

The Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis took a large toll on EU Member States and their economies. Subsequently, many EU citizens faced wage cuts, higher risk of unemployment and poverty. The crisis forced many Europeans into precarious life situations. Member States were also strained, as the burden to retain a safety net for their citizens in precarious life situations added to their fiscal challenges while their state budgets were already under pressure due to the crisis.

While the magnitude of the Great Recession's effects varied across European citizens and Member States to a large degree, EU policy makers have come to identify the difficult situation of individuals and the burden they exert on Member States as a European problem in the aftermath of the Great Recession. In recent years, the European Commission has emphasized more and more the aim to achieve a ["social Europe"](#). The launch of a Youth Employment Initiative to support young adults in regions strongly hit by the crisis matches this aim, as well as the ratification of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which seeks to ground the benchmark principles for social rights of all Europeans. These measures all indicate an evolution of *European welfare solidarity*.

An overwhelming majority of interviewees supports the idea that the EU should guarantee access to health care, a decent standard of living for the elderly and the unemployed

European welfare solidarity is a form of solidarity that transcends the nation state container and refers to solidarity with vulnerable Europeans. One of the key tasks of welfare states is to establish a social security system in order to protect people from risks who cannot cover their living expenses alone through their wages. Thus, European welfare solidarity exists when Europeans are willing to extend their support to all Europeans in precarious life situations, regardless of where they reside in the EU.

In this contribution, we explore to what degree Europeans support European welfare solidarity on the basis of the Transnational European Solidarity Survey (TESS) carried out in 13 EU countries in 2016. We investigate whether Europeans support European-wide social security for the sick, elderly, and the unemployed.

Traditionally, these three groups constitute the main target for welfare benefits.

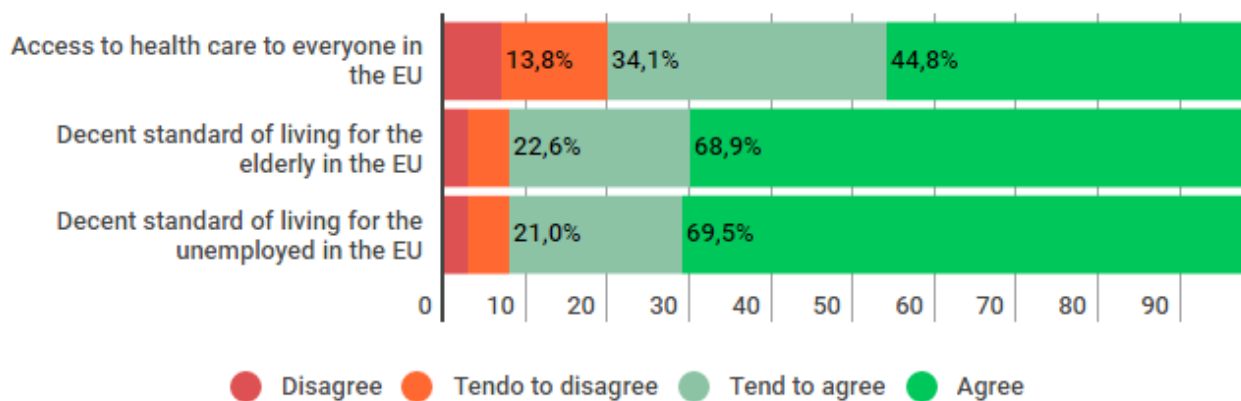
Uncontested High Support Bolstered By Self-interest and Value Orientations

The positive vision of a social Europe from the policy maker's side is also met with enthusiasm from the general public. Our survey clearly shows that there is an overwhelming majority of respondents believing that the European Union (EU) should be responsible for providing social security for people in need, irrespective of the source of their vulnerability [Figure 1]. While 90 % of respondents agree that the EU should be responsible for Europeans with health issues, a similarly high rate of respondents (92%) think it is important for the EU to provide decent living conditions to elderly Europeans. These figures are considerably higher than the response rate in connection with unemployed Europeans. Here 79% of respondents support the notion that the EU needs to secure the standard of living of unemployed Europeans. However, this still well exceeds three-fourths of the respondents. Overall, data indicate a high support for European social security.

