**After austerity: policy responses and public attitudes towards the welfare state in Europe**

**A comparative perspective**

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The WelfSOC project examines public attitudes towards the welfare state and aims at examining people’s aspiration for welfare provisions for the future. Democratic forums will be used as an innovative research method in order to determine the aspirations, priorities and preferences when it comes to assessing welfare provisions in their children’s Europe.

As part of this project, we intend to publish at least two books. The first one, entitled “*After Austerity: The New Politics of Welfare in Europe*”, focuses on policy responses to the Great Recession across Europe and includes other countries such as France, Greece, Italy and Sweden, as well as a chapter assessing developments at the European Union level. The second book will draw on WelfSOC findings, and discuss changes in public attitudes towards the welfare state in comparative perspective. We hypothesise that a long-term shift away from the solidarities that facilitated the development of welfare states in Europe is taking place and that this process has been accelerated by responses to the Great Recession.

The main objectives of this paper is to connect these two book projects and to complement national background papers by offering a comparative overview of policy responses to the Great Recession and of public attitudes towards welfare politics in the five countries analysed within the framework of the WelfSOC project: Denmark, Norway, Germany, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. Some data on public attitudes in France, Greece, Italy and Sweden is also included, and could be part of our first book, as mentioned above. It is divided into three main sections. The first one assesses the political context in the five countries considered, and focuses on party politics and policy responses to the Great Recession. The second one then discusses public attitudes towards the welfare state. A particular emphasis is put on four themes, which should be prevalent in each country: neo-liberalism, immigration, gender, and inequality. National and cross-national data will be put together, in order to assess the relevance of welfare-related issues in comparative perspective. The third section then offers a preliminary conclusion, drawing on similarities and differences between the five countries.

**Welfare/party politics after the Great Recession: most recent developments**

Party and electoral systems significantly vary from one country to another. Denmark and Norway are both parliamentary representative, democratic constitutional monarchies, with well-established multi-party systems and unicameral parliaments; Slovenia is a ‘young’ post-Communist parliamentary representative democratic republic, with an asymmetric bicameral legislature and a stable multi-party system; Germany is a federal parliamentary republic, with a multi-party system led by the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party; and the United Kingdom is a bicameral constitutional monarchy with devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, using a first-past-the-post electoral system favouring bipartisanship despite an increasing fragmentation of the electorate, suggesting a move towards a multi-party system within the constraints of first-past-the-post voting.

**Table 1. List of political parties, per party family, and most recent election results at the national level**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Denmark Last election: 2015* | *Norway Last election: 2013* | *Germany Last election: 2013* | *Slovenia Last election: 2014* | *United Kingdom Last election: 2015* |
| *Conservative* | Conservative People’s Party (3.4%) | **Conservative Party (26.8%)** | N/A (see Christian democratic parties) | Slovenian Democratic Party (20.7%) | **Conservative Party (36.8%)** |
| *Socialist* | Social Democrats (26.3%) | Labour Party (30.8%) | **Social Democratic Party (25.7%)** | **Social Democrats (6.0%)** | Labour Party (30.5%) |
| *Christian Democratic* | N/A (party exists but not represented since 2001) | Christian Democratic Party (5.6%) | **Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union (41.5%)** | New Slovenia (5.6%) | N/A |
| *Agrarian* | **Venstre (19.5%)** | Centre Party (5.5%) | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| *Liberal* | Liberal Alliance (7.5%) Danish Social (Radical) Liberal Party (4.6%) | Liberal Party (5.2%) | Free Democratic Party (4.8%)\* | **Modern Centre Party (34.5%)** Alliance of Alenka Bratušek (4.4%) | Liberal Democrats (7.9%) |
| *Green* | The Alternative (4.8%) Socialist People’s Party (4.2%) | Green Party (2.8%) | The Greens (8.4%) | N/A | Green Party of England and Wales  (0.2%) |
| *‘New Left’* | Red-Green Alliance (7.8%) | Socialist Left Party (4.1%) | Die Linke (8.6%) | United Left (6.0%) |  |
| *Populist Right* | Danish People’s Party (21.1%) | **Progress Party (16.3%)** | Alternative for Germany (4.7%)\* |  | UK Independence Party  (0.2%) |
| *Other* |  |  |  | **Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (10.2%)** | Scottish National Party  (4.7%) Plaid Cymru (0.6%) |

Note: Parties in bold are currently in government.  
\* These parties are not represented in the Bundestag, but hold seats in State parliaments and in the European Parliament.

