



SOCIAL RIGHTS MONITOR 25

The Social Rights Monitor (SRM) analyses the state of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights at national level, as well as the situation of the just transition and civic space. The SRM builds on assessments carried out by National Strategy Groups. These groups are made up of national civil society organisations and are established to monitor the implementation of the EPSR in their countries. They are led by SOLIDAR members. In 2025, 13 countries were analysed (Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain). The general trends that emerged are summarised below. A series of policy recommendations addressed to EU decision-makers are also listed in this summary.

European Trends

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About SOLIDAR

SOLIDAR is a European network of progressive Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to advance social justice through a just transition in Europe and worldwide. We represent over 50 member organisations based in 26 countries (19 of which are EU countries), among which national CSOs in Europe, as well as some non-EU and EU-wide organisations, working in one or more of our fields of activity.

The network is brought together by its shared values of solidarity, equality and participation.

SOLIDAR voices the concerns of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions by carrying out advocacy actions, project management and coordination, policy monitoring and awareness-raising across its different policy areas.

What is the Social Rights Monitor (SRM)?

The Social Rights Monitor assesses the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at national level from a civil society perspective. The EPSR – also known as the Social Pillar – is a set of 20 principles that guide the action of the European Union in the realm of social affairs and policies. In other words, it is intended to be a compass guiding the EU towards a more social Europe. For too many people, however, the implementation of these principles at national and EU level is not yet a reality.

Thanks to the contribution of our members and their networks on the ground (the National Strategy Groups), SOLIDAR monitors the extent to which social rights are respected, upheld and promoted for all people living in the EU. The Social Rights Monitor also investigates the health of civic space and social and civil dialogue in the EU, as well as the extent to which a just transition is being pursued. Therefore, the thematic areas covered by the Monitor are the following: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market; Fair working conditions; Social inclusion and protection; a Just transition; and Civic space. The first three correspond to the three chapters of the EPSR, while the last two have been added to give a fuller picture of social justice in Europe.

Thanks to first-hand data gathered by national civil society organisations, the Social Rights Monitor constitutes a direct channel of policy recommendations between the national level and EU policymakers. It thus amplifies the voices and needs of the most marginalised groups. The Monitor dedicates a section to “advocacy messages” which result from the national-level analyses in each thematic area and are addressed to EU policymakers.

Countries are assigned a score for each thematic area out of a maximum of 100 points. This makes immediately visible how each country is performing in each area and enables comparison with other countries. The numerical scores originate from the National Strategy Groups’ (NSGs) assessments of national developments related to social rights, civic space and just transition. Negative developments in an area result in lower scores. NSGs rate these developments for each country by replying to Linkert-scale questions. This means that the score of a country’s thematic area is given by adding up all the rates given to the questions concerning that thematic area and expressing the score out of 100. The overall score of a country is the average of the thematic areas scores. Further details on the questionnaire and data gathering are provided in the section “About: What is the process?”

Since the SRM score reflects the NSG’s assessment of changes—either improvements or deteriorations—in each of the five areas over the past 12 months, it does not represent the overall status of these dimensions in absolute terms. Instead, it highlights recent trends. For example, a country with a historically strong welfare state might receive a low score if recent reforms have significantly weakened social rights or pose a risk of doing so. This does not imply that the overall situation is poor, but rather that recent developments are cause for concern and may undermine social standards over time.

Therefore, the SRM should not be used to compare the overall situation of social rights across countries—official statistics are more appropriate for that purpose. Instead, it serves as a tool to track short-term national trends and to understand the perspectives of civil society organizations (CSOs) on these developments.

What is the process?

The Social Rights Monitor is a tool that amplifies the voice of progressive civil society at national level. Its content is based on the inputs provided by the National Strategy Groups (NSGs) set up by SOLIDAR’s members and partners, which are active in the countries analysed. They consist of NGOs, associations, movements, trade unions, academia and thinktanks, ensuring that the perspective of civil society is mirrored in the Social Rights Monitor’s analysis. The Monitor reflects the experiences of these organisations, which are active on the ground, and the experiences are complemented by scientific data gathered through desk research.

The data elaborated in the Social Rights Monitor are gathered by SOLIDAR’s secretariat through a questionnaire distributed to the National Strategy Group Leaders (our national members) and completed with information produced by each group. From 2023, this questionnaire has been carried out online.

Based on the picture that emerges from the Monitor, SOLIDAR and the NSGs together devise policy recommendations for EU policymakers. These aim to make social rights, a healthy planet and an enabling, free, protected civic space a reality for all in Europe. The key recommendations stemming from the analysis are used as a basis for SOLIDAR's social affairs advocacy work.

