

# Unidad de Políticas Comparadas (CSIC)

Working Paper 05-08

## EUROPEANIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION AND WELFARE REFORM

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Paper presented at the International Conference:  
“Territorial Governance for the 21st Century”,  
Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Arts & Sciences,  
Brussels, 16-17 September 2005.

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### Abstract

*Europeanization can be regarded as a process that finds expression in the gradual redefinition of state sovereignty and the development of supranational common institutions (e.g. Agreement of Schengen, Court of Justice, Euro currency). In parallel, territorial subsidiarity seeks to provide for a greater sub-state say in areas of social policy-making often linked to cultural or identity considerations. This paper deals with welfare development in the European social model in contemporary times. While a paradigm shift in macro-economic policies has allowed for monetary centralisation and a growing matching of EU internal 'open' markets, the quest for the decentralization of welfare programmes has also aimed at meeting demands for policy innovation and a more effective management. Allegedly, welfare provision by sub-state diversity may affect collective solidarity and redistribution. The emergence of new social risks and the role played by the mesogovernments in welfare reform in Europe are also subject to analysis and discussion in this paper.*

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## 1. Introduction

The unfolding of structures of governance at a supranational European level is taking place by means of formalising interactions--directly and indirectly-- between the twenty five members of the European Union. These interactions affect mainly to actors and policy networks traditionally confined to operate in nation-state arenas. An emerging new layer of supra-national government and an internal all-round political concurrence are processes well under way. As a multilevel political framework, the European Union is a compound of policy processes. Europeanization implies that national, regional and local policies are to be shaped by considerations beyond the mere centrality of the member states.

Europeanization relates to all three economic, political and social domains, and comprises countries sharing a somewhat common historical development and embracing values of democracy and human rights of an egalitarian nature. However, the concept is far from being precise and clear-cut. It is pluri-semantic and subject to various degrees of understandings and interpretations. EU peoples have internalised European institutions, albeit rather loosely and gradually. The European Court of Justice and the Schengen Agreement, as well as common policy-making represented by the Euro currency, the Maastricht macro-economic criteria or programmes put forward by means of the OMC (Open Method of Co-ordination) can be regarded as steps advancing firmly towards the very idea of supra-state Europeanization.<sup>1</sup> In parallel, the principle of subsidiarity provides for decisions to be taken at EU level only if local, regional or state democratic institutions cannot perform better. In other words, the preferred locus for decision-making is that closer to the citizen, and as local as possible. Some political elites of the EU member states, reluctant to further the process of European institutionalisation, have often interpreted the subsidiarity principle as a safeguard for the preservation of traditional national sovereignty and, consequently, the powers to intervene centrally.

Both processes of bottom-up supra-nationalisation and top-down decentralization have allowed a considerable extension of a type of European *cosmopolitan localism* (Moreno, 2005). This is reflected in both societal interests, which are aimed at developing a sense of local community and at participating simultaneously in the international context adjusting both the particular and the general. In a European and global perspective, the harmonisation of economic development has gone hand in hand with the decentralization of political institutions and the regionalization of welfare development. However, the role of sub-state territories has been largely neglected. In 2001, the White Paper on European Governance (CEC, 2001) stated that the national governments of the member states were not involving the local and regional 'players' appropriately in the preparation of their positions on EU policies and, consequently, were not facilitating democratic accountability at those levels of government. Illustrative of this lack of political impulse is the case of the 'partner regions'.<sup>2</sup>

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1 However, the constitution of a United States of Europe is not the necessary outcome of this process of Europeanization. The neo-functionalist school of thought has generally adopted the view that universal progress requires integration, which is made equal to cultural assimilation and single identity formation, along the lines of the American 'melting-pot'.

2 In 2002 about half of the EU-15 regions were 'partner regions', or regions with legislative powers (in almost half of the member states), and were regarded as not being genuinely accountable to their own citizens (Committee of the Regions, 2002). There were 'partner regions' in Finland (the Åland Islands),

Welfare has remained largely as a national centrally-run function, mainly as regards compulsory contributory or tax-financed schemes of social protection. However, the political salience of sub-state regions and regional policy-making in the welfare realm has drawn growing attention to the inter-relationship of both fields of research: territory and welfare (McEwen and Moreno, 2005). Not so long ago, ideas, interests and institutions related to welfare and to spatial developments were frequently regarded as contradictory or even incompatible with each other. Generally speaking, territorial politics literature has tended to neglect the social dimension, while research on welfare has taken the unitary nation-state for granted.