Table 1 offers a comparative overview of party performances in the most recent national elections, per party family. In the five countries analysed within the framework of the WelfSOC project, the most recent election results led to the formation of predominantly right-wing governments or coalition governments. In Denmark, the liberal Venstre formed a single-party minority government, succeeding to the left-wing coalition led by Helle Thorning-Schmidt between 2011 and 2015. In Norway, the Conservative Party allied with the populist-right Progress Party in 2013, succeeding to a Labour-led coalition. German politics has been dominated by the Christian Democratic Union since 2005, and following the 2013 federal election, a grand coalition including the Social Democratic Party as junior partner was formed. In Slovenia, the newly formed Modern Centre Party won the 2014 parliamentary elections and formed a centre-left majority coalition. Finally, in the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party surprisingly won a majority of seats in the House of Commons, and was able to form a majority government in May 2015. Based on each national background paper, this section will offer a summary of recent political developments in each country with regards to the politics of the welfare state, as well as some of the most recent policy responses to the Great Recession advocated by political elites.

*Denmark*

Denmark is a country with a strong tradition of social democratic and centre-left governments. In 2001, a centre-right government was formed under the leadership of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, consisting of the Liberal Party and the Conservative People’s Party. This centre-right government was the first one in 80 years that was able to rule without the support from the social-liberal Radical Liberal Party. The success of right-wing political parties is explained by three main factors (as summarised in the Danish background paper, pp. 8-9):

(1) A strong mobilization on the issue of immigration, not only for the anti-immigration Danish People’s Party, but also by the Liberal party;

(2) A significant turn away from “minimal state” ideas towards pro-welfare policy as regards the Liberal Party. After the electoral defeat in 1998, the new party leader Anders Fogh Rasmussen systematically searched for issues of symbolic importance (preferably with moderate costs) where he could overtake the Social Democratic-Radical Liberal government to the left.

(3) At the same time, the Danish People’s Party quickly abandoned its welfare sceptical and neoliberal ideas (a legacy from the Progress Party) in favour of a centrist, but welfare chauvinist, stance, giving priority to welfare improvements that benefited workers and the elderly.

The latter factor is of particular importance in order to understand major political and attitudinal trends in Denmark. Welfare chauvinism has effectively been a “hot issue” in Danish politics for the past 30 years, and has been successfully exploited by the Danish People’s Party.

Prior to the Great Recession, this right-wing government introduced restrictive policies towards immigrants, adopted a “work first” approach and reduced taxation twice (in 2003/2004 and 2007). Yet, no structural reforms were engaged. The Great Recession, which particularly hit the country in 2008, provided a window of opportunity for such reforms: after adopting a Keynesian response to the crisis at first, the right-wing government adopted a “reconstruction package” with the support of the Danish People’s Party and the Radical Liberals in 2010. This austerity package included a tightening of unemployment insurance and public expenditure retrenchment. It was followed by a controversial retirement reform in 2011. The election of a centre-left government in 2011, led by Helle Thorning-Schmidt, did not lead to a neo-Keynesian turn in response to the crisis, as the government’s agenda was strongly influenced by the Radical Liberals, who supported a neo-liberal response. While the government abstained from further neo-liberal reforms during its last year in office, this did not prove sufficient for winning the 2015 election: the Liberal Party subsequently formed a single-party minority government, while the welfare chauvinist Danish People’s Party became the second largest party represented in the Danish Parliament.

*Norway*

The development of the Norwegian welfare state for the past two decades is summarised as such by Jardar Sørvoll (see background paper, p. 11): “continued support for a generous welfare state amongst politicians and voters, limited external pressure for welfare state retrenchment, and elite consensus about social policy reforms”. There is thus a broad consensus over welfare provisions in Norway. The populist right Progress Party, which accessed government following the 2013 election (see below), also seems to be part of this broad consensus, despite campaigning on an anti-immigration platform. Yet, Sørvoll (pp. 12-12) argues that the party’s “support of key features of the welfare state seems to be one of the factors behind the party’s success”.

