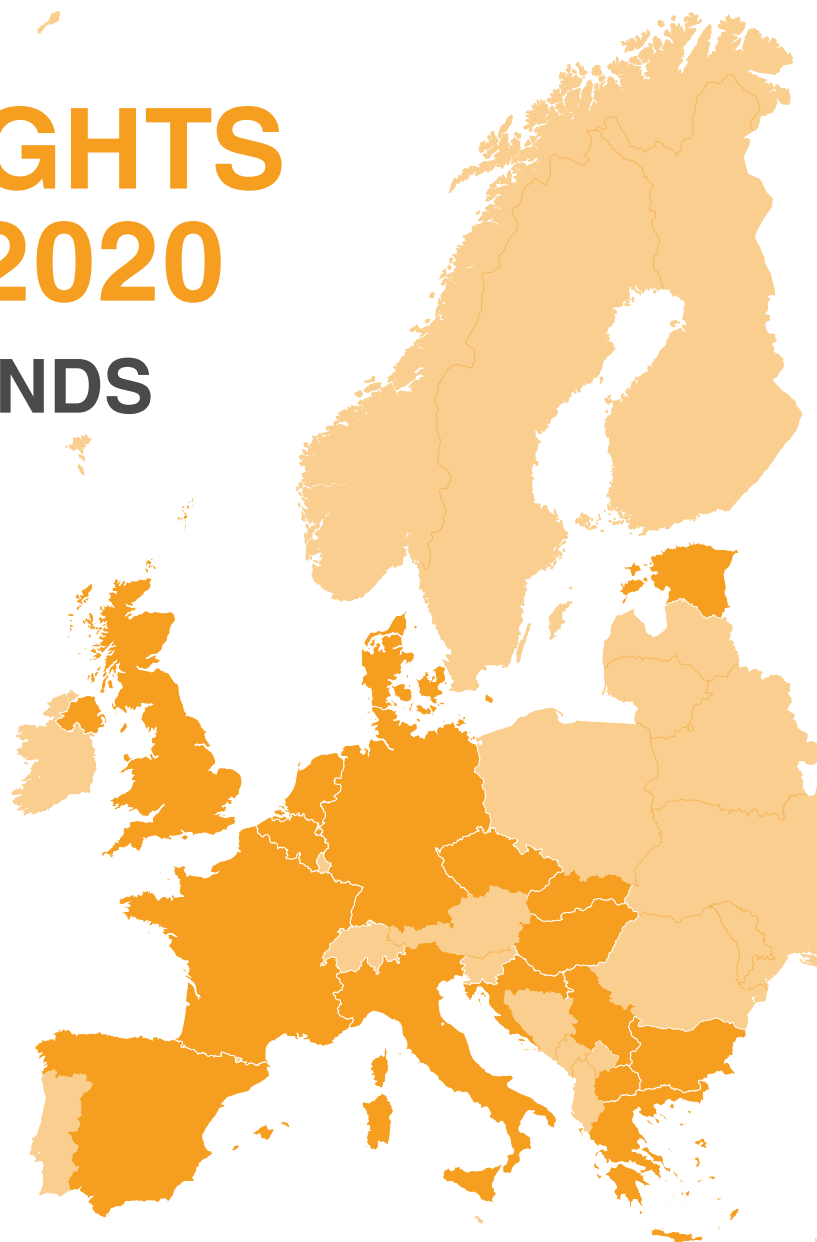


SOCIAL RIGHTS MONITOR 2020

EUROPEAN TRENDS



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INTRODUCTION

The second edition of SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor provides an insight into the state of social rights in different European countries. This edition reports on 14 countries from the European Union – Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Spain and the Netherlands; two candidate countries – Serbia and North Macedonia; and one member that left the EU in 2020, the United Kingdom. The 2020 Monitor assesses the state of social Europe in terms of equality of opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection, inclusion and civic space. It does so on the basis of observations of National Strategy Groups (NSG) set up in each of the 17 countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. These groups pool the expertise of civil society organisations, academics and experts in the field and support this with statistical data and scientific findings.

In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, public health and economic concerns have been pushed to the centre of attention. However, social rights are also under severe pressure as a result of Covid-19 and the measures introduced to combat it. Our National Strategy

Groups observed that existing inequalities – in terms of income, job security, access to health-care and essential services – have been exacerbated by the pandemic. SOLIDAR fears that, in the fight against the virus and its economic damage, progress made since the economic crisis of 2008 will be reversed. We must not strive to return to normal, but instead implement a just transition to create a new normal that is fairer, more sustainable, more inclusive and more equal for all. SOLIDAR's National Strategy Groups warn that the concerning trends of increased limitations on civil-society freedoms and attacks on the free press have continued and intensified over the last year, sometimes under the guise of Covid-19 measures.

