6. Cohesion Policy and Quality of Life

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Abstract (min 100, max 150 words)

The European Union has explicit ambitions to improve quality of life and ensure citizens enjoy the benefits of economic development. But defining quality of life is complex and contested, in research and policy alike. Differing perspectives on how to measure and support 'good lives' have been influential in differing ways, to differing purposes, over time. This chapter considers how policy objectives for improving quality of life have evolved from the first European Social Fund in 1957 through to contemporary Cohesion Policy. The chapter identifies three dominant policy 'frames'. The *living standards* frame views quality of life through access to the material benefits available in an increasingly affluent society. The *social model* frame advocates collective welfare provision from infancy to old age. The *territorial well-being* frame takes a place-based approach to quality of life within thriving regions. The chapter shows how these co-existing frames define outcomes and determine action.

Keywords (6)

Quality of life, well-being, living standards, social policy, European social model, policy frames.

Introduction

Ambitions for improved quality of life have been explicit in European Union policy since the foundational 1992 Maastricht Treaty. Even earlier, the first European Communities were concerned by whether citizens could live well and enjoy the benefits of economic development. Insofar as 'good lives' are shared societal goals that can be progressed at regional scale, quality of life is arguably inherent to Cohesion Policy – and potentially *vice versa*.

But precisely what defines quality of life remains contested in research and policy alike. Quality of life is a complex concept that evokes both the *objective* ability of people to live well with their *subjective* perceptions of whether they do. Quantitative indicators make societal progress intelligible; qualitative perceptions matter to individuals and communities, emerging in effects from electoral results to migration flows. Consequently, differing perspectives on 'what counts' (Stiglitz 2019) for good lives have animated research and influenced policy in differing ways over time.

This chapter considers how policy ambitions for quality of life have evolved from the first European Social Fund (ESF) in 1957 through to contemporary Cohesion Policy. Debates have long simmered over how and why European integration should serve social objectives. This chapter does not aim to assess whether improving quality of life is a worthy, realistic goal for cohesion or to evaluate the outcomes achieved. Rather, the chapter contends that Cohesion Policy contains multiple interpretations – 'frames' (Goffman 1974, Björnehed & Erikson 2018) – that each differently define quality of life and determine appropriate action.

The chapter identifies three dominant frames that have unfolded over time and continue to co-exist. First, the *living standards frame* reflects the EU's post-war origins as an economic bloc, and views quality of life through access to the material benefits available in an increasingly affluent society. Second, the *social model frame* reflects interest in a distinctive European approach to social welfare, viewing quality of life through collective provision from infancy to old age. Third, the *territorial well-being frame* reflects the significance of spatial inequalities within an enlarged EU, and views quality of life as essential for liveable places and thriving regions.

The chapter proceeds through a brief review of the multidisciplinary literature on quality of life, followed by three sections that explore each frame in turn. A discussion then compares the frames and reflects on their lessons and limitations. Finally, the chapter considers how quality of life may be framed as a future policy objective following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Quality of life is a multidisciplinary concept. Broadly conceived, quality of life has a long history in political and philosophical thought. From Aristotle to Thomas Hobbes, classic thinkers mulled the abstract ideal of a 'good life' and envisaged the institutions and governance that would enable progress. In the social sciences, canonical theorists took up concerns with human experience in fast-changing modern societies (e.g. Tönnies 2002 [1912]). How we experience our lives and whether society provides equitably for our needs remain critical questions for many social scientists today.

Despite these intellectual roots, quality of life only emerged as an explicit research concept in the 1960s. This occurred through work to develop social – rather than solely economic – indicators for public policy (Gerson 1976). The first wave of social data included the 1964 Swedish Level of Living Survey and the 1970 UK Social Trends Report (Bache 2013). At the time, however, economic

anxieties and ideological shifts meant that social indicators had little policy impact (Bache 2013). Nevertheless, more influential efforts to measure societal progress beyond GDP have since followed. For example, the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), launched in 1990, provides a comparable composite of life expectancy at birth, access to schooling and expected years of schooling, and standard of living (using Gross National Income). The index reflects the 'capabilities approach' to development (Sen & Nussbaum 1993), which focuses on improving the capabilities people have to 'be and do' over pursuing economic outcomes alone.

