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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CARE CHALLENGES IN WESTERN  
EUROPE

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**ABSTRACT**

In the following essay, I intend to summarize the challenges of the European union from social policy and social care perspective, and also from the economic and political point of view. The examination of contemporary social challenges helps identifying the most acute problems of Europe and this short account can indicate the further things to do, policy directions having a more general message as well. I try to analyze the status of European social models by exercising sectorial and thematic approaches instead of concentrating on the territorial divisions of different social systems.

From many aspects, my observations are not exact in a scientific sense, meaning that the development of European social care and its models are not “the end of the history”, rather they constitute an ongoing process, which is happening nowadays as well, thus without the endpoint, it cannot be evaluated properly from the necessary scientific distance. From a scientific point of view, it is also a problem that the whole idea and all these systems are shaped by humans, thus making everything complex and unpredictable. Beyond all these difficulties, there can be several challenges for the existing systems identified; future tendencies that worth considering from a general perspective.

**KEY WORDS:** social care, development, human, population, social policy

**INTRODUCTION**

Many people contend that Europe is beyond its glory. Only a few people think that their descendants will have a better future than they have after the ‘golden age’ of Keynesianism following the Second World War. We are witnessing now a diminishing optimism and social sluggishness. The reason is not only the uncertainty of the future but the fact that the social composition of the continent is changing inevitably. Despite the multicultural character of the western European cities, the harmonious social cohabitation between the migrants and the local population could not be realized. Social, economic and cultural rifts led to the emergence of parallel societies in many western European countries.

Historically, the Muslim (but not only Muslim) guest workers arrived after the Second World War were the building blocks of the social transformation in Europe, although they enjoyed the development less than the indigenous population. In the coming crises of the ‘70s, the migrant workers became a target of attacks, while the social tensions intensified. This critical moment coincided with the growing visibility of Muslims in the cities of Western Europe. Their appearance in the minds of the locals mounted on the internal problems of Europe, although the Muslims cannot be blamed for these problems.

Migration is a natural process that goes hand in hand with conflicts having an unseen impact on the demographic characteristics and the patterns of cohabitation. The low level of social assimilation is not only rooted in the differences between the interacting cultures but in the purposes of the migrants, they follow. It is evident that migrants came to the western countries due to the economic prosperity and the opportunities these countries could offer. These motivations are still valid and they are above all other factors such as the intention to getting acquainted with the local culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that immigrants do not feel the culture, institutions, and traditions of the recipient countries for themselves; sometimes they are even against it by referring to their own, original culture and religion. And this is the origin of the problem: Islam puts religion in the public sphere that is a challenge to the secular Europe.

Europeans greatly overestimate the share of Muslims in the total population. The total number of Muslims in the eu28 is 28 million. The negative views on Muslim people became connected to the question of mass migration in the latest years. But Islam phobia just like racism, can serve as a mark on certain radical people, but their scapegoating oftentimes led to the total refusal of their legit demands and complaints in connection with multiculturalism. Immigration has not only the 'migrant side'; the problems of the local people with the new communities cannot be swept under the carpet. Neither side of the migration process may monopolize the grievances given by the uneasy cohabitation of different cultures. Historically, educational system and gender equality have been the primary channels of integration in Europe, but these "equalizing" attempts tend to fail in managing cultural diversity caused by the immigration of people having a non-European origin and cultural affiliations. This is where nation-state becomes important again, because it seems that extending social rights to members of lower classes of the same nation is one thing (and in most of the western countries it was a successful process), but the massive migration undermines the common basis of citizenship that has been evolved as a result of several hundreds of years of "organic" development.

According to the French political scientist, Olivier Roy the radicalism based on Islam is a new form of resistance of the youth strengthening the generation gap. These people in Europe and all over the world consider Islam as a social and political mobilization force to achieve certain goals aiming to reform the existing system. The rapid changes of the world together with the tensions of the new, culturally alien environment make the young generation of migrants (originated mainly from the second and the third generation of immigrants) exposed to these pre-packed half-truths offered by radical Islam. Their identity crisis is soluble in these social radicalisms and populist ideologies that can offer them short-term solutions to their grievances. Against these prejudices, religious and secular education can be the best remedy, but these are long-term processes by their nature. These can open up the gates of social integration and help to achieve the marginalization of radical thinking.