Finally, the 2020 Monitor assesses the extent to which these issues have been addressed by the 2020 Country Specific Recommendations of the European Semester process. Especially now that the Semester process has been merged with the Recovery and Resilience Plans, we consider it of utmost importance that these recommendations guide Member States towards a socially sustainable recovery after the Covid-19 crisis.

	2018	2019
GINI index ¹	30.8	30.7
Unemployment ²	6.8%	6.3%
Gender Equality Index ³	67.4	67.9
In-work poverty ⁴	9.4%	9.2%
Housing Overcrowding ⁵	15.5%	15.6%

Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

1 Eurostat (2020). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12

2 Eurostat (2020). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/BE>

4 Eurostat (2020). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

5 Eurostat (2020). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND FAIR WORKING CONDITIONS

In the 2019 Social Rights Monitor, we saw some improvement in social conditions, even though some European countries were still not back at pre-2008 crisis levels in terms of, for example, employment and wage growth. In the 2020 Monitor, we see some positive developments with increased minimum wages in Spain, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. However, SOLIDAR partners in all 17 countries express their concern over increasing income inequalities. This worry is confirmed by countries' Gini coefficients, many of which have slightly increased since 2010.⁶



Overall, the National Strategy Groups do not report any major changes in taxation. But they do point out that the fiscal burden on low-income households continues to be high, sometimes as a result of flat-rate taxation of income and a relatively high share of taxation on consumption, especially in Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Greece and Hungary. In countries that continue to have a flat-rate tax system, low-income households are affected disproportionately and tend to pay a relatively large share of their income in taxes. Belgium's last tax reform benefited low-wage workers but left behind non-working people.

EMPLOYMENT

At the end of 2019, employment in the EU-28 area was at an all-time high of 69.5%.⁷ In fact, several National Strategy Groups even reported labour shortages, especially in the health-care, education and services sectors. However, this increased demand for labour has not come with improved working conditions. Most pressing is the rise in precariousness in the labour market, which all National Strategy Groups flag as a concern. Job insecurity and precariousness in the labour market were already flagged in SOLIDAR's 2019 Social Rights Monitor. However, the Covid-19 crisis has made the risks in healthcare, education and services painfully clear. The same issue also affects enlargement countries, such as North Macedonia, where informal employment is a major feature of the labour market.⁸ In Serbia, the NSG flags high youth unemployment and a brain drain as key medium-to-long-term employment challenges.



⁶ Eurostat (2020). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi190/default/table?lang=en>

⁷ Eurostat (2020). Employment rates by sex, age and citizenship (%): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSQ_ERGAN_custom_160161/default/table?lang=en

⁸ European Commission (2020) Commission Staff Working Document – North Macedonia 2020 Report https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf

Although recent data is scarce, it is undeniable that the Covid-19 crisis has had immense effects on employment in almost all European countries and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Since February 2020, we have seen the unemployment rate in the EU-27 increase by a full percentage point, from 6.5% of the population to 7.5% in September. In Spain, one of the countries hit hardest by both the first and the second wave of the virus, unemployment has increased by almost 3 percentage points since the beginning of the crisis.⁹ Certain sectors and categories of workers have been hit harder than others. Our National Strategy Groups report that some of the sectors hit hardest, such as hospitality and tourism, are also those that employ a relatively large share of precarious workers and people from vulnerable groups such as women, youths and migrants. Covid-19 and the lockdown measures that followed in many countries had a particularly strong impact on these sectors. Moreover, many of the people working in them had precarious contracts, leaving them under-protected after becoming unemployed.

To prevent mass layoffs, most governments have introduced emergency measures, including short-time work schemes that cover part of workers' wages. The extent to which these schemes have been successful in protecting workers' incomes and future job security varies from country to country. The percentage of wages covered also varies, from 100% in Ireland to only 50% of the minimum wage in Poland.¹⁰ Some countries have made the arrangement conditional, for example forbidding companies that make use of the scheme to lay off workers.

