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Under pressure: Evolution of the Social Economy institutional recognition in EU

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Introduction

The Social Economy (sometimes defined as Third Sector[2]) encompasses a wide array of private organizations that can be situated along a continuum that goes from civil society (on the one end) to business sector (on the other end), such as: associations, organizations of volunteers, foundations, social cooperatives, mutuals, social enterprises, cooperatives, social business initiatives.

The social sphere populated by SE/TS organizations operates in complex and multilayer environments and is particularly responsive to institutional configuration, public policy, fiscal regulation, social and health planning.

This article deals with the institutional policy and attitude of the EU Commission towards SE/TS organizations in welfare policy. The aim is, firstly, to illustrate the main institutional configuration emerging in the EU policy towards the SE in the last three decades, then, secondly, to determine the level of recognition and institutionalization of the SE in a sample of ten EU countries, and, finally, to connect this international reality with the DiMaggio and Powell's theory of institutional isomorphism (1983).

The main institutional configurations emerging in the EU countries are summarized as follows.

In the period after the Second World War until the mid seventies of the last century, the mainstream political framework was the one inspired by Keynesian policies, also recognized as the Welfare State institutionalization process. During that period the role of SE/TS organizations was mainly of advocacy towards the governmental policies and of service deliverer under contract to Public Administration Agencies. We can call it a "complementary" role.

In the period from the beginning of the eighties and the mid two-thousands the political environment changed dramatically and the "neo-liberal" became the mainstream economic approach. The SE/TS organizations were under pressure to "compete" in the so called "quasi-market" welfare system. We can call it a "competitor" role.

From the mid two-thousands, a new framework started to influence the EU policy and attitude towards SE/TS organizations: the so called "social investment" approach. It aim was to reach a compromise between the two main political streams of the last century: the liberal (lib) policies and the labour (lab) ones. In this institutional configuration the SE/TS organizations play a role that we can define as "activation agencies".

Finally, nowadays we live in a transition period characterized by what could be named "Neo-Keynesian" or "Post-Keynesian" welfare policy. But it is worth noting that there are two versions

[1] Andrea Bassi wrote paragraphs 2 and 3; Alessandro Fabbri wrote paragraphs 1 and 5. The introduction and the conclusions are written together.

[2] The authors are aware of the different definitions concerning "civil society organizations", such as: non-profit sector, third-sector, social economy, social and solidarity economy, etc. (see Table n. 1). We know that the *Social Economy* usually encompasses the following organizations/institutions: cooperatives, mutuals, associations and (more recently) foundations. Whereas the *Third Sector* generally does not include the cooperatives as such, but only the sub-section of cooperatives known as "social cooperatives" (and/or work-integration cooperatives). Nevertheless – since this article adopts a comparative approach trying to analyse the "level of recognition ad institutionalization" of civil society organizations by the public sector in each country under scrutiny – we will assume the most widespread terminology at the country level. So, for example, in UK it is called "charitable sector" and only recently the term "social enterprise" has been used. In French speaking countries the main term adopted is "économie sociale" (social economy) or more recently "économie sociale et solidaire". In Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain, the term widespread in the public opinion is "terzo settore" and "tercer sector" (third sector). In conclusion, the way in which we refer to the different terminologies and definitions of "civil society organizations", in first instance, it is not aimed at providing a pure scientific definition, but it tries to catch the cultural, social, historical roots of the "sector" in each country.

(or two possible directions) of this approach: a progressive one and a regressive one. What we have labeled, respectively, "Welfare Society" configuration and "New chauvinism" configuration. In the first scenario the SE/TS organizations are promoted as "partners" in the co-production of public services; in the second one they are considered as manifestation of philanthropic attitudes and they play the role of "buffers" in case of market and/or State failures.

The article is structured in five sections. In the first one, the authors examine the regulatory eco-system at the European level concerning Social Economy, social enterprises and social innovation.

In the following second and third sections, they analyze the political attitude towards the Social Economy sector and social enterprises in the EU at European level (section 2) and at national level (section 3).

The fourth section deals with the current condition of the Social Economy in EU countries according to European official data.

Finally, in the fifth section, the main results of the analysis will be summed up in order to assess the current conjuncture of the Social Economy sector in Europe, also in the perspective of the institutional isomorphism theory.

- Scheme1 here -

1. Social investment and Social Economy in the European regulatory eco-system

In order to clarify the terminology used, it is first of all necessary to define the meaning of the social policy approach known as "social investment" in the political context of the European Union (EU), and how it is related to the reality known as "Social Economy".

According to Hemerijck,

> "The notion of social investment emerged as a policy perspective round the turn of the century with the ambition to modernize the welfare state and ensure its sustainability […]. Social investment implies policies that «prepare» individuals and families to respond to new social risks of the competitive knowledge society, by investing in human capital stock from their early childhood on, rather than simply to «repair» damage after moments of economic or political crisis" (Hemerijck 2014, p. 11)

After the 2008 crisis, this approach has been reintroduced through the so called "Social Investment Package", which consists of two main documents of the European Commission (and a series of Staff Working Documents[3]):

a) a Communication *Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion*, COM (2013) 83;
b) a Recommendation *Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*, C(2013) 778

and it provides a policy framework for redirecting Member States' policies towards social investment throughout life.

Together with the European Parliament resolution on Social Investment Pact (20 November 2012)[4] it encourages Member States to pursue the modernization of their social protection systems, ensuring their effectiveness, adequacy and sustainability. These strategies can put "pressure" on the Member States, and therefore determine a "light coercive isomorphism" among them.

[3] From SWD (2013) 38 – to SWD (2013) 44.

[4] European Parliament resolution of 20 November 2012 on *Social Investment Pact – as a response to the crisis* (2012/2003(INI)

In this institutional framework a central role is assigned to actors outside the public sector. The *Communication*, for instance, underlines that the non-profit organizations (NPO) are important providers of social services, particularly in the field of social assistance (for elderly, homeless, people with disabilities etc.): their contribution is valuable, often pioneering and potentially complementary to the action of public institutions, but they are not supported as much as they deserve (COM (2013) 83, p. 5).

The *Communication* also proposes a definition of Social Economy and social enterprises:

> "The social economy, also referred to as the 'third sector', refers to non-government actors such as community organisations, voluntary organisations, and social enterprises that undertake activities for social benefit.
>
> Social enterprises are businesses with primarily social objectives, and where surpluses are usually reinvested into the business or in the community, rather than maximising profit for owners and shareholders" (ibidem).

Another very important driver for the modernization of the welfare systems of the Member States and toward the adoption of a "social investment" approach in their social policies is represented by social innovation. It consists in a social policy aiming to allow people to display all their potential in the social and economic context. This translates in an investment throughout their whole lives, particularly in childhood and during the critical phases of the existence (illness, loss of job etc.). This program is strongly recommended by the *Communication* for the new social policy strategies (COM (2013) 83, p. 8).

Moreover, this document recognizes and underlines the interlocking relationship among Social Economy, social enterprises and social innovation. Social innovation, indeed, is a necessary program: European society is changing day by day, and new challenges and threats come continuously to light. In order to face them it is necessary to promote frequent and flexible innovations of social policy strategies, methods and products. NPOs and social enterprises can adapt to these changes more easily than public sector: therefore, they can play a pioneering role and become an example to imitate, but they need to be helped by Member States with "support schemes, incentives for start-ups and […] an enabling regulatory environment" (COM (2013) 83, p. 11).