The SRM is published every year, around the end of November/beginning of December and its findings cover the period going from June of the previous year to May of the year of the publication. This timeline is due to the fact that the NSGs submit their questionnaire by the end of May of the publication year.

How do we use it?

SOLIDAR's main role as a European-level civil society network is as a bridge between EU institutions and their policies on the one hand and our progressive members working at the national level on the other. The Social Rights Monitor is a valuable tool to gather information from the ground and bring it to policymakers' attention. This ensures that the voices of the most neglected social groups are duly taken into account. For example, the SRM complements the European Semester, by providing a more-complete assessment of Member State policies. Regrettably, the Semester is still too focused on countries' economic and financial performances and does not provide sufficient guidance on upward social convergence in the European Union.

SOLIDAR disseminates the findings of the Social Rights Monitor in various ways, including through the Social Europe Conference, an annual event at which it is presented, and which also explores a topic of priority for social Europe. More generally, the Monitor is one of the main ways through which the SOLIDAR network presents its positions on social affairs, so its findings are mainstreamed throughout our advocacy work.

Social Rights Monitor Overview

The 2024-2025 reporting period shows a Europe is experiencing difficulty in upholding its core values, reports for the 2024-2025 period show. Key aspects of the democratic welfare state, such as civic rights and social welfare, have been put under significant strain. The housing crisis has intensified, pushing many households into poverty, so they are increasingly unable to access essential services such as energy and transport. Budget cuts threaten the future and adequacy of welfare and social security services, at a time when challenges are rising in the form of the green, digital and demographic transitions. Civil society faces a multitude of attacks, ranging from hostile rhetoric and threats by right-wing politicians to bans on protests, violence against protestors and large funding cuts. Women, third-country nationals, ethnic minorities and the LGBTQI+ community have experienced a rise in verbal and physical hostilities, aggravating the discrimination they already face.

However, there has been positive evolution in some areas. In many countries, education is helping combat high youth unemployment and playing an important role in up- and re-skilling workers for quality green jobs as part of the green transition. Minimum-wage and income levels have been increased, even though these have not always kept up with rises in living costs. To combat these rising costs, some countries have subsidized energy, transport and housing.



Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market

Investment in the welfare system

Most monitored countries increased social expenditure as a share of GDP from 2023, though the extent varied.^[1] But in some countries, such as Greece, the share remained the same. In all countries, social expenditure remains one of the largest budget allocations, but the welfare system in many countries is proving inadequate to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Whilst the underlying causes vary, welfare systems in several countries are ineffective for structural reasons. Access to welfare services for all citizens, especially in rural areas, remains a pressing problem. Services such as daycare centres and shelters are more readily available in urban centres, but even then often have waiting lists. Even in countries with a high coverage rate of such services, such as Serbia, few professional staff are available.^[2] Another reason welfare services are often inadequate is budget cuts, as funds are often reallocated to other social services. In Germany, for example, of €180 billion allocated to work and social affairs, €130 billion finances the pension system.^[3] Another big reason welfare systems are ineffective is that people entitled to benefits do not always take them up, either because they do not know they exist, or because the application process is highly bureaucratic or digitized. As a result, some of the most vulnerable groups – such as migrants, refugees and people with low (digital) literacy – have some of the highest non-take-up rates.^[4]

Gender equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) Gender Equality Index for 2024 accorded the European Union a score of 71 out of 100.^[5] a moderate increase of 0.8 from 2023. The EU scored highest in health (88.6 points) and money (83.4). It improved most in power (a 2.3-point rise), thanks to increases in the sub-domains of economic power (plus 2.9 points) and social power (plus 2.5). No significant regression occurred in the domains covered by index. However, there were significant disparities between the countries featured in the Social Rights Monitor (SRM). Spain was at one end of the spectrum with 76.7 points, and Greece at the other with 59.3.

A multitude of factors – ranging from economic and social to structural – affect women's employment across countries. In all the monitored countries, women are underrepresented in higher-paying and decision-making roles. All countries and sectors have gender pay gaps. Women's employment and social status are affected by cultural expectations that they care for families, and these are often reinforced by a lack of institutional support for women and inadequate laws. All the monitored countries lack adequate and available childcare facilities such as daycare centres. This particularly affects lower-income families and forces women to take on precarious jobs or not work, so that they can perform care duties.