The search for social indicators similarly intersects with 'happiness' studies (Clark 2018, Layard 2010), which have troubled assumed equivalences between economic growth and individual well-being. Bhutan famously introduced 'Gross National Happiness' measurement in 1972. In 1974, economist Richard Easterlin used US data to demonstrate that subjective happiness does not increase as a nation's income rises over the long term. The 'Easterlin paradox' has since been observed across other countries, contexts, and time series (Easterlin & O'Connor 2020).

These examples suggest how quality of life overlaps with well-being as a person-centred concept. Well-being can encompass how people think and feel, what they have and do, and their relationship to ideas, people, and things (White 2009). Philosophers and psychologists distinguish between *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* well-being, or individual happiness and life fulfilment (Ryff et al. 2021). For social scientists, well-being is contextual and cannot exist in isolation since individual needs and wants are shaped partly by the biophysical environment (Ruth & Franklin 2014) and partly through everyday life (Pacione 2003). Critically, these contexts can change. For example, digital exclusion has recently emerged as a social phenomenon with ramifications for individual well-being.

Contemporary social science research on quality of life is varied and reflects diverse influences and interests. Nevertheless, three current conceptual challenges can be identified (Shucksmith et al. 2009). First, quality of life is inherently multidimensional. The concept connotes the conditions in which people live, the attributes people have, and their wants and expectations. This creates research challenges. On one hand, quality of life can all too easily become a vaguely defined 'fuzzy concept' (Markusen 2003) that is difficult to operationalise. On the other, efforts to refine quality of life to a smaller, sharper list of determinants invite criticism both for what they include and what they leave out.

Second, quality of life is mutable and multiscalar. Progress may be tracked at a national (or territorial) level, but outcomes are simultaneously individual. How an individual perceives their current quality of life is inevitably subjective and contingent (Wright 2012). For instance, two people in the same place and time, with equal material circumstances, may have very different perceptions of their quality of life. These perceptions are difficult to capture as data, let alone meaningfully compare (Ferrara et al. 2020). Unfortunately, using more convenient proxy metrics risks "deepening the gap between counting that which matters to people and that which is easy to measure" (Milcu et al. 2013: 5).

Third, and relatedly, researching quality of life raises epistemological questions. Understanding quality of life holistically requires combining both objective and subjective data. Because social science research tends to split along qualitative and quantitative lines, methodological debates and data limitations continue to influence how quality of life is studied. These influences and the forms of data they generate matter for translating quality of life outcomes into policy and practice.

Frame analysis (Goffman 1974, Björnehed & Erikson 2018) helps illuminate how quality of life can be conceptualised in different ways, to different purposes, and through different data. A 'frame'

describes both the meaning that is constructed with a given context, and the potential effects this meaning sets in motion (Björnehed & Erikson 2018). Examining how quality of life has been framed through the evolution of Cohesion Policy thus shows how quality of life has been defined, which objectives for improvement have been pursued, and why. The following sections outline three key frames for quality of life in Cohesion Policy: standard of living, the social model, and territorial well-being.

The standard of living frame

Although peace and cooperation have driven European unity following World War II, the contemporary EU originated in an economic bloc. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was formed in 1951 and the European Economic Community (EEC) was created through the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The Treaty ostensibly established a common market and customs union, yet as Article 2 (EEC 1957, emphasis added) stated:

"The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and progressively approximating the economic policies of Member States, to promote throughout the Community a harmonious development of economic activities, a continuous and balanced expansion, an increase in stability, *an accelerated raising of the standard of living* and closer relations between the States belonging to it."

These explicit ambitions to raise living standards reflect how quality of life was first framed in the antecedents to Cohesion Policy. The standard of living frame pictured quality of life as primarily material and directly linked to economic development. Objectives for development were simultaneously objectives to improve living standards. The Treaty therefore noted that "aid to promote the economic development of areas where the standard of living is abnormally low" (EEC 1957: article 92 3a) was compatible with the common market.

The notion of a 'standard of living' arose in the 1920s, following nineteenth century socio-economic change (Coffin 1999). The mass consumption enabled by the industrial revolution had generated new problems for statisticians and the nascent social sciences. At the Prussian Office of Statistics, for example, Ernst Engel (1821-1996) theorised that, since poorer families spent a large proportion of the household budget on food, rising incomes would direct more spending to housing, clothing, culture, leisure, and education (Coffin 1999). Similarly, British social reformer Helen Bosanquet (1860-1925) considered the 'poverty line' and was among the first to directly refer to 'standard of life' (Gillie 1996).