EDUCATION

Our National Strategy Groups report some contrasting trends for early school leavers. In some countries they pose a growing problem, whereas others seem to be more successful in dealing with the issue. Overall, we see a positive trend, with the rate of early school leavers in Europe diminishing: in 2009, 14.2% of students in the EU-28 still left school without a diploma; in 2019 this was down to 10.3%.¹¹ Nevertheless, our NSGs point out that, in all countries, vulnerable groups such as Roma and students from low-income households are still more likely to leave school without a diploma. There also continues to be a striking difference between the sexes, with male students significantly more likely to leave school early than their female counterparts. Luckily, this gender gap seems to be slowly closing. We also see a positive trend with the number of young people that are neither in school or training nor employed (NEETs). This diminished from a peak of 15.9% in 2013 to 12.5% in 2019, according to Eurostat in 2020.¹²

Some NSGs also call attention to the lack of qualified teachers, which affects the quality of education and creates inequalities between regions, as some have bigger shortages than others. In some countries, such as Bulgaria, inequalities have been further worsened by the transfer of education competences to local authorities. In addition, because many students have had to rely on distance learning due to Covid-19, existing socioeconomic inequalities have been exacerbated. In several countries, including Italy and Spain, teachers report that especially pupils from low-income households

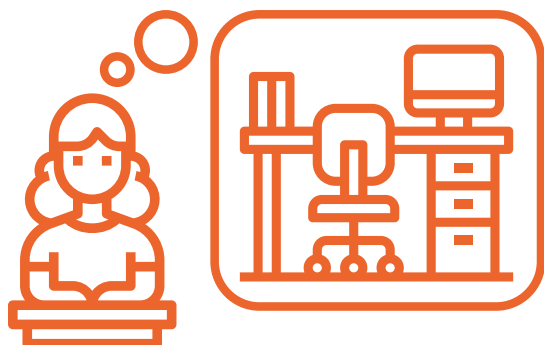
9 Eurostat (2020). Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/une_rt_m/default/table?lang=en

10 ETUC (8 May, 2020). Covid-19 Watch ETUC Briefing Note: Short Time Work: https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2020-05/Covid_19%20Briefing%20Short%20Time%20Work%20Measures%2030%20April.pdf

11 Eurostat (2020). Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status: <https://bit.ly/3lmlld6>

12 Eurostat (2020). Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex (NEET): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_08_20/default/table?lang=en

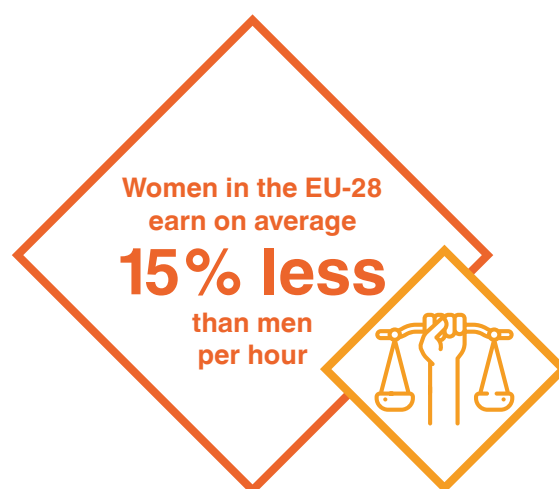
struggle to follow online lessons, as they often lack the technological tools and a quiet space at home to study.



This is linked to another issue that has become acutely problematic: the lack of IT skills amongst many Europeans. This challenge had already been recognized before the Covid-19 pandemic. Under President Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission made one of its priorities A Europe fit for the digital age. This is playing a prominent role in the European Semester cycle for 2021 and will be addressed by the Digital Skills Agenda.¹³ Digital skills were already in increasing demand in the labour market, and Covid-19 has made them indispensable for millions of students to follow remote lessons. The pandemic has also made digital skills essential for working from home and for citizens to access government services online.

GENDER EQUALITY

Overall, gender equality in the EU-28 has slightly improved, with the Gender Equality Index increasing from 67.4 in 2019 to 67.9 in 2020.¹⁴ Nevertheless, progress is limited, and our National Strategy Groups report that the implementation of the work-life balance directive has been slow, with large discrepancies between Member States. We see some positive developments in childcare and pay transparency. However, in general, gender equality continues to not be mainstreamed in most European countries, and NSGs point to the lack of an overarching framework.



The gender pay gap shrank in the EU-28 from 17.1% in 2010 to 15% in 2018. Here also, however, we see large differences between countries: in Luxembourg women earn on average 1.4% per hour less than men, whereas in Estonia the difference is 21.8%.¹⁵ To get a full picture of gender (in)equality in the labour market, it is important also to consider the employment gap. In Romania, for example, we see a relatively low gender pay gap (2.2%) but one of highest European employment gaps, at 19%.¹⁶ Similarly, in Denmark the workforce is highly segregated with women being overrepresented in lower paid public jobs.