Gender-based violence has been increasing across Europe, and feminicides reached record highs in Italy and Germany. Despite these increases, women-specific forms of violence, such as obstetric and gynaecological violence, are not always recognized as separate crimes. Violence and aggression against LGBTQI+ people are also rising, often fuelled by right-wing discourse.

Education, training and lifelong learning

Non-traditional forms of learning expanded in 2024 in terms of both policy support and recognition. They are becoming more widely seen as high-quality alternatives to academic learning. Several countries are promoting lifelong learning to up- or re-skill workers for new professions in the green economy. Slovenia, for example, introduced a programme to train teachers in digital, sustainable and financial literacy.^[6]

Vocational education and training (VET) opportunities are increasing too, with Serbia, Spain and Bulgaria adopting dual education models. Both Spain and Bulgaria acknowledge the importance of STEM education, and Bulgaria is actively addressing this through its STEM centres.^[7] Spain, however, faces a shortage of STEM teachers, in particular in mathematics.^[8]

The two trends highlight the need for continued investment in all forms of education throughout the EU. Public schools often struggle to provide high-quality education due to a lack of resources. Private schools, such as the Onassis Schools in Greece,^[9] do not have this problem, as they are often financed through both public and private sources. Moreover, private schools increasingly profile themselves as elite schools for elite students, leading to segregation based on students' academic performance and social class.

Similar moves towards *de facto* academic segregation of students can be seen in other parts of the EU, such as France's "Choc des Savoirs" (Knowledge Shock) measures, which introduce ability-based grouping.^[10] Other forms of private education also remain prevalent. In Serbia, more than 17% of adults are engaged in non-formal education (NFE), of which private tutoring is a prevalent form.

Inclusion of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers (MRAS), minorities and vulnerable groups

Migration policy is a topic of heavy debate in Europe. Many countries have introduced new and stricter legislation. More worryingly, countries such as Greece and Italy have continued illegal practices such as pushbacks and return hubs. These are being challenged before courts, however, resulting in some condemnations.^[11] People on the move continue to face multiple forms of discrimination in Europe. They often receive lower wages (in particular migrant women) and lower social benefits. They tend to be subject to stricter entitlement conditions, and they encounter barriers to employment and housing – such as language barriers and discriminatory biases – that often push them into informal employment or housing. Moreover, structural barriers in many countries often make it impossible for migrants to regularize their stays. A disastrous illustration was Portugal's transition to the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), which led to many technical and practical issues that prevented people on the move from renewing or applying for a permit.

Positive developments included measures in Germany to promote specific forms of migration, in particular for work. Others countries, such as Slovenia and Serbia, updated existing frameworks to facilitate the regularization of stays and improve access to the labour market. Croatia introduced similar measures, as well as non-discrimination amendments that protect foreign workers against wage dumping and others that regulate the conditions for employer-provided housing to be declared adequate.

Youth employment

In 2024, 9.2% of young people (15-24 years) in the EU were not in employment, education or , the same rate as in 2023training.^[12] EU youth unemployment was 14.9% in 2024, a 0.3-percentage-point increase from 2023. However, the rates are substantially higher in countries such as Albania, Italy, North Macedonia and Kosovo. All four of these countries have difficulty in matching educational outcomes to demand for labour, so many young people with secondary or even tertiary qualifications end up working in jobs that require only lower qualifications. This has led to a brain drain, as an increasing number of young people emigrate to other countries or regions.

Another important factor in youth unemployment is the opportunity to acquire work experience and find a first job. The Youth Guarantee has greatly improved youth employment in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Serbia. Italy, too, implemented the Youth Guarantee but with less success. One of the biggest reasons cited was derogations on youth employment clauses which circumvented obligations for companies to employ young people. Other initiatives that led to improvements were the Bulgarian job matching platform edujobs.mon.bg and career counselling services in Slovenia.



Fair Working Conditions

Adequate wages

Minimum wages increased across Europe but often proved insufficient to effectively combat poverty.^[13] Average wages, too, increased but often failed to keep up with increases in the cost of living – such as consumer and housing prices.^[14] As a result, many households' purchasing power declined. The rate of people in work but at risk of poverty in the EU was 8.2%, a marginal decrease of 0.1 percentage point ^[15] 2023. In many countries, a greater percentage of people in socially vulnerable groups are working poor due to interacting factors such as gender pay gaps, lower wages for migrants and in economically weaker regions, and sectoral differences.

Job security

The EU employment rate was 75.8% in 2024, a 0.5 percentage point increase from 2023,^[16] and the employment rate in many countries rose only incrementally. The green economy has provided a major boost to employment in countries such as Spain. Many of these green jobs provide workers with long-term and stable employment.

