

## Social Europe: what Parliament is doing on social policy



The EU is working to create a more social Europe ©AP images/European Union - EP

**From childhood to retirement, social policies are important at all stages of our lives. Find out what EU rules Parliament is working on.**

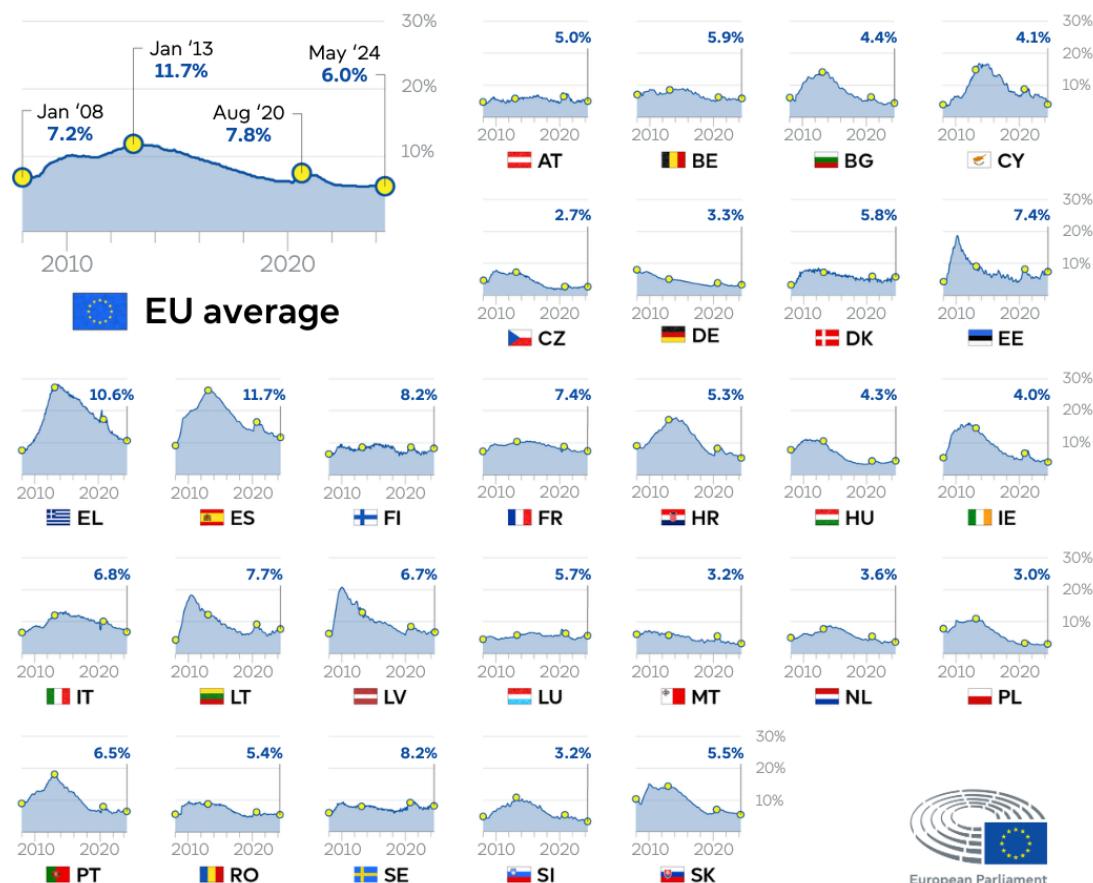
### A wide range of challenges

Compared to the rest of the world, Europe has the best levels of social protection and also ranks highly in terms of [quality of life](#) and wellbeing. However, it faces a wide range of challenges.

The effects of the economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the energy crisis are still deeply

felt in many EU countries and, even though things have improved in many countries, great disparities remain within the EU. [Unemployment rates](#) are decreasing overall, but vary strongly among EU countries.

## Unemployment rate in the EU 2008–2024



Source: Eurostat [une\_rt\_m] · most recent data available (May 2024)

Infographic showing the unemployment rate in the EU and its 27 member states from 2008 to May 2024

[Low birth rates and an aging population](#) also challenge the **sustainability of welfare systems**.

**Working life** is being transformed by technological innovation, globalisation and the rise of the services sector. New business models in the sharing economy with more flexible forms of working are becoming more important.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a major impact on social policies, leading the EU to take [a series of measures](#) to deal with the fallout from this unprecedented crisis.

