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**Preparation for the**

**Hearings of the Commissioner-designates after the EU elections in autumn**

Elaboration of questions from the sector of Health & Social Policy

Vienna, 01.07.2024

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# Securing public contracts for non-profit and social organisations

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| **Question** |
| Many types of social services are currently being outsourced to commercial providers, who provide them at lower quality and with poorer working conditions. **How do you ensure that non-profit and social organizations continually receive orders in the future and that these are not outsourced to commercial providers?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How do you intend to contribute to ensuring that the financing of public social services is secured in the long term for the future? |

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| **Background** |
| The liberalisation and privatisation efforts of recent decades have led to a significant reduction in the quality and supply of public infrastructure in many EU countries. This situation is particularly dramatic in the area of social and healthcare services of general interest. Many services have been outsourced to commercial providers, who have then provided them at lower quality and poorer working conditions, often at higher prices.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Demographic change, in particular the ageing of society and the consequent increase in demand for social services, but also continuing demand in the area of homelessness, integration of refugees, etc., require sustainable funding for non-profit and social organisations in this area, also to prevent a shift to inferior commercial providers. The European Commission also has a role to play in ensuring that social and non-profit organisations can continue to provide services of general interest on a sustainable basis. Liberalisation and privatisation efforts, as well as purely selective funding, make this more difficult and should therefore give way to the long-term securing of public contracts. |

# Financing of social services of general interest

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| **Question** |
| The financial capacity of local authorities is under severe pressure in many places. However, social services of general interest require stable funding and continued investment from local authorities. **How do you ensure that local and regional authorities have sufficient financial room for maneuver to provide social services of general interest?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Will public investment in social infrastructure be excluded from the Stability and Growth Pact in the future? |

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| **Background** |

The European Commission must ensure that the provision of services of general interest is not hindered or made disproportionately difficult for social organizations and municipalities as a result of liberalization and privatization efforts and other requirements. Inter-municipal cooperation, public procurement and joint management are also important instruments for the efficient fulfillment of public service tasks, taking into account the sustainable use of available financial resources. These forms of financing and providing of social services should also be strengthened and promoted.

The Stability and Growth Pact sets clear debt limits and targets in the interest of fiscal stability. However, it does not differentiate between expenditures that are necessary for a functioning social infrastructure and other expenditures. A more refined treatment of public spending is needed. In order to cope with the increasing fiscal pressure due to demographic change,[[2]](#footnote-2) public investment in social infrastructure could be exempted from the Stability and Growth Pact in the future.

# Provision of care services

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| **Question** |
| Demographic change and the aging of society in the EU are increasing the demand for care services, while the supply of care workers is not keeping pace. **How do you ensure that the provision of public care services is maintained in the face of an aging population?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How do you ensure that private companies do not make large profits at the expense of affordability, quality and working conditions as a result of demographic change and the resulting gaps in provision? * Since there have been cases of organized crime in the care sector in Sweden, how do you ensure that organized crime does not enter the care sector or, if it does, that it is contained? |

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| **Background** |
| For many years now, the EU has been experiencing an aging society, which has significantly increased the demand for care services. At the same time, the supply of care workers is not growing at the same rate, leading to a gap in supply. The major challenge is to ensure the quality and affordability of care services in the face of staff shortages. There is a risk that private providers will fill the gaps in public care with commercial services, exploiting their position to make large profits at the expense of quality, working conditions and affordability.  In countries such as Sweden, there have already been cases where long-term care provision was abused by organized crime as a financial outlay. These are cases where criminal networks have taken over care companies in order to profit from state funding for the care of the elderly. To counter such developments, a clear legal framework, monitoring measures and increased international cooperation are needed.[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4) Even more important would be to ensure a sustainable, functioning provision of public care services. |

# Use of digital technologies in care work

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| **Question** |
| The rapid development of digital technologies, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence and robotics, also offers numerous new opportunities for nursing and healthcare. **What measures do you intend to take to support the use of digital technologies to improve care services and combat the shortage of skilled workers?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How do you ensure that prevailing standards are not undermined in the process? * How do you ensure that the use of digital technologies in care facilitates the work of caregivers in a people-centered way and at the same time improves the quality of care? |

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| **Background** |
| The rapid development of digital technologies, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence and robotics, also offers numerous new opportunities for nursing and healthcare. These technologies can significantly increase the efficiency and quality of care services and help to counteract the shortage of skilled workers. Measures that support the use of digital technologies include targeted investment in digital infrastructure, training programs for nursing staff and the promotion of research and development. It is essential that prevailing standards and ethical guidelines are strictly adhered to. To ensure that the use of digital technologies remains human-centred, care staff should be actively involved in the design and implementation of the technologies. Their needs and expertise are crucial for the acceptance and effectiveness of new technologies in day-to-day care. Technologies should be designed in such a way that they reduce the workload, for example by automating routine activities and administrative tasks, so that nursing staff have more time for direct patient care. In addition, continuous evaluation and adaptation of the technologies is necessary to ensure that they improve the quality of care services and do not give rise to additional complexity and complications. Training and education must also be offered regularly to ensure that nurses can use the new technologies effectively and develop their skills accordingly. |

# Substances of human origin

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| **Question** |
| There is a constant need for substances of human origin in healthcare. Commercial trade in these particularly sensitive substances poses numerous risks. **Are you planning further legislative steps with regard to the regulation on substances of human origin?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can a stable supply of substances of human origin to medical facilities be ensured? * How can you ensure that the supply of substances of human origin is not commercialized? |

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| **Background** |
| In spring 2024, the EU Parliament and the Council of the EU adopted the regulation on standards of quality and safety for substances of human origin (SoHO) intended for human application. The regulation is intended to support the continuous and stable availability of SoHO therapies based on high safety and quality standards. In addition to further harmonizing healthcare in the EU, it is intended to ensure the conditions for safe, effective, accessible and affordable innovation in this sensitive sector. In this way, the regulation should also contribute to the realization of the European Health Union and the digital future of healthcare. There are concerns about the commercial use and trade of substances of human origin. These highly sensitive substances should not be commercialized. Compliance with ethical principles must also be ensured. The supply of medical facilities with necessary therapies on the basis of SoHo depends on voluntary and unpaid donations. In Austria, for example, the Red Cross is an irreplaceable provider of blood reserves that patients with serious illnesses, after an accident or even after giving birth need. They rely on voluntary donations from the public. Therefore, trust and security must be safeguarded, which commercial providers could obstruct. |

