

8th ESPAnet Conference 2010. Social policy and the global crisis: consequences and responses.

Stream 6. European Social Policy in a global perspective.

Stream 6.1. The crisis and social citizenship (Robert Maier and Patricia Frericks)

Individualization of social rights and social citizenship: Could the present economic and financial crisis revive the debate in the European Union?

In the last few months, a debate on the individualization of social benefits started in some EU Member States. In France, thousands of long-term unemployed dropped out of the unemployment insurance scheme and lost their benefits. They could not enter the unemployment assistance scheme, because benefits are means-tested and the income of the household is taken into account. The crisis revealed a somewhat 'forgotten' legislation and brought the Government, trade-unions and representatives of the employers to search for a solution in order to maintain individualized benefits and active measures for jobseekers. A similar debate is currently taking place in Finland.

At the same time, some EU Member States are testing 'back-to-work' measures granting part-time workers a public subsidy as a supplement to their wages. In France, this financial support has been put under a social assistance scheme, it is means-tested and takes into account maintenance obligations of civil law. The worker is considered as being dependent upon his/her family (spouse, ascendants, descendants...).

How do these debates and reforms in employment policy fit into the European objective of 'individualization of social rights' in order to 'change the gender balance'? This objective has been defined by the Commission in the Communication on 'Modernizing and improving social protection in the European Union' (1997). Our research project in the context of the network SPECIAL (Social Protection in an Enlarged Europe) in 2003/2004 showed that 'individualization of social rights' could not be considered a central topic in the discussions on modernizing Welfare systems on the national level. Ideology, based on the male breadwinner model and/or on family/marriage as a basic element of society, seemed to remain very strong, especially in France, Luxembourg, Hungary and Poland.

Could the present financial and economic crisis revive the debate on the individualization of social rights in the EU Member States? How do the EU institutions tackle this question in a crisis period? Will the crisis reinforce the *status quo*? Are recent debates and reforms revealing new signs of a reverse trend, namely the application of a means-test to previously individualized benefits taking into account the income of the household or maintenance obligations inside the family? Our current research aims to give an insiders perspective on the reforms in Bulgaria, Finland, France, Hungary, Luxembourg and Poland.

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