By the turn of the 1930s, Europeans' spending had clearly shifted to new goods and services – like pianos, sports, and cinema-going – including among working-class families (Coffin 1999). These consumption changes were even more pronounced across the Atlantic, and the relative affluence of American 'blue collar' households soon became a yardstick for economic prosperity (Coffin 1999). While some social scientists railed against American consumerism (Coffin 1999), the multidisciplinary 'Depression Delegation' convened by the League of Nations in 1939 placed "the need to increase living standards through consumption … at centre-stage of its agenda" (Clavin 2013: 240).

After World War II, with the US in economic ascendancy and the Soviet bloc emerging, "no Western European government would have been content with mere recovery" to pre-war levels (Milward 1984: 358). Pent-up demand, available labour, and war-time technological advances paved the

ground for rapid growth (Kershaw 2015). While debates over Franco-German *production* fed into forming the ECSC (Milward 1984), *consumption* provided a broader backdrop to the EEC, with Western European development pathways favouring an affluent consumer society (Hilton 2007, Kershaw 2015). Government emphasis on modernising industry, infrastructure, and agriculture was echoed in household expenditure on modernised standards of living. From the 1950s, goods like cars, vacuum cleaners and sewing machines drove consumer spending, and new televisions, refrigerators and washing machines rapidly diffused (Milward 1984). Meanwhile, living standards became a Cold War battleground, as capitalist and communist states competed over their ability to provide the 'good life' for their citizens (Hilton 2007).

If economic prosperity was the vehicle for improving living standards through consumption (Hilton 2007), then incomes and labour markets were clearly crucial. The Treaty of Rome introduced two policy mechanisms that explicitly referenced improving living standards, and both did so through income and labour. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) contained an objective to "ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community … by increasing the individual earnings of persons engaged in agriculture" (EEC 1957: Article 39b). The European Social Fund (ESF) was then directly tasked with advancing living standards through labour markets. Early initiatives especially focused on using training and mobility to reduce unemployment (Petaccio 1971). The ECSC had already established labour mobility principles for the coal and steel industries, and the EEC broadened these rights to an ideal citizen conceived of as "a worker, husband and father … a responsible family man who was concerned with achieving a comfortable standard of living for himself and his family" (Pukallus 2016: 57). Because this ideal citizen was envisaged as rationally seeking employment opportunities, labour mobility provided "concrete possibilities to find work and secure a decent quality of life" (Pukallus 2016: 57).

Income and consumption-oriented living standards were foundational for how the first European Communities framed the quality of life citizens could enjoy – and hence which policy mechanisms were needed. Rather than idealist hopes for supra-national 'community', rising prosperity in Western Europe seemed to confirm the wisdom of integration (Milward 1984).

The standard of living frame persists. Yet changing fortunes and more member states have exposed the limitations of an approach to quality of life measured through consumption and mediated by labour market participation. Over time, the language of living standards has become less prevalent in European policy. By the *First Report on Economic and Social Cohesion*, for example, living standards were mainly mentioned in the specific context of "least developed areas with an abnormally low standard of living or serious unemployment problems" (EC 1996: 68). Yet, just as standard of living concerns were becoming affixed to particular (lagging) places rather than particular (working male) people, quality of life ambitions broadened. Four decades after the first European communities advocated accelerating living standards, a union of fifteen member states considered that "socio-economic trends are clearly not the only determinants of the quality of life of the Union's people" (EC 1996: 6). Understanding this shift requires turning to the second frame: the social model.

The social model frame

For the first European Communities, labour policy and social policy were effectively synonymous (Pukallus 2016). The ESF aimed to reduce unemployment, reflecting the view that differences in living standards within and between member states were outcomes of economic participation. Yet

the European Parliament found the ESF useful for advocating for expanded social policy objectives (Roos 2021), while the 1973 enlargement sparked enduring debates about legislative competence (Brusse & Hemerijck 2002). By the 2000 Lisbon Strategy, social and economic cohesion had become explicitly differentiated.