# Support programs to combat the shortage of skilled workers

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| **Question** |
| The shortage of skilled workers in the EU threatens the green transformation of the European economy and the preservation of prosperity in the EU. **Do you intend to set up support programs to counteract the shortage of skilled workers?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How could such support programs be structured? |

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| **Background** |
| The shortage of skilled workers represents a significant challenge for the economies of the European Union and has far-reaching effects on the competitiveness and innovative strength of companies and the economy as a whole. Support programs could combat the shortage of skilled workers and facilitate the necessary qualifications of the workforce.  In terms of the qualifications in demand, jobs with manual tasks are particularly affected by labour shortages, including primarily elementary occupations, such as in transportation and construction, especially cleaners. The labour shortage is also comparatively high for highly qualified types of employment such as healthcare professions, lawyers and social workers. Many of the professions needed for the green transition are particularly affected by the shortage of labour and skilled workers. These include new jobs in the highly skilled sector, but also elementary professions in the production sector, construction and transportation, as well as in water supply, wastewater treatment and waste disposal. This means that key sectors of the ecological transition are affected by increasing labour shortages. These are the key findings of the *Employment and social developments in Europe* (ESDE)[[5]](#footnote-5) report. Through education and training initiatives, existing employees can expand their skills and acquire new competencies that meet the current demands of the labour market. This not only increases productivity, but also employee motivation and satisfaction. In addition, such programs help to reduce the unemployment rate by offering new perspectives to people who previously had no access to qualified education. Such support programs could take various forms. One such measure could include scholarships and financial support for training and further education. These include both traditional courses at universities as well as extra-occupational courses and training. Companies could be encouraged to invest in the further training of their employees through tax breaks or direct subsidies. |

# Administrative burden due to reporting obligations

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| **Question** |
| In recent years, there have been several new EU regulations which have causes new administrative costs and require new staff positions due to reporting obligations and increasing demands on the administration. In times of demographic change and the expected decline in the working population, this additional administrative burden is becoming increasingly difficult to handle. **How can you contribute to reducing the administrative burden caused by reporting obligations and excessive and complex regulations?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What do you intend to do with the data collected as a result of the reporting obligations? * How can sensitive company data that is collected due to reporting obligations be protected from unauthorized access? * How do you ensure that small non-profit organizations in particular can keep the burden of reporting obligations for EU targets to a minimum? |

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| **Background** |
| Reducing the administrative burden due to reporting obligations and complex regulations is a fundamental challenge for the European Union. The current skills and worker shortage further exacerbates the problem.  In principle, excessive reporting obligations and complex EU regulations can limit the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations in the internal market. The administrative burden ties up valuable resources, some of which could be used for the core tasks of the organizations. This is particularly true for small non-profit organizations, which often have limited financial and human resources. The high administrative burden can place an excessive burden on these organisations and limit their ability to act.  Another important aspect is the collection of data due to reporting obligations. This data is often sensitive and requires careful handling. The storage and processing of such data is not only technically demanding, but also prone to cyberattacks. Sensitive company data must therefore be comprehensively protected against unauthorized access. For small non-profit organizations, managing such data is particularly challenging as they often lack the resources for comprehensive cybersecurity. It is therefore important to reduce the administrative burden and simplify regulations to ensure that these organizations can efficiently fulfill their social missions of public utility. |

# Skilled workers: Recognition of qualifications

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| **Question** |
| The shortage of skilled workers in Europe, combined with demographic change in the EU member states, makes it necessary to recruit nursing staff from third countries. Currently, the labour market integration of foreign skilled workers is hampered by bureaucratic difficulties in the recognition of their educational qualifications. **How do you ensure that nostrification, i.e. the recognition of qualifications, is simplified in the care sector?** |
| **Further Questions** |
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| **Background** |
| The shortage of skilled workers in Europe, particularly in the care sector, requires measures to recruit care workers from third countries. However, bureaucratic hurdles, particularly in the recognition of educational qualifications, stand in the way of the labour market integration of foreign skilled workers. Several approaches are relevant in order to simplify nostrification, i.e. the recognition of qualifications in the care sector:  Transparent and efficient procedures for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad must be established so that foreign professionals can be quickly integrated into the labour market. This includes the nostrification of diplomas, examination certificates or other qualifications. Uniformity within the EU also plays an important role here. Common standards and criteria can facilitate the process and thus also increase the attractiveness of the European labour market for skilled workers. Another aspect is access to information on recognition procedures. This must be easily accessible for nursing staff from third countries. This includes advice centers and online resources that are also available in multiple languages. Cooperation between the EU and third countries is essential for nostrification, as this is the only way to identify falsified qualifications and evaluate the level of qualification. Bilateral agreements and mutual recognition can speed up the process. |

# Skilled workers: labour recruitment agreements

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| **Question** |
| **Will you work on initiating new labour recruitment agreements for skilled workers from third countries in order to counter the shortage of skilled workers in the EU, particularly in the care sector?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * With which countries can you imagine concluding such recruitment agreements? * How can you ensure that the destination country, the country of origin and the workers themselves all benefit (triple win)? |

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| **Background** |
| More and more workers are needed throughout the EU, both in the higher and lower-skilled sectors. Recruitment of workers from abroad is therefore becoming increasingly important. To achieve a broad impact, a coordinated common EU migration policy would be required. However, this is in tension with national sovereignty, which in turn results in implementation difficulties and efficiency problems in the pooled distribution of migrant workers. The "Blue Card" has so far fallen short of expectations. The EU Commission has therefore proposed the "EU Talent Pool"[[6]](#footnote-6), which is intended to "match" people from third countries with vacancies in EU countries based on their qualifications. The EU Commission published these and other measures to curb the shortage of skilled workers on April 27, 2022, in the Communication on the recruitment of skilled workers from third countries[[7]](#footnote-7). The agreement on the "Pact on Migration and Asylum"[[8]](#footnote-8) in the EU Parliament and Council at the end of last year has hardly produced any new solutions. Although the central problems were discussed and worked out, sustainable solutions in asylum policy and the recruitment of workers have not emerged. |

