

For a social Europe.

Recommendations of the German Association for Public and Private Welfare regarding the 2024 election of the European Parliament

The recommendations (DV 24/23) were adopted by the Executive Committee of the German Association on 13 December 2023.

Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V.
(German Association for Public and Private Welfare) – the forum for the social sector since 1880.

The German Association for Public and Private Welfare (Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V.) is the joint forum of municipalities and non-statutory social welfare organisations and their social services in Germany, the Länder (federal states) and academia in all fields of social work and social policy. Through its experience and expertise, it monitors and shapes policy and legislation in relation to children, young people and families, the social insurance system, social assistance, assistance for the elderly, care and rehabilitation, social volunteering, the planning and management of social work and social services as well as international and European social policy and social legislation.

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Preamble: Using experiences from crisis management to reinforce a social Europe

European integration and the founding of the European Union is one of the most successful political peace projects in modern history. Created in the terrible wake of two world wars and in the hope of reconciliation, we are united for the better in the European Union. We are convinced that in a time of overlapping crises, a peaceful future can only be secured through cooperation and unity. Europe thrives on unrestricted respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We defend these values collectively against populist, nationalist or antidemocratic forces. It is therefore the task of the European Union to strengthen the structures of civil society. By providing quality social services, strong non-profit organisations and municipalities reduce social differences and divisions and work to achieve equal living conditions in all European regions.

The management of crises and political challenges is increasingly shifting from being exceptional to the general modus operandi of European policy. The last five years were characterised by the coronavirus pandemic, the worsening climate crisis, humanitarian emergencies on the external borders of the EU, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the resulting refugee movements, increased energy prices and costs of living. The challenging events and developments of the last legislature have once again illustrated the need for an effective EU and a unified Europe in response to current challenges. The European institutions proved to be able to react and act in overcoming the multiple crises. However, to prepare for future crisis management scenarios, requirements need to be in place to ensure transparency and democratic legitimacy. There are remaining challenges in the institutional structure in order to make the EU more resilient, both internally and externally. The crisis situations also revealed shortcomings in transnational coordination, for example in asylum policy, health care and social infrastructure. The cooperation of Member States to provide basic services must be developed further and municipal cooperation in particular needs to be reinforced.

From a social policy perspective, European crisis management differed fundamentally to the approach taken in the financial and debt crisis that arose in 2008. The creation of instruments to stabilise the economy and labour market in response to the coronavirus pandemic mitigated social upheavals and enabled a swift economic recovery. This has largely prevented Europe from drifting apart, as it did in the aftermath of the debt crisis. It is now necessary to learn from this experience, in particular from the social aspects of crisis management. The last five years have shown that the heightening of the social dimension of the EU has led to concrete successes in economic and social development in the Member States. This progress must be continued and existing social challenges addressed by further developing a social Europe. The German Association has thus formulated the following recommendations in five thematic areas for a social Europe. In issuing its recommendations, the German Association addresses the members of the next European Parliament, the newly appointed European Commission and national ministries involved in European decision-making processes through their involvement in the European Council.

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1. Continuing positive developments for a social Europe

The legislative period ending in 2024 brought tangible progress towards a social Europe. This progress must now be effectively implemented and continued. One key success was the adoption of the long-demanded EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages (EU) 2022/2041¹ in December 2022. As part of its implementation, the determination of minimum wages and collective bargaining coverage need to be significantly improved in many Member States. Consequently, Germany must now take measures to raise collective bargaining coverage from 49%² currently to the 80% target. Coordinated political guidelines were formulated with the European Child Guarantee, which are intended to support Member States in preventing the social exclusion of children as a result of poverty.³ For the next legislative period, it will be important to achieve similar progress in guaranteeing minimum income schemes that may effectively contribute to protecting people against poverty and to actively supporting people affected by poverty.