The centre-left Stoltenberg I government, consisting of the Labour, the Socialist Left and the agrarian Centre parties, was in power when the Great Recession reached Europe. Unlike many other governments in Europe (including Norway’s Nordic neighbours), the government adopted a neo-Keynesian response to the crisis: “in 2009, the government stimulated the economy by spending an unprecedented amount of Norway’s oil wealth. […] The oil wealth boosts the economy in many different ways; it affects aggregate demand directly and indirectly in related industries, the private service sector and the public sector” (Sørvoll, background paper, pp. 12-13). As such, Norway did not implement austerity measures as a response to the crisis, and a neo-liberal approach was not perceived as a viable solution for Norway. Right-wing parties such as the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, who have been in a minority coalition government following the 2013 election, also favour existing welfare provisions: “little suggests that the present right-wing government […] will push for a fundamental retrenchment of the welfare state” (Sørvoll, background paper, p. 2). Yet, the Norwegian welfare state faces some challenges. Among these, immigration, economic globalization and population ageing are recurring themes that led to discussions among political elites with regards to the future of the Norwegian welfare state. In such consensual democracy, it is also expected that public attitudes play an important role in shaping the political agenda, and thus the future of welfare provisions. Yet, despite fairly high levels of welfare chauvinist attitudes (see below) and the increasing political importance of the populist right Progress Party, such policy agenda has never been adopted by the Norwegian executive.

*Germany*

In Germany, considerable welfare reforms were implemented between 1999 and 2005, under the Red-Green alliance led by Gerhard Schröder. Such reforms included a gradual increase in the regular retirement age, a decrease in the level of public pensions and the creation of quasi-markets in health care. The controversial ‘Hartz reforms’ (including the so-called ‘mini-jobs’), adopted between 2003 and 2005, were particularly unpopular, leading to public protests and the gradual emergence of ‘Die Linke’ as a lasting political force in the German political landscape (see Jan-Ocko Heuer and Steffen Mau’s draft chapter, pp. 7-8). The subsequent ‘Grand coalition’, consisting of the CDU/CSU and the SDP, put an end to this series of welfare reforms and put a stronger emphasis on ‘new social risks’ and social investment, including an expansion of kindergarten and stronger rights for women in paid work.

Like in all other European countries, policy responses to the crisis affected welfare provisions in Germany, even though the country’s experience of the Great Recession significantly differs from the rest of Europe (see draft chapter, p. 12 for a full explanation). Among the new policy measures adopted by the Grand coalition, the most important one is the use of ‘Kuzarbeitergeld’, i.e. short-time work scheme enabling companied to respond to declining demand by reducing the working time of their employees, affected up to 1.5 million employees who were employed on such basis during the recession. Following the 2009 federal election and the formation of a Christian-Liberal coalition, a series of spending cuts were introduced and included benefit reductions for long-term unemployed people, as well as reductions in parental allowances for high earners. In 2009, the Constitution was amended to limit structural deficit to a maximum of 0.35 per cent of GDP at the federal level, while Länder will not be allowed to run any deficit from 2020 onwards. As mentioned by Jan-Ocko Heuer and Steffen Mau (p. 13), “while the immediate impact of the Great Recession on welfare policies in Germany has been limited, the new ‘politics of austerity’ […] might be the starting point for another round of welfare state restructuring and retrenchment”.

In 2013, a new ‘Grand coalition’ was formed following the federal election, as the liberal Free Democratic Party lost all of its seats in the Bundestag. The most recent social policy reform introduced by this government is the introduction of a minimum wage in 2015, pushed by the SDP as a response to the rise of short-time, unsecured and low-paid forms of employment. The emergence of a new populist right party, Alternative for Germany (formed in 2013), should also be noted: this party, which gained representation in the European Parliament as well as in five state parliaments, favours chauvinistic and Eurosceptic responses to the Great Recession, and the right wing of the German political landscape are now ‘pressurized’ by this agenda, similarly to UKIP’s influence on the Conservative Party’s European agenda in the United Kingdom.

*Slovenia*

From the five countries analysed within the framework of this project, Slovenia seems to stand out with regards to its recent political developments. It is a country with a strong tradition of centre-left coalition governments. However, in 2004, the conservative Slovenian Democratic Party formed a centre-right government and implemented a series of neo-liberal reforms, which were met with scepticism by the powerful trade unions and public opinion. In the context of the Great Recession, political changes and instability occurred in the country, as summarised in the draft chapter written by Maša Filipovič Hrast and Tatjana Rakar (p. 9):

From November 2008 until the end of 2011, left-wing governments retained power. Then, during the next preliminary elections, a right-wing government came to power, only to lose public support again in 2013 and be replaced by a centre-left government that lasted until August 2014, when a new party, the Party of the Modern Centre (SMC), won enough national support to form a second centre-left coalition. These changes to government have been seemingly continual, swift and momentous. However, both rightist and leftist governments have acted to curb government spending, viewing the discharge of the state’s responsibility for social protection and the wellbeing of its citizens as the dominant way out of the difficult economic and financial circumstances in which Slovenia found itself.