# Coordinated labour recruitment of skilled workers

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| **Question** |
| Global competition for skilled workers is currently intensifying. **How can you support a coordinated approach within the EU member states for recruiting skilled workers from third countries and how do you prevent EU states from competing for skilled workers and poaching skilled workers from each other?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Do you intend to use a quota model in the recruitment of skilled workers, i.e. a regulation that creates incentives for a reasonably balanced distribution in order to avert competition for skilled workers within the EU? * What could be the criteria for distribution? * What could the quotas look like? |

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| **Background** |
| Global competition for skilled workers continues to intensify. At present, the EU is still clearly lagging behind the USA, Canada and Australia. The EU must therefore improve its position internationally as a location for skilled workers. However, competition is also increasing within the EU. This harbors great risks for unequal economic development and a further drifting apart of the European regions and states. A coordinated approach is therefore required within the EU member states, particularly in order to prevent the poaching of skilled workers from one another. To this end, the EU should generally promote the exchange of information and cooperation between member states. Joint initiatives and coordinated approaches to the recruitment and integration of skilled workers can defuse the competition. Uniform standards and transparent procedures for the recognition of qualifications of foreign workers are conducive to integration and distribution in the EU. A quota model could create incentives for a balanced distribution of skilled workers. The criteria for quotas could be based on labour market needs, demographic factors and the specific conditions of regional labour markets. It is also important that quotas are flexible and responsive to changing local needs and socio-economic developments. |

# Labour market integration of people with displaced person status

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| **Question** |
| Many people with displaced person status are currently dependent on basic social services. Many are not yet integrated into the European labour markets. The reasons for this are a lacking provision of childcare services, barriers in the integration into national education systems as well as the lack of recognition of qualifications acquired in third countries. **What measures are you planning to integrate people with displaced person status into the European labour markets more quickly?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can you ensure that the children of displaced persons are integrated into the education system? |

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| **Background** |
| One factor that mitigates the demographic trend towards an ageing society and a shrinking workforce is migration. Migrants are already primarily active in sectors affected by labour shortages. There are still major hurdles to labour market integration, some of which are being exacerbated in the current political climate. Through further immigration, but even more so by removing existing barriers for people with a migrant background who already live in the EU, these groups can contribute to alleviating the labour shortage. The rapid integration of people with displaced person status into the European labour markets not only promotes social cohesion, but also alleviates labour shortages and thus the current overburdening of the workforce in many sectors. Rapid integration into the labour market enables people with displaced status to quickly become financially independent and actively contribute to the economy. This also reduces the burden on European social systems. Access to education is crucial for the children of displaced persons. Early integration into the education system supports linguistic and cultural integration and lays the foundation for their future participation in social and economic life. Education is a key factor for equal opportunities and social advancement, and the integration of children into the school system promotes stable life courses in the long term. |

# Volunteering and shortage of skilled workers

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| **Question** |
| In some EU countries, many social services are provided by volunteers. At the same time, social organizations in particular are increasingly affected by the shortage of skilled workers. **How do you intend to promote volunteering and what importance do you see in volunteering to counteract the shortage of skilled workers?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * In which sectors can you imagine to increase volunteering to counteract skills shortages? * How do you ensure that volunteering does not reduce the quality of the service provided? |

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| **Background** |
| Volunteering plays a crucial role in the provision of social services and can help to alleviate skills shortages in some EU countries. Volunteering enables people to learn new skills and gain practical experience that improves their professional qualifications and labour market integration. In the long term, this can help volunteers to choose careers in the areas in which they have volunteered, which can also mitigate skills shortages. In addition, volunteering promotes social cohesion and a sense of community. People who volunteer often develop a strong sense of responsibility and a close bond with the community. In general, volunteering promotes social contacts and integration, both for those helping and for the beneficiaries. Volunteering thus contributes to the general resilience of society.  It is important to ensure that the quality of the services provided does not fall. This can be ensured through targeted training and clear standards. Volunteers can be supported through professional training and mentoring programs so that their work does not undermine the standards of permanent staff. |

# Employment criteria for Just-Transition funding

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| **Question** |
| With the emergence of the Just Transition Fund, the EU faces the challenge of ensuring a fair and sustainable transformation of its economy. It is essential to introduce employment criteria to ensure that funding is targeted where it is most urgently needed. These criteria should cover both the creation of new jobs and the retraining and support of workers, particularly in regions and sectors affected by structural change. **To what extent do you plan to combine payments from the Just Transition Fund with job retention in the companies?** |
| **Further Questions** |
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| **Background** |
| The Just Transition Fund aims to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the transition to a low-carbon economy and ensure that regions and sectors that are largely dependent on fossil fuels are adequately supported. A key concern is to introduce employment criteria to ensure that funding is targeted to where it is most needed. This includes the creation of new jobs as well as training and support for employees, particularly in sectors affected by structural change such as the energy, coal and automotive industries. The fund's resources have the potential to provide long-term financial support, create sustainable employment opportunities and strengthen the resilience of the affected regions. In order to ensure that just transition funds contribute effectively to securing jobs, disbursements could be linked to employment criteria. Companies that receive funding from the fund must prove that they are taking measures to preserve jobs and create new employment opportunities, as proposed, for example, by the Carinthian state guideline on qualification and consultancy funding. [[9]](#footnote-9) Further measures should not only support the preservation of jobs, but also increase social acceptance of the necessary socioecological changes and enable a smooth transition to a sustainable economy. |

