

A close-up photograph of several hands of different skin tones stacked together in a circle, symbolizing unity and support. The hands are positioned in the center and right side of the frame, with some fingers overlapping. The background is bright and slightly blurred, showing parts of people's faces and clothing. A large yellow diagonal shape is on the left side of the page.

EURACTIV

THE ROLE OF 'SOCIAL EUROPE' DURING THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

EVENT REPORT | FEBRUARY 2019
<http://eurac.tv/9Q2B>

PLACE 
DE LA **SANTÉ**

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de la

 **MUTUALITÉ
FRANÇAISE**



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Social Europe is still finding its place within the European Union. Social protection of European citizens interests 18% of French people, lagging behind other issues such as terrorism, unemployment, immigration and climate change.



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INTERVIEW

'Citizens do not see Europe as an answer to social challenges'

EURACTIV.fr / Translated by Rob Kirby



Matthias Savignac is a Vice-President of the International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM), in charge of International Collaboration (Fédération nationale de la Mutualité Française).

In the run-up to the European elections, the social dimension of Europe remains a great unknown to European citizens. EURACTIV France has spoken to Matthias Savignac.

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The European elections will be held on 26 May. How do you assess the last five-year European term on social matters?

Over the last decade, very little European legislation has focused on social matters, access to healthcare and environmental health. Europe has remained mainly focused on economic concerns.

The adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 represented a step. But it was more a reference grid for assessing member states' social policies, on the basis of the lowest common denominator. It isn't a coercive piece of legislation with the objective of upward convergence in social law.

This idea of upward convergence was supported by the International

Labour Organization (ILO), which proposed a social protection floor. This floor could be taken up at the European level by proposing a real "social convergence treaty," including the upward harmonisation of social rights.

Europe is often criticised for its inertia on social issues. Is this criticism legitimate?

Even though issues of access to care and public health are broadly covered by the member states, Europe

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also deals with social policy as this is one of its prerogatives. But do citizens notice and sense this work in their daily lives?

What's happening in Italy, Austria and the United Kingdom, with Brexit, shows that Europe is now seen more as a hindrance and citizens don't see the EU's usefulness in their daily lives. There's a European coexistence crisis.

Precisely, Brexit was more the expression of Europe being rejected in its more social dimension than its economic one.

The British have never criticised Europe's economic benefits. But shared destiny and coexistence are not built on a simple economic union.

When it comes to social Europe, one state's point of view only has meaning if it resonates with that of other countries. This is why we are launching a great debate to gather Europeans' expectations for health, sustainable development, employment, data and social protection. Are the concerns of French people the same as elsewhere? Are social issues perceived as Europe's responsibility? We're asking these questions on the collaborative platform europeennes.placedelasante.fr.

Which issues would you particularly like to highlight?

Environmental health is a good example. It's a unifying theme for Europeans. With environmental health, you can address several of the issues constituting European coexistence: mobility, access to healthcare, ecology, etc.

Today, Europe is going through a real crisis of meaning, in a context of collective loss of hope: liberal hopes (carried away with the 2008 crisis), collectivist hopes (swept away with the fall of the Berlin wall), political hopes

(as demonstrated by the "yellow vest" crisis) and religious hopes (with the rise of obscurantism). The mutualist movement can contribute to providing answers to this despair with its non-profit, democratic and deeply secular business model.

There has been some progress, for example, the recent vote on parental and paternity leave. But for French people, these new rules will only make very small changes to existing parental and paternity leave. How can the progress made in Europe be appreciated when French law is as protective, if not more?

At the European level, most of the decisions in the social field are taken on the criteria of the lowest common denominator. As a result, many states, such as France and Belgium, already have legislation which is at least as protective. These countries therefore have to ensure they maintain a good level of coverage.

At the European level, in the context of economic crisis and weakened social systems, collective standards should be established, without moving towards standardisation from the bottom.

According to a recent survey, the social protection of European citizens is of interest to French people (18%) in the context of the European elections. But this issue remains far behind terrorism, unemployment, immigration and the climate. How do you explain this?

Citizens don't think Europe is legitimate on social issues because their point of contact for these issues is the state. And Europe is not yet seen as able to respond to social challenges. However, social Europe is already present on health, employment and environmental issues in a diffuse manner – matters at the heart of citizens' concerns.