If Europe really needs a certain large amount of migrant worker, the western countries have to find a solution in which there is no citizenship question on the agenda. In other words, the right to work and right to citizenship will be separated for these people. The so-called 'gastarbeiter' system in Germany is one example of this approach: the workers received only permit of residence and a work contract for a couple of years. A similar system is in operation in the gulf countries and in my opinion, it is a way to make immigration acceptable without the migrants who make use of the system without any benefit for the recipient country.

**1. Social policy and social care challenges in Western Europe**

**2.1 lack of sufficient amount of labor force**

Beyond intercultural challenges, Europe is in danger of ageing that is also connected with the lack of a sufficient amount of labor force in certain countries. “according to Eurostat (2010) statistics, in the eu27, the proportion of those 80+ will increase from 4.66 percent in 2010 to 6.93 percent in 2030 and to 10.99 percent in 2050, and the proportion of those 65+ from 17.38 per cent in 2010 to 28.81 per cent in 2050.” this will have serious consequences to the fiscal structure of the states. According to estimations, “population ageing is expected to add an average of 3.9 per cent of gdp to the cost of pensions 46 unsocial europe and a further 1.7 percent of gdp to the cost of healthcare in oecd countries between 2000 and 2030.”

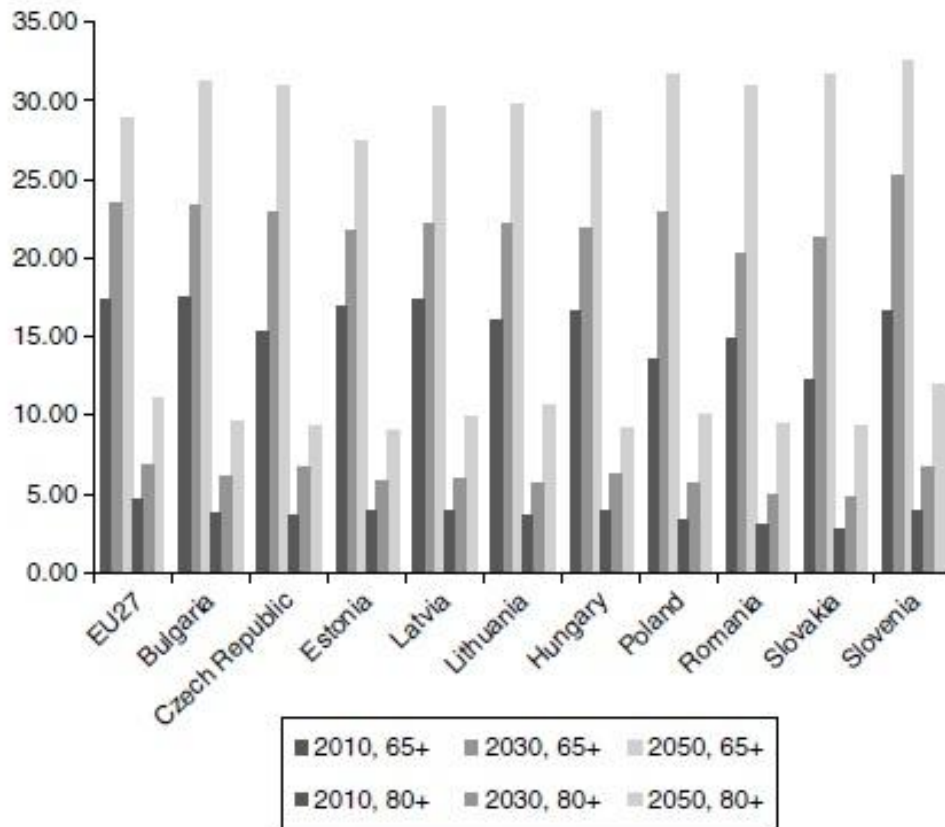


Figure 13.1 Share of total population aged 65/80 years and over, 2010, 2030 and 2050  
Source: Eurostat (2008).