In contrast, temporary contracts continue to be prevalent in Southern and Eastern Europe. Low-wage and low-productivity sectors such as tourism, retail and personal services often use temporary contracts. As women and young people are overrepresented in these sectors, they are most prone to precarious working conditions. Migrants, too, often work in these and similar sectors, and they are even more vulnerable if employed in informal work. Serbia's agricultural sector has a particularly high informal employment rate. More than half the workers in the sector are engaged informally, compared to only 6.1% in non-agricultural sectors. Precarious employment leaves workers vulnerable, as they often find it hard to defend their labour rights.

Occupational safety and health

OSH continues to be a problem in Europe. Kosovo, North Macedonia and Spain all operate with outdated legal frameworks, which obfuscate the true numbers of OSH-related incidents. Proposals have been introduced to improve or update the frameworks in Kosovo and North Macedonia but have either not yet been approved or not yet implemented. New OSH legislation frameworks entered into force and were implemented in 2024 in Albania and Serbia.

All these countries need effective OSH enforcement, which includes adequate labour inspections. Employers in violation of national OSH laws can often escape accountability due to the limited number of inspectors and their limited capacity.

Social dialogue

Whilst social dialogue has been relatively stable in central Europe, it remains worryingly limited in the Western Balkan region. Albania^[17] and Kosovo^[18] had tripartite social dialogue institutions that remained functionally inoperative during the reporting period. No new collective agreements were concluded in the Serbian Social and Economic Council, and social dialogue is highly ineffective in North Macedonia.^[19]



Social Inclusion and Protection

Housing

The SRM makes clear the extent of Europe's housing crisis, which is multi-faceted and affects different social groups in different ways. Young people find it increasingly difficult to access adequate housing: Price increases mean that acquiring property is for many a far-off dream, while rent increases often force them to adopt solutions such as co-housing. In Spain, around 70% of young people live in rented properties; of these, 87% share apartments, usually among three or four people.

Economically disadvantaged households, such as those headed by single parents or migrants, also face major challenges, as wage increases in most countries have not kept up with the increases in housing prices. A large factor in these increases and the limited availability of affordable housing is the widespread financialization of the housing market. Another factor is the shortage of social and public housing, which particularly affects vulnerable groups that cannot afford market prices. A comprehensive strategy is needed at EU and national level. The European Affordable Housing Plan represents an important opportunity to tackle the financialization of the housing market, eradicate homelessness and ensure access to adequate, affordable and sustainable housing to all in the EU. Strategies also appear to be lacking to address homelessness and the housing problems of national minorities, such as those Roma who live in encampments.

Poverty eradication

Poverty is a pressing challenge in Europe, even though the fight against poverty was one of three 2030 headline targets of the EPSR Action Plan, together with job creation and training.^[20] In 2024, 21% of the EU's population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion.^[21] In many countries, the poverty rate either decreased only marginally or even increased. Of the EU's three headline targets, reducing poverty continues to prove the most difficult.

Many families have been unable to cope with inflation in the prices of consumer goods and housing. Certain social groups are particularly vulnerable to poverty, such as single parents, migrants and low-income households, all of which are often already socially disadvantaged in other ways. The vulnerability of these groups illustrates that poverty does not have a single cause but is instead multifaceted, and that its various aspects all require attention.

There is an urgent need for the European Commission to develop a comprehensive European anti-poverty strategy. This should be holistic and based on principles including human rights and intersectionality. The strategy should feature targeted measures to address all forms of poverty, taking into account the specificities of both the various social groups affected and the regions they live in. There are exceptionally large differences in poverty among regions in countries such as Italy and Croatia. Southern Italy has a poverty rate of 46.6%, over 2.5 times the rate of the north.^[22] In general, poverty is greater in rural regions, which are also more prone to transport and energy poverty.

Exclusionary eligibility criteria and lack of accessible information are significant barriers that stop migrants and minorities from accessing key social assistance and welfare programmes, leading to the non-take-up of benefits. France has introduced several projects that facilitate access to benefits by – for example – automatically filling out application forms.^[23] In Portugal, civil society remains vital in providing welfare services and making them accessible amid a lack of institutional and financial support from public authorities.

Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare is difficult in Europe, especially for vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities and migrants. Language and cultural barriers often prevent them from seeking medical assistance. Albania introduced health mediator programmes, which offer community-based information sessions by members of minority communities like the Roma.^[24] These groups can also face discrimination in access to healthcare: In Spain, the current healthcare system ties access to residency status.