Social welfare defines a second frame on quality of life. Rather than relying on individual income and consumption to raise living standards, the 'social model' frame centres collective social protection against economic insecurity and inequality (Davoudi 2007). The 1994 white paper *European Social Policy* articulates the link to quality of life:

"The objective in the coming period must be to preserve and develop the European social model as we move towards the 21st century, to give to the people of Europe [a] unique blend of economic well-being, social cohesiveness and high overall quality of life" (CEC 1994: 1).

In the social model frame, quality of life is enabled by state welfare provision and comprehensive public services (Hermann & Mahnkopf 2010). Citizens should thus receive a minimum entitlement to services that support their well-being, "such as health care, childcare or care for the elderly, assistance to disabled persons or social housing … [which] provide an essential safety net for citizens and help promote social cohesion" (European Commission 2011: 2).

The vision for a distinctively *European* social model is usually attributed to Commission President (1985-1995) Jacques Delors (Hermann & Hofbauer 2007). There are earlier origins, however. In nineteenth century Germany, Chancellor (1871-1890) Otto von Bismarck introduced old-age provision and pioneered social insurance against sickness, accident, and disability (Fay 1950). By the Treaty of Rome, the signatory states (excepting Italy) shared a broadly 'Bismarckian' social insurance system (Scharpf 2002).

In the Bismarckian logic, worker well-being was linked to economic efficiency. But ideals began to change after 1945. Internationally, Article 22 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security". Rising prosperity also raised new prospects for social policy. In contrast to the belief – reflected in the standard of living frame – that a consumer society would suffice for improving quality of life, emerging visions (e.g. Galbraith 1958) paired private consumption with public expenditure. The emerging social model frame similarly espoused 'decommodification' (Esping-Andersen 1990): citizens' relative ability to access the resources for sustaining their lives without depending on markets.

Delors popularised a European social model against the foil of welfare privatisation in the US (Bitumi 2018). But from the 1980s, market mechanisms were increasingly introduced into social provision in Europe, too (Hermann & Mahnkopf 2010). Services of General Interest (SGIs), for example, are sometimes publicly and sometimes privately provided across the member states. Since only 'economic' activities are technically subject to European legislation and universal service obligations (European Commission 2011), most social provision ultimately remains at member state discretion. Whether a truly shared social model exists is thus debatable (Brusse & Hemerijck 2002, Davoudi 2007, Hermann & Mahnkopf 2010).

Notably, successive EC/EU expansions have also increased political and institutional diversity (Copeland 2012) beyond the initial Bismarckian base. Southern states – Greece in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986 – brought welfare systems with different origins and less universalistic characteristics (Ferrara 1996). Greece, for example, does not historically share the 'European' social model, and the 'Europeanisation' of Greek social policy since accession has been relatively slight (Sotiropoulos 2011). Expansions to post-communist central and eastern European states in 2004 and

2007 entailed different circumstances again (Golinowska 2009). These states have needed to juggle market-based economic restructuring and accelerating demographic transitions with public expectations for former welfare entitlements (Golinowska 2009). Unsurprisingly, the social model often appears in debates over European integration and economic liberalisation (Davoudi 2007, Scharpf 2002).

To some extent, the social model frame's concern for collective needs (Hermann & Mahnkopf 2010) mirrors Cohesion Policy's emphasis on solidarity (EC 1996). At the same time, diverse national contexts can reinscribe divisions. For example, lauding generously funded welfare systems in the wealthy Nordic countries turns other states into laggards by comparison (Tervonen-Gonçalves & Oinonen 2021). Balancing shared social objectives with member state autonomy and capacity remains a persistent policy challenge.

Through the social model frame, Cohesion Policy offers to enhance quality of life through equitable access to collective social services. A focus on *what* people can access, however, can lack sensitivity to *where* people live. The third frame – territorial well-being – directly engages with this issue.

The territorial well-being frame

Early ECSC labour mobility policy obviously acknowledged that some places offered better prospects than others (Pukallus 2016). But in the labour market context, quality of life was a material goal that workers moved to improve, rather than an objective for place-based intervention. Although the preamble to the Treaty of Rome claimed ambitions to "reduc[e] the differences existing etween the various regions" (EEC 1957: aa) regional policy remained "vague and cautious" (Manzella & Mendez 2009: 5) until the Directorate-General for Regional Policy was formed in 1968.