**Fig.1. Costa-Font, Joan – Courbage, Christophe (eds.): Financing Long-Term Care in Europe. Institutions, Markets and Models, Palgrave, 2012.238.**

## 2.2 Old age as a phenomenon

The “discovery” and analysis of old age as a phenomenon in human life and its societal recognition is the result of the social processes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The long process of ageing became a common social “experience”, old people nowadays constitute not only a generation, but a social category as well. This new approach increases the importance of relatively new realms of social care such as long-term care and “gerontechnology”<sup>2</sup> meaning the practical use of intelligent assistance systems in the help of elderly people. To address the questions and conditions of old people, there are expectations that take the emergence of pensioner parties into account in the future political arena of Europe.

The ordinariness of oldness has caused a shift in the emphasis of social care: with the dramatic rise of pensioners, the generational approach in the basically health and poor-centered social care appeared. The separation among generations has taken place in Europe with regard not only to set of values and technology, but physically as well. As a consequence, nowadays multigenerational households are absolutely not common in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.3 Traditional household

Another generational challenge is coming from changes in the traditional household structure: the emancipation of women and their participation in the labor market implied decreasing attention for child-care in families. Thus, for these women having good position in the labor market and having a baby at the same time became a very demanding task.<sup>4</sup> In connection with this, Richard E. Easterlin contended that the more difference between lifestyle aspirations and actual living standards exist, the less will be the number of birth in the families. This demographic rule can be palpable in Western European countries, where values of individualism and secularism together with growing standard of living opened up a decline of fertility.<sup>5</sup> This process has started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (first in France) and Colin Crouch called it as “the emergence of industrial urban family” having both low death rate and birth rate.<sup>6</sup> Since then the demographic pattern did not change substantially, but the process spread from wealthier groups to the poorer and now the delayed marriage system, carrier aspirations or the popularity of one-membered households transformed the life of urban people significantly.

“If fewer children are born, and, at the same time, people live longer, there is a twofold pressure on the age distribution of the population, which results in a move towards ageing.”<sup>7</sup> This poses severe strains to the economic foundation of the European integration and welfare state in general designed for a previous era. The economic and welfare basis of the European Social Model can be traced back to the 1970s when the decision makers identified the following key points in order to maintain the idea:

- full employment in the society
- economic growth of 3–4%

<sup>1</sup> Tamara K. Hareven: Families, History and Social Change. Life-Course and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Westview, 2000. 219.

<sup>2</sup> Aging in European 34.

<sup>3</sup> Valeria Fargion: Timing and the development of social care services in Europe, West European Politics, 23:2, 2000. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Valeria Fargion: Timing and the development of social care services in Europe, West European Politics, 23:2, 2000. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Tomka Béla: A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe, Routledge, 2013. 22–23.

<sup>6</sup> Crouch, Colin: Social Change in Western Europe. Oxford University Press, 1999. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Tomka Béla: A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe, Routledge, 2013. 47.

- people entering the labor market at the age of 18 and pay taxes until the age of 65 (47 years altogether)

