more relevant in federal and multi-level polities, in which higher-level policies are more at risk of getting unravelled at the frontlines,⁷ as street-level providers are not direct arms of the supranational level. The so-called last mile problem (the final link of the implementation chain) has a political dimension as well. The level of government/political authority that controls the last mile has an incentive to "capture" as much political credit as possible, even if resources (legal and/or financial) come from higher levels.

Some of the proposals suggested by Ferrera would work as antidotes against this syndrome, enhancing the EU's visibility for end-recipients at the terminal phase of the implementation chain. The current situation is more advanced on this front than Ferrera acknowledges. EU institutions (especially the European Commission) are aware of the last mile problem and have in fact already made several attempts to foster the visibility of EU's

⁴ Regional policy is endowed with 351.8 billion euros and accounts for approximately a third of the EU budget for the current 2014–2020 budget cycle. It co-finances (primarily through the ESF, the ERDF and the Cohesion fund) projects to promote job creation, competitiveness, economic growth and citizens' quality of life.

⁵ These findings partly reflect the diverse relevance and size of EU financing across countries, but still there is no strong correlation between level of awareness and per-capita EU funding.

⁶ Cf. May, P. J. & S. C. Winter (2007), 'Politicians, Managers, and Street-Level Bureaucrats: Influences on Policy Implementation' *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 19 (3): 453–476 (p. 454).

⁷ Cf. Keiser, L. R. (2001), 'Street-Level Bureaucrats, Administrative Power and the Manipulation of Federal Social Security Disability Programs', *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 1 (2): 144–164.

action at the points of actual delivery. I will illustrate this with the example of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), a new EU social program that was launched in March 2014 with the aim of confronting the most severe forms of material deprivation by providing non-financial assistance to the most needy.

The FEAD, in brief

The assistance provided by the FEAD takes primarily the form of food, clothing and other essential stuff, accompanied by advice and counseling to help beneficiaries to re-integrate into society. The FEAD may also finance stand-alone social inclusion activities, which are designed to strengthen most deprived people’s skills and capacities to help them overcome the situation of difficulty they face.⁸

Participation in the programme on the side of member states is mandatory and its governance model rests on a multi-level approach. Member states are required to prepare national Operation Programmes (OP), illustrating the domestic strategy for implementing the Fund during the 2014–2020 period. They can opt for two different OP types: OP I – covering primarily food aid and basic material assistance, complemented by social inclusion measures; and OP II – dedicated to stand-alone social inclusion measures.

Overall, the programme was endowed with 3.8 billion euros from the EU budget. In addition, member states have to top up the allocation through national co-financing.⁹

Despite the steering role played by European and national managing authorities in the management of the programme, the actual implementation of the measures at the street level primarily relies on partner organisations, i.e. civil society organisations such as food-banks and charities, that are in charge of the actual distribution of assistance and the provision of social inclusion measures.

⁸ See European Commission (2015), *The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) – Breaking the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁹ The minimum co-financing rate is set at 15 per cent of eligible public expenditures, but it can be reduced up to 0 per cent for member states with temporary budgetary difficulties.

In the context of this Forum's discussion, the FEAD experience is interesting in two main respects. First, the FEAD Regulation¹⁰ details a number of requirements that, at the very end of the implementation chain, street-level providers have to comply with. These include the requests that 'during the implementation of an operation, the beneficiaries of funding and partner organisations shall inform the public about the support obtained from the Fund by placing either at least one poster with information about the operation (minimum size A3), including about the financial support from the Union or a Union emblem of reasonable size, at a location readily visible to the public. This requirement shall be fulfilled, without stigmatising end-recipients, at each place of delivery'; and 'any document, including any attendance or other certificate, concerning an operation shall include a statement to the effect that the operational programme was supported by the Fund.'¹¹ This is a relatively explicit strategy precisely aimed at claiming some symbolic and thus political credit at the end of the last mile.

Second, the European Commission has made special efforts to strengthen awareness, as well as its reach over front-line partners, by financing the creation of a community of stakeholders, grouping together EU-level NGOs and EU institutions, partner organisations – in addition to national managing authorities. Within the activities of the FEAD Network, the European Commission organises face-to-face meetings and has created a social media platform to boost virtual interactions. In this case, the political goal is not only credit claiming, but more ambitiously that of establishing direct links between the supranational level and the social and 'civic' grass roots.

How compliant are local authorities and delivering agencies with these new regulatory provisions? How effective are they in raising awareness, enhancing visibility, generating symbolic credit? We do not have any empirical answer yet, these are, however, very relevant and intriguing questions for future research.

An EU Social Card?

Introducing an 'EU Social Card' aimed at easing citizen access to services, as envisaged by Ferrera, could be another promising strategy. It would be a small *riforma col cacciavite* (to use an Italian metaphor: a simple fix made

¹⁰ Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council no. 223 /2014.

¹¹ Art. 19 of the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council no. 223 /2014.

with a screwdriver, with limited cost and high effectiveness) to make the social dimension of EU citizenship more visible and tangible. The EU has already introduced a *European Health Insurance Card* (EHIC), which entitles to medical treatment – on a par with nationals – in health emergencies as well as for pre-existing conditions while travelling through Europe. In February 2016, a pilot project for an *EU Disability Card* has been launched and it is meant to enable mutual recognition of disability status between EU Member States, making it easier for persons with disabilities to travel to other EU countries. There is also a *European Professional Card*, aimed at simplifying professional qualification recognition procedures for workers moving to other EU countries.¹²

These three initiatives provide tangible benefits only if there is a cross-border element – in Ferrera’s terminology they are isopolitical instrumental facilitators. Ferrera rightly highlights, however, the need to empower and make more visible the stakes of European citizenship also for the stayers. Many contributions to this Forum have addressed Ferrera’s proposals from a normative perspective. Some have raised doubts about the very fact that stayers may bear material burdens in the wake of mobility. The essential point, however, is that stayers – especially if low-educated and low-skilled – do *think/feel* (it is both a belief and an emotional reaction) that they indeed suffer some penalty. These beliefs/feelings may be normatively or factually unwarranted. But they exist, as profusely documented by empirical research. And they are politically relevant facts, closely linked with the rise of Euroscepticism. I agree with Ferrera that it would be politically sensible to de-activate the disruptive potential of these orientations through some EU programme dedicated to (or including) those citizens who, for any reason, do not exercise free movement and risk to find themselves in a situation of economic difficulty. Again, the EU is already moving in this direction, with a novel initiative aimed at addressing the up-skilling of low-qualified people.¹³ The programme targets adults with weaknesses in basic skills, knowledge and competences, who therefore are more likely to face a higher risk of unemployment, a higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion. In 2016 there were 63 million people – almost a quarter of the Union population

¹² See European Commission (2017), *EU Citizenship Report*, available at http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/document.cfm?doc_id=40723.

¹³ Cf. Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults, available at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001.

aged 25–64 – with at most lower secondary education. A *Skills Guarantee*, the official name of the Commission’s proposal,¹⁴ could really kill three birds with one stone: providing a concrete support to the most vulnerable (normative rationale), making the EU economy more competitive via an enhanced human capital (functional rationale), and bringing the stayers closer to (i.e. more loyal and supportive of) the European Union as such: a political rationale well worth pursuing.

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¹⁴ European Commission (2016), *A New Skills Agenda For Europe*, COM(2016) 381 final, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381&from=EN>.