From 2010 onwards, a series of austerity measures were introduced by both centre-left and centre-right governments. Among these, several cuts in social benefits have hit the lower-middle class, including the Exercise of Rights to Public Funds and the Financial Social Assistance acts (see ESPAnet paper, p. 9). Accordingly, austerity as a response to the Great Recession has been widely accepted by political parties across the left-right political spectrum.

It is also interesting to note that the Democratic Party of Slovenian Pensioners (DeSUS) has been a well-established political force in the Slovenian Parliament since 1996. This party, aiming at representing the elderly’s interests, has also been part of coalition governments since 2004, and received more than 10 per cent of votes in the 2014 parliamentary election, the party’s best performance since its creation. The presence of such party and its strong popular support means that it is more difficult to reform the pensions system in Slovenia.

*United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom’s experience of the Great Recession first took place under Gordon Brown’s Labour government. The immediate response to the recession was an automatic increase in spending on unemployment and low pay benefits, and a number of measures to protect business (tax cuts) and jobs, as well as an increase in personal allowances. While the management of the recession was initially successful, the Labour Party lost the 2010 General Election, and a coalition was formed between the Conservative Party (led by David Cameron) and the Liberal Democrats (led by Nick Clegg) as junior partner. As mentioned above, such coalition agreement, as a result of a hung parliament, is unusual in the United Kingdom, where the first-past-the-post electoral system tend to favour bipartisanship and single party majority governments. The Coalition first headlined the issue of immigration, lending force to welfare chauvinism as a response to the crisis. It also pursued a radical and vigorous programme of structural reform in welfare, expanding the role of the private and non-state welfare, entrenching payment by results and requiring people to take much greater individual responsibility for outcomes. The objective was a decisive shift towards smaller and more liberal social sector and an embedded individualism in welfare politics. With regards to welfare spending, pensions became the government’s priority, while health care and education spending held steady and failed to match the population increase.

The recent 2015 General Election results in the United Kingdom have surprised all observers. While all polls and experts predicted another hung parliament, with the Conservative and Labour parties being unable to secure a majority in the House of Commons, the Conservative Party won an outright majority, while the Labour Party lost many seats and the Liberal Democrats, which used to be the junior coalition partner between 2010 and 2015, became marginal in the Parliament. In contrast, the nationalist Scottish National Party, which mostly campaigned on a ‘fightback’ anti-austerity programme, gained 56 out of the 58 Scottish seats and became an active political force in the opposition. Yet, both the Conservative and Labour parties campaigned on reducing the budget deficit: as such, neo-liberal responses to the recession were broadly accepted amongst political elites. The newly elected Conservative government immediately announced a series of measures to eliminate the budget deficit, and pledged to find £12 billion in welfare cuts. Benefit caps were reduced, a four-year benefits freeze was introduced, as well as a limit on child tax credit to two children. The Government also announced a rise in the minimum wage from £6.50 to £6.70 per hour, and pledged to create 3 million apprenticeships with a rate of £3.30 per hour. In addition, the Prime Minister is holding negotiations with EU partners to limit benefits available to EU migrants over time. It is believed that reforms surrounding the UK’s relationship with the European Union will lead to such welfare restrictions. In addition, the rise of the UK Independence Party, which won the 2014 European elections, suggests that Euroscepticism and welfare chauvinism is on the rise in the United Kingdom.

In sum, the experience of the five countries on which the project focuses reflects common experiences across Europe. The initial response to the Great Recession has been a Keynesian state intervention programme to stimulate demand. However, by 2010, policy had moved to a more neo-liberal retrenchment with measures to enhance work incentives and also some social investment to mobilise workers. In most countries, chauvinistic responses to immigration were evident. By 2015, right-wing governments were in power in all countries. One significant division lies between those where governments wished to retain or expand welfare spending, although limiting it to non-immigrant groups or to retrench while also focusing welfare on established national citizens.