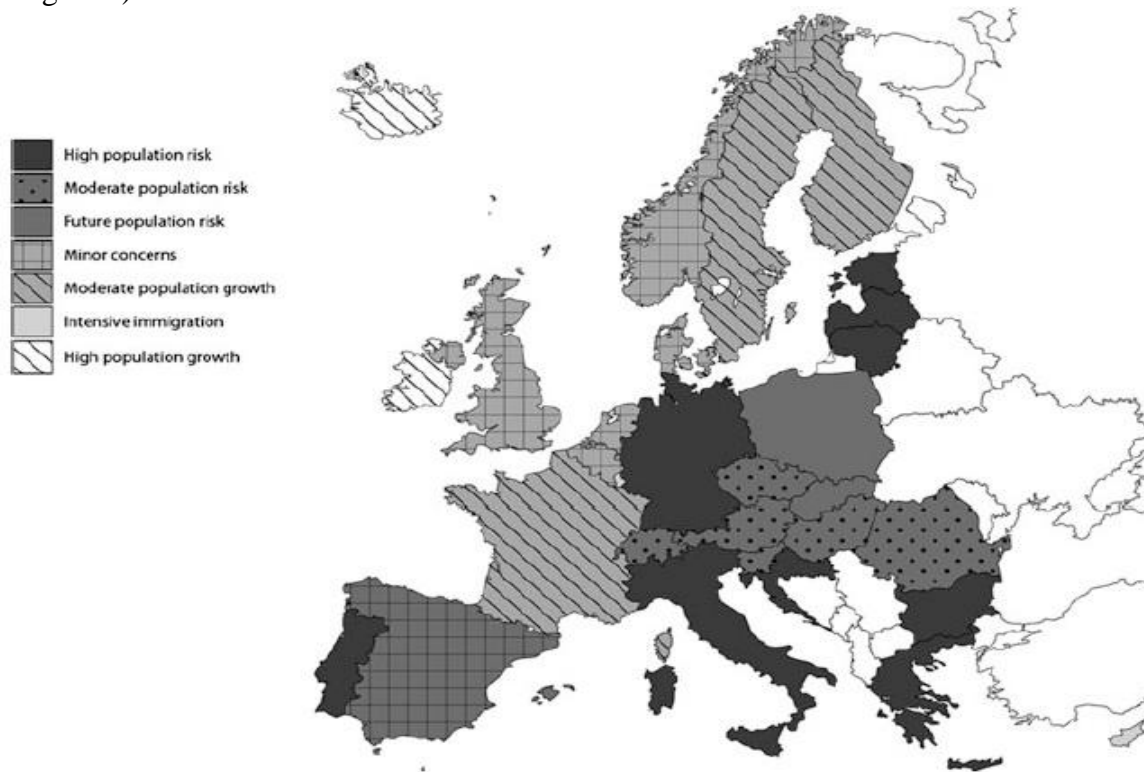


Fig. 1 Seven types of countries according to population structure

Fig. 2. Schubert, Klaus – Villota, Paloma de – Kuhlmann, Johanna (eds.): **Challengesto European Welfare Systems,**

In this system the high rate and efficiency of labor force contributed to the financial maintenance of the young and the old: 18 years for the young and 10 years for the old in average, because the life expectancy at that time was around 75 years. However, nowadays the practical limits of the system prolonged: many youngsters enter the labor force around 25 years old and people living in pensioner status is also a bit longer than before. In this way, the social security system has to finance 25+15 years of inactivity by having only 40 years of work. Experts contend that in the long run this situation cannot be sustained, especially if we consider that the economic growth is slower and the population in almost every European country is stagnating or even decreasing. It means that less and less employers produce the goods required to maintain the social allowance system for the pensioners and the young people.

The atomization of family structure can be attributed mainly to the Nordic countries, in which the Scandinavian model of social care prevails. This statement is especially interesting if we consider that the model itself is about a collectivist approach to welfare issues, but the society



in the Nordic countries consist of the most autonomous “responsibilities” that refuse the gender asymmetric setting.<sup>8</sup>

In the issue of gender equality, in the larger part of Europe the male breadwinner model is prevailing (except the Nordic countries) that cannot make the women possible to enter the labor market in larger scale. However, higher level of women employment would enable the mitigation of family and child poverty.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 7.3** Employment rates – total, male, female 2010

	Total	Male	Female
EU 27	64.1	70.1	58.2
New member states (12)	65.4	71.3	59.4
EU (15 countries)	64.3	70.5	58.0
Belgium	62.0	67.4	56.5
Denmark	73.3	75.6	71.1
Germany	71.1	76.0	66.1
Ireland	59.6	63.5	55.8
Greece	59.6	70.9	48.1
Spain	58.6	64.7	52.3
France	63.9	68.2	59.7
Italy	56.9	67.7	46.1
Luxembourg	65.2	73.1	57.2
Netherlands	74.7	80.0	69.3
Austria	71.7	77.1	66.4
Portugal	65.6	70.1	61.1
Finland	68.1	69.4	66.9
Sweden	72.1	74.6	69.6
United Kingdom	69.5	74.5	64.6

Source: Eurostat (2013d); Employment (main characteristics and rates, lfsi\_emp\_a); annual averages; concerning full-time equivalent see Chap. 4 Fig. 4.4 in this book

Fig. 3. Eibel, Dieter – Rokicka, Ewa – Leaman, Jeremy (eds.): **Welfare State at Risk. Rising Inequality in Europe**, Springer, 2014. 129.