13 European Commission (2020). Commission presents European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1196

14 EIGE (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020>

15 Eurostat (2020). Gender pay gap in unadjusted form : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en

16 Eurostat (2020). Gender employment gap : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_30/default/table?lang=en

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION

Since 2013, government expenditure¹⁷ on social protection¹⁸ as a percentage of GDP has been steadily dropping. In the period before Covid, we saw the share of people in Europe at risk of poverty decrease slightly to 16.8% in 2019.¹⁹ This development is largely attributed to increasing employment levels and thus mainly applies to working individuals. In reality, there are significant discrepancies between social groups, and our NSGs call attention to the fact that minimum-income schemes and poverty alleviation measures in many Member States are insufficient to lift people out of poverty. In Greece and Hungary, the financing of social security has come under pressure, as employers' share of social contributions has been lowered. However, here too we see some positive development, such as the introduction of new minimum income schemes in Spain²⁰ and Italy.²¹



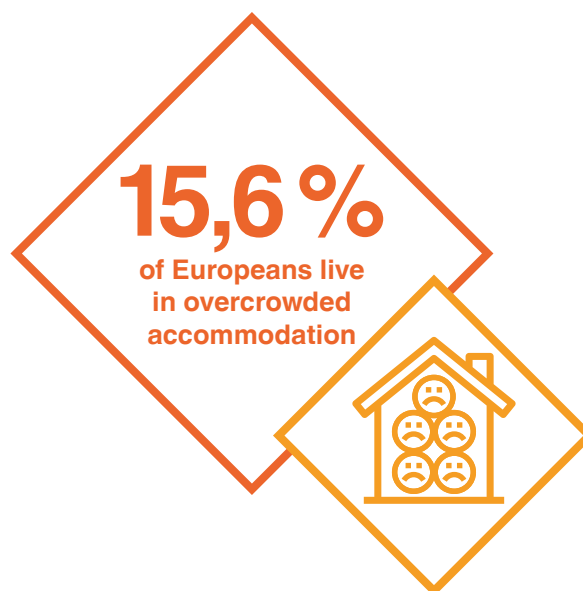
INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND MINORITIES

Employment continues to be a crucial factor for the inclusion of migrants and minorities both for many national governments and for the European Commission. At the same time, our National Strategy Groups report language

barriers as the most pressing issue standing in the way of newcomers accessing essential services and healthcare, as well as the labour market. Civil society organisations play a key role here, sometimes even taking on responsibilities neglected by (national) governments, such as providing language courses and facilitating access to essential services and housing. It is therefore all the more worrying that SOLIDAR's member and partner organisations report an increase in attacks on organisations working with migrants, notably in Greece, Hungary, Croatia and Bulgaria.

HOUSING

The lack of quality and affordable housing continues to be one of the most pressing social issues, according to our NSGs. 15.6% of Europeans live in overcrowded accommodation, and 10.1% live in a household where housing takes up over 40% of the total disposable



17 Eurostat (2020). Expenditure on social protection : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00098/default/table?lang=en>

18 Eurostat (2020). Net social protection benefits: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/SPR_NET_BEN_cus-tom_166174/default/table?lang=en

19 Eurostat (2020). At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex - EU-SILC and ECHP surveys: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_ji02/default/table?lang=en

20 State Official Newsletter (2020). Royal Decree-Law 20/2020 on the minimum income scheme: <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rdl/2020/05/29/20/con>

21 Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2020) Reddito di Cittadinanza <https://www.redditicittadinanza.gov.it/>

income.^{22, 23} These issues affect renters and low-income households much more than they do home-owners. We also see large differences between countries, with only 1.7% of households being overburdened by housing costs in Malta, compared to 39.5% in Greece.²⁴ The availability of social housing also leaves much to be desired: in the Belgian region of Flanders in 2016, there were as many people on the waiting list as there were already-occupied social housing units. Furthermore, our National Strategy Groups report significant regional disparities, with housing costs in urban centres and tourist areas rising especially sharply relative to incomes.

HEALTHCARE

The healthcare systems in all European countries have had to cope with an unprecedented demand for care during the Covid pandemic. With a total of over 9 million people in the EU/EEA and UK diagnosed with Covid-19,²⁵ European healthcare systems and their workers are under immense pressure. This has brought underlying issues such as underfunding and understaffing to light in the harshest way possible and impacted the lives of vulnerable groups most heavily.