Initially, amidst urbanisation and unbalanced development, regional policy was mostly concerned with how economic activity was distributed. The first memorandum on *Regional policy in the European Community* (Common Market Commission 1965) mentioned living standards just twice. But expansion to new member states at different levels of development drew increased attention to regional divergence. Following Spanish and Portuguese accession, Cohesion Policy was formalised in 1988. Yet regions still primarily mattered as a measure of convergence and employment and economic measures took precedence. Cohesion Policy was interested in places that diverged, but less concerned with place *per se*.

As Cohesion Policy developed, policy language shifted from 'standard of living' to 'quality of life'. In Cohesion Policy's first phases, this language often returned to economic outcomes. For example, the *Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion* (EC 2004a: xxvii) stated:

"The cost of not pursuing a vigorous cohesion policy to promote growth and tackle disparities is therefore measured not only in terms of a loss of individual and collective well-being but also in economic terms, in a loss of potential real income and higher living standards."

The reasoning ran that, by preventing people from fulfilling their potential, poor quality of life reduced the EU's overall economic competitiveness (EC 1996). Yet, as the quote above also suggests, quality of life could be decoupled from economic success alone.

Quality of life began to appear in more direct approaches to place around the turn of the millennium. In 1998, Eurostat's first 'Urban Audit' piloted a "response to growing demand for an assessment of the quality of life in European towns / cities, where a significant proportion of

European Union citizens live (EC 2004b: 5). The audit identified nine statistical domains, ranging from classic indicators like housing and labour markets to measures of civic involvement, culture, and recreation. Sustainability began influencing policy during the same period. Environmental policy clearly raised distributive questions (EC 2001). More so, interest in 'greening' national accounts acknowledged that biophysical environments influenced the quality of life those living in them could enjoy (EC 1996).

The concept of 'territorial cohesion' first appeared in the *Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion* (EC 2001). Here, the concept partly evoked the standard of living frame's focus on employment and economic attainment, and partly suggested the social model through spatially distributed SGIs. But labour mobility was no longer a ready answer. If citizens' quality of life should not be disadvantaged by where within the EU they lived or worked (Davoudi 2007), then *where* they lived indeed mattered. Quality of life disparities in rural areas, for example, began to receive specific attention (CEC 2007). The territorial dimension was formally incorporated into Cohesion Policy under the 2008 Lisbon Treaty.

2008 was a significant year. The Global Financial Crisis raised critical questions about the limitations of existing economic development strategies. The international Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (commonly called the 'Stiglitz-Sen Commission'), established by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, reported in 2009. The report recommended shifting "emphasis from [GDP's] production-oriented measurement system to one focused on the well-being of current and future generations towards broader measures of social progress" (Stiglitz et al. 2009: LXIX). The OECD responded with the *Better Life Index*, launched in 2011 and now published annually. Updating classic research on social indicators, the index assesses OECD states on metrics including housing, environment, and life satisfaction.

But although broader indicators for quality of life were being associated with territorial development, recovery from the 2008 crisis was measured in macroeconomic terms. These metrics "provided poor guidance … resulting in (or at least contributing to) policy decisions that have left deep scars in many places, especially in Europe" (Stiglitz 2019: xvii). The 2016 'Brexit' referendum and rising populist support in other member states has since exposed 'geographies of discontent' (De Ruyter et al. 2021), characterised by similar experiences of being 'left behind' by social change and economic success. Political awareness of these places has brought Cohesion Policy's territorial dimension into fresh view, and renewed impetus for place-based approaches.

The European Spatial Observatory Network (ESPON) recently advanced the concept of 'territorial quality of life', defined as: "the capability of living beings to survive and flourish in a place, thanks to the economic, social and ecological conditions that support life in that place" (Sessa et al. 2020: 9). An accompanying methodological report offers a framework for measuring territorial quality of life. Significantly, the framework uses participatory and deliberative processes to engage local residents in determining what matters most for quality of life in the place where they live. From envisioning regional convergence according to a small set of proxy metrics comparable at European scale, the territorial well-being frame has evolved to embrace diversity. Or, perhaps these complex ambitions have once more returned to an enduring question: what makes good lives?