This key role of civil society actors in implementing social investment policies is clearly recognized by the *Communication*: it indeed recommends strongly not only the aforementioned support of social entrepreneurship initiatives, but also the development of public-private-third sector partnerships. Moreover, it indicates which European funding programs (ESF, ERDF, EAFRD, EIF and PSCI) can provide the resources for these synergies and suggests obtaining additional private financing (COM (2013) 83, p. 12).

Given this regulatory eco-system at the European level concerning Social Economy, social enterprises and social innovation, in the following section we would like to analyze and illustrate the evolution of the "meanings" and of the "political attitudes" towards the first two terms. This evolution follows the enlargement of the European Union from the EEC (Rome treaty 1957; in effect on 1st January 1958) through the EC (Maastricht treaty 1992, in effect on 1st November 1993) to the EU (Lisbon treaty 2007; in effect on 1st December 2009).

2. Evolution of the Social Economy institutional recognition in the EU

The political attitude towards the Social Economy sector and social enterprises in the EU can be analyzed at two levels: at European level and at national level. In this section the topic will be the Social Economy institutional recognition at European level in a diachronic perspective, while in the next section, being impossible to present a comprehensive frame for each country, the topic will be the level of recognition of this sector in a sample of European countries, in a synchronic and contemporary perspective.

2.1 From "Economie Sociale" to "Social Economy"

"Social Economy" is the English version of the French words "Economie Sociale": this label has been used in France since the half of the 19th century, in order to indicate a group of collective actors whose aim is to pursue the interest of their members and, in so doing, to contribute to the achievement of the general interest of society as a whole. The term has witnessed a diffusion in the French speaking area of Canada (Québec) and in South America, due to the activity of several cooperative leaders, religious organizations and also to the influence of some French scholars and intellectuals.

Traditional French Social Economy is composed by four families of actors: cooperatives, associations, mutual societies and (later on) foundations.

Recently, in France, the label has been modified in "économie sociale et solidaire" (Social and Solidarity Economy), with the intention of enlarging the traditional Social Economy categories of actors, in order to include more innovative and "bottom up" (informal) types of initiatives and forms of activities, for instance work integration social enterprises (WISE) and proximity service delivering organizations. The European definition of Social Economy is based on the French traditional concept.

In May 2002, the European umbrella organization for the four main Social Economy categories of actors: CEP-CMAF (European Standing Conference of Cooperatives, Mutual Societies, Associations and Foundations), during a meeting in Salamanca approved the so-called European Chart of the Social Economy. The Chart states that the area known as "Social Economy" is composed of organizations active in every sector of the social and economic life (e.g. cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations): particularly in the welfare typical sectors (social protection, social services, health care, housing, education etc.), but also in sectors close to the for profit world (banking, insurance, agricultural production, craft trades etc.) (CEP-CMAF, 2002). With regards to this, the Social Economy organizations are recognized by the Chart as distinguished from for profit organizations by some peculiarities: they are indeed characterized by some common features such as the primacy of the person, an open membership, a democratic governance, the pursuit of both the organization interest and the general interest, a social and environmental responsibility and so on (ibidem). Of course, these peculiarities mirror the principles that form the identity of the Social Economy.

Furthermore, according to CEP-CMAF, the success of enterprises in the Social Economy cannot be measured solely in terms of economic performance, which is nonetheless necessary to the achievement of their goals in terms of mutualism and solidarity, but must above all be gauged by their contributions in terms of solidarity, social cohesion and social capital.

In the last 30 years the Social Economy sector has entered a phase of institutionalization and public recognition within the EU. On the other hand, in recent years this trend has been in some way slowed down, and currently the sector is facing several difficulties in getting due recognition and support (Noya and Clarence 2007). This situation challenges the possibility of expansion of the sector and its capacity to overcome the obstacles limiting its growth.

In 1989 the Commission published its first Communication to the Council on "social economy enterprises", which recognizes the specificity of Social Economy enterprises and their role in the internal market.

In order to foster the development of the sector, in the same year, a Social Economy unit was created (Unit 4) within DGXXIII (Directorate General for Small and Medium Enterprises) of the European Commission. In this period several European conferences on Social Economy were periodically organized, patronized by the European Commission. They represented an important occasion for meeting and raising awareness on the sector. In the following year the activities of the Social Economy Unit adapted to the changing priorities of the Community.

In 2000, following the reform of the Commission, DGXXIII became part of the bigger DG Enterprises (GROWTH), and Social Economy was taken over by the Unit E3 (Crafts, Small Enterprises, Cooperatives and Mutual Societies). The Unit is mainly focused on the "enterprise aspects" of cooperatives, mutuals, associations and foundations.

The main tasks of the Unit are the following: to promote the knowledge and visibility of the sector and to develop links with public officials responsible for the regulation and development of Social Economy in the Member States. The Unit acts in consultation with the representative organizations of cooperatives, mutuals, associations and foundations.

The umbrella organization representing the Social Economy at the European level (former CEP-CMAF) is now called Social Economy Europe[5].

Moreover, since Social Economy – and especially social enterprises – is a major actor of employment and social inclusion policies, also the DG (EMPL) Employment and Social Affairs is directly involved.

The visibility and the recognition of the social and solidarity economy have also been supported by the theoretical work of several scientific associations and international research networks such as CIRIEC, EMES and ISTR[6]. Each of them has a different and original approach to Social Economy and Third Sector organizations, nevertheless in recent years the opportunity of fruitful exchange and confrontation among them has increased greatly.

2.2 From Social Economy to social enterprise[7]

The first half of the 2000's, under the European Commission Presidency of Romano Prodi (September 1999 – November 2004), was a very tough but exciting period. Three main political and economic events occurred, which are worth mentioning:

a) The adoption of the common currency;
b) The enlargement of the Union to ten Eastern European Countries;
c) A wide and deep reform of the European governance (Constitution for Europe)[8], both from a political and administrative point of view.

As far as the "Social Economy" narrative and key words are concerned, that period was characterized by the emergence and the progressive diffusion of the term "social enterprise", due

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[5] See http://www.socialeconomy.eu.org (last accessed: March 27, 2019).

[6] CIRIEC: International Center of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy, www.ulg.ac.be/ciriec (last accessed: March 27, 2019);
EMES: Research programme on the emergence of social enterprises in Europe, www.emes.net (last accessed: March 27, 2019);
ISTR: International Society for Third Sector Research, www.istr.org (last accessed: March 27, 2019).

[7] The term Social Enterprise was introduced in the public debate in Italy at the end of the 1980s by the so called "social and solidarity cooperative" movement. The main national umbrella organization of these peculiar type of cooperatives (inspired by a "solidarity principle" and not by the "mutual principle" as the traditional cooperatives) Federsolidarietà, through its national Consortium CGM, started to publish a journal named "Impresa sociale" (Social enterprise, indeed). Nowadays the journal is online http://www.rivistaimpresasociale.it/.