**Public attitudes towards the welfare state**

Within the framework of our WelfSOC project, the democratic forums will focus on the following question: “*What should the priorities of the government in [country] be for benefits and services in 2040?*”. While we would like participants to bring up the issues that appear to be the most important to them (see updated fieldwork specifications, to be discussed during the second co-ordinating chapter), we have identified four overarching themes to assess public attitudes towards the welfare state: neo-liberalism, immigration, gender, and inequality. The aim of this section is to compare the relevance of each of these themes (and underlying issues) in the five countries analysed in the WelfSOC project. National and cross-national data are used in order to offer a broad comparative analysis. We analyse trends in the five countries considered.

*Attitudes towards neo-liberalism*

Neo-liberalism is a policy paradigm which calls for the reduction of state intervention and a pre-eminent role for the free market, so that taxation, regulation and state provision should be kept to a minimum and welfare state services privatised. With concerns over the size of budgetary deficits, austerity has been the predominant response to the Great Recession across Europe. Austerity has been pursued with particular enthusiasm in UK, Ireland and Germany and with less vigour in Spain, Italy and elsewhere. Two countries (France in 2012 and Greece in 2015) elected governments opposed to the logic of austerity; both have been forced to implement welfare and public sector cuts as a result of external economic pressures, reinforced by rising unemployment in the case of France. In Norway however, a neo-Keynesian approach was adopted as part of a broad political consensus.

Public attitudes towards neo-liberalism can be assessed with regards to the government’s role and responsibility, as well as on taxation and public spending.

* Government’s role and responsibility:

The 2008 European Social Survey includes several questions examining people’s attitudes towards the role of the government (questions D15 to D20). In all countries surveyed, an overwhelming majority of respondents believe that it is the government’s responsibility to provide a series of benefits and services spanning the traditional welfare state services for deserving non-workers (the old and the sick) and social investment to mobilise people into paid work and support workers: childcare for working parents, healthcare for the sick, paid leave from work for people who temporarily have to care for sick family members, and to ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old and the unemployed. Results are slightly more tempered when it comes to assessing the government’s responsibility to provide jobs for everyone, especially in France (55.9 per cent) and Denmark (48.3 per cent).

*Government’s responsibility to provide childcare services for working parents, total percentage*

*Government’s responsibility to provide healthcare for the sick, total percentage.*

*Government’s responsibility to provide paid leave from work for people who temporarily have to care for sick family members, total percentage*

*Governments' responsibility to ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed, total percentage*

*Government’s responsibility to ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old, total percentage*

*Government’s responsibility to provide jobs for everyone, total percentage*

These results are confirmed by national data in Germany: 96 per cent of German respondents believe that the government is, strongly or partly, responsible for social security, while 33 per cent believe that private households are strongly responsible (see Heuer and Mau, draft chapter, pp. 16-17).

* Taxation and public spending

In Denmark, public support for maintaining social welfare at least at the current level is strong, despite a short decline from 59 per cent in 2007 to 48 per cent. Similarly, a majority of the Danish population prefers welfare provisions rather than tax relief: while in 1994, respondents tend to favour tax relief, preference for welfare progressively increased to 46 per cent in 2007, with a small decline during the Great Recession (35 per cent in 2011). Demand for ‘social investment’ expenditures, like kindergarten and education, has been increasingly important (respectively 64 per cent and 59 per cent in 2011). Support for more government spending on unemployment benefits has also been fairly low for the past two decades (see Danish background paper, pp. 16-17 and Table 5).

Based on national data, the percentage of the Norwegian population agreeing that high taxes are necessary to uphold important public services and believing that reducing taxes is not a political priority has considerably increased between 1999 and 2013 (+21 per cent for the former, +40 per cent for the latter; see Sørvoll, background paper, p. 32). In addition, the percentage of the Norwegian population wishing to increase or keep welfare benefits at present level has decreased following the Great Recession, from 77 per cent in 2007 to 66 per cent in 2013 (see Sørvoll, background paper, p. 32). This may be quite interesting to investigate, since Norway opted for a neo-Keynesian response to the crisis and did not cut its welfare spending.

The German population displays a shift towards a ‘social investment’ paradigm reflecting the policies of 2005-11: when asked in which area the government should spend more, more than 80 per cent of respondents mentioned education in 2006, compared to less than 55 per cent in 1996. Healthcare comes second (more than 60 per cent), followed by pensions (more than 50 per cent; see Heuer and Mau, draft chapter, pp. 17-18).