Are there differences between educational groups and between different European countries in their support for European solidarity? We concentrate on support rates for unemployed Europeans only.

Figure 1. Approval of providing social security by the EU

Should the European Union guarantee...



Source: TESS 2016

[Figure 1] Approval of providing social security by the EU – Source: TESS 2016

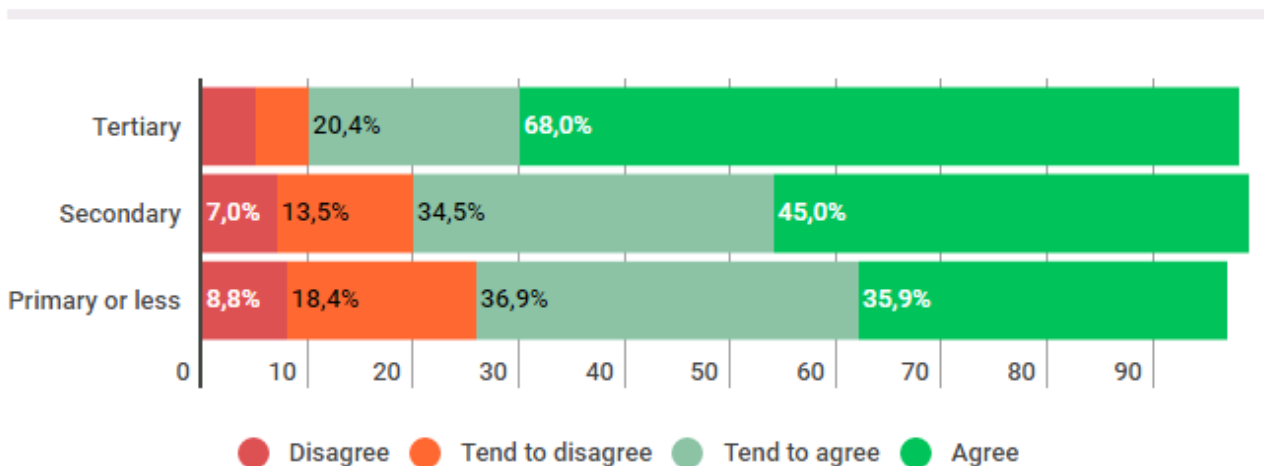
Figure 2 illustrates how the support for the EU providing help for unemployed Europeans varies by level of education. We find that individuals with the lowest level of education (primary level or less) have the highest rate of approval (88%) for the EU guaranteeing a decent standard of living for unemployed Europeans. Those with secondary and tertiary education are more reserved to such measures, although still exhibit high approval rates. Four fifths of respondents with secondary education level approve of European level measures, while 73% of respondents with tertiary education agree that European unemployed should be supported.

However, policy makers should not be so hasty to build a

supranational welfare system to realize a social Europe, as our results do not give policy makers a green light for a concrete endeavor. Uncontested high approval rates for European social security do not automatically suggest that further supranational policy measures will be undisputed

These findings indicate that self-interest bolsters support for European social security. In the wake of the crisis those with lower levels of education have become so-called outsiders in the European labor market (Heidenreich 2015, 2016). They have one of the highest potential to become unemployed and would gain from European-wide social policy measures to support the unemployed. So, they have a vested interest to support the notion that the EU should aid unemployed Europeans.