[8] On 29th October 2004 the ceremony of the signature of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe took place in Rome (broadcasted live throughout Europe). The Constitution was signed by the Heads of State, or Government, of the 25 European Union countries and their foreign ministers. The European Constitution, formally known as "Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe", was a draft revision of the Treaties founding the European Union, drawn up by the European Convention in 2003 and eventually abandoned in 2009, following the ratification of the stop imposed by "no" to referendum in France and the Netherlands. Several innovations included in the Constitution have been adopted by the "Treaty of Lisbon", which entered into force on 1st December 2009.

also to the influence that several publications (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Nyssens, 2006) of the European Research Network EMES had in those years.

In February 2009 the European Parliament approved the *Resolution on Social Economy* – the so called "Toia Report" (from the name of the Italian MP Patrizia Toia, who presented it) (European Parliament 2009).

The *Resolution* is structured in a Preamble and 7 Sections (48 articles/paragraphs):

Preamble (contains 12 points = Letter A-L);
Section 1 – General remarks (contains 5 paragraphs = 1-5);
Section 2 – Recognizing the concept of the social economy (contains 4 paragraphs = 6-9);
Section 3 – Legal recognition: European statutes for associations, foundations and mutual societies (contains 5 paragraphs = 10-14);
Section 4 – Statistical recognition (contains 2 paragraphs = 15-16);
Section 5 – Recognition as a social partner (contains 1 paragraph = 17);
Section 6 – The social economy as a key operator for fulfilling the Lisbon Strategy objectives (contains 16 paragraphs = 18-33);
Section 7 – Resources needed to achieve the objectives (contains 15 paragraphs = 34-48);

Some quotations of the *Resolution* clearly show the approach underlined and the general philosophy adopted by the European Parliament in this political phase. Of course the 1st paragraph is the most significant in conceptual terms:

> "1. [The European Parliament] Points out that the Social Economy plays an essential role in the European economy, by combining profitability with solidarity, creating high-quality jobs, strengthening social, economic and regional cohesion, generating social capital, promoting active citizenship, solidarity and a type of economy with democratic values which puts people first, in addition to supporting sustainable development and social, environmental and technological innovation" (European Parliament 2009, p. 4).

The following paragraphs are coherent with this premise: for instance, paragraph 4 wishes for Social Economy enterprises a "secure legal framework", different from the usual regime of competition that rules for-profit enterprises (ibid., p. 4); paragraph 8 calls on the European Commission for a promotion of the Social Economy and a defense of its peculiar idea of entrepreneurship (ibid., pp. 4-5); paragraph 9 calls on the European Union and the Member States to recognize the Social Economy in their legislation and policies, including financial direct and indirect support (fiscal facilitations and focused funding) (ibid., p. 5); paragraph 17 suggests to include Social Economy actors in social consultations among the sectoral and inter-sectoral stakeholders of the EU social and economic life (ibid., p. 6).

It is therefore clear that the *Resolution* is referring to a conceptual framework, and is adopting a political language that was still inside the so called "Social Market European Model" of relationship of the main actors of the economic, political and civil arena: private enterprises, public authorities and Social Economy organizations. It was adopted during the last year of the first mandate of José Manuel Barroso Presidency (2004-2009). But the general mood had already changed: the new-liberal economic trend was dominating the scene, a new wind was blowing across Europe, as we will see in the next paragraphs, and the attitude of the European institution toward the Social Economy changed dramatically during the second Barroso term (2009-2014).

2.3 From Social Enterprise to Social Business Initiative

In October 2011 the European Commission adopted the Communication 682, called *Social Business Initiative*. The key principles of the new approach can be easily revealed by the analysis of some clauses of this document. For instance, the pro-market attitude of the new Commission leadership appears from the objectives of the Communication:

> "In order to promote a 'highly competitive social market economy', the Commission has placed the social economy and social innovation at the heart of its concerns, in terms of both territorial cohesion and the search for new solutions to societal problems, in particular the fight against poverty and exclusion, under the Europe 2020 strategy, the flagship initiative 'The Innovation Union', the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion and the 'Single Market Act' (SMA)" (COM (2011) 682, p. 2).

But also the definition of a "social enterprise" is highly significant:

> "A social enterprise is an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders. It operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives. It is managed in an open and responsible manner and, in particular, involve employees, consumers and stakeholders affected by its commercial activities" (ibidem).

> "For the purposes of this Communication, the terms 'social business' and 'social enterprise' are equivalent" (ibidem, footnote n. 6)

Moreover, in the final part of the Communication the Commission proposes an action plan to support social entrepreneurship and social innovation in Europe. The action plan consists of eleven key actions articulated in three main chapters: 1. Improving access to funding (key actions 1 to 4); 2. Increasing the visibility of social entrepreneurship (key actions 5 to 8); 3. Improving the legal environment (key actions 9 to 11) (ibid., pp. 6-11).

As we can easily realize, the language is completely different from the one used in the Resolution analyzed in the previous paragraph. The key words now are: "promote a highly competitive social market economy"; "social enterprises"; "social innovation"; "new solutions to societal problems"; "provide innovative responses"; "social impact"; "entrepreneurial and innovative fashion"; "managed in a responsible manner"; "commercial activities".

But the genuine innovation was the introduction ("invention"?) of the term "social business", never used before in an official document by European institutions. For the present study, the threefold categorization of "social enterprises/social businesses" stated by the Communication is particularly interesting.

Compared to the longstanding tradition of the Social Economy sector, the most problematic one is the first typology: "those [businesses] for which the social or societal objective of the common good is the reason for the commercial activity, often in the form of a high level of social innovation" (ibid., p. 2), because in this definition there is no reference either to the limited distribution of profit or to the democratic structure of the ownership. The other two typologies, instead, are the two pillars of the traditional Social Economy organizations (together with the social aim): the first one is a typology of business where profits are reinvested for social purposes, and the second one is a typology where governance and ownership are democratic or inspired by social justice (ibidem).

- Table 1 here -

We are facing here a blurring of the boundaries between actors (see Table 1) that have historically played a quite different role for the society as a whole: the private business initiatives (corporations, firms), whose main aim was to create economic wealth, and the Social Economy organizations (associations and cooperatives), whose aim was, and has always been, to produce "relational" or "merits" good, to generate social capital in the community and to reinforce the democratic fabric of the society, through the participation of the most vulnerable people.

2.4 Back to the Future?

The year 2014 can be considered as a landmark for the EU attitude toward Social Economy. Indeed during this year two huge (and somehow quite opposite) events took place. The first one can be considered as the last initiative undertaken under the José Manuel Barroso Presidency of the European Commission (2004-2009; 2009-2014), whereas the second one represents the first public event on the topic under the new Jean-Claude Juncker Presidency (November 2014 onwards).

We are referring to the event "Empowering Social Entrepreneurs for Innovation, Inclusive Growth and Jobs", held in Strasbourg on 16th and 17th January 2014, and to the Conference organized under the Italian semester of Presidency of the EU "Unlocking the Potential of the Social Economy for EU Growth", held in Rome on 17th and 18th November 2014.

Both of them have draft a Declaration, known respectively as the *Strasbourg Declaration* and the *Rome Strategy*, which represent two quite different views of the role, function, tasks, duties and rights of the Social Economy in the EU.

