P258 / Social assistance systems across South-East Europe

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Edlira Narazani (Centre for research on pensions and welfare policy)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Social assistance systems across South-East Europe have undergone significant reforms over the past two decades, driven by fiscal pressures, demographic change, EU integration processes, and the pursuit of more efficient poverty-reduction mechanisms. Despite these reforms, evidence suggests that social assistance schemes in the region continue to face persistent challenges related to benefit adequacy, coverage, and fiscal commitment. While many programmes are relatively successful in targeting resources towards low-income households, their overall effectiveness in reducing poverty and social exclusion remains limited. As a result, social assistance often functions primarily as a poverty-mitigation instrument rather than as a pathway towards sustainable social inclusion.

This panel aims to examine the evolution, performance, and future direction of social assistance systems in South-East Europe, including both Western Balkan countries and EU Member States in the region. It seeks to bring together researchers, policymakers, international organisations, and practitioners working on social protection, poverty measurement, labour market transitions, and fiscal policy. Particular attention will be paid to recent reforms, including digitalisation of benefit administration, proxy means-testing mechanisms, activation policies, minimum income schemes, and policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent cost-of-living pressures.

The panel will address several interrelated research questions:

To what extent do current social assistance systems succeed in reducing poverty, inequality, and material deprivation?
How do countries balance the trade-off between targeting accuracy and broad coverage of vulnerable populations?
What are the distributional consequences of recent reforms in eligibility rules, benefit design, and administrative procedures?
How have digitalisation and data-driven targeting tools affected inclusion and exclusion errors?
What lessons can be drawn from comparative experiences across South-East Europe and the European Union?
How can social assistance systems be redesigned to respond to emerging challenges such as informal employment, population ageing, migration, and changing labour market conditions?

The scientific relevance of this panel lies in its contribution to a growing international debate on the adequacy and effectiveness of social protection systems in middle-income and transition economies. Although a substantial body of research has examined poverty and social expenditure in European welfare states, comparative evidence on the functioning of social assistance schemes in South-East Europe remains relatively limited. By bringing together empirical studies, microsimulation analyses, impact evaluations, administrative data research, and policy assessments, the panel seeks to advance understanding of how social assistance can better contribute to poverty reduction and social inclusion.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Over the past two decades, countries in South-East Europe have implemented a wide range of social protection reforms aimed at strengthening poverty reduction, improving targeting mechanisms, and enhancing the efficiency of social assistance delivery. Despite notable progress in administrative modernisation and targeting accuracy, social assistance systems across the region continue to face important challenges related to benefit adequacy, coverage, fiscal sustainability, and their overall capacity to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Recent economic shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary pressures, demographic change, migration, and evolving labour market structures, have further highlighted the need to reassess the role of social assistance in promoting inclusive development.

This panel invites contributions that explore the design, implementation, performance, and future evolution

of social assistance programmes in South-East Europe, including both Western Balkan countries and EU Member States in the region. We welcome theoretical, empirical, comparative, and policy-oriented research that advances understanding of how social assistance systems can better address poverty, vulnerability, and inequality.

Particular attention will be given to contributions examining:

Poverty reduction and redistributive impacts of social assistance programmes;
Minimum income schemes and their adequacy relative to poverty thresholds;
Coverage gaps, non-take-up, and exclusion of vulnerable populations;
Targeting mechanisms, proxy means testing, and eligibility reforms;
Fiscal sustainability and financing of social assistance programmes;
Interactions between social assistance, labour market participation, and activation policies;
Digitalisation of welfare administration and data-driven service delivery;
The impact of economic crises, inflation, demographic change, and migration on social protection systems;
Microsimulation analyses of existing or alternative policy designs;
Comparative studies across countries and regions;
Lessons from EU social inclusion policies and implications for candidate and potential candidate countries.

The panel particularly encourages submissions employing innovative methodologies, including tax-benefit microsimulation models, impact evaluations, distributional analyses, administrative data research, and mixed-method approaches. Contributions focusing on specific country experiences are welcome, as are comparative studies that identify common challenges and policy lessons across the region.

By bringing together academics, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, the panel seeks to foster dialogue on how social assistance systems can move beyond poverty mitigation towards more effective poverty reduction and social inclusion. The discussion aims to generate evidence-based insights that can support the development of more adequate, inclusive, and resilient social protection systems in South-East Europe.