In the United Kingdom, priorities for extra spending on social benefits have been relatively stable since the mid-1990s: pensions come first (67 per cent in 2014), followed by benefits for disabled people (60 per cent) and child benefits (36.9 per cent). Conversely, support for social investment and for unemployed people is low compared to other European countries.

The cross-national International Social Survey Programme offers comparative data on attitudes towards various areas of government spending. Even though data from Denmark is only limited to one survey, it is possible to analyse the evolution of such attitudes in Germany, the United Kingdom, Norway and Slovenia. While support for more government spending in retirement benefits and health services remained fairly stable over time, support for more unemployment benefits decreased in all countries, and more particularly in the United Kingdom. As far as education is concerned, support for more government spending has been very high since 1985, despite a slight decrease in support in Slovenia and in the United Kingdom.

*Public support for more government spending in retirement, 1985-2006*

*Public support for more government spending in unemployment benefits, 1985-2006*

*Public support for more government spending in health services, 1985-2006*

*Public support for more government spending in education, 1985-2006*

*Attitudes towards immigration*

Struggles over immigration from elsewhere in Europe and beyond have been increasingly significant across Europe, particularly in countries where immigration is high (or is perceived to be high), such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Greece and Slovenia. One outcome is a shift towards *welfare chauvinism* (or welfare dualism), often on the part of lower-income groups previously keen to support universal provision. Welfare chauvinism argues for the restriction of access to welfare state provisions to the native population. At the political level, such policy response is often advocated by right-to-populist-right political parties.

*Percentage of foreign-born population, 2001-2012 (Source: OECD 2015)*

Two forms of chauvinism can be distinguished. Some political parties have adopted a ‘hard’ chauvinism, which requires the exclusion of would-be immigrants. Others have pursued a softer approach, calling for temporary restrictions on access to welfare provision for immigrants. The European Social Survey conducted in 2008 reflects on such distinction.

*When should immigrants obtain rights to social benefits/services? (Source: European Social Survey 2008, Question D38)*

The survey demonstrates high levels of ‘soft’ chauvinism across Europe, with respondents tending to favour migrants’ access to welfare provisions after they worked and paid taxes for at least a year. Such provision is particularly popular in the United Kingdom (48.5 per cent), France (46.8 per cent) and Germany (42.6 per cent). In Slovenia, the majority of respondents link social benefits and services to citizenship (51.4 per cent); as such, Slovenia favour more restrictions than the rest of Europe. Comparatively speaking, Swedish attitudes are less chauvinistic than in the rest of Europe, with 19.5 per cent of respondents believing that immigrants should be entitled to receive benefits/services immediately on arrival. ‘Hard’ chauvinism, however, tend to be less popular, though Greece displays a noticeable level of support compared to other countries (19.3 per cent).

*Social benefits/services encourage people from other countries to come live here (Source: ESS 2008, Questions D21-26)*

The ESS survey further indicates that an overwhelming majority of respondents across Europe believe that social benefits and services tend to encourage people from other countries to settle in their own country. Yet, Slovenia stands out, demonstrating ambivalent attitudes on this matter. Even though such question cannot be interpreted as an expression of welfare chauvinism per se, it shows that European populations believe that their own welfare provisions are generous enough to attract immigrants.

*Immigrants receive more or less than they contribute (% total)*

*Source: ESS 2008, question D39.*

Finally, the ESS data shows that most respondents believe that immigrants tend to receive more than they contribute, thus taking advantage of social benefits and services offered in their country of settlement. There is some cross-national variation: a majority of respondents in the United Kingdom (56.7 per cent), Germany (55.5 per cent) and Greece (51.9 per cent) believe immigrants receive more, while less than half of respondents from France (40.7 per cent) and Sweden (39.7 per cent) expressed such views.

*Immigrants are a strain on / contribute to our welfare system, total percentage (Source: European Quality of Life Survey 2011, question 27b)*

Additional data from the 2011 European Quality of Life Survey offer contrasting results on immigration across Europe. In Sweden, a majority of respondents believe that immigrants contribute to the welfare system (60.9 per cent), while in other countries, most respondents perceive them as a strain. Countries with the most ‘chauvinistic’ results are Greece (80.2 per cent), the United Kingdom (74.4 per cent) and France (68.2 per cent).

