

What is 'Social Triple A'?

In a context of austerity and fragile economic recovery, the call for a more 'social' Europe is growing. In his October 2014 speech to the European Parliament, European Commission President-elect, Jean-Claude Juncker, spoke of his wish for Europe to be 'triple-A on social issues', putting social issues further up on the agenda. So far, initiatives have been launched by the Commission to give greater prominence to employment and social considerations in European policies. Parliament, for its part, consistently pushes for higher European social standards.

The EU employment and social context

The economic and social situation in the European Union (EU) continues to be uncertain. The unemployment rate remains historically high (9.0%), and long-term unemployment is worryingly high (5.1%) in the EU. Youth unemployment rates have not decreased significantly, sitting at an EU average of 21.4% ([Eurostat](#)). The share of [people at risk of poverty](#) or social exclusion in the EU is more than 24.4% of the total population. Europe is off track in reaching its [2020 employment and social inclusion targets](#). Since the onset of the crisis, more and more voices have highlighted the high social cost of austerity policies, and called for a different approach ([stakeholders](#), [European Trade Union Confederation](#), [think-tanks](#), [media](#)).

The European Commission's goal: achieving a 'Social Triple A' rating

In this context, [President-elect Juncker](#) set out his ambition for the EU to achieve what he called a 'Social Triple A' rating, in parallel to being 'triple A' in the financial sense, in his 22 October 2014 speech to the European Parliament. To reach this goal, he stated that the European Semester should not just be an economic and financial process, but must take into account the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). A more detailed description of how to achieve this 'Social Triple A' was set out in [the Five Presidents' report](#), 'Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union' (June 2015). This mainly consists of promoting employment through 'efficient' labour-market policies (flexibility, active ageing, deeper integration of national labour markets, facilitating geographical and professional mobility, etc.), improving education and lifelong learning policies, better coordinating social security systems, and offering an effective social protection system to everyone in the framework of the EMU. The Council adopted [conclusions](#) on social governance as 'part of the vision for a 'Social Triple A' rating for Europe' on 7 December 2015.

Since the beginning of the Juncker Commission, concrete initiatives have been put forward such as the [Youth Employment Initiative](#), a proposal for a recommendation on [fighting long-term unemployment](#), a [European Accessibility Act](#), and giving greater prominence to social considerations in the coordination of economic policies through the European Semester with the integration of three new indicators – the activity rate, long-term and youth unemployment rate – in the [Alert Mechanism Report 2016](#). Work is also under way on [work-life balance for working parents](#), for a [New Skills Agenda for Europe](#) and for an [EU labour mobility package](#). On 8 March 2016, the Commission is expected to adopt a Communication for consultation on a '[European Pillar of Social Rights](#)', which should build greater convergence in employment and social performance thanks to an updated legal framework to screen employment and social performances.

European Parliament's active role for high European social standards

[Parliament](#) has long shown its determination to improve European citizens' employment and social conditions and prospects (see notably its March 2015 [resolution](#)). On 23 February, the EP's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) voted to put forward an [oral question](#) to the Commission on 'Social Triple A rating' as regards its concrete content, detailed timetable, defined monitoring process and selected indicators or targets. A debate on this question is expected to be scheduled for the March plenary session.