Regional actors, mesogovernments and local authorities have now gained relevance not only concerning culture and identity politics. Sub-state institutions are increasingly regarded as optimal welfare policy providers as a result of the interaction of the processes of bottom-up globalization and top-down devolution of powers. However, welfare decentralization has also been criticised on the grounds that it can exacerbate inequalities and jeopardise collective solidarity. All these developments might have modified, to some extent, the tenets and configurations characteristic of European welfare.

Is Europe's social model today based upon the same cognitive and normative principles of several decades ago? Have the views of actors been substantially modified on the role of the European welfare states? Is there a growing convergence or divergence among national welfare approaches to reform? Can we expect the development of supranational European institutions for social policy-making and/or a further Europeanization of national welfare policies? These are questions which regard both the functional and territorial aegis of social life that need to be scrutinised in order to lend evidence to claims of paradigm shifts and mutations within the broad model of social Europe.

The two subsequent sections of this paper reflect on economic paradigm shifts and welfare reform in Europe. The emergence of 'new social risks' and the recipes to meet new risks challenges seem to indicate a confluence of responses in the various European welfare regimes. In general, most EU countries follow the developments carried out in the Liberal typology of social protection. However, this cannot be made regarded as a process of 'Americanization' of welfare. In fact, there is a widespread belief that the European social model provides collective unity and identity to most EU countries, in contrast to other systems, especially the United States social model, where individualization is a distinctive tenet for welfare provision. After discussing the territoriality of welfare solidarity, an examination of the increasing role played by sub-state layer of European governance is carried out in the latter part of this paper

## **2. Economic paradigm shift and welfare reform in Europe**

In general terms, paradigms suggest new approaches to empirical evidence, new problems for solution and sometimes, but not necessarily, new explanations for phenomena which cannot be understood through other paradigms. In policy terms, a paradigm is concerned with the manner political and social actors approach key issues

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Belgium (3 regions, 3 communities), Germany (16 Länder), Austria (9 Länder), Spain (17 Comunidades Autónomas), Portugal (2 autonomous regions), Italy (20 regioni and 2 autonomous provinces), and the United Kingdom (3 parliaments, or regional assemblies).

and seek to resolve them. Paradigms, value systems and *référentiels* provide normative and cognitive elements which shape principles and actions adopted by actors within the same frame (Kuhn, 1970; Hall, 1993; Jobert and Muller, 1987; Surel, 2000)

It has been argued that a significant paradigm transformation has occurred concerning the European welfare state, which correlates changes in economic policies (most notably, from Keynesianism to Monetarism). Has welfare development in Europe, as a consequence, evolved into a mere surrogate of economic ideas, interests and institutions? Certainly there are a number of new features which may have given way to what can be regarded as a distinct post-welfare state model (Loughlin, 2004).

Let us remind that during the *trentes glorieuses*, or 'Golden Age' of welfare capitalism (1945-75), West European systems of social protection were based upon the assumption of full employment and on the complementary role of the family, and, in particular, of women's unpaid work within households (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis, 1997). A combination of social policies, Keynesianism, Taylorism and female segregation facilitated a sustained economic growth and the generalisation of a type of 'affluent worker'. The outcome of these factors translated into two main types of welfare state: the Keynes-Beveridge and the Keynes-Bismarck welfare state. In both cases governments managed economies with a relatively high degree of autonomy. They were able to provide social provision for needs which market and family did not meet. The tax consequences of such provision were legitimated upon political coalitions of working and middle class groups (Flora, 1986/87).

The effects of the oil crises in 1973-74 and 1978-79 revealed the increasing openness and interdependence of European economies, and altered a scenario of prosperity and abundant stable male employment. Nevertheless, the Golden Age evolved into a Silver Age of the welfare state showing limitations but also a high degree of resilience in resisting pressures of a diverse nature (Taylor-Gooby, 2002).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a neo-liberal ideological offensive challenged the tenets and legitimacy upon which welfare states had previously developed. Its discourse elaborated on the effects that processes of international competition and industrial transformations had had on the national labour markets. In parallel, deep structural modifications had taken place as a consequence of the ageing of population, the increasing participation of women in the formal labour market, and the re-arrangements occurred within households as producers and distributors of welfare. In sum, fiscal crises and the erosion of the ideological consensus which gave way to the 'Mid-century Compromise' had conditioned the recasting of welfare states in Europe (Crouch, 1999; Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000; Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002).