How do you intend to mobilise voters around the issue of social Europe?

We would like to listen to French and European citizens on the issues of social Europe with a view to the European elections. The Mutualité Française has launched a collaborative platform in all of the member states, which will gather EU citizens' expectations for social Europe. Then, around 10 debates held regionally will bring out citizens' proposals, which will then be put to the vote online. At the end of this consultation, the proposals with the most support will be submitted to the candidates heading the lists for the European elections at the great debate on 11 April.

OPINION

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Manifesto: Let us build the Social Europe of tomorrow together!

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By La Mutualité Française



With the upcoming elections for the European Parliament fast approaching, Europe is currently in a state of limbo. This makes it an ideal time to reflect on the likely shape of the European Union of tomorrow, and, above all, the form that we, as mutualists, want it to have.

We believe in fundamental European values and salute the historical – if not unique – acquis

developed over the history of humanity: peace, democracy and the rule of law, the respect for human rights, and the freedom of movement.

It is these values that make the Union a unique historic achievement. It remains remarkable that in this small territory, with its vast cultural and linguistic diversity, has now successfully established dialogue and working with one another as a better alternative to the wars of the past.

Yet, over the last 60 years,

Europe and the world have changed dramatically. The economic, financial, and sovereign-debt crisis is not behind us yet. It has left its mark: a rise in poverty, inequality, and unemployment, particularly among young people.

In parallel, geopolitical change – whether wrought by the giants of the digital world, by global warming, by migrant flows or by terrorism – is

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disrupting the ability of Europeans to work together.

In light of those developments, the Union will not be able to rely on its usual tools of widening the market, creating greater freedom and openness, breaking down borders and setting up a large area of free movement for all Europeans. Already, the majority of British people have voted against that Europe of freedom and economic integration in their "Brexit" referendum.

The European project remains unrealised, as the EU lacks the necessary powers to address citizens' most pressing issues. We believe that greater supranational powers should be conferred to the EU to allow it to deliver on those crucial issues and regain the trust of citizens in the EU project.

It is a matter of urgency that we reconnect with the original European narrative. The challenge is to have all Europeans adopt a mindset of "we Europeans", rather than "them in Brussels", or even "those Continentals", as has been heard in the United Kingdom.

National and local identity does not contradict with a European identity. The European component builds on national and local history, culture and values.

The theme of protection has been at the heart of citizen consultations organised by the European Commission. Much has been said about a social Europe, health, solidarity, the environment, work and employment. It is precisely here that Europe has now run out of ideas and shared political will.

The proclamation of the European pillar of social rights has opened the door to a new Europe; a social Europe that protects its citizens and that is able to satisfy their concrete needs for health and social protection. Mutuels, as social economy operators, have an

essential role in implementing this European pillar of social rights.

Mutuels contribute to both economic growth and job creation, while the values of solidarity, social inclusion, democratic governance and the primacy of the individual, placing them at the front line and of the corporate purpose above that of capital.

In drafting this Manifesto, we mutuels, as members of a European family of players in civil society and social progress, believe in mobilising citizens across the 28 member states; a mobilisation to which we intend to contribute in the coming period.

The mutual model provides solutions for the economic, social, and democratic crises affecting Europe. Our ambition is to revive the ideals that underlie the creation of the European Union by placing the future of social protection in Europe at the heart of national political debates.

From our perspective, we wish to retain a specific vision of a fair Europe, one that is redistributive and respectful of people as well as of the environment. We want to believe that the values of solidarity and our notion of societal life are what characterise us as Europeans.

As European citizens, we should have the courage to defend the European project, across all the issues that are currently undermining its legitimacy. In other words, "If you desire peace, cultivate justice.

Signatures:

AIM Healthcare and social benefits for all ; fimiv, Federazione Italiana della mutualita integrativa volontaria ; Associaçao Mutualista Montepio Juntos por todos ; vdek Die Ersatzkassen, Knappschaft ; La Mutualité Française ; Mutualité chrétienne, Solidaris, Sozialversicherungsanstalt der Bauern ; SVLFG sicher & gesung aus einer Hand

French people make 'social Europe' proposals in workshops ahead of EU elections

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By *Cécile Barbière* | EURACTIV.fr / Translated by Rob Kirby



Moderator Camille Marguin during the workshop.