The Strasbourg Meeting represents, so to say, the "end of a cycle". As it is clear from the extract below, the language of the *Declaration* is still recalling the new-liberal trend, and the key words are patently "business-like" or "market-like" terms:

> "Social enterprises are recognised as a vehicle for social and economic cohesion across Europe as they help build a pluralistic and resilient social market economy. Building on the strengths of a long social economy tradition, social entrepreneurs are also drivers of change, creating innovative solutions to the big challenges that face us today. Acting in the general interest, they create jobs, provide innovative products and services, and promote a more sustainable economy. They are based on values of solidarity and empowerment; they create opportunities and hope for the future" (European Economic and Social Committee 2014a, p. 1).

In this document the main actor is the "social entrepreneur", who acts as an "agent of change"; and the narrative is defined by the terms: "resilient economy", "drivers of change", "innovative solutions", "social innovation", "empowerment", "opportunities" "passionate". The cultural and political dimension of the traditional Social Economy discourse disappeared, and there is only a very soft reference to it in the preamble: "Building on the strengths of a long social economy tradition […]" (ibidem). Moreover, social entrepreneurs are individuals (even if the document states that they can also be "groups"), described as "passionate about improving the lives of people" and able to "create opportunities and hope for the future" (ibidem). Whereas the subject of the Social Economy was a "collective actor", meaning a group of people gathering together for the pursue of a "collective interest" (and, as byproduct, the amelioration of the "general interest"), and the principle (logic) of action was the mutual collaboration of the organization's members (usually in the form of "association"), here the protagonist is an individual (social entrepreneur), or a very small group of people (social enterprise), who starts an economic activity ("earning income by trading"): the only reference to the "social" is given by the "social or societal objective of the common good as the reason for their economic activity" (European Economic and Social Committee 2014a, p. 1), that is a quite generic statement. Any reference to a "different model of production" of goods and services (in comparison to the capitalistic one) is lost, and the same happened to any emancipation yearning.

But again, the picture was changing suddenly, and the era of the neo-liberal movement was coming to an end, even if it would take several years before this awareness became common in the majority of the economic, political, social and cultural actors of the society.

The Rome Conference, on the other side, can be considered as the beginning of a "new cycle". Since the vocabulary of the *Rome Strategy* has been adopted, a completely different point of view has emerged in comparison to the *Strasbourg Declaration*:

> "On the occasion of its Presidency of the EU Council, the Italian government took the opportunity to promote a dialogue between social economy organisations, national and local governments, and European institutions – a dialogue that in recent years has seen a plurality of actors working to define and promote the role of the Social Economy for European growth.
>
> The conference "Unlocking the Potential of the Social Economy for EU Growth", held in Rome on the 17th and 18th of November 2014, seized the opportunity provided by the beginning of the new European Parliament's and European Commission's mandate in order to identify the areas of intervention deemed necessary by the varied actors who have worked to promote the spread and strengthening of the Social Economy as a key driver of economic and social development in Europe" (European Economic and Social Committee 2014b, p. 1).

The language utilizes the typical jargon of the longstanding history of the Social Economy movement: in the five page document (even the length is significant, and style of writing is more argumentative and not a "bullet point" style, as the previous one) the term "social entrepreneur" is never mentioned, and the term "social enterprise" is mentioned only once in a 1.600 word document!

In the Preamble the political and institutional dimensions of the Social Economy organizations are strongly underlined, and several references to political institutions are mentioned. Specifically the role of the "European Parliament" and of the "European Economic and Social Committee" are stressed, and the "Social Economy Intergroup", that brings together more than 200 MPs from all political positions, is expressly cited (European Economic and Social Committee 2014b, p. 1).

Among the official documents voted by the European Institutions on the topic, it is worth noting that the European Parliament's Resolution on the Social Economy of 2009 (the aforementioned "Toia Report") is quoted (ibidem), reference that disappeared in the more recent declarations.

Other excerpts from the *Rome Strategy* clearly show the recognition that the plurality of forms and legal statuses, that characterize the organizations belonging to the Social Economy sector, share a common feature: they all are "organisations based on the primacy of people over capital" (ibid., p. 2), element that was definitely not clear in the "social entrepreneur" / "social entrepreneurship" conceptual frame. Moreover the main families of the Social Economy movement are mentioned again in a very clear and sharp way: "this universe includes organisational forms like cooperatives, mutuals, foundations and associations" (ibidem); whereas the reference to the "social enterprise" form is only secondary: "as well as newer forms like social enterprises" (ibidem). Finally, the *Strategy* underlines again other fundamental features of the Social Economy organizations, such as "working methods based on cooperation and reciprocity" and "democratic governance and transparent models", that the documents published under the Barroso Presidency did not mention clearly. With regard to this, it is worth noting the stress put on the consequences generated by this type of governance: "trust in those that participate in their activities", that is recognized as "a fundamental condition for the survival and future development of the European social model" (ibidem).

After this historical excursus, concerning the process of institutionalization and recognition of the Social Economy sector by the EU leadership, in the next section we will investigate the "level of recognition" that the term/concept of Social Economy has in a sample of ten European countries.

3. Level of recognition of the Social Economy in ten European countries: view from the InnoSi project

One of the authors of this paper was involved in the InnoSi Project, a social research project funded by the European Commission through its Horizon 2020 Program (2015-2017)[9]. One of the tasks of InnoSi was to investigate the *level of recognition* of the Social Economy sector in EU countries, particularly through "in-depth case study evaluations taking place in 10 Member States"[10]: Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. Therefore, taking advantage of the results of this unprecedented investigation, in the present section we will illustrate the "level of recognition" that the term/concept of Social Economy has in these ten European countries, in a synchronic and contemporary perspective, proposing an original and innovative classification[11].

3.1 Finland

During the rapid expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the Finnish debate on welfare issues can be interpreted through social investment lenses. Many significant

[9] See http://innosi.eu/ (last accessed: April 9, 2019).

[10] See http://innosi.eu/about-innosi/ (last accessed: April 9, 2019).

[11] As far as the methodology is concerned, it could be useful to explain the steps undertaken. First of all, the Work Package (WP) leader elaborates a Template articulated in several sections and sub-sections; each section includes several questions to be fulfilled by the ten Academic Partners of the Consortium. In order to complete the task the research units/teams did refer to many different sources of data, such as: a) presence/absence of laws (at National, Regional and Local level) concerning the Social Economy/Third Sector; b) other laws (for example related to Health Care; Social Policy; Education; Migration; Active labour; Housing, etc.) that have direct impact on Social Economy/Third Sector; c) existence (or not) of an institutional body of consultation of the sector (such as National Council of Social Economy/Third Sector as it is in France and Italy); d) presence/absence of a national census of the sector by the National Institute of Statistics; e) presence/absence of one (or more) national umbrella organization of representation of the sector (such as National Federation, National Forum, etc.); f) presence/absence of an annual (or biannual) event (or more) at the national level of study, reflection, discussion, organised by the main umbrella organizations of the country; g) presence/absence of a journal, review, weekly magazine, published by a networks of civil society organizations and fully dedicated to the sector, at a national level; h) number of program broadcast on different media (radio, TV, web, etc.) dedicated to civil society organizations or dealing with topics related to their activities/services; i) number of articles on main national newspapers (or column) dedicated to civil society organizations, or to related topics; l) data from national research (survey) on behaviour, perception, attitude of citizens toward the sector. Moreover, each national research team should carry out a certain number (around 10/15) of interviews (and/or focus groups) with key informants, such as: I) policy makers (member of Parliament; leader of political parties; top public manager at national level); II) civil society leaders (chairs of the board of main Federations and umbrella organizations; CEOs of big national social economy organization; top managers, etc.) III) journalists and media operators. All these information and data become the basis for writing a country Report following the template scheme.
The above-mentioned set of data and documents can be aggregated in three main categories: 1) institutional level [a, b, c, d]; 2) civil society level [e, f, g]; 3) public opinion level [h, i, l]. Analysing all the information gathered, the academic partner should assign a position on a three ladders scale: low, medium, high, for each of the three dimensions [institutional, civil society, public opinion] about the level of recognition and institutionalization of the Social Economy sector in their country. Based on this self-assigned score classification and on the careful reading of the ten countries Reports, the coordinating research team (WP leader) elaborated the classification shown in Table n. 2.