Certainly, new economic reforms have allowed for monetary centralisation and a growing harmonisation of single-market policies in the European Union. Likewise, EU member states have faced and implemented policies of a similar nature. Those countries which attempted to exercise their nominal state sovereignty against the tide of the new economic policies were heavily penalised. Failure of the programmes for indicative planning implemented by the first Mitterrand Government in the early 1980s illustrated the 'persuasiveness' of the new economic neo-classical and supply-side paradigm embraced by neighbouring and competing countries. This episode illustrated that national economic 'sovereignty' was very limited in manoeuvres to promote the

previous Keynesian demand-side approach (Camilleri and Falk, 1992; Schmidt, 1995; Strange, 1995).

In the light of the economic changes occurred in Europe in the last 30 years, can we conclude that European welfare has substantially changed even if their outer forms remain as they were before? In trying to respond to such a question it should be pointed out that all three political, economic and social dimensions are simultaneously present in a paradigm, even if we agree that one of them is usually dominant.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, different dimensions, (economic, political, and social) could be considered on their own merits. A paradigm shift would result from the interaction of all three of them. If we were to take into account the latter view, the statement that social welfare in Europe has been over-determined by economics ought to be qualified (Jessop, 2002). A different view could be interpreted by analysing the high levels of public expenditure and popular support for social welfare in Europe (Svallfors and Taylor-Gooby, 1999; Bonoli, 2000; Kuhnle, 2000; Pierson, 2001).

An important conceptual distinction may be drawn between (a) objective economic and social elements that influence the context in which the politics of welfare reform operates; and (b) the subjective level of the understanding of those issues by those actors involved in interpreting popular perceptions and influencing reforms. The latter influences processes of policy learning and transfer, opportunities for coalition-building and the extent to which policy reform is to be understood as pursuing a new direction, based on new values and objectives, or as modification of existing policy directions. Such a distinction is useful on analysing the emergence of new social risks --alongside traditional social needs-- across European welfare states (Taylor-Gooby, 2005).

With the extension of the criteria for 'open' market competition stimulated by economic globalization, subsequent de-regulation and market flexibility have allowed for the extension of a general sense of uncertainty and the emergence of new social risks. These are associated with the transition to a post-industrial (post-Fordist) society (Esping-Andersen, 1999), and include four main elements: (1) Higher participation of women in the formal labour market; (2) An increase in the numbers of frail and dependent elderly people; (3) The rise of social exclusion for workers with poor education; and (4) The expansion of private services and the de-regulation of their public counterparts.

As a consequence, vulnerable groups are likely to experience new needs in three broad areas: (I) Balancing paid work and family responsibilities (especially child-care), (II) Being called on for care for a frail elderly relative, or becoming frail and lacking family support; lacking the skills necessary to gain access to an adequately paid and secure job, or (III) Having skills and training that become obsolete and being unable to upgrade them through life-long learning; and using private provision that supplies an insecure or inadequate pension or unsatisfactory services (Bonoli, 2005).

The answer to the question of whether new social risks would induce new welfare re-arrangements and how they could be reconciled with old 'core' commitments for social provision is still to be articulated by European actors in the various contexts of European governance. Up until now, new social risks do not seem to add up to a new paradigm of welfare, but ought rather to be regarded as a modification which will

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<sup>3</sup> Or 'hegemonic', in Gramscian terms (Loughlin, 2004).

generate new political discourses testing economic reforms which favour the introduction of a more flexible and de-regulated European social model.

Despite the diversity of its institutional forms and manifestations in EU's mature welfare states, the European social model can be still identified as one based upon collective solidarity and as the result of institutional patterns of social conflict and co-operation in modern times. Let us turn to a brief examination of its nature and to a discussion of some of the territorial challenges for its adaptation to changing economic, political and social scenarios.

### **3. Europe's social model, decentralization and solidarity**

During the 20th century the rise of the welfare state --a European 'invention'-- allowed provision for the basic needs of 'the people', by means of income security, health care, housing, and education. There is a widespread belief that the 'European social model' provides collective unity and identity to most of EU countries, in contrast to other systems, where individualization is a distinctive tenet of welfare provision (the USA, for example). The articulation of 'floors' or 'nets' of legal rights and material resources for citizens to participate actively in society can be seen as a common primary concern of the European countries. Accordingly, the fight against poverty and social exclusion plays a central role in the European social model. EU's countries share a common perspective on social risks coverage and the promotion of egalitarian social citizenship.