A general problem is the prohibitive expense of healthcare, mainly in the form of private healthcare costs and out-of-pocket payments. Nearly a quarter of Italians use private healthcare without private insurance coverage due to long waiting lists in the public healthcare system.^[25] Slovenia, on the other hand, made supplementary health insurance mandatory, significantly improving access to quality healthcare.



Civic Space

Enabling space for civil society organizations

Civic space in Europe is going through turbulence. Several countries continue to be classified as “Narrowed” by the CIVICUS Monitor, indicating continued restrictions on and violations of civil rights.^[26] Worrying examples have been the bans on certain protests and protest groups. Germany’s classification was reduced to “Narrowed” from “Open”, as it cracked down heavily on pro-Palestine protests under the pretext of combatting antisemitism.

In general, the tolerance of divergent opinions and their expression is decreasing, often fuelled by hostile language from politicians and increasingly leading to concrete consequences. The French *contrat d’engagement républicain* (CER – Republican Commitment Contract) was used to deny subsidies to associations with opinions that diverge from those of local governments. In Kosovo and Italy, some CSO activities providing aid to minorities have been criminalized. Funding for CSOs is increasingly being cut, heavily limiting their capacity to operate, even in countries such as Slovenia and Portugal that are classified as “Open”.

A highly worrying form of this intolerance is violence and intimidation used against protesters by the state and government-aligned actors. Greece and Serbia are now classified as “Obstructed”, and large protests in both countries – that called out governments on their failings – were met with heavy police presence. Serbian police used excessive force to disrupt several student protests and deter protesters from forming associations.

Involvement of civil society organizations in civil dialogue

CSOs throughout Europe are reporting challenges and barriers to meaningful participation in civil dialogue. Bulgaria and Croatia adopted legislation that imposed “transparency” obligations on CSOs, and Croatia adopted a lobbying act that severely impacts CSOs’ operational capacity. In many countries, civil society organisations often have only a symbolic role in decision-making and little to no room to make meaningful contributions. CSOs report a lack of follow-up on their policy feedback, structural and technical problems with online consultation platforms, and government favouritism when selecting CSOs for consultations.

This lack of meaningful participation combined with ever-scarcer funding systematically discourages CSOs from advocating policy changes or participating at all. The Croatian Ombudswoman’s Report presented evidence of this decline. In 2023, 325 CSOs participated in online public consultations and provided over 2 300 comments. But in 2024, only 127 CSOs participated, and they provided just 582 comments.^[27]



Just Transition

Decent green jobs in the green transition

Europe's green economy has great potential as a contributor to social progress. It has proven an important source of job creation in Spain, while Albania has introduced several initiatives to promote the green economy.[28] Other countries, including North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia, show strong potential for green job and green economy growth.

These examples show that several elements are essential to fully realize Europe's green-economy potential. One is sufficient investment in training educators and workers. Another is public support to foster green jobs that are high quality and nurture social justice and inclusion. The EU Quality Jobs Roadmap is a key to achieving this objective, but it must be driven by workers and communities, allocate sufficient funds, and foster just transitions through a lifelong-learning approach.[29]

Access to energy and energy poverty

Access to affordable energy remains a persistent challenge throughout Europe. Nearly a tenth of EU households (9.2%) were unable to heat their homes adequately in 2024.[30] The rate was considerably higher in Bulgaria (19%), Greece (19%) and Spain (17.5%). Whilst prices have decreased since the energy crisis, energy remains a sizeable cost for many households. Poorer households tend to rely on fossil fuels for heating, but they are often less effective and entail serious safety risks, especially when housing is inadequate, due to overcrowding for example.

Both the EU and national governments introduced measures to mitigate rises in energy prices. Germany introduced counselling services, such as the Stromspar-check,[31] and financial benefits, such as heating and climate allowances.[32] As part of the EU Energy Community Initiative, Bulgaria has been supporting the development of energy communities to provide citizens with green and affordable energy.

Access to sustainable mobility and transport poverty

Transport costs have been rising in Europe in line with other living expenses. Especially in sparser populated areas, public transport is inadequate partly due to insufficient investment. This, combined with a lack of other affordable options, leads many people to rely on individual forms of transport – often cars powered by fossil fuels.

France, Kosovo and Portugal all announced strategies and sizeable investments for their railway systems, seeking to improve the general quality of services and their provision to rural areas. However, these strategies span multiple years, and concrete improvements are not expected for several months or even years. Spain has taken a different approach, heavily subsidising public train, metro and bus services by offering substantial discounts and even free tickets.

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