welfare initiatives were introduced and/or expanded (e.g. pension scheme, comprehensive school, child welfare clinic system). However, after the financial crisis at the beginning of 1990s (Finnish GDP decreased over 10 % between 1991 and 1993), the debate has changed. Although welfare investments have been and are still relatively high, welfare payments and services are seen more as costs rather than investments. In the past few years, the concept of "welfare economy" has emerged in the Finnish debate. Welfare economy shares many features with social investment, however, in the Finnish context the role of public sector is more crucial compared to the definition provided by CIRIEC. Societal entrepreneurship, for example, is in its infancy when compared to UK.

Things may also change. Nowadays there are some signs of increasing interest for the role of private capital in welfare delivery. As an example, SITRA (the Finnish Innovation Fund) has invited various stakeholders to debate on how to promote private investments in welfare (Social Impact Bond, SIB[12]).

3.2 Germany

The concept of Social Economy developed by CIRIEC is not broadly recognized in Germany. The German government uses the term Social Economy for all non-profit institutions and organizations, essentially the six big welfare associations. Research in different German states (Saxonia, Bavaria, Saxonia-Anhalt) focused on task fields instead of organizational characteristics, where private companies are integrated. In the social sciences a structural approach with different frames at the intersections of private ownership, social objectives, origins of funding and non-profit orientation dependent on the research question has been developed.

3.3 Greece

To our knowledge the concept of Social Economy developed by CIRIEC is not fully recognized in Greece. The concept of Social Economy was introduced very recently with the Act 4019/2011 on "Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship", which identifies Social Economy as "the sum of economic, entrepreneurial, productive and social activities, undertaken by juridical entities or associations whose statutory aim is the pursue of collective benefit and the service of wider social interests". Despite the fact that the concept of Social Economy is widely accepted by the academia but also by the public sector (CIRIEC 2012, p. 39), the current law has been widely criticized (Nasioulas 2011, pp.7-13) and not actually implemented yet.

3.4 Hungary

After the change of the political regime, the idea of social market economy had been present for many parliamentary cycles. In 1987, the Civil Code legalized the institution of the foundations. The Law on the Right of Association was approved in January 1989 by the Hungarian Parliament and it allowed the establishment of non-profit enterprises. This was followed by the law on public benefit organizations in 1997, which declared the public benefit status of non-profit organizations. The CXLIV/1997 law introduced a particular corporate form among the corporate forms, the 'public benefit corporation'. This is the legal background of the 'third economy' in Hungary.

The first projects have been launched with the support of the OFA, as a transit program for non-profit organizations, and employed long term unemployed people excluded from the labour market. Since 2004 – after entering the EU – it was the OFA again that participated in the support programs

[12] See http://www.sitra.fi/en/economy/impact-investing (last accessed: March 29, 2019).

(HEFOP) financed by the Structural Funds of the EU. OFA funded the scientific research of Social Economy and development network to promote the establishment of the organizations of Social Economy.

But the development of Social Economy has not been significant till 2010.

In 2011, the Social Economy got greater emphasis by the Hungarian government, which adopted the so called "Hungarian Work Plan Program". In a TAMOP 2.4.3. B) program, 2,3 billions HUF were provided for 57 social co-operatives, in order to employ unemployed people or support them to become self-employed.

Today we have a jungle of definitions of Social Economy. Usually Social Economy in Hungary is used as a collective term in which all social enterprises and cooperatives are included. This economy is between the state and the market in order to fulfill its social mission, it performs business activity, and it is self-financed.

Social Economy, in a broader sense, means all different kinds of organizations that have a social mission and are self-financed on a long-term basis.

3.5 Italy

The concept of Social Economy (from the French *economie sociale*) is not fully recognized in Italy. In order to identify the organizations of civil society the most commonly used term is "third sector" (Terzo Settore). On the other side, in the national official statistics they are defined as Nonprofit Institutions (ISTAT, Italian statistical institute). Nevertheless, among the leaders and the top management of third sector organizations, in the policy debate, and among the social and economic actors, the concept of Social Economy is widely recognized.

Recently, while in charge of the Presidency of the EU Council, the Italian government took the opportunity to promote a dialogue between Social Economy organizations, national and local governments, and European institutions – a dialogue that in recent years has seen a plurality of actors working to define and promote the role of the Social Economy for European growth. The aforementioned conference "Unlocking the Potential of the Social Economy for EU Growth", held in Rome on the 17th and 18th of November 2014, has seized the opportunity provided by the beginning of the new European Parliament's and European Commission's mandate in order to identify the areas of intervention deemed necessary by the different actors, who have worked to promote the spread and strengthening of the Social Economy as a key driver of economic and social development in Europe.

The Conference was preceded by a public consultation, which gathered contributions from a wide range of European organizations, and organized ten working groups on specific topics, attended by over 600 people from all over Europe, including practitioners, policy-makers, and experts. Through this bottom-up approach, the Rome Conference did not only summarize the results achieved to date, but it also looked at the future challenges that the various decision-makers and actors responsible for the management and promotion of the Social Economy are called to address, either individually or, more often, collectively.

In Italy the main difference between the concept of Social Economy and the concept of third sector is based on the fact that the former includes the cooperatives, while the latter doesn't (except for the cluster of the so called "social cooperatives"). For the third sector definition concerns four main typologies of organizations: a) organizations of volunteers (Volontariato); b) associations with a social aim (Associazionismo Pro-Sociale); c) social cooperatives (Cooperative Sociali) and d) Foundations (Fondazioni: civic or social foundations in order to be distinguished by Bank Foundations, that are peculiar to the Italian context). The first three of these types of organizations are regulated by a special (*ad hoc*) law: Volontariato Law 266/1991; Associazionismo Pro-Sociale Law 383/2000; Cooperative Sociali Law 381/1991; whereas the Fondazioni are regulated only by the norms of the Civic Code.

The third sector in Italy does not include the following organizations: political parties; churches and religion congregations; work unions; trade unions; professional associations (of lawyers, architects, etc.) and the clubs and other types of organizations that discriminate the access by census (monetary threshold).

In 2006 the Law on social enterprise (Impresa Sociale) has been introduced: Legislative Decree n. 155/2006 enlarges the juridical forms allowed to a private non-profit company in order to pursue social goals, but the new legislation has not been very successful (nowadays there are only about 700 registered social enterprises in Italy).