*Immigrants contribute more in taxes than they benefit from health and welfare services (Source: Eurobarometer 71.3, 2009)*

*The arrival of immigrants in Europe can be effective in solving the problem of Europe’s ageing population (Source: Eurobarometer 71.3, 2009)*

Finally, a 2009 Eurobarometer survey on the future of Europe offers comparative insights with regards to immigration. Across Europe, most respondents disagreed with the fact that immigrants contribute more in taxes than they benefit from health and welfare services. However, when asked whether immigration can solve the problem of Europe’s ageing, divergences appear from one country to the other: in Sweden and Denmark, respondents tended to agree with this statement (55 per cent and 48 per cent respectively), while countries disagreeing the most were Greece (67 per cent), the United Kingdom (55 per cent), Slovenia (54 per cent) and Germany (52 per cent). Results were relatively balanced in France and Italy. These findings are interesting in view of the relatively low replacement rates in Germany, the UK and Greece, which are likely to have a substantial impact on state spending in these countries during the next half-century.

*Projected Impact of Population Ageing on Welfare State Spending, selected countries (%, ECOFIN 2014)*

A survey conducted in Denmark and Norway by Bay *et al.* (2013)[[1]](#footnote-1) further demonstrates that welfare chauvinism is quite widespread in both countries, but tends to be more prevalent in the former than in the latter:

While 40 per cent of our Danish sample report to agree completely or partly with the idea of withholding social assistance from immigrants, 37 per cent of the Norwegian sample do the same; and a larger share of the Norwegian sample say they disagree partly or completely with this idea (42 per cent versus 35 per cent in Denmark). However, although these differences are statistically significant according to conventional criteria we must nevertheless conclude that there are not large aggregate differences in voter attitudes between the two countries (Bay et al. 2013: 206-207).

These indications of welfare chauvinism in Norway are somewhat tempered by a survey conducted by Norwegian Statistics in 2014, where 77 per cent of respondents agreed that most immigrants make a useful contribution to the Norwegian economy. However, 28 per cent of respondents believe that immigrants are a source of insecurity in society (see Sørvoll, background paper, pp. 35-37)

In Germany, national surveys demonstrate that a non-negligible proportion of the population display welfare chauvinist attitudes; yet, this proportion does not appear to drastically expand over time (see Heuer and Mau draft chapter, pp. 20-21).

*Attitudes towards inequality*

Income inequalities generally grew larger across in EU countries during recent years with Greece, Spain, Italy and the UK showing the greatest inequalities and Slovenia and Scandinavian countries the least, although inequality increased in Denmark during the period. National statistics indicate the fall in the UK from 2011 has now been made up.

*Inequality in selected countries, 2005-2013 (Gini coefficients: Eurostat database: LH scale truncated)*

Several questions included in the ESS 2008 survey[[2]](#footnote-2) aim to assess public attitudes towards income inequalities. In a majority of countries, respondents believe that large differences in income are acceptable to reward talents and efforts. In Slovenia however, results are much more ambivalent reflecting the lower level of inequality in the country (36.5 per cent agree, 40.1 per cent disagree).

*Large differences in income acceptable to reward talents and efforts*

However, in all countries, a broad majority of respondents believe that their government should reduce such income inequalities. The Slovenian results (86.6 per cent) are also confirmed by the national surveys (see Slovenian background paper, p. 7). In Denmark, however, responses are more ambivalent, as 41.6 per cent of respondents agree, while 36 per cent disagree. These results are confirmed by national election surveys; in addition, the Danish research team notes that “despite the enormous decline in class-based voting, the class differences in attitudes towards inequality have remained almost the same throughout the 40-year period” (see Danish background paper, pp. 17-18).

*Government should reduce differences in income levels*

*Differences in income are too large*

*For a fair society, differences in standard of living should be small*

Except in the case of Denmark, where 45.3 per cent of respondents disagree, a majority of respondents across Europe believe that for a fair society, differences in standard of living should be small. Data from Denmark is particularly interesting, especially since most Norwegians (56 per cent) and Swedes (56.7 per cent) agreed with this statement.

The next chart shows that, in most of the countries included, the proportion supporting a proportional tax system, with everyone paying the same share of income in tax, are roughly equal to the proportion endorsing a more progressive system, with high earners paying relatively more. In Slovenia and in Denmark the group supporting the progressive approach is relatively larger, while in France, the largest group supports proportional tax.