Building on the positive experience from the use of crisis instruments during the coronavirus pandemic, the German Association recommends further developing measures such as the SURE programme, which protected jobs and incomes on a large scale, or the CRII initiatives⁴, which enabled a more flexible use of cohesion funding, and to expand the coordination of social policy in Member States. The rapid mobilisation of extensive aid programmes for cushioning the social impact of macroeconomic shocks enables a social response to an impending economic crisis, which can reinforce a more social Europe for the long term. In this context, the German Association sees need for action in the following areas:

- **Consistent implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR):** The objectives of the social summit in Porto in May 2021 and the Action Plan for implementing the EPSR⁵ represent major commitments that will continue to have an impact beyond the end of the current legislative period. The German Association calls for making the consistent implementation of the EPSR a priority of the new Commission.⁶ In order to realise the European social model, fur-

1 European Commission, 2022, Directive 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, accessible at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022L2041> (15 October 2023).

2 Collective bargaining coverage in 2022 at 49%, press release of the Federal Statistical Office of 2 June 2023, accessible at: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2023/06/PD23_214_62.html (15 October 2023).

3 Recommendation of the Council on the introduction of a European guarantee for children of 14 June 2021, accessible at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021H1004#PP2Contents> (9 November 2023).

4 SURE stands for “Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency”. The programme was established during the coronavirus pandemic and mobilised extensive loans for Member States for reducing unemployment risks in exceptional situations. The CRII programme (Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative) provided more flexibility in cohesion funding by adapting spending priorities and accelerating the disbursement of funding.

5 At the social summit in Porto in May 2021, the EU institutions committed to three social policy objectives that are to be achieved by 2030: an employment rate of at least 78% in the EU, the participation of at least 60% of all adults in further training and development measures each year and the reduction of the number of people threatened by poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, including five million children. The action plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights was presented by the EU Commission in February 2022 and defines measures for implementing the 20 social policy principles of the EPSR. The action plan can be accessed here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1226&langId=de> (15 August 2023).

6 For further reading, please refer to the Opinion of the Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V. regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and the “Porto Declaration” of 16 June 2011, p. 4 ff. as well as the Opinion of the Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V. regarding the European Commission consultation on reinforcing social Europe of 30 April 2020, p. 6 ff., accessible at:

ther efforts are needed particularly in combating poverty, strengthening social security systems and social infrastructure. In addition, the principles of the EPSR need to be linked even more closely with economic and climate policy measures.

- **Developing the social dimension in the European Semester:** With the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and, in particular, the integration of specific indicators via a social scoreboard into the EU's annual economic policy coordination process, its social policy component has been expanded. In the view of the German Association, in addition to the focus on the labour market and employment, the third chapter of the pillar and thus the aspects of social protection and social inclusion should be given greater prominence. Furthermore, according to a proposal by the Belgian and Spanish governments, a procedure on social imbalances should be established in the semester process, which would establish a warning mechanism if social objectives are not met.⁷
- **EU framework for minimum income systems:** The aim of binding regulations must be to make social security systems more accessible and to organise minimum income and support services in the Member States appropriately. In addition, minimum income systems must be designed in such a way that they offer low-threshold access to all those who need support. This is an effective way to protect people from poverty and social exclusion and to help them on their path out of poverty.
- **Dismantling barriers throughout Europe and enabling mobility for all:** In order to eliminate obstacles for older people, people with disabilities or people with limited mobility in everyday life, leisure activities and professional contexts, further efforts are required at European level. This may be promoted by an EU disability card and the recognition of a disability status throughout Europe. The EU can support this process by advocating for the convergence of support services and an equal understanding of disability. Mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Voluntary Service should also open up even more by offering targeted support to groups that are currently underrepresented in the programmes.
- **Improving equality and working conditions in care:** The efforts initiated by the European Care Strategy⁸ towards realising an improvement in this area must be continued. In order to meet the challenges of the shortage of skilled workers in particular, which is intensifying across Europe, the German Association emphasises the need to improve working conditions, professionalise care and enable standard employment arrangements for unregistered carers⁹ Here,

https://www.deutscher-verein.de/fileadmin/user_upload/dv/pdfs/Empfehlungen_Stellungnahmen/2023/dv-22-23_eu-erwachsenenschutzvo.pdf (accessed on 15 August 2023).