Figure 2. Approval rate for supporting unemployed Europeans by level of education



Source: TESS 2016

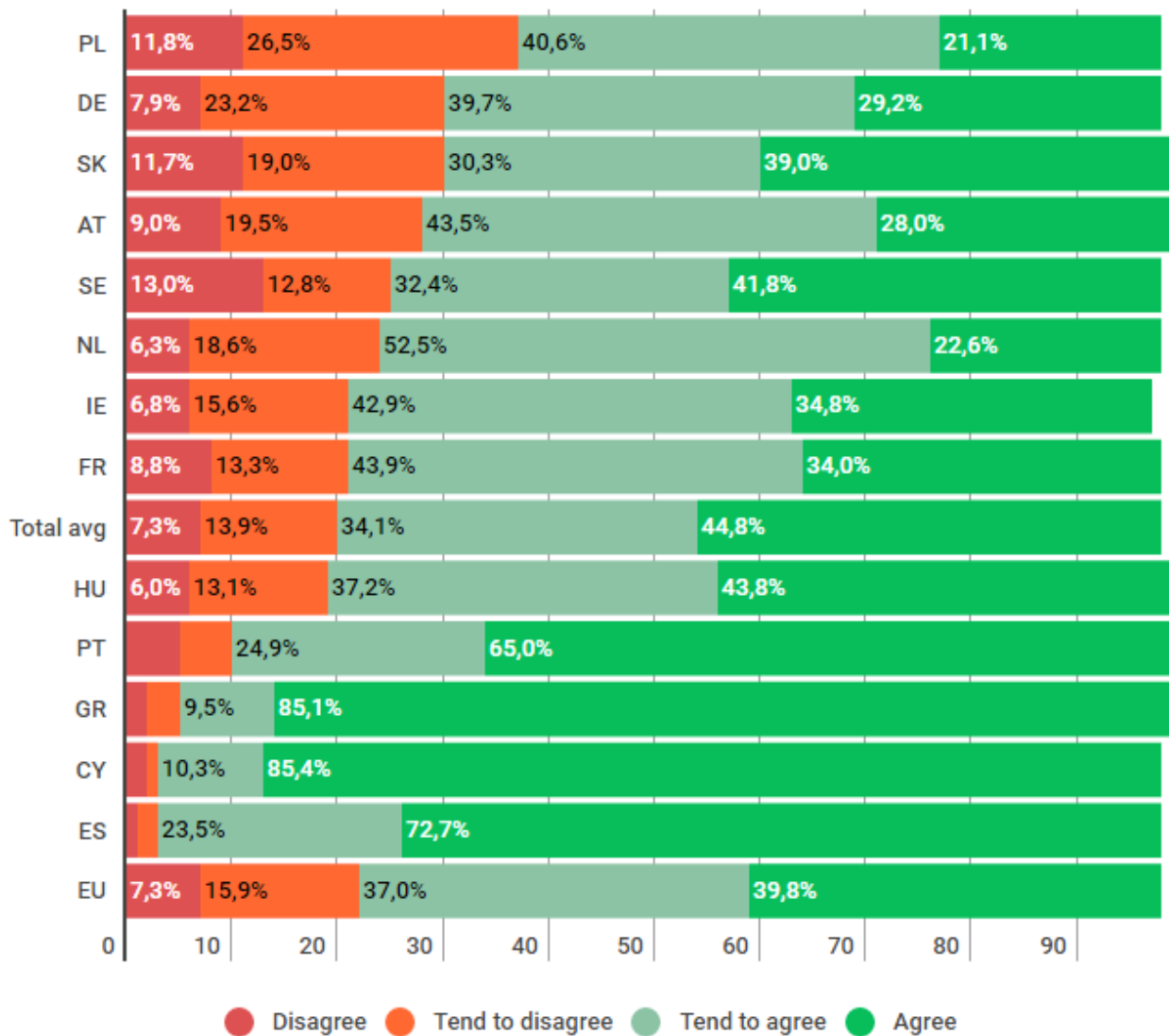
[Figure 2] Approval rate of the EU guaranteeing a decent standard of living for unemployed by level of education – Source: TESS 2016

On top of self-interest, cultural underpinnings to support European social policy initiatives also exist. The more left-oriented a respondents' political value the more she or he will support measures connected to European welfare solidarity. To a lesser degree European identity is also relevant for attitudes. If respondents identify with Europe, they will more strongly support European social security measures. Overall, a detailed analysis (see forthcoming publications) shows that high support rates are driven by not only self-interest of respondents, but also value underpinnings connected to the notion of European social security.