The National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2011 carried out a Census on Nonprofit Institutions. According to the data provided, in Italy there are 301.191 Nonprofit Institutions (active, operating); 201.004 Associations without juridical personality (unlimited liability) (66.7%); 68.349 Associations with juridical personality (limited liability) (22.7%); 11.264 Social Cooperatives (3.7%); 6.220 Foundations (2.0%); 6.583 Religious organizations (2.2%); 996 Mutuals (0.3%); and 6.775 non-profit organizations which cannot be included in the previous categories (2.2 %).They involve: 4,7 millions of volunteers, 681thousand full time paid staff, 271thousand people working with external contracts, and 5thousand temporary workers. They mobilize a 63.9 billion Euros turnover per year. In conclusion, to have an estimate of the overall size of the Social Economy in Italy, we need to add to the 301.191 Nonprofit Institutions the 50.134 Cooperatives (active, operating in 2011), for a total of 351.325 organizations.

The demonstration that the term commonly used in Italy is third sector is supported by the fact that, at the national level, the main umbrella organization which represents the four main organizational typologies of Italian civil society organizations in the dialogue with the Government and other social actors, is named Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore (third sector national forum, founded in 1997).

3.6 Netherlands

The concept of Social Economy is not used in national and governmental policy in the Netherlands. However, social entrepreneurship and social business are entering the political debate. In April 2015, the Dutch Social Economic Council (SER) published a Report on social entrepreneurship. The definition of social business in this report is:

> “Social businesses have at least in common that they are all independent enterprises, that deliver products and services and primarily and explicitly strive for a social purpose. The advice of the Social Economic Council is intended to with regard to the development of social businesses: 1) invest in common impact measurement; 2) reinforce cooperation between social businesses; 2) increase knowledge on social business; 3) research possibilities for the adoption of a public label for social business; 4) improve climate for financing; 5) create possibilities for social businesses with regard to procurement of services by (local and national) government”.

The Social and Economic Council gives herewith an incentive for the development of social businesses within the wider field of the labour market.

Social entrepreneurship[13] is also encouraged at the local level, as cities such as Rotterdam, Utrecht and Amsterdam have created Social Impact Bonds, with a couple of social and CSR businesses and local governments/ municipalities. However, decentralization reforms and the impact bonds concluded have only been implemented since January 2015. The impact of these measures and new alliances is not clear yet.

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[13] See also www.socialenterprise.nl (last accessed: March 29, 2019).

3.7 Poland

The concept of Social Economy, as developed in Poland, is entirely in line with the definition adopted by the CIRIEC network. Social Economy entities include foundations, associations, co-operatives (including social co-operatives, worker co-operatives, co-operatives for disabled people), social integration centers, vocational centers and mutual insurance societies. The year 2014 saw the adoption of the National Program for the Development of Social Economy, which identifies crucial directions for public intervention, with the goal of creating conditions encouraging the growth of Social Economy and social enterprises in Poland. The goals contained in the Program were shaped on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the Social Economy sector. They take into account the current political, social and economic context, both in Poland and in the entire EU.

3.8 Spain

The concept of Social Economy described by CIRIEC is in line with that adopted by institutions in Spain, perhaps not surprisingly bearing in mind that CIRIEC's headquarters are at the University of Valencia. Spanish Social Economy has been defined by the Law of 29th March 2011 (Ley5/2011), which represents a turning point in the recognition and visibility of the sector.

This Law states that Social Economy is a set of economic and business activities in the private sector carried out by institutions that, in accordance with the following principles, pursue public economic or social interest or both.

These principles are:

- People and the social aim take precedence over capital, manifested in autonomous and transparent, democratic and participative management, which leads to the prioritization in decision-making based more on people and their contributions to work and services offered to the organization, or on the social objective and on contributions to social capital.

- Application of the results obtained from economic activity mainly from the work and service contributed or activity carried out by members, where applicable, to the social aim of the organization.

- Promotion of internal solidarity and with society that favors commitment to local development, equal opportunities between men and women, social cohesion, insertion of people at risk of social exclusion, the generation of stable, quality employment, conciliation among personal, family and work life and sustainability.

- Independence from public powers.

The Law recognizes the following types of institutions as part of the Social Economy:

- Cooperatives (with a special mention of traditional fishing cooperatives)
- Workforce-owned limited companies
- Mutual societies
- Specialist employment centers
- Associations
- Foundations
- Labour market insertion companies

3.9 Sweden

The idea of Social Economy is not very widely used in Sweden, although the country has a long tradition of social engagement and third sector involvement in social services and education activities. Concepts such as "Social Economy" and "social enterprise" are relatively new in Sweden (but not in practice) and are used alongside more traditional terminology such as cooperatives, not-for-profit or voluntary organizations and civil society organizations. A variety of organizational structures are recognized by the Swedish government as social enterprises: work integration social enterprises (WISE), economic associations, non-profit organizations, foundations or limited companies. WISE, in particular, have received increasing government attention due to the investment in marginalized people.

3.10 UK

The CIRIEC definition of ‘Social Economy’ resembles the definition of co-operative or mutual, which in the UK is regulated as an ‘industrial and provident society’. This is both too narrow a definition for what we call ‘Social Economy’ in the UK, and also can include some organizations that might not be considered part of the Social Economy. ‘Social Economy’ is used interchangeably with ‘third sector’ and ‘community and voluntary sector’ - and is easier set out as what it is not, i.e. state sector or ‘profit-making’ sector. That said, all need to make a profit or be bankrupt eventually, and the Community Interest Company model allows for limited profits for shareholders. The co-op is perhaps too big to be part of the social economy, and some private clubs for the elite could be included in the CIRIEC definition.

The analysis provided allows to discriminate each country under scrutiny according to the level/degree of recognition/institutionalization of the term/concept of Social Economy.

- Table 2 here -

Our classification is slightly different from the one proposed in the ITSSOIN European project (Anheier *et al.* 2014) for several reasons.

First of all, we suggest a three-level categorization (low, medium, high), whereas they use a two-level taxonomy (low and high). This allows us to differentiate more accurately the countries under scrutiny.

Secondly, our classification is based on the criterion of “level of recognition” of the sub-set of organizations that can be included under the label of “Social Economy”, whereas they use as criterion the size of the (third) sector in the countries studied. We used a qualitative criterion, which refers to the “level of understanding and visibility of the concept of Social Economy” (perception) among the main collective actors of the society: politicians, top public management, scholars and researchers, practitioners, and public opinion. The ITSSOIN project uses a quantitative criterion which translates the scope of the (third) sector in terms of: a) the share of state expenditures on core welfare state activities that flows into the third sector (%); b) the third sector share of paid workforce (as % of total national workforce); c) the third sector share of GDP (%). This criterion shows a limited inner coherence, because the first measure refers to “welfare state activities”, whereas the other two concern the third sector as a whole.

After this overview on the level of recognition of the Social Economy in ten selected European countries, it is necessary to consider also the concrete strength and weight of this sector in order to reach a full comprehension of its importance for the social cohesion and the economic prosperity of the EU. The next section will be therefore dedicated to the illustration of the current condition of the sector through the use of the official statistics, data, analyses and assessments in all the 28 countries of the EU, published by the European Commission and its offices.

4. A brief overview of Social Economy in EU countries

The current condition of the Social Economy in EU countries can be deduced from many official documents published directly by the European Commission or, on its behalf, by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) with the technical assistance of the CIRIEC[14]. These documents provide a useful overview of the entities and enterprises of this sector, their numerical size, their "health" and their problems.

