

Stream #7

Employment Policies and the Quest for a European Labour Market

Conveners:

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Employment and labour market policy were not originally central to the project of European integration, nor were they initially subject to hard governance at EU level. Long considered the preserve of Member States, these policy areas were primarily coordinated through soft instruments, reflecting concerns over subsidiarity and national diversity. Over the past two decades, however, the EU has gradually expanded its role in shaping employment and labour market policies through an evolving mix of soft coordination, regulatory intervention and financial steering.

The global financial crisis and the subsequent European sovereign debt crisis initially reinforced a policy paradigm centred on austerity, labour market flexibility and deregulation, with especially pronounced effects in peripheral Member States. From the late phase of the second Barroso Commission onwards, however, a gradual reorientation became visible. This shift was consolidated under the Juncker Commission and further strengthened by the successive von der Leyen Commissions, marking a renewed emphasis on the EU's social dimension. Key developments include the adoption of the EPSR and its Action Plan, the expansion of EU labour and social directives (e.g on adequate minimum wages, work-life balance and platform work) and the deployment of new financial instruments, notably the SURE mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the RRF in the postpandemic phase. Together, these developments point to a recalibration of the EU's approach to flexicurity, combining stronger social protection and labour standards with the continued use of conditionality, activation measures and supply-side labour market policies. At the same time, they raise important questions about policy coherence, social inequalities, national diversity and the EU's capacity to foster a more integrated and inclusive European labour market.

This stream invites policy-oriented contributions examining how EU-level employment and social policies shape national labour markets and contribute to—or hinder—the emergence of a European labour market. We particularly

welcome papers addressing pandemic and post-pandemic developments, with attention to peripheral Member States, core–periphery dynamics and comparative perspectives. Relevant topics include, but are not limited to: EU policy frameworks for employment and labour market coordination; policy pathways towards a European labour market; alignment between national growth models, labour market institutions and EU priorities; the role of EU financial instruments in linking investment, reform and social objectives; and the long-term implications of EU funding for labour market convergence. The stream aims to bring together empirical, theoretical and policy-oriented research to critically assess current governance arrangements and future pathways towards a more integrated European labour market.