#### 2.4 Globalization affect the social life of European

Not only internal, but external factors such as globalization affect the social life of European citizens. Skepticism towards globalization is originated from the facts that the last decades and global crises intensified the risks creating an environment of “less community, weaker solidarities, and more inequality” in the fabric of European societies.<sup>10</sup>

Globalization and the emergence of international trade to the world level factually pose serious challenge to the international competitiveness of the continent. Competitiveness in a global market-place assumes that states embrace a relatively minimal role in the provision of public goods. Europe has to have contest with overseas producers that have less social expenditures and lower salaries for the same job thus making the production more profitable for the companies and less pricy for the costumers. The expansion of world trade coincided with the era of decreasing growth in the EEC, and as a result, European companies started to outsource their activities to non-European markets leaving the local labor without occupation.

<sup>8</sup> Valeria Fargion: Timing and the development of social care services in Europe, *West European Politics*, 23:2, 2000. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Eibel, Dieter – Rokicka, Ewa – Lemman, Jeremy (eds.): *Welfare State at Risk. Rising Inequality in Europe*, Springer, 2014. 135.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Peter Blossfeld (et al.) (eds.): *Globalized Labour Markets and Social Inequality in Europe*. Palgrave, 2011.xiv.

The shift of manufacturing production to newly industrializing countries became the feature of the 1980s. The aim of the companies was to reduce labor costs and tax burdens, but as a consequence, they left “reduced fiscal capacity” for the welfare states of Western Europe to maintain the social care systems.<sup>11</sup>

There are fundamental differences between the cleavages of society comparing the beginning of the European project (in the mid- ‘50s) and the social structure of the contemporary Europe. Since social care and all kinds of social policy target the areas of potential inequalities by creating standard services and mitigating or removing the differences among social classes, it is important to see the developments in the EU not only horizontally (territorially), but vertically (periodically) as well.

According to Lipset and Rokkan<sup>12</sup> there were four substantial cleavages in Europe in the ‘50s and ‘60s: stockholders and employers; urban people and peasants; secularists and religious people; and centrum-periphery in the society. By now, we can see the erosion of these structures; these categories are not really the agendas for policy-making with the exception of centrum-periphery distinctions that are still causing significant disparity among regions and member states. As for the stockholders and employers’ opposition, the emergence of the service sector blurred the line between these categories and created capital accumulation in the hands of employers as well. The free movement of workforce also helped this process. The same way, there are less and less peasants (or people living in the countryside) in the European countries, therefore the city-village distinction also lost its significance in social policy. Maybe the irrelevance of religion is the most visible feature that is shaping the public thinking about the social structure, although coming from the periphery there is an emerging religious sentiment in Western Europe as well: the religion of the immigrants that is mostly the Islam.

So, what are the new cleavages of the society? First, there is a relevant difference between the citizen with global outlook and the citizen with national attitude enclosed by his/her local community. In this framework, the global citizen is the winner of the process, while those who insist on their national identities are on the losing side. The latter now has no confidence in the democratic institutions of Europe, since the perception is that on the level of decision makers the adherents of globalization take the lead.

This dilemma is very much connected to the fundamental problem of the EU, namely the attempt towards a deeper integration among the member states or the delegation of power back to the nation states, thus deconstructing the integration and making it possible to resist globalization on national level and creating national solutions to common challenges. Also, this question can be related to the redistributive role and solidarity that the European Union plays; factors that are indispensable for maintaining the cohesion of the society. In this sense, in a post-material world it is the standard of living that is in the center of every discussion about social care and social policy: the basic needs for living are now out of question in these developed countries. However, for achieving social well-being, several approaches can be found in the political spectrum of the European countries: liberals contend that if the state supports the riches and the talented ones, they can have positive impact on the whole society thus creating the well-being of everyone. This approach is the closest of all to the fundamental idea of capitalism, namely the free contest among the free people on the

<sup>11</sup> Anne Gray: *Unsocial Europe. Social Protection or Flexploitation*. Pluto Press, 2004. 34–37.