## Competence in social policies: EU vs national governments

The EU has only [limited competence](#) when it comes to social issues as most of it is up to national governments.

The responsibility for employment and social policies **lies mostly with the member states** and their governments. This means that national governments - and not the EU - decide on issues such as wage regulations, including minimum wage, the role of collective bargaining, pensions systems and retirement age, and unemployment benefits.

However, over the years, the **EU has been working on social issues** throughout the European integration process and come up with a series of instruments in the social sector. These include EU laws, funds and tools to better coordinate and monitor national policies. The EU also encourages countries to share best practices on issues such as social inclusion, poverty and pensions.

The Treaty of Rome in 1957 already included fundamental principles such as **equal pay for women and men** as well as the **right of workers to move freely** within the EU. To make this mobility possible, further provisions were adopted, such as rules for the mutual recognition of diplomas, guarantees regarding medical treatment when abroad and safeguards regarding already acquired pension rights.

In addition, there are EU rules on **working conditions**, such as working time or part-time work, as well as legislation to tackle workplace discrimination and to ensure workers' health and safety.

The EU complements and supports EU countries in their efforts to **organise healthcare and improve the health of Europeans** through funding and legislation on a wide range of topics, such as health products and services, safe food, tackling diseases, clean air or healthy workplaces

In November 2017, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) to deliver new and more effective rights for people and support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. The pillar is based on 20 principles and comprises a number of initiatives linked to equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; and adequate and sustainable social protection.

Since the early stages of European integration, the European Parliament has often called for the EU to be more active on social issues and has supported the Commission proposals in this

area.

## Social rights for Europeans working abroad

EU rules on [social security coordination](#) ensure that people do not lose their social security protection when moving to another EU country.

In 2019 MEPs approved plans to establish a [European Labour Authority](#) to ensure the fair and simple application of EU rules on labour mobility and social security coordination.

In 2018, Parliament approved new legislation on the [posting of workers](#) to ensure equal pay for equal work in the same place.

## Assistance for the unemployed and the young

Launched in 1957, the [European Social Fund](#) is the EU's main tool for promoting employment and social inclusion. It has helped millions of people to learn new skills and find jobs.



### The European Social Fund explained

[https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/european-social-fund-plus-helping-the-most-vulnerable\\_N01-AFPS-210319-EUSF\\_ev](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/european-social-fund-plus-helping-the-most-vulnerable_N01-AFPS-210319-EUSF_ev)

In June 2021, the European Parliament adopted new rules to tackle unemployment and poverty in the EU in the wake of the pandemic. The [renewed and simplified European Social Fund+](#) focuses on children and youth. It merges a number of existing funds and programmes, pooling their resources.

The [European Globalisation Adjustment Fund](#) provides support for workers made redundant as a result of changing global trade patterns when for example large companies shut down or production is moved outside the EU. In 2021, MEPs [adopted new rules](#), broadening the fund's scope to offer assistance in case of major restructuring events linked to digitalisation, automation and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The [European Network of Employment Services](#) (Eures) is a job mobility network that provides

information, guidance and recruitment and placement services to job seekers and employers.

To tackle youth unemployment, EU countries agreed in 2013 to launch the [Youth Guarantee](#), an EU initiative to give everyone under 25 years a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

Launched at the end of 2016, the [European Solidarity Corps](#) aims to create opportunities for young people to volunteer or work in projects that benefit communities and people around Europe. In 2021, MEPs extended the scope of the European Solidarity Corps to include humanitarian work (previously a separate programme), making it a stand-alone volunteering programme with its own budget for the first time.

### Further information

[Read more on EU measures to tackle unemployment](#)

### Further information

[Read more about what the EU does to tackle youth unemployment](#)

## Working conditions

The EU wants to make sure that all workers have a decent standard of living. MEPs adopted new rules in September 2022 meant to ensure [national minimum wages are adequate](#).

In 2019, the Parliament adopted rules introducing new minimum rights on working conditions to protect all workers in the EU, including the most vulnerable employees on atypical contracts and in non-standard jobs such as gig economy workers.

In April 2024, Parliament approved [new EU rules on platform workers](#), to correct the employment status of people working for digital platforms who have been misclassified as self-employed, and regulate the use of algorithms and data in decisions about their recruitment, salary or working conditions.

Working from home has grown significantly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, but that practice coupled with the development of digital working tools has blurred the distinction between professional and private life. MEPs are pushing for clear rules that would reinforce employees' fundamental [right to disconnect from work](#) outside working hours.