When consulted at a workshop on the future of "social Europe" after the European elections, French people put forward ambitious proposals on social issues. EURACTIV France reports.

Could the French be more pro-European than their political representatives?

At a discussion workshop on social Europe, held in Paris on 19 February and organised by Mutualité Française, which groups many French health insurers, participants listed a dozen proposals to reform social Europe.

Asked about employment, health, the environment, and solidarity, the participants – most of them ordinary citizens – selected 12 measures and all

of those proposals were ambitious.

One of them was establishing a compulsory civic service lasting one year in a different European country on a solidarity-based project for young people aged between 16 and 30.

There was also the idea of revisiting decision-making procedures at the

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European Medicines Agency (EMA) by regulating the influence of lobbies.

On environmental issues, the participants wanted the EU to invest in agricultural enterprises which use sustainable techniques and to stop funding polluting companies. This could be done by redirecting how European funds are allocated.

However, this idea may be overly ambitious at a time when the European Union is struggling to agree on banning glyphosate.

The outcome of the three-hour workshop fitted onto a few pages. However, this exercise in drawing up citizen proposals for social Europe, set in motion by Mutualité Française, will continue in 11 other regions in total. The process should bring up a large number of proposals, which will then be sorted through an online vote.

The final decisive step will be a debate on 11 April between the leading candidates for the European elections. "The proposals with the most support will be submitted to the candidates heading the lists for the European elections," explained Matthias Savignac, vice-president of the International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM) in an interview.

"We want to hear the candidates discussing social Europe," explained Thierry Beaudet, chair of Mutualité Française, in a video message at the introduction to the discussion workshop.

A RISKY EXERCISE

The exercise was not an easy one. "The objective of the morning was to produce six proposals by listening to others and keeping to everyone's speaking time. But, above all, it had to be practical," explained Camille Marguin, moderator of the working group on solidarity.

"For instance, there can't be proposals to end poverty or to stop climate change," Camille Marguin continued. Roughly ten participants around the table listened carefully to these guidelines before moving on to the discussion.

"The first step is to define together what is included in the topic of solidarity," the moderator explained. In order to take note of the solidarity-based issues at the European level, the participants reflected on cards which summarised the major issues. These included access to housing in the various European countries, achievement in secondary schools and the number of Europeans living below the poverty line, etc.

The other restriction imposed on participants was that proposals had to have a European-level scope and be achievable for elected European officials.

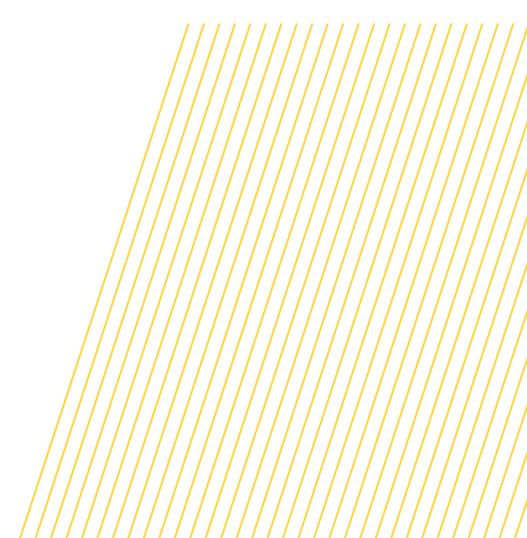
The workshop exercise meant that ill-advised good ideas could be ruled out and some proposals could be refined. For instance, the proposal of "guaranteeing access to new technologies within the EU" developed into "requiring operators

to devote a share of their profits to covering 'white' areas," at the second roundtable.

The proposal "to turn the European Union into a social dynamic to deal with the irreversible need for solidarity," was not kept. "It expresses an objective but it isn't specific enough to be implemented," a participant explained.

Certain issues would not be among the proposals adopted by a majority decision at the end of the workshop, to some participants' disappointment. "I'm quite surprised there wasn't a proposal on homeless people, the topics were proposed by rich people!" one participant regretted.

The ten discussion workshops will be held across France until April and should broaden the debate to include other topics.





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