<sup>12</sup> Lipset and Rokkan. 1967. *Party systems and voter alignments: Cross-national perspectives*. Toronto: The Free Press

principle of equal opportunities. But opportunities are rarely equal in modern societies: globalization has created even bigger gap between the poor and the rich than it was half a century ago. Another approach of handling the issue of social cohesion can be labelled as “Christian democratic”, which is centered on the support of traditional values and formations of the society, namely the families. According to social democrats, the poor people have to be supported in order to achieve a minimum cohesion in the society and prevent social tensions. The idea of social care shares the same values as these two latter approaches and these principles are dominant in the public discussions, but in reality, the idea of free competition and thus the influence of economic wealth overcome these reasonable considerations. Adherents of liberal values often criticize the state if the budget contains massive welfare expenditures and the excessive role that states play in redistribution of goods. Even if this criticism legitimate, the principle of the economy for the people and not the people for the economy has the utmost importance in my analysis.

There can be differences measured in a sense that how Europeans think about well-being. In general, Western Europeans share the attitude of taking personal responsibility for the personal well-being, therefore more or less ready for any challenges during the life of the individual. The newly joined member states of Central Europe still have the legacy of the former period and therefore individuals of those countries rely more on the state allowances if something goes wrong in their personal life. Contrary to this, the whole European society underwent the process of the weakening of collective social identities that led to the dissolution of large social blocks (industrial workers, peasants, and owners) and created the culture of individualization.

As a consequence of globalization and enlargement process of the EU, the discrepancies among the member states created a much more compound system of society, in which different people live in different realities and their lives are not based on the same experiment even if they have the same level of income. This social dissipation, the emergence of new professions, the flexibility of jobs and the effect of workforce flowing from the Eastern member countries contributed to the weaker performance of the trade unions.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.5 Technological development**

During the assessment of contemporary challenges, we have to consider the permanently upgrading technology that is currently at our disposal. Technological development can have an impact on the welfare of the European societies in an unpredictably positive way. The most important fields of development will be most probably the medical sciences, biology and chemistry, which all effect the quality of life and thus social care policies. It is difficult to make estimations on the levels of automatization in certain sectors of labor market. A significant amount of substitution of workforce would bring a new system of social distribution. This may be the most important, but most uncertain challenge that the future holds, therefore preparing for it is a huge task for the social care system.

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<sup>13</sup> Vail, Mark I: Recasting Welfare Capitalism. Economic Adjustment in Contemporary France and Germany, Temple University Press, 2010. 4.



## 2.6 The sustainability of national pension arrangements

Broadly speaking, we may distinguish between economic, fiscal, and demographic pressures, all of which challenge the sustainability of national pension arrangements.<sup>14</sup> There are political hindrances to implement sustainable reforms: governments generally do not intend to make commitment to one strategic direction, because the implementation process is always longer than the political payback period of the reforms. A comprehensive reform has to cope with serious institutional obstacles: the challenging social phenomena and irresistible forces are in vain; welfare states oftentimes remain “immovable objects” and “immune to change”.<sup>15</sup> For example, as a result of several economic crises governments started to replace the passive protection of labor with a more active way of making initiatives. Instead of unconditional benefit entitlements for unemployed people, governments introduced training programs and labor counselling to help people becoming accommodated to the requirements of job market. Some experts coined this proactive role of state as a shift from “welfare state” to “workfare state”.<sup>16</sup> These changes were not so significant that it would be legit to talk about the stagnation of the welfare state. From the ‘70s, the money spent on welfare issues has been increasing constantly in the whole EEC and EU.<sup>17</sup>

There is no clear-cut formula for policy makers to have patterns that can be applied to every circumstance thus solving the problem of funding health care. Monitoring social changes is a constant task, health services have to adapt themselves to these challenges. Without a designated role for the decision makers, only the conclusions drawn from experiences so far and certain principles can serve as bases for the implementation of any reform. The most important criterion is that establishing of reforming social care systems has to be under the greatest transparency and with the incorporation most of the interest of the social policy actors. Since the necessary requirements listed here have certain limits, they cannot be realized equally as we could see during the assessment of European social care models.