# Retraining projects within the scope of the Just-Transition mechanism

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| **Question** |
| The Just Transition Mechanism aims to ensure a just and inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy by supporting both jobs and communities dependent on traditional, carbon-intensive industries, while promoting the transition to sustainable, green jobs. As part of this approach, retraining projects and programs will be developed to prepare affected workers for new occupations and employment opportunities. **What retraining projects are you planning and where do you see a need to support the member states?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What measures do you plan to take to ensure that the transition through retraining does not cause a deterioration in job quality? |

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| **Background** |
| The Just Transition Fund aims to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the transition to a low-carbon economy and ensure that regions and sectors that are largely dependent on fossil fuels are adequately supported. A key concern is to introduce employment criteria to ensure that funding is targeted to where it is most needed. A particular focus is on supporting retraining projects and programs that prepare affected workers for new occupations and employment opportunities. These retraining initiatives include vocational training, education programs and financial support. The challenge, however, is to ensure that these retraining projects are adequately funded and effectively implemented to meet the specific needs of the affected workers. From a public sector perspective, there is a need to work closely with local and regional authorities, educational institutions and the private sector to ensure that retraining measures are targeted and practical. Sufficient financial resources must be available to support the implementation of these programs and facilitate the transition. |

# Quality in the care of relatives

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| **Question** |
| In many families, necessary care and support services are provided by relatives. The shortage of skilled workers in the nursing and care sector will potentially increase the proportion of family caregivers compared to formal care. **To what extent will you support national and local initiatives to improve the quality of care for relatives?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Are you planning funding in the area of further training and support for family caregivers? |

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| **Background** |
| In many families, relatives provide the necessary care and support at great personal and financial cost. The shortage of skilled workers in the nursing and care sector could lead to a further increase in the proportion of family caregivers compared to formal care. Support for national and local initiatives to improve the quality of care for relatives is therefore crucial. Funding for further training and support for family caregivers is essential to ensure and improve the quality of care. Through targeted training programs, family caregivers can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure high-quality care. This includes both medical and psychological aspects of care in order to meet the diverse requirements. In addition, support services for family caregivers, such as financial benefits, counseling services, training and psychosocial support, provide relief and prevent overwork and burnout. This not only contributes to the health and quality of life of those in need of care, but also to the long-term physical and mental health of the carers themselves. |

# Distribution of care work and female labour force participation

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| **Question** |
| Women still bear the main burden of family care work, from childcare and household organization to cleaning. This has a negative impact on the compatibility of family and career and therefore also on women's participation in the workforce. **How can you support a more equal and fairer distribution of care work in the household and family?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What incentives do you plan to provide to improve the compatibility of family and career for women and to increase women's participation in the workforce? * What incentives do you want to provide to reduce intersectional disadvantages in the distribution of care work, i.e. disadvantages based on gender combined with migration background, religious affiliation, socio-economic status, etc.? * What incentives do you want to provide so that migrant women in particular are more integrated into the labour market? |

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| **Background** |
| Increasing the participation of women in the labour market is a key lever in the fight against the shortage of labour and skilled workers, but above all in the fight against poverty in old age, which also affects women more. However, this can only be achieved if the family obligations of care work are distributed more evenly. It is also important to address intersectional disadvantages in the distribution of care work. Migrant women are even more affected by discrimination and at the same time bear a higher burden of care work. This makes their integration into the labour market more difficult and reinforces existing inequalities. There is therefore a great need for action to eliminate intersectional disadvantages in the labour market, for example due to socio-economic status, migration background, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc., and to increase their participation in the labour market.  Various incentives could be used to overcome these challenges. These include, for example, flexible working time models, paid parental leave and tax benefits for families who share care work equally. Specific support programs for migrant women, such as language courses, vocational training and mentoring programs, can support their integration into the labour market and improve their career opportunities. However, men must also be included in this process to break down outdated role models in the distribution of care work in the household and family. |

# Support services for homeless people in their countries of origin

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| **Question** |
| In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of homeless immigrant EU citizens who do not have access to national basic security systems in their destination country. Due to a lack of support systems, discrimination or criminalization in their countries of origin, many remain without prospects of employment in the destination country. **What coordinating measures can you take to expand the social systems and support services in the member states, especially in the cities?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can European social protection systems be further harmonized without lowering standards in some member states? |

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| **Background** |
| In addition to other challenges, mobile EU citizens are often confronted with the fact that they must have a main residence in order to find employment. At the same time, however, they need employment and income to be able to rent an apartment or obtain social security entitlements. The result is often homelessness, which manifests itself particularly in cities. However, these do not have the resources to provide adequate, long-term support. Important aspects to counteract this development are, in particular, the harmonization or strengthening of basic security and social systems as well as the expansion of support services for homeless people in the countries of origin. More generally, the coordination and expansion of social systems and support services in the member states is of great importance for social and economic stability in Europe. In the face of increasing social inequalities and economic challenges, a strong, integrated social safety net is essential. These measures not only promote social cohesion, but also strengthen society's resilience to economic and social crises. One important aspect is the harmonization of European social protection systems without lowering standards in some member states. Particularly in cities, which often face the greatest social challenges, the expansion of social systems and support services is crucial. This includes comprehensive measures to combat poverty, support for the unemployed, access to affordable housing and healthcare as well as education and training programs. Through a coordinated approach, Member States can ensure that all citizens, regardless of where they live, have access to adequate social support. This not only strengthens social structures, but also promotes economic development by improving the participation of all citizens in the labour market and social life. |

# Expansion of social systems in net recipient states

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| **Question** |
| As part of the EU Cohesion Fund, large sums of EU money are distributed to the respective member states with the aim of promoting economic convergence between the EU states and regions. With these funds, the EU also has a lever to promote upward convergence in the social systems of the Member States. **How can it be ensured that the net recipients of EU funds among the Member States expand and improve their social security systems?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can the Cohesion Fund be used in a targeted manner for this goal? |