The pandemic has been met by weakened healthcare systems after more than a decade of cuts and austerity. The financial crisis in 2008 led to a reduction in spending on public services, including healthcare systems. They became a target for cuts because their size made them appear to have. As a result, the number of hospital beds available in the EU-28 steadily declined for potential for greater efficiency more than a decade.²⁶ Already in the 2019 Social Rights Monitor, SOLIDAR members and partners raised concerns over the shortages of qualified healthcare staff in several countries.

Several National Strategy Groups have also voiced concerns about regional disparities in the availability and accessibility of healthcare in countries including France, Belgium, Croatia and Serbia. The reasons are mostly a shortage of qualified medical staff or regionalised management of health policies and infrastructures. Our National Strategy Groups in Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany and Italy warn that the language barrier remains the biggest obstacle for migrants and minorities to access healthcare. In Bulgaria, France, Greece and Spain, administrative burdens are reported as an additional complicating factor.



22 Eurostat (2020). Overcrowding rate by sex - EU-SILC survey: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi170/default/table?lang=en>

23 Eurostat (2020). Housing cost overburden rate by sex - EU-SILC survey: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi160/default/table?lang=en>

24 Eurostat (2018). Housing statistics: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Housing_statistics

25 European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020). COVID-19 situation update for the EU/EEA and the UK, as of 8 November 2020: <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea>

26 Eurostat (2020). Hospital beds by type of care: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/HLTH_RS_BDS__custom_177966/default/table?lang=en

CIVIC SPACE

The deterioration of civic space across Europe is a concerning trend. SOLIDAR members and partners report that financial support for civil society organisations (CSOs) is diminishing and, in some countries such as Germany, has become subject to stricter scrutiny and taxation. CSOs working with migrants are facing increasing attacks – both financial and legal – from governments, as well as extremist groups.

In an attempt to contain the Covid-19 virus, many governments across the continent have limited the freedom of assembly by prohibiting public gatherings or limiting their size. Although this is understandable in the context of the pandemic, the impact it has had on the right to demonstrate might not be justifiable, especially in light of the often more lenient measures imposed on commercial enterprises. Also during the Covid-19 pandemic, social partners have seen their competences undermined by governments taking unilateral

decisions on employment issues without (sufficient) consultation with trade unions and employers organisations. In France, trade unions began in spring to demand to be involved in negotiations over remote working, and talks finally started in November.

In addition, continuous attacks on the media by both state actors and extreme right groups are endangering the freedom of the press. In the Netherlands, the state broadcaster has been forced to remove logos from its satellite vans after continued threats and attacks from right-wing conspiracy theorists.²⁷ Reporters Without Borders says that, although some European countries are still leaders in press freedom, free journalism in Europe is under threat from “illiberal democracies” and the “fight against terrorism”, especially in the east and south of the continent.²⁸ The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few powerful actors further limits freedom of the press in these regions.



27 NOS (2020). NOS haalt na aanhoudende bedreigingen logo van satellietwagens : <https://nos.nl/artikel/2352452-nos-haalt-na-aanhoudende-bedreigingen-logo-van-satellietwagens.html>

28 Reporters without Borders (2020). Europe - Central Asia: <https://rsf.org/en/europe-central-asia>

COMPARISON WITH COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations were published in May, at the height of the first peak of the pandemic. It is therefore not surprising that many of the recommendations have a strong focus on mitigating the first direct effects of Covid-19 on healthcare systems and the economy. We are pleased to note that for the majority of the countries covered in the Social Rights Monitor, the European Commission also recommends strengthening social safety nets, including for atypical workers (Italy) and

the self-employed (the Netherlands). However, the socioeconomic effects of this crisis go much deeper than income. Our National Strategy Groups report that Covid-19 is heavily impacting all aspects of social rights, from employment to education and from access to essential services to civic space. As it is becoming ever clearer that Covid-19 will continue to affect our societies for the foreseeable future, SOLIDAR insists that a broader approach to its socioeconomic consequences is needed.



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SOLIDAR is a European Network of more than 50 Civil Society organisations who gather several millions of citizens throughout Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the values of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the three main policy sectors: social affairs, international cooperation and lifelong learning.

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The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the social democratic political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe. FEPS operates as a hub for thinking to facilitate the emergence of progressive answers to the challenges that Europe faces today. Today FEPS benefits from a solid network of 68 member organisations. Among these, 43 are full members, 20 have observer status and 5 are ex-officio members. In addition to this network of organisations that are active in the promotion of progressive values, FEPS also has an extensive network of partners, including renowned universities, scholars, policymakers and activists.

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