The European Commission could draft appropriate directives, urging national Member States to adequately protect vulnerable groups within nation states, similar to the European Pillar of Social Rights, or an EU-wide minimum wage mentioned by Emmanuel Macron in his Sorbonne address

It is also worth looking at how the support rates vary across countries. Figure 3 depicts how the support rates for providing unemployed Europeans a standard of living by the EU varies across countries. On the one end of the approval rates are Mediterranean countries: Spaniards, Cypriots, and Greeks show the highest approval rates. In contrast, with Sweden, Germany, and Poland we find countries with a relative stable economy during the crisis with the lowest approval rates.

Figure 3. Approval rate for supporting unemployed Europeans by country

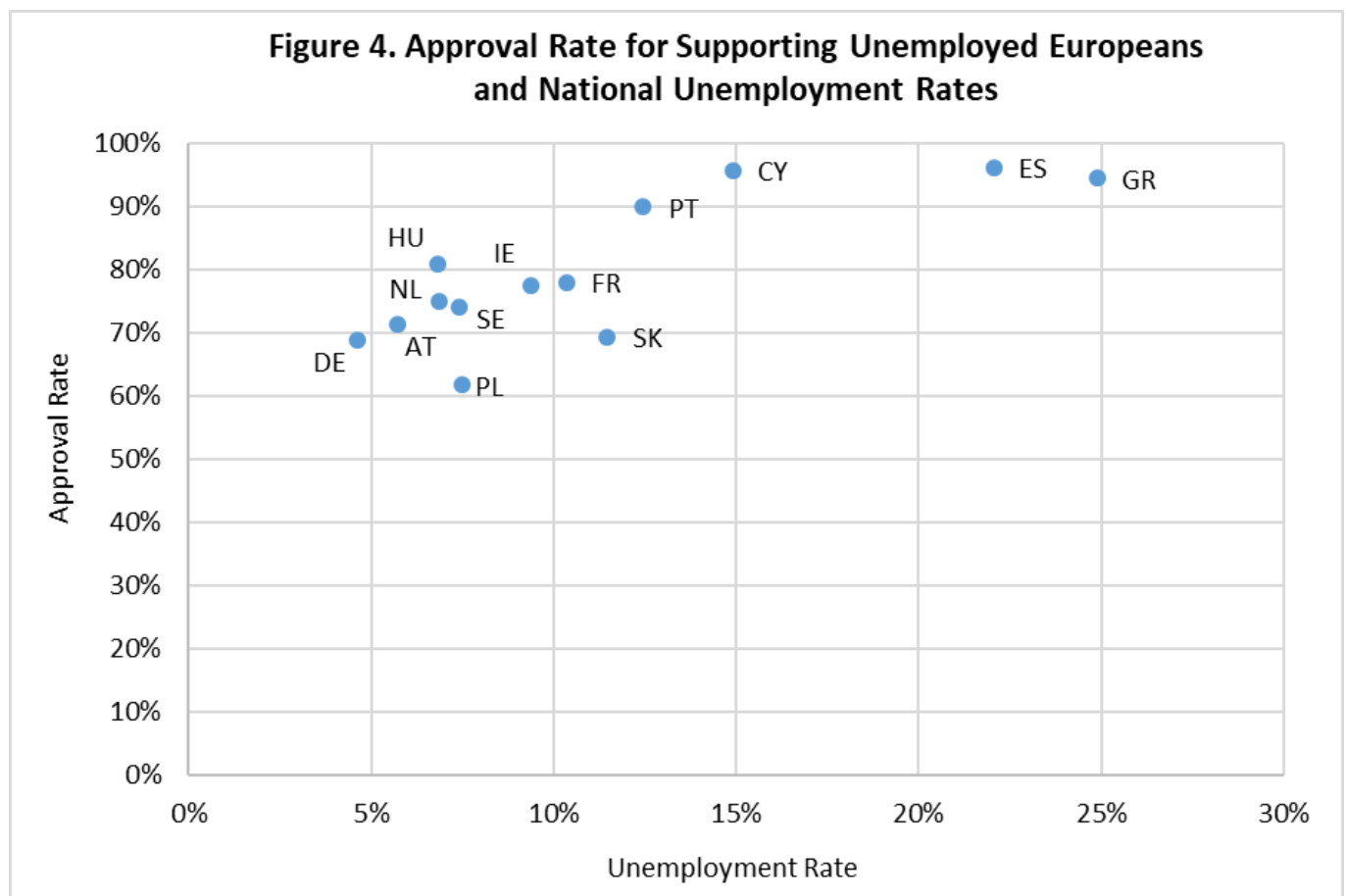


Source: TESS 2016

[Figure 3] Approval rate of the EU guaranteeing a decent standard of living for unemployed by country – Source: TESS 2016

Delving into the country differences in more detail, we can identify systematic

cross-national variations in attitudes. Figure 4 depicts how the rate of approval for supporting unemployed Europeans increases when the unemployment rate in the country is high. The connection between attitudes and the level of unemployment rate is strong and it indicates that also on the country level self-interest is a key factor. What is also notable is that post-socialist countries do not significantly differentiate from Western attitudes, and these do not build one unified and distinct group of countries. Instead, there seems to be a large gap between respondents from creditor and debtor countries of the Eurozone crisis.



Source: TESS 2016 and [World Bank 2016](#)

The Path to a Social Europe Still Needs to be Paved

Our results provide tailwind for those politicians who want to deepen the European integration process and build a social Europe. The analysis shows that the

overwhelming majority supports the idea that the EU should guarantee access to health care, a decent standard of living for the elderly and the unemployed. Our results indicate that Europeans consider social security a right that should be granted to all Europeans.