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| **Background** |
| Expanding and improving social protection systems in net recipient countries of EU funds is crucial for the long-term stability and prosperity of the European Union as a whole. These countries often face major economic and social challenges and therefore need targeted support to develop their social protection systems to a level that improves the quality of life of their citizens and reduces inequalities. The EU Cohesion Fund could be an instrument for this goal. It aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion by providing financial support to the Member States with the lowest per capita income. The EU could define the strategic objectives for the use of cohesion funds more clearly and include indicators of social inclusion and poverty reduction. The allocation of funds could then be linked to the implementation of reforms and improvements in the social systems in accordance with the defined indicators. This would increase the efficiency, transparency and effectiveness of the systems. Furthermore, it should be possible to trace the correct use of funds even after they have been allocated. The EU should monitor the use of the funds and ensure that they fulfil their intended purpose and impose sanctions in the event of non-compliance. The targeted use of the Cohesion Fund will ensure that the resources are used effectively to strengthen the social security systems in the net recipient countries and improve the living conditions of their citizens. This ultimately contributes to a fairer and more prosperous European Union. |

# Combating child poverty

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| **Question** |
| Many children in the EU are still affected by poverty. **What measures are you planning to gradually end child poverty in Europe?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What specific instruments and budgets are planned to this aim? * How do you ensure that the money reaches the children? * Would earmark benefits in kind be a possibility? |

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| **Background** |
| With the Covid-19 pandemic, child poverty in Europe has increased again[[10]](#footnote-10), a fact that highlights the urgent need for action. Ending child poverty in Europe step by step is crucial for the future of the EU. Child poverty significantly affects children's development and well-being and leads to long-term socio-economic disruption. Therefore, targeted measures and budgets must be put in place to tackle this issue and ensure a fair future for all children. In this context, the EU Commission has published the Strategy for the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee. The latter aims to ensure that all children have access to basic services. This includes free education, healthcare, meals in schools and adequate housing.[[11]](#footnote-11) Other instruments for combating child poverty are the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). These funds can finance programs that improve access to high-quality education, healthcare and social services. Direct financial support and dedicated benefits in kind could also be funded. Financial support for low-income families and investment in education and early childhood development are key to promoting equal opportunities and combating child poverty. |

# Unequal access to digital technologies

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| **Question** |
| During the Covid-19 pandemic, many social inequalities became more apparent. Inequalities by gender and socioeconomic background in access to digital technologies needed to maintain teaching during the pandemic have become more apparent. **How can you support equal access to digital technologies - regardless of gender and socioeconomic status?** |
| **Further Questions** |
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| **Background** |
| The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown that digitalization does not benefit everyone unconditionally. There are still major inequalities in access to digital technologies according to socioeconomic status, gender and age.[[12]](#footnote-12) Equal access to digital technologies is crucial to creating an inclusive and equitable society. Digital technologies are now an integral part of everyday life and the world of work. Unequal access reinforces existing inequalities and creates new barriers. Female students often have less access to digital technologies and the corresponding educational resources than their male peers. This is particularly true for families with a lower socioeconomic status. Targeted support programs that improve access to computers, the internet and digital education can better integrate these groups into the digital transformation. Specific measures include the provision of free or subsidized technology and internet access for low-income households, as well as special education and training programmes. Initiatives that promote girls and women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are also of great importance to reduce gender inequalities in the field of digitalization. |

# Reducing long-term unemployment

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| **Question** |
| The EU internal market is still characterized by structural long-term unemployment. **What measures do you intend to take to reduce long-term unemployment in the EU?** |
| **Further Questions** |
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| **Background** |
| Long-term unemployment has far-reaching negative effects on the individuals concerned and on society as a whole. For the people affected, long-term unemployment often leads to a loss of qualifications, self-esteem and social participation, and even to a deterioration in health. This makes it more difficult to return to the labour market and increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion, thereby placing a burden on public social systems. Targeted measures and programs are needed to effectively combat long-term unemployment. One suggestion is the model of a job or employment guarantee. This model could entail introductory courses for the long-term unemployed that include one-to-one training, counselling and, if necessary, support from experienced social workers, doctors and psychologists. Companies that are willing to create new jobs for the long-term unemployed could be supported through tax breaks and financial subsidies. The job guarantee model also includes the creation and financing of additional employment relationships in the non-profit sector for all long-term unemployed people for whom, for serious reasons, no company can be found to offer them a job. To this end, it is necessary to identify suitable jobs that match the jobseeker's qualifications and at the same time offer opportunities for further development. However, such a model must also be promoted in the longer term in order to achieve sustainable effects. [[13]](#footnote-13)  Finally, reducing long-term unemployment not only improves the quality of life of those affected, but also strengthens the EU's social and economic resilience. Lower unemployment leads to higher tax revenues, better utilization of the workforce and greater social cohesion. |

# Labour taxation

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| **Question** |
| As a result of tax competition within the EU and the associated race to the bottom in capital taxes, many member states are shifting the tax burden onto the labour factor, to the detriment of the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European labour market. **How does the EU intend to develop incentives for member states to reduce the burden on labour?** |
| **Further Questions** |
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| **Background** |
| The EU is one of the economic regions in the world with the highest taxation of labour relative to the taxation of capital. The tax burden on labour refers to the difference between an employer's total costs for an employee and the employee's net disposable income. It includes payroll taxes, but also social security contributions. The EU could develop incentives for Member States to reduce the burden on labour, for example by adjusting income tax systems or reducing social security contributions. However, it is important to carefully assess the impact of such measures and ensure that the reduction in the tax burden does not in turn create new costs for workers and jeopardize social protection.[[14]](#footnote-14) Targeted tax cuts, especially income taxes, can increase employment for specific target groups. This includes, for example, the abolition of joint income taxation for couples, as joint income taxation reduces employment on average. |

# European minimum wages

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| **Question** |
| The existing Minimum Wage Directive represents a step towards harmonisation of minimum standards in the EU. Existing high standards should not be undermined by EU minimum wage requirements due to specific institutional circumstances in the member states. **Are further legislative steps planned regarding European minimum wage requirements?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * If so, how do you ensure that European minimum wage requirements do not cause a reduction in wage standards in member states with higher wages, i.e. that they result in upward wage convergence? |