*Taxation for higher versus lower earners*

Taken together, these findings indicate support for a generally more egalitarian role for the state in Slovenia (perhaps related to the historical legacy and to lower inequality) and cast an interesting light on Denmark as an outlying member of the Scandinavian group. In other countries the largest group in the population supports some state-led redistribution to produce greater equality, but sees an important role for incentives.

*Attitudes towards Gender*

*Gender employment gap, 2014 (Eurostat, LFS)*

The largest gaps between employment rates for men and women are in Greece and Italy with the UK at the EU average and other countries, particularly Scandinavian countries with the closest approach to gender equality in employment.

In this particular context, attitudes towards gender have to be understood in a broad context, to include issues of family life and of the gender division of work. In Germany, attitudes towards female labour market participation have drastically evolved over time, moving from a ‘male breadwinner / female homemaker’ model to an ‘adult worker / dual breadwinner’ model (see Heuer and Mau, draft chapter, pp. 14-15). In Scandinavian countries the dual breadwinner model has been well-established and least so in the Mediterranean countries.

The International Social Survey Programme conducted four rounds of surveys on family and changing gender roles, between 1988 and 2012. This gives us the opportunity of compare attitudes towards gender equality over time in the five countries considered. Denmark was included in the 2002 round. In all countries, one can notice an increasingly positive attitudes towards ‘employment for all’ and female labour market participation, moving away from the ‘male breadwinner / female homemaker’ model. Yet, there are some variations from one country to another and depending on the question asked. Denmark and Norway, which tend to be ahead of other European countries with regards to gender equality, have consistently displayed positive attitudes. In the United Kingdom, attitudes have tended to stabilize over time when it comes to assessing whether both men and women should contribute to the household income. Major differences in attitudes appear when respondents are asked whether family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job: while 73.3 per cent of respondents disagree with such statement, only 46.8 per cent of Britons and 39.1 per cent of Slovenians disagree. Such variations might be interesting to analyse and could be discussed as part of the WelfSOC project, based on discussions taking place in the democratic forums and focus groups.

*Working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work (% agree)*

*All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job (% disagree)*

*Both the husband and wife should contribute to the household income (% agree)*

*A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family (% disagree)*

*Conclusion*

This overview of public attitudes towards welfare provisions in Germany, the United Kingdom, Norway, Slovenia and Denmark has demonstrated similarities and divergences. While in all countries, the population seems to strongly believe in the governments’ responsibility to provide a wide range of benefits and services, including some provision aimed at social investment and at better opportunities for women (child care; care leave), public support for more government spending varies significantly depending on the country and on the type of welfare provision considered. For instance, unemployment benefits have tended to be less popular since 1996 in all countries. Welfare chauvinism also appears to be a widespread phenomenon in the five countries considered, though more relevant in Denmark, the United Kingdom and Norway than in Germany and Slovenia. This suggests the erosion of solidarities with regards to migrants, and possibly the emergence of a new wave of nationalist solidarities. Attitudes towards inequality also vary significantly from one country to another. Among some of the findings discussed above, the fact that Danish respondents do not strongly believe that their government should reduce differences in income levels stands out. Slovenian attitudes seem to be slightly more ambivalent than in other countries, too. Finally, while there has been an increasing shift towards a ‘dual breadwinner’ in all five countries analysed, attitudes towards gender equality may vary strongly, for instance when it comes to assessing the impact of a working mother on family life.

These differences are located within a general picture of considerable support for the welfare state in Europe, both for traditional mass services (pensions and health care) and for new social risk/ social investment provision. It is noticeable that these attitudes persist despite the move towards more neo-liberal policy approaches and towards austerity and balanced budgets in responses to the Great Recession after 2010. The distinction between deserving and undeserving groups particularly focused on unemployed people has become well established during the past 20 years, and much greater concerns are emerging about the inclusion of immigrants within the welfare framework. Our fieldwork is expected to dig further in these similarities and divergences, and will help us assessing whether austerity is now undermining the pattern of solidarities on which European welfare states were founded, and whether public attitudes are moving towards support for new approaches to social provision.

1. Bay, A.-H., Finseraas, H. and Pedersen, A. W. (2013) ‘Welfare Dualism in Two Scandinavian Welfare States: Public Opinion and Party Politics’, *West European Politics* 36(1), pp. 199-220. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note: graphics drawing on ESS surveys include other countries covered by our first book proposal. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)