However, policy makers should not be so hasty to build a supranational welfare system to realize a social Europe, as our results do not give policy makers a green light for a concrete endeavor. Instead, the results rather provide a general framework for social policy actions, as the TESS was only directed at measuring *general* attitudes towards Europe-wide responsibility for people in need. Uncontested high approval rates for European social security do not automatically suggest that further supranational policy measures will be undisputed. Previous studies show ([Baute et al. 2017](#); [Gerhards et al. 2016](#)) supranational institution building does not have a majority in all European countries.

The European project has started to shift from an elite project to one that is relevant to other parts of the population as well

Nonetheless, there are various non-supranational policy tools at hand. For instance, the European Commission could draft appropriate directives, urging national Member States to adequately protect vulnerable groups within nation states, similar to the European Pillar of Social Rights, or an EU-wide minimum wage mentioned by Emmanuel Macron in his [Sorbonne address](#). Second, an emergency budget to fund national social security systems in case of short-term shocks. This could constitute the “golden mean” between European and national responsibilities ([Weber 2017](#)).

Lastly, we want to highlight that more affluent Europeans (who more likely constitute part of the European elite) are more reluctant to express their support for European welfare solidarity. Our findings indicate that the European project has started to shift from an elite project to one that is relevant for other parts of the population as well.

Of course, exactly such a development can also endanger the European project, as economic interest based coalitions are more likely to disperse once there is no

European Welfare Solidarity in Focus: High Support for European
Social Safety Net
By Jürgen Gerhards

interest. Future analyses need to delve deeper into the matter and assess whether self-interest really bolsters European welfare solidarity, or it has the potential to undermine it, with also a consequence for building a social Europe.

Photo Credits CC: [Nan Palmero](#)