In functional terms, EU member states have embraced new economic policies of a similar nature. As stated earlier, those countries, which attempted to exercise their nominal state sovereignty against the tide of the new economic policies, were heavily penalised. Less attention has been generally paid to the territorial dimension of welfare and, in particular, to the growing input made by sub-state institutions and actors for welfare development and the alleged threats of exacerbating territorial inequalities within a model based upon collective solidarity. These issues are examined succinctly in the paragraphs that follow.

A result of within-state historical variations, often reflected in different party systems, channels of elite representation or interest articulation, is that decentralization has become a major embedding factor in contemporary political life in Europe. Decentralization in some countries (for example, Belgium, Italy or Spain) is affecting the very 'core' of traditional social policies. In these countries, health care, for instance, has been decentralised allowing the establishment of regional systems of health provision (McEwen and Moreno, 2005).

EU institutions, particularly the Commission and the Parliament, have encouraged multilateral co-operation on the assumption that national states would be less 'sovereign' than they have been up until now. Increasingly, sub-state governments and local authorities do not require the rationalising intervention of central bureaucracies and elites, and can activate policies of industrial relocation or attraction of foreign capitals without the role of intermediaries at the state's centre. By means of local incentives, urban re-development plans, or favouring corporatist agreements with trade unions and industrialists, regional governments and metropolitan authorities can have direct negotiations with the trans-national corporations involved (Rhodes, 1996; Moreno, 2003).

Sub-state governments do not exist in isolation from the new international order. They are subject to the same socio-demographic pressures and necessity of a greater inter-relationship with institutions and actors beyond their boundaries (Jones, 1995; Keating, 1998). This may constrain their capacity to generate social solidarity and reinforce territorial loyalties through the distribution of social transfers and services. Critics of the de-structuring of the old order have suggested that globalization, decentralization and the increasing role of sub-state governments may bring about two major drawbacks to welfare development:

(a) Sub-state governments may be more sensitive to pressures from the business community for increased flexibility, lower taxation and lower public spending. Individually, sub-state communities appear more vulnerable to the threat of dis-investments in an era where capital is increasingly mobile, and when even a single corporate relocation can devastate an entire community (Piven, 1995).

(b) Sub-state governments may be tempted in an increasingly competitive international arena to offer 'too' generous conditions for capital investments or industrial relocations. By engaging themselves in a 'race to the bottom', social rights may be restricted, making welfare retrenchment inevitable. Viewed from this angle, decentralization would render social citizenship rights somewhat precarious (Mishra, 1999).

It follows from such analyses that nation-state governments should take on redistribution while the sub-state layer of government should be in charge of developmental functions. However, no consistent empirical findings lend support for a 'positive sum' arrangement with the allocation of the function of redistribution to the national level and those concerning the operationalization of welfare policies to the regional level. Politicians in either national or regional governments make choices so as to maximize their own benefits. This fact greatly explains why members of both layers of government are reluctant to tax their constituents in order to allow less-favoured citizens to prosper, something which makes redistribution difficult (Peterson, 1995).

Both politicians and decision-makers at state and sub-state levels may become 'credit-claimers' or 'blame-avoiders', depending upon their situational logic and political strategies. Furthermore, what is economically efficient may not be politically possible or sustainable.<sup>4</sup> Thus, political impacts on national and regional bureaucracies in the implementation process must be taken into account. Likewise, national and regional politicians seek credit for their activities and they do so regardless of economic and rational arguments.

The form of decentralization is an important area for analysis in assessing redistribution and social policy outcomes. Some findings point to the fact that countries in which responsibility for spending is decentralized, but responsibility for revenue-raising is centralized, tend to spend more than other countries, other things being equal. By contrast, in countries where both revenue-raising and welfare spending are decentralized, expenditure levels appear lower (Rodden, 2003).

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<sup>4</sup> On analyzing the effect of two federal grant programmes in the United States, Chubb (1985) found the exact opposite of what economists predicted because the political factors affected the oversight and ultimately the overall spending.