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| **Background** |

In an analysis of the Directive on adequate minimum wages, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) notes that the legislation is already having an impact even before it is fully implemented in all member states. According to the ETUI, the reference values for adequate minimum wages set out in the Directive—60% of the gross median wage and 50% of the gross average wage—have already influenced developments at the national level. The briefing cites examples from Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and the Netherlands, where the reference values, or at least one of them, are considered when setting minimum wages or used in trade union demands for an increase in the statutory minimum wage.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The introduction of further legislative steps in European minimum wage guidelines can help ensure fair working conditions and social protection across the EU, but it could also lead to a lowering of the high standards in countries like Austria or Scandinavian nations. The minimum wage directive, which was already adopted in 2022, was designed to ensure that the directive would lead to an upward convergence of standards and that countries with a stronger social dialogue, especially collective wage bargaining, would not be affected by the directive.[[16]](#footnote-16)

There also strong arguments for EU-wide minimum wage guidelines. These can help reduce unfair competitive conditions. The introduction of a European minimum wage can also strengthen purchasing power and economic stability. Higher wages boost consumption and investment, which in turn has a positive impact on the economic situation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

# Social hotspots in cities

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| **Question** |
| Many EU cities are currently affected by increasing socioeconomic inequalities and segregation. Combined with other factors, social hotspots have sometimes erupted into open conflict. **How do you intend to ensure that social hotspots in European cities are reduced?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What specific instruments and budgets are envisaged for this objective? |

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| **Background** |

Numerous studies point to an increase in segregation in European cities.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a result, social conflicts and hotspots are also on the rise. This also manifests itself in an increase in crime, physical violence and political/religious radicalisation.[[19]](#footnote-19) In order to break the vicious circle of violence and poverty, measures are urgently needed to promote a social mix in the housing sector and limit the emergence of social hotspots. The EU also has a range of political instruments at its disposal in the area of funding budgets, reform proposals as part of the European Semester, EU-wide intermunicipal cooperation and even cross-border police cooperation through Europol. A targeted and comprehensive strategy that combines all these political and financial instruments can certainly help to reduce social hotspots in cities.

# Sustainability for socially disadvantaged groups

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| **Question** |
| Climate-friendly decisions and climate-friendly behaviour are difficult to afford for many people or are not possible due to external circumstances and knowledge. **How do you ensure that sustainable and climate-friendly goods and services are affordable and accessible for socially disadvantaged groups?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How do you ensure that there are targeted programmes at Member State level for socially disadvantaged groups so that climate protection does not become a social conflict between rich and poor? * How can broad sections of the population, who currently only come into contact with sustainability in a negative way through advertising and sensational media coverage, be reached and made aware of the issue of sustainability in a positive way? |

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| **Background** |

Climate-friendly and sustainable goods and services are still more expensive than conventional alternatives, even though conventional products often have a negative impact on the environment and people's health. This leads to sustainability becoming a question of affordability and socioeconomic status. What is needed here are measures that make sustainable and climate-friendly goods and services affordable and accessible to socially disadvantaged groups and, conversely, make harmful goods more expensive and more difficult to access in order to internalize the true costs. Only if sustainability is affordable and people have access to it can it become more widely accepted.

Broad sections of the population, especially socially disadvantaged groups, who currently only come into contact with the topic of sustainability in a negative way through advertising and sensationalist media coverage, should be sensitized to the topic in a positive way. This can be done through comprehensive education and awareness campaigns that emphasize the benefits of climate protection measures for all citizens. Financial incentives, such as subsidies for energy-efficient household appliances or tax breaks for environmentally friendly behavior, could also help to encourage interest and participation in sustainable practices. In addition, community projects that take place directly in disadvantaged communities, such as community gardens or solar energy initiatives, which offer both environmental and social benefits, should be encouraged.

# Climate change adaptation for socially disadvantaged groups

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| **Question** |
| Climate change has particularly unpleasant or even harmful effects on lower income groups and vulnerable groups, including older people, people with impaired health, occupational groups who work outdoors, etc. **How do you ensure that vulnerable groups are protected from the effects of climate change?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Are there plans to provide financial resources to this aim? |

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| **Background** |

Year after year, climate change causes more heat-related deaths, flood victims and other weather-related health hazards as extreme weather events increase. Vulnerable groups are even more affected, even if they have contributed less to global emissions. The situation is not expected to improve in the coming years. Researchers are therefore calling for climate change adaptation measures that are appropriate for the target groups.

These groups, including older people, children, people with low incomes and people with impaired health, are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events. Cities are often hotspots for events of extreme heat, as the urban built environment often amplifies heat effects. Heatwaves can be particularly intense in urban areas due to the "urban heat island effect", which can lead to health problems and higher mortality rates. Flooding can threaten the livelihoods and safety of many people, especially those living in precarious housing conditions. It is therefore important to provide financial resources to develop and implement preventive measures and adaptation strategies. These funds could, for example, be invested in improving urban infrastructure, creating green spaces, building cooling community facilities and modernising buildings to make them climate-proof. In addition, specific programmes should be developed to ensure access to resources and support for vulnerable groups. This includes the provision of climate-adaptable housing, emergency plans and climate-related health services.

**Provision of care services in smaller communities**

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| **Question** |
| The care crisis is being felt even more acutely in rural areas. There is a shortage of healthcare workers and therefore a shortage of supply. "Community Nursing" projects attempt to counteract the problem of the undersupply of care services in smaller communities. However, for many projects of this kind, it is often unclear how they will continue to be funded once the EU funding ends. **How can the provision of care services in rural regions and smaller communities be improved?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What role can community nursing play in that regard? * Should community nursing be expanded further? * How can you ensure that community nursing continues to exist in smaller communities in the longer term? |

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| **Background** |

The care crisis is particularly acute in rural regions. There is a lack of labour and therefore also a lack of services, which further exacerbates the undersupply in smaller communities.