Discussion

From the standard of living frame's perspective, the 'good life' is measurable, comparable, and accrued through material consumption. Because consumption is enabled by individual (or

household) income, employment and labour mobility policies have been used to tackle living standard disparities since the first European Communities. Yet these are narrow policy tools that simplify quality of life determinants. Employment policy, for example, offers little help to those who – due to age or illness – cannot seek employment.

By contrast, the social model frame emphasises providing services and welfare to support quality of life collectively. From this perspective, good lives are at once an individual right and an objective for social solidarity. But the 'European' social model's universalist vision obscures the different origins, institutional structures, and political prerogatives that determine social policy across the member states. Successive EC/EU expansions have highlighted these differences, animating debates about state autonomy and distributive goals.

While the social model frame's concern with collective provision risks spatial blindness, the territorial well-being frame considers quality of life in place. Through this lens, good lives are shaped in interaction between people and the places where they live. Regional policy has a key role and place-based approaches are essential for improving outcomes. The territorial well-being frame recognises diverse potential indicators for quality of life, including locally-specific values. This participatory emphasis responds to 'geographies of discontent' – but whether Cohesion Policy can realistically address the resulting complexity remains to be seen.

This summary raises four discussion points. First, dominant policy priorities influence how, when, and why quality of life becomes operationalised. To be an objective for Cohesion Policy, quality of life disparities must be made visible; the frame used to identify disparities in turn determines the possible mechanisms for action. In other words, how Cohesion Policy addresses quality of life depends on how quality of life is defined. Second and relatedly, quality of life is a malleable concept, but need not be fuzzy. There are plainly ways to 'know it when we see it' (Markusen 2003) in policy and practice. Whether the ways policy sees quality of life are sufficient and align with citizens' own perceptions may be greater challenges than measurement and mechanisms.

Third, quality of life outcomes are not confined to one dimension of Cohesion Policy. Improving quality of life requires more than economic prosperity but cannot be simply solved through social policy, either. Quality of life is potentially embedded in and enabled by all three Cohesion dimensions: social, economic, and territorial. Fourth and finally, the three quality of life frames described in this chapter have evolved alongside Cohesion Policy and continue to co-exist. The standard of living and social model frames can be traced to the first European Communities. Territorial well-being has not wholly replaced these established lenses, and other frames may emerge in future. Indeed, frames are not necessarily applied in successive and linear ways. In 2004, for example, the *Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion* returned to the language of living standards following the accession of new post-socialist member states. But unlike in the 1950s, labour mobility was a much more uneasy answer. Following this observation, the chapter concludes by considering how recent crises and emerging priorities may re-frame future quality of life objectives in Cohesion Policy.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored how quality of life has emerged and evolved as an objective for Cohesion Policy through three dominant frames: the *standard of living* frame, the *social model* frame, and the *territorial well-being* frame. Each frame offers a different view on how to define and measure quality of life, and hence suggests different mechanisms for improving outcomes.

The EU originated in – and remains – an economic bloc. But as a democratic project, the union's stability depends on citizens' perceptions that they are sharing the benefits of economic development and enjoying 'good lives'. Quality of life is therefore likely to remain an important concern for Cohesion Policy. The critical question, however, is how and why future policy will frame quality of life. This chapter's analysis indicates that emerging social and political issues will shape the next development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant disruption across Europe and recovery is ongoing. The pandemic has hit economies and strained health and welfare systems. These are key respective concerns for the standard of living and social model frames. That some areas have been more resilient than others could see both frames overlap in indicators for recovery and priorities for investment. At the same time, new possibilities for remote work and the 'Great Resignation' from unsatisfying jobs suggest that many people are reflecting on how and where to make good lives. A place-based approach to well-being could prove a forward-looking choice for regional policy.

Which direction policy will turn remains unsettled, especially as war in Ukraine has intervened in hopes for a swift pandemic recovery. Rising energy prices and a potential cost of living crisis are now becoming critical concerns across much of Europe. As consumers' purses pinch, living standards may again overshadow the more subjective determinants of wellbeing. While labour mobility offers few substantive solutions to challenges many regions share, employment seems set to return to the political fore in debates over income and inflation. Perhaps an old policy frame may soon need new mechanisms.

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