MEPs regularly adopt updated EU rules on the [protection of people at the workplace](#), for example by setting stricter exposure limit values for harmful chemical substances.

In November 2023, Parliament called for [better working conditions for artists and cultural](#)

[workers](#). In another resolution from January 2024, MEPs insisted on rules for a [fairer distribution of revenue from music streaming](#), in favour of authors and performers.

## Further information

[Read more on how the EU improves workers' rights and working conditions](#)

## Gender equality

The EU adopts legislation and issues recommendations and good practices to improve gender equality, be it at work, in politics or other fields. The European Parliament, with its [women's rights committee](#), has always been a strong defender of the cause, and every year raises awareness by organising various events to mark International Women's Day.

MEPs also want to ensure a proper work-life balance. In 2019 they adopted new rules to better [reconcile work and private life](#) and strengthen rights for parents and carers. In 2021, MEPs adopted the [EU Strategy for Gender Equality](#), calling on the Commission to draw up an ambitious action plan to tackle the gender pay gap setting clear targets for EU countries to reduce the gender pay gap over the next five years. In 2023, Parliament adopted new rules on [binding pay-transparency measures](#).

With its resolutions, Parliament also draws attention to the need to combat specific forms of violence against women, such as sexual harassment or cyberstalking, and to increase the consistency of gender equality policies and other policies such as trade, development or migration.

Parliament is in favour of women and men being equally represented in politics. Find out facts and figures about the percentage of [women in high-level positions](#) in the European Parliament.

## Further information

[Read more on the Parliament's fight for gender equality in the EU](#)

## Further information

[Read more on how the EU is fighting gender-based violence](#)

## Improving public health

The EU regulates the **authorisation and classification of medicines** through the [European medicines regulatory network](#). Once on the market, the safety of authorised products continues to be monitored.

EU legislation sets minimum [health and safety requirements](#) for the workplace: provisions for the use of equipment, the protection of pregnant and young workers and the exposure to noise or specific substances, such as carcinogens, mutagens, asbestos and lead.

The EU has rules guaranteeing a high level of safety at all stages of the [food production and distribution process](#).

In 2018, a new [regulation on veterinary medicinal products](#) was adopted to curb **the use of antibiotics** in farming and halt the spread of resistance from animals to humans.

[Bathing waters](#) are monitored for bacteria by EU countries through the bathing water directive. The [Water Framework Directive](#) protects EU waters and the drinking water directive further improves the quality of [drinking water](#).

In April 2024, Parliament adopted a [revised law to reduce air pollution](#) in the EU and to achieve zero air pollution by 2050.

The [European Health Insurance Card \(EHIC\)](#) ensures that people living in the EU have access to medically necessary, state-provided healthcare during a temporary stay in all EU countries.

In 2021, the new [EU4Health programme](#) was launched for 2021-2027, enabling the EU to better prepare for major international health threats, while making affordable medicines and medical devices more readily available.

## Further information

[Read more on how the EU helps to improve public health](#)

## An inclusive labour market

Parliament proposed a set of measures to ensure people who have been ill can easily get [back to work](#), while chronically ill or disabled workers can be better integrated in the labour market.

In 2019 MEPs approved the [European Accessibility Act](#) to make many everyday products and services - such as smartphones, computers or ATMs - accessible to the elderly and to people with a disability in the EU.

In 2024, Parliament approved the introduction of a [European Disability Card](#) to make sure that persons with disabilities have access to preferential conditions, such as priority access and access to reserved parking, across the EU.

Following Parliament's recommendations, the European Commission adopted a [strategy for the](#)

rights of people with disabilities for the period 2021-2030.

The [Social Climate Fund](#) was created in 2021 to help those affected by the energy transition, including small businesses.

In 2024, Parliament adopted [new standards for national equality bodies](#), that play an important role in fighting discrimination in the workplace.



### **The European Accessibility Act explained**

[https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/european-accessibility-act-better-access-for-the-disabled\\_N01-PUB-190304-ACCE\\_ev](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/european-accessibility-act-better-access-for-the-disabled_N01-PUB-190304-ACCE_ev)

## **Social and employment policies**

[European Commission: reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe \(26 April 2017\)](#)

[Fact sheet: social and employment policy](#)

[Briefing: social and employment policies in Europe](#)

[Briefing: European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

[Podcast: EU Pillar of Social Rights](#)

[Fact sheet on the fight against poverty, social exclusion and discrimination](#)