The most recent data are available in the report *Recent Evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union*, commissioned by the EESC, carried out by the CIRIEC and published in 2017: it follows two other reports published in 2008 (Monzon, Chaves 2008) and in 2012 (EESC 2012), allowing a diachronic perspective of the evolution of the Social Economy entities and enterprises during the economic crisis. The direction of this evolution is generally positive, with limited negative impacts, as Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group of the EESC, stated in the "Foreword": "What is evident is that the social economy has emerged from the economic and financial crisis largely unscathed. Today, the sector provides paid employment to 6.3% of the working population in the EU-28, compared to 6.5% in 2012" (EESC 2017, pp. 3, 66). Previous statistics (2009-2010), however, referred to 27 countries, because Croatia entered the EU only in 2013 (EESC 2012, pp. 46-47). However, it is certainly possible to acknowledge that between the 2009-2010 wave and 2014-2015 there was a moderate loss of paid jobs in the sector. The following Table 3 shows the proportions of this loss, with the data provided by the available statistics:

- Table 3 here -

Despite this loss, the overall strength of the Social Economy sector remains "unscathed", as President Jahier stated. Considering only the number of entities and enterprises of the sector, this condition of durable solidity appears clearly across these years. The European Commission report *Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship*, published in 2013, presented data taken from the previous, and aforementioned, EESC report *The Social Economy in the European Union*: these data referred to the years 2009-2010 (EESC 2012, p. 45). According to these sources (European Commission 2013, p. 46), in this period the overall number of Social Economy enterprises was 2.825.769, divided among:

- 2.595.324 Associations, foundations and other similar accepted forms (92%)
- 208.655 Cooperatives and other similar accepted forms (7%)
- 21.790 Mutual companies and other similar accepted forms (1%)

This amount has not substantially changed, because the EESC report *Recent Evolutions* states that in 2014-2015 the sector still consisted in «over 2.8 million entities and enterprises» (EESC 2017, p. 66). It is reasonable to assume that also the proportion among these three categories, "associations and foundations", "cooperatives" and "mutual companies", has not changed. This division is typical of the CIRIEC method of classification. The following Table 4 provides detailed data for each category and EU country (Croatia included):

[14] This cooperation includes also the adoption, by the EESC, of the Social Economy definition elaborated by the CIRIEC: "*The set of private, formally-organised enterprises, with autonomy of decision and freedom of membership, created to meet their members' needs through the market by producing goods and providing services, insurance and finance, where decision-making and any distribution of profits or surpluses among the members are not directly linked to the capital or fees contributed by each member, each of whom has one vote, or at all events take place through democratic and participative decision-making processes. The social economy also includes private, formally organised organisations with autonomy of decision and freedom of membership that produce non-market services for households and whose surpluses, if any, cannot be appropriated by the economic agents that create, control or finance them"* (EESC 2012, p. 22) and also "*they are organisations of people who conduct an activity with the main purpose of meeting the needs of people rather than remunerating capitalist investors"* (ibid., p. 23).

- Table 4 here -

In addition to the amount of entities and enterprises, and to the paid jobs they provide, the importance of the Social Economy sector is demonstrated also by the number of unpaid volunteers employed, that is 82.887.715 people (ibid., pp. 66, 72), and by the "more than 232 million members of cooperatives, mutuals and similar entities" (ibid., p. 66).

The Social Economy sector has therefore demonstrated its resilience to the crisis: this resilience is essentially due to its peculiar cultural basis, that is to say, its aforementioned characteristics, such as the primacy of the person, a democratic governance and a social and environmental responsibility. The different identity of the Social Economy entities and enterprises has proven itself as a strength, not as a weakness, during the years of the crisis. This fact was recognized also by the 2013 European Commission report *Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship*:

> "The significant contribution of the social economy to economic development and wellbeing has been confirmed by the recent economic crisis. It is well documented, for example, how cooperative banks, unlike commercial banks, largely refrained from risky financial activities that triggered the crisis and continued to concentrate their lending on the real economy rather than investing in speculative financial products. Moreover, during the crisis, they continued to support family enterprises through their lending even as other banks stopped doing so (European Commission 2013, p. 52)".

Despite this formal recognition of the importance of the Social Economy sector, many obstacles still prevent it from displaying all its potential. The EESC, in its recent official publication *Best practices in public policies regarding the European Social Economy post the economic crisis* (again realized by the CIRIEC), identified four groups of obstacles as particularly harmful: "(i) visibility and awareness; (ii) leadership and government administration; (iii) financing and taxation; and, (iv) explicit institutional barriers" (EESC 2018, p. 44).

The first group "concerns a lack of awareness and understanding of the concept" in many countries, that affects not only society, media and public debate, but also the academic world and statistical institutes, that often don't have "databases, official statistics and reliable data" (ibidem).

The second group is related to the absence of a leadership, inside many governments or umbrella organizations of the EU countries, able to act in the sector's interests: "Many correspondents say that there is a lack of leading institutions with responsibility for the social economy, social enterprises, volunteers and civil society that are able to develop policies and encourage the social economy." (ibid., pp. 44-45).

The third group concerns the current financial and tax schemes, that in many countries are unfavorable to the sector, for example limiting or excluding dedicated public funds, while, "On the other hand, no European-level tax reforms for social enterprises are under consideration" (ibid., p. 46).

The fourth and last group is composed by obstacles of an essentially institutional nature: there are "changes in sector regulations" that are unfavorable to the Social Economy and its operations (ibidem); then there is "the non-implementation of the new regulations for social enterprises" because of the neglect or the unwillingness of the governments (ibid., pp. 46-47); finally, there is a more general problem of legal recognition of the social economy entities and enterprises, because the "new national legal forms of social economy or changes in legal forms" often don't recognize or exclude realities that, instead, form a part of the sector and are already operating in those national context, and are therefore damaged (ibid., p. 47). These are the challenges that the Social Economy sector has to currently face in the EU-28.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper aimed at illustrating the main institutional configuration of the EU policy towards the SE in the last three decades, then at determining the level of recognition and institutionalization of the SE in a sample of ten EU countries, and finally at connecting these developments with the DiMaggio and Powell's theory of institutional isomorphism (1983).

With regard to the first aspect, to sum up, in terms of European social policy the current conjuncture of the Social Economy can be interpreted as follows: in the last 30 years this sector has entered a phase of *institutionalization* and *public recognition* within the EU, and, particularly during the Prodi Presidency (1999-2004), the European Commission has carried out a coherent policy based on the recognition of its social value, with the only exception of the 2nd Barroso Presidency (2009-2014).

This period was politically less favorable to the Social Economy because of the neo-liberal general attitude and was also economically problematic because of the beginning of the financial crisis. Despite these obstacles, the sector demonstrated its *resilience*, as the EESC data show, remaining substantially "unscathed": this resilience is essentially due to its peculiar cultural basis, that is a strength rather than a weakness.

The European Commission has recognized and supported this strength, trying to promote a process of harmonization among the EU-28 countries through its official resolutions and recommendations, and through its funding programs.

Nevertheless, with regard to the second aspect, the *level of recognition* of the Social Economy sector is not yet uniform in each European country, as it is summarized in Table 2. The situation inside the countries is dynamic, and the governments do not always adopt policies that are promoting this sector. On the contrary, as EESC certifies, they can create many of the obstacles that still affect the Social Economy in national contexts.