7 Björn Hacker: Die Europäische Säule sozialer Rechte: Wirkung und Weiterentwicklung. Zwischen Kompass und Steuerungsinstrument, SWP-Studie 5, May 2023, p. 41.

8 European Commission, 2022 (440), European Care Strategy, accessible at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0440> (9 October 2023).

9 Opinion of the Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V. on the European Care Strategy, p. 4, accessible at: https://www.deutscher-verein.de/fileadmin/user_upload/dv/pdfs/Empfehlungen_Stellungnahmen/2023/dv-2-23_stellungnahme-europaeische-strategie-pflege-betreuung.pdf (accessed on 9 October 2023).

it is important to support the Member States particularly with impulses for the adequate and sustainable financing of these care systems.

- **Adopting an Anti-discrimination directive:** A horizontal regulation offering comprehensive protection against all forms of discrimination has been sought at European level for a long time now. The draft that has been on the table since 2008 could not be adopted in this legislature either. For the coming legislative period, a joint effort by the Council, Parliament and the Commission is needed to launch an overarching Anti-discrimination directive in order to effectively protect and support social groups that are subject to stigmatisation and discrimination in the EU.
- **Strengthening the non-profit social economy:** A large part of the social economy in Europe is made up of not-for-profit or non-profit actors and organisations. The framework conditions for promoting the social economy must be set in such a way that they address the specific characteristics of non-profit organisations and take greater account of and recognise their services for the common good, particularly in public procurement and state aid law.
- **Protecting mobile workers in Europe:** A social Europe safeguards equal rights for mobile workers in all Member States and ensures transnational equality of opportunities. The reality for many millions of workers is still far from this standard. The pending revision of the corresponding EU Directive (883/2004) on the coordination of social security systems must translate the principle of equal treatment into concrete legislation. The German Association calls for the coordination of national insurance systems to be improved and for existing gaps in social security to be closed in order to prevent the exploitation of mobile workers. In view of demographic change, the European Union has a particular responsibility to organise contractual relationships between people in need of care and employees who provide everyday care as live-in care workers from abroad.
- **Stabilising crisis instruments:** The crisis instruments SURE, CRII and NextGenerationEU¹⁰ were able to successfully cushion the economic shocks caused by the pandemic by mobilising resources in a targeted manner. The German Association recommends evaluating the crisis instruments, particularly with regard to the involvement of social actors, and strengthening their role in future. The results can be used to better prepare for crisis situations and implement measures in an even more targeted manner. In particular, the measures to stabilise the labour market, such as those implemented by the SURE programme, should be institutionalised on a permanent basis.
- **Social summit in 2025:** At the beginning of the new legislative period, a new social summit should be held to reinforce trans-institutional cooperation in the area of social policy and to formulate specific objectives and measures for the coming years. With the inclusion of civic actors, experience and insights from crisis management should be utilised for upcoming policies.

¹⁰ With NextGenerationEU, the largest financial instrument in the history of the EU was created to enable investments in climate-neutral renovations as well as digital and social infrastructure, thereby mitigating the economic impacts of the pandemic.

2. Social equity as a principle of climate policy

With the European Green Deal, the European Commission led by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has set itself ambitious climate policy goals. Concrete measures have been initiated in the Fit for 55 legislative package in order to achieve these targets. The impact of climate change affects economically and socially disadvantaged groups in particular, since they are less able to use own resources to adapt to change. Accordingly, the ecological transformation must take socio-political principles into account, in order to avoid conflicts between ecological objectives and social concerns. Although the Social Climate Fund has been set up as a financial instrument to create a mechanism for balancing additional financial burdens, more far-reaching efforts are needed in the form of a Social Green Deal to make the transformation towards climate neutrality socially acceptable.

