

Simona M. Stănescu, *Social Protection in the European Union: A Comparative Analysis*, Pro Universitaria, Bucharest, 2015, 198 p.

The Great Recession left its heavy mark on global societies and stirred deep waves of populism, and of contesting global order. At the level of the European Union, it triggered worrying phenomena from Euroscepticism – finalized by the current Brexit process of Great Britain – to the most lucid ones of identifying actual means of reestablishing the European construction on bases that would give more pragmatic and transparent answers to the expectations of the societies from the member-states.

Identifying the right answers is a difficult and arduous activity, as numerous barriers of understanding, interpreting, and expressing positions exist in the European context and, in this respect, we believe that sociological analyses regarding major European concerns must be on the forefront of useful answers.

Simona Maria Stănescu's book may be counted among these efforts of explaining one of the most sensible fields of the present, respectively the social policies' field at the level of the European Union. In the wider context of European policies, for planning the future is necessary to understand the past, the evolutions, outcomes and perceptions about these policies. A first merit of this book, that could be continued by future works, is the attempt of realizing a comparative analysis underpinning not only the pursued objective of extended coordination in the field of social policies and protection and improving quality of life at European level, but to highlight, as well, the main issues that might lead frequently to differentiations. These differentiations are not only in approach, evolution and quantifiable practical outcomes of adopting a certain type of social policies but also in the way in which the population of the respective member-countries relates to these policies, and its perception about them, along with the

identification of elements requiring improvement for increasing efficiency and effectiveness of these policies.

The first part is dedicated to the time contributing decisively at underpinning the “re-configuration” necessities in the field of social policies and of social protection systems in Europe, respectively the accession of Central and East-European countries. In the chapters dedicated to this difficult and sometimes hard process, are shown the main issues related to becoming a member-state of the European Union. Public policies find their most concrete expression in social policies, and these are one of the most debated fields at European level. In this regard, the first part brings a major contribution in emphasizing the imperatives in the improvement of European social policies coordination, but also the reasons of institutional and legislative nature that often seem meant rather to temper than to encourage this effort.

The author explains the reasons by reviewing the fundamentals on which the European Union was founded and identifies just one of the main reasons why nowadays European Union still needs to fine tune approaches, interventions and pace in the social field. It is focusing, perhaps, too much on the *economic* and *political* considerations that lead to the establishment, development, and expansion throughout the years of this construction. Social policies received only secondary consideration for a rather long period of time, a fact reflected by making these objectives explicit only in treaties of relatively recent date (the Treaty of Amsterdam, and the Lisbon Agenda). In this context, a relevant element is approached in the attempt to explain why many objectives remained unfulfilled and left for the time horizon of the European Agenda 2020.

One of the possible explanations the author pursues, is provided by putting into an objective context the conditions and conditionality that had to be fulfilled by countries from Central and Eastern Europe during their accession throughout the development period of the Lisbon Agenda. In this respect, the author succeeds in catching and highlighting the economic, institutional, and legislative difficulties faced by these countries from a well-substantiated comparative perspective based on selected quantitative and qualitative data selected attentively and with thoroughness for relevant details. These data are then interpreted for providing a comprehensive image concerning the achieved objectives, but also regarding those still in progress in the current programming period of Europe 2020 Agenda. Additionally, the impact that the negotiation process in itself, as described in the chapters of the first part, had and continues to have on the efforts of extended coordination is presented, as well.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to demographic challenges to which the EU has to provide rapid and viable answers. The author shows, first, that precisely this demographic challenge has a decisive role even regarding *representativeness* at the level of the European structures, namely how the interests of each member-state are pursued and defended. The demographic issue is relevant for the distribution and allocation of resources at the level of member-states, the author capturing the true issues of the “demographic battle” from historical and contemporary perspective. The study emphasizes that the decreases in the birth rates together with migration are both part of the issue and of the solution in solving the current European demographic crisis.

Various social policy approaches regarding birth rates are analyzed, but also the reasons contributing to the decisive amplification of the negative natural growth in former countries of the communist block that became member-states of the European Union. Moreover, the reasons why the European West is now caught into the “scissor” of low

fertility rates and the need of (relative) encouragement of the migration process are also extensively approached.

The social protection of families represents a specific part of the book, and it pursues the way in which family is considered in the EU member-states starting from the present context marked by erosion factors. These factors are diverse, such as demographic decline, new forms of families, the increased age on first marriage and on the birth of the first child, along with changes of lifestyle and higher divorce rates. At the same time, the author draws attention to the addition of new dimensions and ethno-cultural specifics, but also to the more acerbic way in which family members – mother and father alike – tend to pay more attention to pursuing own career interests. The answer to these challenges is found in interventions on the institutional structure, and in legislative measures that would contribute to generating a more favorable framework for encouraging and strengthening families.

After presenting the accession context of the New Member-States, and enumerating some of the most concerning topics in the field of social policies, the fourth part focuses on the most significant corollary of the issues approached in prior parts and chapters of the volume. This part is dedicated to the measures dedicated to alleviating poverty. This topic is one of the most relevant and defining for EU’s social policies because it succeeds in gathering up and reflecting fully all previously approached ideas. All questions of the foregoing parts might find answers by relating them to the policies dedicated to alleviating poverty, which far from being eradicated turns into an increasingly more concerning topic as social and economic disparities not only among member-states, but also within each member-state are increasing. The analyses referring to national and European regulations in the field of unemployment and minimum guaranteed wage, along with others regarding the need for continuous structural reforms both in developed and developing countries of the

European construction are but few of the main ideas concluding the present volume. Thus, the volume represents at the same time a Romanian and European perspective about the European social policies and social protection in the present and in the future, filtered carefully from the perspective of past which is substantiated by institutional, legislative

and social analyses, and substantiated by taking into account also arguments of economic nature.

Cornelia Dumitru,
Institute for Quality of Life Research,
Romanian Academy