"Community nursing” projects are trying to counteract this problem by offering nursing services directly in the communities and thus closing the gap in care supply. However, the financing of such projects is often uncertain after the end of EU funding, which jeopardises their long-term continuation. In Austria, community nursing projects have already been successfully funded and implemented with EU funds.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The lack of care in rural areas is not a new phenomenon, but the shortage of skilled labour has further exacerbated the care crisis. In order for community nursing projects to counteract the care crisis in the long term, sustainable funding is required, as well as the political will to implement this form of social infrastructure on a broad scale. Long-term funding can be secured through a combination of state support, regional funding programmes and the involvement of non-profit organisations and private partners. Local networks and self-help groups can also help to strengthen community nursing initiatives by providing additional resources and support.

# Social participation of the elderly

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| **Question** |
| European societies are ageing. The growing demographic group of older people is increasingly shaping social life and the labour market. Social participation is central to a good life. It is important therefor that large sections of the population are not excluded from social life. This includes cultural participation, digital participation, participation in the labour market, political participation and many other areas. **How can you help to increase and promote the social participation of older people?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can you ensure that older people can remain active and healthy in the labour market for as long as possible? |

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| **Background** |

Promoting the social participation of older people is crucial for an inclusive and resilient society. With the demographic change and an ageing population, it is becoming increasingly important for older people to remain active and healthy in social and economic life. Social participation strengthens the well-being and quality of life of older people, as well as social and economic stability.

Promoting digital participation is essential to give older people access to digital communication and information. Educational programs such as training courses and workshops can help older people to acquire digital skills, while access to affordable digital devices ensures that no one is excluded due to financial constraints. In addition, user-friendly software and accessible technologies also help to take into account the specific needs of older users.

Poverty in old age can be combated through various measures that ensure that pension systems are sufficient to guarantee the standard of living of older people. In addition, approaches should be developed that help older people to participate actively and independently in social and economic life. To this end, companies should also be incentivized to hire and retain older employees. They should also take measures to ensure that companies are attractive to older workers.

Another important aspect of the social life of elderly is informal care. Support for family carers through training, financial support and respite services can reduce the burden and improve the quality of care. In addition, care networks and self-help groups can be established and promoted to facilitate exchange and mutual support.

# Inclusion of people with disabilities

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| **Question** |
| **What concrete measures are you planning to enable people with disabilities in the EU to participate fully and equally at all levels of society?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How can you improve the harmonisation of the rights of people with disabilities in the Member States? * How can the European Disability Card be extended to cover access to other services? |

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| **Background** |

Equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of social life is a fundamental part of realizing an inclusive and just society in the EU. People with disabilities often face multiple barriers that limit their participation in the labour market, education, and political participation. These barriers lead to social exclusion and economic disadvantage.

A key step towards improving the situation is the harmonization of the rights of people with disabilities in the EU member states. There are currently considerable differences in the legal and social standards that support people with disabilities. Harmonization can create uniform minimum standards to ensure that all people with disabilities in the EU have the same rights and access to support services.

The new European Disability Card is intended to serve as proof of disability status throughout the EU, so that people with disabilities have access to the same conditions and preferential treatment as residents of the country they are travelling to. EU countries usually offer special conditions for the use of public transport and preferential treatment at cultural, leisure and sports events and activities, for example when visiting a museum or attending a concert. [[21]](#footnote-21)

Extending the European ID card would not only improve mobility and access to services for people with disabilities, but also promote their participation in the labour market and society as a whole.

# European Pillar of Social Rights in the European Semester

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| **Question** |
| The European Semester is an instrument that encourages and supports the Member States to implement social and economic policy reforms. Although social indicators have already found their way into the European Semester, many dimensions have not yet been taken into account. **How can the European Pillar of Social Rights be anchored more firmly in the European Semester?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How will you ensure that the European Semester's reform proposals are based on sound evidence and are then implemented in the Member States? |

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| **Background** |

During the last legislative period of the European Parliament, there were several new initiatives concerning the European Pillar of Social Rights.[[22]](#footnote-22) In 2022, also based on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission published the European Care Strategy.[[23]](#footnote-23) The strategy proposed measures to ensure high-quality, affordable, and easily accessible care and support services in the European Union and developed new indicators to monitor reforms in the care and support sector within the European Semester.

However, many dimensions of the European Pillar of Social Rights are not yet integrated into the European Semester through indicators or reform benchmarks. This could be a starting point for the further development of the Pillar of Social Rights.

There have been many ideologically driven reform proposals in the past, especially in the area of government budget cuts. Many of these proposals have failed because of unrealistic assumptions and impractical approaches. A scientific basis for the recommendations, which also takes into account the diversity of scientific evidence and different approaches, could revitalise the European Semester.

# Further development of EU public procurement

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| **Question** |
| Public procurement and contracting is an important lever for the pursuit of social and environmental goals. **What priorities will you set in the further development of public procurement and where do you see the greatest need for action in this area?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * What measures would you like to take to make public procurement more socially responsible and to implement social concerns, e.g. to empower women, older workers or the unemployed, to create transparency in supply chains or generally to ensure that contractors comply with minimum social standards? |

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| **Background** |

Public purchasers are important investors in Europe, public procurement accounts for more than 16% of the EU's GDP and plays a fundamental part in the European economy. Since the EU was founded, public procurement has been continuously developed through legal reforms.[[24]](#footnote-24) Currently, there is still a window of opportunity to initiate socioecological reforms in the economy, to focus more on social issues and to promote socially responsible behavior. Integrating social criteria into public procurement can serve these objectives.

A more socially responsible public procurement system means that not only the price, but also social criteria such as working conditions, equality, inclusion and environmental sustainability are taken into account when awarding public contracts. This promotes fair working conditions, supports disadvantaged groups and contributes to climate change mitigation.

Implementing social concerns through public procurement strengthens social cohesion and promotes the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market. It can also help to support the local economy by giving small and medium-sized enterprises a better chance of winning public contracts.

Overall, the further development of EU public procurement can contribute to a fairer and more sustainable economy.