- **Impacts of climate policy on vulnerable groups:** The social impact of climate policy is still considered to be of secondary importance. The German Association recommends that the European Commission should make it a principle to measure the social impact of all climate policy measures in advance through impact assessments and to carry out precise monitoring with a focus on vulnerable groups when implementing measures.
- **Creating social equity mechanisms:** Political measures for combating climate change must include a visible social dimension. Here, the Social Climate Fund¹¹ comes in exactly where it is needed by using part of the revenue from the newly created emissions trading scheme for the transport and building sector, in order to provide financial support to vulnerable groups in connection with climate adaptation measures. However, at EUR 65 billion, the scope of the fund is insufficient for absorbing the additional costs. Accordingly, further clearly visible measures must be taken, such as additional investments in local public transport or the abolition of climate-damaging subsidies.
- **Creating regulations efficiently with little bureaucracy:** European regulations intended to support the ecological transformation must be simple and unbureaucratic to implement and must not result in extensive reporting obligations and increased administrative burdens.
- **Embedding the partnership principle in funding programmes:** The collaborative partnership with civil society partners in the planning and implementation of EU funding has proven its worth, for example in the case of the structural funds. It creates more transparency and results in funds being provided according to the needs of the target groups. In order to also guarantee the targeted implementation of EU funding for the socio-ecological transformation, the partnership principle must likewise be embedded in funding instruments such as the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund.

¹¹ The proposal to establish a Social Climate Fund from 2026 was formally accepted in April 2023. Further information and the legal text can be found at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/infographics/fit-for-55-social-climate-fund/> (22 August 2023).

3. Upholding humanitarian principles in asylum policy and using the opportunities of legal immigration

Across Europe, populist forces are using European asylum policy to polarise. It is important to bring to objectify the political debate and to return to a policy that is firmly based on human rights and primary legal principles, such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The possibilities for people to come to Europe by way of economic migration should be reinforced and existing bureaucratic requirements should be simplified and streamlined.

In this way, the basis can be created for accepting migration as a societal phenomenon that primarily offers opportunities to counter current challenges such as the shortage of skilled workers or the demographic development in the EU.

- **Positively guiding political discourse:** Political discourse in asylum policy has increasingly intensified in recent years. People who come to Europe seeking protection and opportunities for themselves and their families are perceived more and more as a threat and presented as a burden. The German Association appeals to political actors to refocus political discourse more strongly on solutions once again and to bring objectivity to how existing challenges are handled, such as the development and financing of the necessary infrastructure.
- **Strengthening the principles of international refugee protection:** Asylum policy is based on international agreements, in particular the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Human Rights Convention. These international agreements are implemented in the existing Common European Asylum System (CEAS), but their implementation is often ignored by Member States. In order to reform the CEAS, it is necessary to reinforce these foundations under international law and support the Member States in their application. This can be ensured through targeted monitoring and support by the corresponding EU agencies. Achieving a functional asylum system accepted by all Member States will require a sense of solidarity. Specifically, this means that all Member States should commit to providing a substantial contribution to the reception and care of arriving people.
- **Expanding economic migration:** Initiatives like the EU Talent Pool and labour partnerships, which provide third-country nationals with labour market access, should be promoted and expanded. Greater cooperation in the training and recruitment of workers can place relationships with third countries on a different footing – one which provides advantages to both sides. Furthermore, there should be greater efforts at European level to facilitate the recognition of qualifications and certificates, to increase the inner-European compatibility of processing methods and to shorten processing times.
- **Increasing use of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund for admission and integration:** In total, EUR 9.88 billion are available in the form of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for the period 2021–2027 to support the Member States in implementing their asylum and migration policy. In many Member States, only a small portion of the funding is received by local

actors, such as municipalities and civic organisations, who urgently require these resources to cover the support and integration of migrants.

Measured by the number of people requiring support, 75% of the funding should go directly to regions, municipalities and civic actors following the principle of the European investment and structural funds, in order to enable decentralised support structures as well as faster and efficient administrative processes and provide financial relief to municipalities that provide shelter to people in need.

4. Strengthening municipalities and non-profit organisations in Europe and improving the framework conditions for social services in Europe

Municipalities are important actors in the multi-level system of the EU. Two-thirds of European decisions directly or indirectly affect the municipalities and are implemented by municipal structures. Strengthening their role as political actors at the European level is necessary to allow them to participate effectively in policy-forming and decision-making processes. Conversely, it is up to the municipalities to bring the European level into local work and to make it visible and accessible to citizens.