Concerns over the 'race to the bottom' or, conversely, of sub-state communities becoming welfare 'magnets', have generally been overstated. While politicians may choose to believe that generous benefits will attract welfare beneficiaries from other sub-state territories, there is little evidence to support such claims. Even in a federal country such as the USA --where there is a much greater geographical mobility than in Europe-- there is little empirical evidence to suggest that 'welfare tourism' or 'voting with their feet' actually takes place (Weissert and Weissert, 2002; Berry *et al.*, 2003).

The debate on whether decentralization constrains redistribution and solidarity is an unfinished one. There is a large cross-national literature which uses multivariate analysis to understand the factors that influence levels of social spending (Hicks and Swank, 1992; Huber and Stephens, 2001). This literature has a long-standing trajectory (Cameron, 1978), and has regularly concluded that federalism and/or decentralization constrains the expansion of the welfare state. Further arguments point to the contention that it can have more powerful negative effects than any other institutional variable; greater than factors such as the level of corporatism in decision-making, the nature of the electoral system or a presidential system of government (Swank, 2002).

Redistribution may also be affected by the state's internal composition. It has been argued that the degree of redistribution is more limited in countries which are culturally heterogeneous or that have high levels of immigration. Some have suggested that public policies designed to recognize and to accommodate internal diversity are detrimental to the robustness of the welfare state, with numerous consequences. They may have: (A) a crowding-out effect, diverting energy, money and time from redistribution to recognition; (B) a corroding effect, eroding trust and solidarity amongst citizens; or (C) a misdiagnosis effect, with 'culturalist' solutions shifting attention from the 'real problem' of class inequalities. However, the linkage between welfare retrenchment and policies of accommodation and recognition is not empirically sustained. In fact, countries that have implemented far-reaching policies of accommodation and recognition tend to demonstrate a greater positive correlation between social spending and redistribution (Banting and Kymlicka, 2003).

Modernising strategies by sub-state layers of government have found in the principle of European subsidiarity a renewed impulse for the running of public affairs, and new opportunities for policy experimentation. There is certainly a case for sub-state units to become 'laboratories of democracy'. It has been claimed that the payoff from innovation exceeds the advantages of uniformity: the greater the need for innovation (for example, a 'new' problem or solution), the greater is the rationale for that function to be provided by the sub-state government (Donahue, 1997).

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Despite the political anti-climax brought about by the failure of the drafted 2005 European Constitution to be approved by EU member states, Europeanization continues its process of system-building and multilevel governance. Political developments, however, do not necessarily point towards a 'command-and-control' model of vertical welfare provision. The polycentric nature of Europeanization and the compound structuring of intergovernmental governance do not lead to the institutionalization of a centralized European Union. Rather, Europeanization confronts a gradual and necessarily 'slow' process of accommodating cultural, historical and political diversity



within the Old Continent while respecting the principles of democratic accountability and territorial subsidiarity.

Consequential to their profound embedding in the development of the modern nation-state, European welfare systems face difficult dilemmas in the transition towards new multilevel configurations. At present, a fully-fledged articulation of social citizenship in the EU framework seems unrealistic despite its desirability (Ferrera, 2005). However, national, regional and local governments can work together with EU institutions in multilateral agreements allowing mutual collaborations in the three main stages of policy process (planning, decision-making and monitoring).

Frameworks of solidarity, such as those provided by state systems of social insurance, or increasingly those affected by European directives, will continue to play a crucial role. However, sensitive areas of citizens' concern, where more efficient policy provision is plausible by means of more effective development of community-orientated services, are increasingly important. Of a particular relevance are those concerned with the weaving of 'safety nets' to combat poverty and social exclusion and with the development of social services for young children and for the frail elderly. Such areas of social intervention appear suitable to be run by elected sub-state layers of government, which can be accountable for the implementation of means-tested programmes, and for purposes of optimising economies of scale. In this manner, the reconstruction of programmes of social citizenship may also be articulated from 'below'.<sup>\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> Parts of this paper have been re-elaborated from previous texts co-authored with Nicola McEwen and Bruno Palier. As a member of the research team, I am also grateful to the WRAMSOC project ('Welfare Reform and the Management of the Societal Change', European FP5) for making use of some of the findings of the investigation carried out in the period 2002-2005 ([www.kent.ac.uk/wramsoc/](http://www.kent.ac.uk/wramsoc/)). I am also grateful to Javier Moreno for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Responsibility for interpretations and views remain solely with the author.

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