# Social Climate Fund

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| **Question** |
| The European Green Deal places "social fairness" at its center. In its calls to the member states, the EU Commission also speaks of a "socially balanced path" in the transition to climate neutrality. To this end, the "Climate Social Fund" was proposed to cushion the social impact of climate protection measures. **How can the targeted use of these funds be ensured?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * In addition to the Social Climate Fund, do you intend to provide additional financial measures for socially disadvantaged groups in order to cope with the effects of structural change in a fair manner? |

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| **Background** |

The transition to a climate-neutral economy is one of the greatest challenges of our time and requires comprehensive adjustments in various sectors of the economy. This structural change not only affects technological and ecological aspects, but also has far-reaching social implications. Socially disadvantaged groups are particularly affected, as they often have fewer resources and opportunities to adapt to new circumstances. In view of this challenge, it is essential to take measures to ensure that socially disadvantaged groups are not left behind.

In December 2022, the Commission and Parliament gave their provisional approval to the Social Climate Fund.[[25]](#footnote-25) Financed by the revenue from EU emissions trading, this fund already supports measures for energy efficiency, the use of renewable energies and combating energy poverty. However, the distribution of funds has not yet been focused on specific target groups. Many people feel that their interests and needs are not being taken into account by the current reform measures of the European Union, the structural change of the European economy towards an ecologically sustainable economic system. Measures must be taken to bring European societies along with them. This includes further financial support measures, but also economic redistribution measures to cushion the negative consequences of economic structural change.

# Competence in the area of social protection

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| **Question** |
| One problem that is evident in many social policy agendas is the lack of competences at EU level, which would, for example, enable binding directives on European social protection systems. **Will you support the expansion of competences in this area?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Where do you see possible levers for this objective? |

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| **Background** |

To date, the democratically elected institutions of the EU have hardly any legal and political room for manoeuvre in the area of social protection, as this is not provided for in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. On the one hand, further levers for expanding competences should be considered here, such as a stronger underpinning of the reform proposals of the European Semester with financial instruments linked to reform projects, institutional reforms in the area of the distribution of competences between the Commission, Parliament and Council, or other reforms. On the other hand, the treaties also need to be adapted to current intra-European, but also extra-European and geopolitical developments.

The European Commission has presented recommendations to promote social dialogue at national level and at EU level.[[26]](#footnote-26) Social protection itself could also be dealt with more vigorously at EU level. Finally, it is important that the EU expands its competences in the area of social protection in order to strengthen social inclusion and the protection of citizens.

# EU Social Taxonomy

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| **Question** |
| The plan for a social taxonomy for investment subsidies based on social criteria has been put on hold by the EU Commission for the time being. **Will you support the implementation of a social taxonomy equivalent to the environmental taxonomy?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * How could the design of an EU social taxonomy look like? |

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| **Background** |

US economist Janelle Jones argues in favor of also treating sectoral wage negotiations and state subsidies for the already rapidly growing care sector as part of industrial policy, as a synergy of industrial and employment policy.[[27]](#footnote-27) In this respect, the plan for a social taxonomy[[28]](#footnote-28) for categorizing and incentivizing investments according to social criteria can also be characterized as industrial policy in the broader sense. While the environmental taxonomy is intended to channel investments into environmentally friendly and climate-friendly projects, a social taxonomy would promote investment goals such as combating poverty, promoting equality, decent working conditions and social inclusion.

An EU social taxonomy aims to set clear criteria and standards for social sustainability to guide companies and investors. This would ensure that economic actors consider not only environmental but also social indicators when making investment decisions.

An EU social taxonomy could cover various areas, including labour law, health and safety at work, access to education and social justice. For example, criteria could be developed to ensure that companies pay fair wages, promote diversity and inclusion and monitor their supply chains for human rights violations.

**LGBTIQA+ – Protection against discrimination**

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| **Question** |
| In 2024, assaults and discrimination against the LGBTIQA+ community continued to occur regularly in many EU countries. **What measures are you planning to ensure that people of the LGBTIQA+ community in the Union are better protected and that discrimination is further reduced?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * In 2020, the EU Commission initiated the LGBTIQ Strategy 2020-2025. How do you intend to combat the various forms of discrimination that still exist in the individual member states, especially in Hungary? * What will you do to implement the directive on discrimination outside the world of work, which has been in the Council for many years? * Are you planning a Europe-wide campaign on the subject? |

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| **Background** |

Assaults on the LQBTIQA+ community have been comparatively high in recent years. In 2019, 43% of the LGBTIQA+ community surveyed stated that they had personally experienced discrimination.[[29]](#footnote-29) The majority of cases of discrimination, especially structural discrimination, are not quantified. In some EU member states, the situation has become even worse due to political and media developments. Well-targeted awareness-campaigns are needed to the objective described here that are designed not to provoke further negative backlash.

In 2004, the EU Commission published the directive on gender equality outside the working environment.[[30]](#footnote-30) This directive aims to combat gender-specific discrimination in access to and supply of goods and services. It establishes a framework for equality between all genders in areas such as education, healthcare and social services. The directive obliges member states to take effective measures to prevent discrimination and promote equality. LGBTIQA+ rights could also be further enshrined and promoted in EU law, similar to this directive.

**Violence at work**

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| **Question** |
| The EU Commission has called on the member states of the EU to ratify Convention No. 190 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and to implement further national measures to protect against violence in the workplace. **What measures do you plan to take to reduce violence in the workplace in the member states, particularly in service and transport professions, which continue to exist despite the ILO 190 ratification?** |
| **Further Questions** |
| * Is the European Commission planning an EU-wide campaign to raise awareness and educate people about violence in the workplace? * What is the Commission doing to further combat violence, discrimination and sexual harassment in general? |

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| **Background** |

The ILO 190 Convention*[[31]](#footnote-31)* sends a clear signal worldwide that any behaviour that degrades, humiliates, sexually harasses or physically or psychologically attacks people in the working environment is prohibited and ostracized. The Convention is the first of its kind in the world to offer employees and other people in the world of work extensive protection against violence and harassment. Natural persons who exercise the powers, duties or responsibilities of an employer are also protected.

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