- **Promoting European networks and partnerships:** Municipal partnerships and networks offer support in effectively expressing interests at the European level. It is therefore important to invest in these structures and enable networking and cooperation, for example through funding programmes such as Interreg or European networks like the European Social Network.
- **Expanding cross-border cooperation:** The potential of cross-border cooperation, for example in social services or public welfare, does not receive sufficient attention. Not only can resources be utilised more effectively in this way, it also strengthens the formation of a European identity. By reducing bureaucracy, promoting language skills and trans-regional partnerships, cross-border cooperation can be promoted and municipalities can be supported in providing services of general interest.
- **Improved funding conditions for municipal and non-profit actors:** As a result of high co-financing rates, financially weak municipalities and non-profit organisations in particular are often unable to apply for the funding they need to strengthen the social infrastructure. In order to remove this obstacle, it is important to create financial models and frameworks that enable low-threshold financing.
- **Practical regulations in public procurement and state aid law:** In order to limit the administrative workload for municipal actors in Europe-wide public procurement, the threshold should be raised to EUR 750,000 for services and the tender procedure simplified. In the area of state aid regulations, the de minimis regulation should be adapted and the thresholds for services of general economic interest (SGEI) increased to 1.5 million euros within three fiscal years.

5. Protecting the rule of law and promoting democratic principles

The European Union is based on the commitment of its Member States to fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law. Authoritarian forces are cancelling this consensus and threatening not only the rule of law and democratic principles in many Member States, but are also targeting the EU institutions themselves. The instruments and procedures for countering violations of and threats to constitutional principles must be further expanded and strengthened. Public and legislative spaces for an active civil society are also becoming smaller. These spaces must be protected and resources created to put European civil society in a position to stand for democratic values.

- **Expansion of the programme “Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values” (CERV):** Of the European Commission’s numerous spending programmes, the programme that invests specifically in an active European civil society has comparatively low financial resources. For the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the resources for this programme need to be significantly increased in order to invest in projects and initiatives aimed at civic and social participation as well as measures to strengthen fundamental rights and anti-discrimination.
- **Promotion of European political education in the Member States:** For the majority of citizens, the EU institutions and the decisions made there still seem far removed from the reality of their own lives. European political education and information opportunities need to be further expanded and incentives created, e.g. for European reporting or the promotion of European political education institutions, including outside schools and universities.
- **Active combatting of disinformation and hate speech:** With the Digital Service Act¹², the EU has created an instrument for combating hate speech and agitation online. This must now be implemented efficiently and, if necessary, conditions and sanctions for the major social media platforms must be tightened if the regulations that have now been created are not implemented effectively.
- **Protecting civil society and creating good framework conditions:** European civil society has long advocated for a European legal form for associations. The proposal presented by the European Commission in September 2023 for a European cross-border association¹³ would be a significant step towards reinforcing European civil society, which could counteract the development of shrinking spheres of action that can be observed in many European Member States. Beyond a European organisational form, standards need to be defined to safeguard the foundation, registration and equal treatment of civic organisations, guaranteed by the Member States. Good framework conditions also include a

12 The Digital Service Act aims to regulate major online services and platforms more strictly. It was adopted in October 2022 and is now being successively implemented by the Member States. Further information can be found at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package> (25 August 2023).

13 European Commission 2023 (2023/0315), proposal of the European Parliament and Council on European cross-border associations, accessible at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023PC0516> (27 October 2023).

reasonable degree of bureaucratic requirements and procedures, particularly in transparency regulations and financing statements.

- **Expanding instruments for protecting the rule of law:** Through the possibility of financial sanctions and the withholding of European funding, the EU institutions have for the first time created strong instruments against the violation of fundamental principles of the rule of law in the Member States. In order to ensure better protection of democratic values and principles in the EU, the sanction mechanisms against Member States that demonstrably violate them must be further expanded and, if necessary, the decision-making powers and participation options of the relevant Member States restricted.

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