So it is possible to argue that there is a tension between the national policies, that sometimes were or are unfavorable (or even hostile) to the Social Economy, and the European Commission policy, that till now has been a favorable policy, based on support and harmonization, with the exception of the Barroso Presidency: otherwise, the tendency of the Commission has constantly been to carry out a strategy based on moral suasion, financial support and soft law in order to encourage the EU countries to develop the Social Economy.

This constant tendency is pertinent to the third aspect: indeed, if we consider the DiMaggio and Powell's definition of *isomorphism*, that is, "a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 149), and if we highlight that, among the three types or mechanisms of *institutional isomorphism*, "Coercive isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function" (ibid., p. 150), then we may argue that the role of the European Commission has undoubtedly been that of a powerful factor of *coercive isomorphism*, supporting the development of the Social Economy with its legislative, financial and moral tools against the original weaknesses of the sector, the aforementioned hostile attitude of some governments and other factors, such as the crisis. A "coercion", however, that is based on the awareness of the positive effects produced by the Social Economy in the single social and economic contexts, and that has counterbalanced the hostile pressure against the sector.

Therefore, now the central point of the question is which *political attitude* will be adopted by the next European Commission Presidency[15] after the 26th May 2019 elections. However, either with

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[15] It must be recognized that the Juncker Presidency (2014-2019) shows a significant discontinuity towards the two previous Barroso Presidencies, as far as the welfare policy is concerned. This is testified by the "European Pillar of Social Rights" statement, adopted by The European Parliament, the Council of EU and the EU Commission the 17th November 2017 in Gothenburg. Nevertheless during his Presidency little attention was given to the SE/TS organizations.

or without the positive action of coercive isomorphism carried out by the Commission, the Social Economy sector has demonstrated to be able to resist, react and grow "under pressure".

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Policy Framework	Institutional Configuration	Social Economy Role	Key Principles
Keynesian	Welfare State	Advocacy, Actor in Social Policy delivering	Universalism, Solidarity, Equality
Neo-liberal	Minimum/Residual State	Social Enterprise and Social Business Corporate Social Responsibility	Freedom of choice, Consumer empowerment, Competitiveness, Efficiency, Cost reduction
Lib-Lab compromise[16]	Social Investment State	Agencies in promoting active labor policies and social inclusion	Activation, Responsibility, Autonomy, Effectiveness, Sustainability
Neo-Keynesian Post-Keynesian	a) Welfare Society __________ b) New *chauvinism* Welfare State	a) Social Partners [co-design, co-production, co-governance of welfare policies]; b) Traditional Charitable Sector	a) Principle of Subsidiarity; __________ b) Protectionism, National citizenship

Scheme 1 – Institutional configurations of welfare policies

[16] With the term "Lib-Lab" we define a policy framework that includes several features of the Labour approach (Keynesian policies) and some elements of the Liberal approach (Neo-liberal) in a new comprehensive institutional configuration based on the "active policy" frame. Also called the "Third Way".

	Social Economy	Nonprofit sector	Third Sector	Social Enterprises
Cooperatives	√			√
Social Cooperatives	√		√	√
Mutuals	√			√
Associations	√	√	√	
Foundations	√	√	√	√
Private for profit corporations with a social aim				√

Tab. 1 – Typology of organizations by legal status in the different narratives (approaches)

LEVEL OF RECOGNITION of the Social Economy concept	COUNTRIES
LOW	Finland, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom.
MEDIUM	Italy, Germany, Greece; Hungary.
HIGH	France, Poland, Spain.

Tab. 2 – EU Countries by level of recognition of the Social Economy concept

Employment in the Social Economy				
Country	**2002/2003**	**2009/2010**	**2014/2015**	**Δ%2010-2015**
Austria	260,145	233,528	308,050	31.9%
Belgium	279,611	462,541	403,921	-12.7%
Bulgaria	(n/a)	121,300	82,050	-32.4%
Croatia	(n/a)	9,084	15,848	74.5%
Cyprus	4,491	5,067	6,984	37.8%
Czech R.	165,221	160,086	162,921	1.8%
Denmark	160,764	195,486	158,961	-18.7%
Estonia	23,250	37,850	38,036	0.5%
Finland	175,397	187,200	182,105	-2.7%
France	1,985,150	2,318,544	2,372,812	2.3%
Germany	2,031,837	2,458,584	2,635,980	7.2%
Greece	69,834	117,123	117,516	0.3%
Hungary	75,669	178,210	234,747	31.7%
Ireland	155,306	98,735	95,147	-3.6%
Italy	1,336,413	2,228,010	1,923,745	-13.7%
Latvia	300	440	19,341	(n/p)
Lithuania	7,700	8,971	7,332	-18.3%
Luxembourg	7,248	16,114	25,345	57.3%
Malta	238	1,677	2,404	43.4%
Netherlands	772,110	856,054	798,778	-6.7%
Poland	529,179	592,800	365,900	-38.3%
Portugal	210,950	251,098	215,963	-14.0%
Romania	(n/a)	163,354	136,385	-16.5%
Slovakia	98,212	44,906	51,611	14.9%
Slovenia	4,671	7,094	10,710	51.0%
Spain	872,214	1,243,153	1,358,401	9.3%
Sweden	205,697	507,209	195,832	-61.4%
U. Kingdom	1,711,276	1,633,000	1,694,710	3.8%
TOTAL EU-28	**11,142,883**	**14,137,218**	**13,621,535**	**-3.6%**

Tab. 3 – Evolution of paid employment in the Social Economy in Europe
(n/a) not available; (n/p) not pertinent
Source: EESC 2017, p. 70

Country	Cooperatives and similar	Mutual Societies	Associations & Foundations	Total
Austria	70,474	1,576	236,000	308,050
Belgium	23,904	17,211	362,806	403,921
Bulgaria	53,841	1,169	27,040	82,050
Croatia	2,744	2,123	10,981	15,848
Cyprus	3,078	(n/a)	3,906	6,984
Czech R.	50,310	5,368	107,243	162,921
Denmark	49,552	4,328	105,081	158,961
Estonia	9,850	186	28,000	38,036
Finland	93,511	6,594	82,000	182,105
France	308,532	136,723	1,927,557	2,372,812
Germany	860,000	102,119	1,673,861	2,635,980
Greece	14,983	1,533	101,000	117,516
Hungary	85,682	6,948	142,117	234,747
Ireland	39,935	455	54,757	95,147
Italy	1,267,603	20,531	635,611	1,923,745
Latvia	440	373	18,528	19,341
Lithuania	7,000	332	(n/a)	7,332
Luxembourg	2,941	406	21,998	25,345
Malta	768	209	1,427	2,404
Netherlands	126,797	2,860	669,121	798,778
Poland	235,200	1,900	128,800	365,900
Portugal	24,316	4,896	186,751	215,963
Romania	31,573	5,038	99,774	136,385
Slovakia	23,799	2,212	25,600	51,611
Slovenia	3,059	319	7,332	10,710
Spain	528,000	2,360	828,041	1,358,401
Sweden	57,516	13,908	124,408	195,832
U. Kingdom	222,785	65,925	1,406,000	1,694,710
TOTAL EU-28	**4,198,193**	**407,602**	**9,015,740**	**13,621,535**

Tab. 4 – Paid employment in cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and similar entities. European Union (2014-15)

Source: EESC 2017, p. 68