- vertical equity (progressive distribution), who pays how much
- horizontal equity: people with the same income level pays the same amount and receive equal care
- provides access to the widest area of health care
- makes the economy efficient (creates opportunity for job mobility and labor market flexibility, and have positive impact on international competitiveness
- uses the latest technology
- cost effective both from individual and systemic perspective: efficient in distribution and in allocating the financial sources<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the existence of the European Union, the decision making system of the nation state still bears the responsibility for in the determination of health care and labor conditions of its citizens. They are part of an everyday reality and national employment and social care regulations have their significant differences among countries.<sup>19</sup> These divergences in social policies can partly be regarded as the roots of social inequalities.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Martin Schludi: *The Reform of the Bismarckian Pension Systems. A Comparison of Pension Politics in Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden.* Amsterdam University Press, 2005. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Kees van Kersbergen – Barbara Vis: *Comparative Welfare State Politics. Development, Opportunities, and Reform.* Cambridge University Press. 2014. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Schubert, Klaus – Villota, Paloma de – Kuhlmann, Johanna (eds.): *Challenges to European Welfare Systems*, Springer, 2016. 325.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Gray: *Unsocial Europe. Social Protection or Flexploitation.* Pluto Press, 2004. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Elias Mossailos (et al.) (eds.): *Funding health care: Options for Europe.* Open University Press, 2002. 272.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Peter Blossfeld (et al.) (eds.): *Globalized Labour Markets and Social Inequality in Europe.* Palgrave, 2011. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Eibel, Dieter – Rokicka, Ewa – Leaman, Jeremy (eds.): *Welfare State at Risk. Rising Inequality in Europe*, Springer, 2014. 121.

It has to be seen that the existing form of the European Union as a mean to shape social coexistence by regulations is not powerful enough to achieve an overall and efficient version of social care systems. While the EU redistributes 1% of the GDP of the member states covering a wide range of issues regarding the integration, a member state can have a budget of half of the annual GDP (like Hungary) for supporting different policies in a much more coherent territory (within one country). This financial ineligibility together with the legitimacy crisis of the EU (democracy deficit of the central institutions) and the weak means to enforce the implementation of the regulations prove that now the formation of the social care systems in Europe is deeply influenced by the national governments. This fact in itself contributes to the existence of various forms of social care and social policies in Europe having different standards and being constantly exposed to daily politics.

### **CONCLUSION**

Beyond the institutional social care, there is the realm of original interhuman care, and the future will most probably set the European communities in motion to this direction. In this sense, the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be characterized by the construction and perfection of institutional social care, while the 21<sup>th</sup> century will be the degradation of this system and its replacement with civil and local initiatives. The monopolized position of the state will diminish and the notion of “welfare state” will be replaced by “welfare society” that is closer to the traditional family and religion-based care systems of the European history, but it materializes a higher level of care and general sensitivity to social imbalances without any connection to religious values. The promotion of these everyday interactions is the common duty of the society, but there is no best policy recommendation of the way, how this should be done. The two most important things in this regard, are the follows: creating a world in which everybody has the possibility to realize his/her talent. The responsibility of state in this sense is to empower the citizens to take part in the production and common activities. Besides, it is crucial to have an effective social worker network to prevent the overuse of public health and education systems.

An effective welfare state actually does not withhold resources from the economic development, but make way for a strong and sustainable economy instead. “Political polemics suggest that market-making and social policy are opposed in a zero-sum game. The evidence, however, argues that they are complementary: advances in either one requires advances in the other.”<sup>21</sup>Welfare services are social investments that require long-term thinking and strategic vision. Unfortunately, this is in opposition with the policy of profit making in the short term. To form social policies and address the latest challenges, social systems have to follow one direction, one designated strategy. The constant change and curtailment in the system undermine the stability of the system and make it more susceptible to public distrust.

Beside all these considerations mentioned above, the fundamental task for Europe in the future is to preserve the legacy of the last two generations that after decades of bloodshed and conflicts created and maintained peace in the old continent. Europe in this form is a young project from historical distance, therefore it needs time and patience even during these turbulent times of ours.

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<sup>21</sup>The Search for Europe. Contrasting Approaches, Open Mind, 2015. 131.

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