

PUBLIC OPINION TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME IN EUROPE

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1. Introduction

The idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) has gained increasing attention in public debates and among policymakers across Europe (De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2004; OECD, 2017).

In the decade since the great recession, the issue of whether a universal basic income (UBI) can provide a guaranteed, basic living standard for all in society has increased in prominence in political and academic discourse.

Obtaining a sufficient citizenship-based income without work obligations is fundamentally opposing the foundations of the welfare systems that are in place nowadays.

In particular, providing a sufficiently high income for all, regardless of their need for support and without work obligations, is fundamentally at odds with the foundations of European welfare systems, where reciprocity and need play a crucial role.

The introduction of a universal basic income would provide a flat-rate cash transfer to all citizens irrespective of their previous contributions and present situation.

The aim of a universal basic income scheme is to gradually replace all other forms of transfer and presently several experiments are underway in European countries.

Less clear, however, are the factors influencing support for a UBI.

Proponents hold that a UBI can provide a flexible protection against poverty and destitution in light of increasingly fragmented labour markets and the threat of automation (Standing, 2011; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017).

Advocates stress its universalism, which reduces the gaps in coverage of existing welfare state policies. Its unconditional characteristic could also decommodify labour more fully, thereby increasing the bargaining power of workers to push for better working conditions and wages, especially at the low-skill end of the labour market.

Notable advocates have argued that UBI has the potential to fully “emancipate” its recipients and allow them to pursue the life they desire unencumbered (see, for example, Van Parijs, 1991; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017).

Critics, meanwhile, consider the UBI economically inefficient or as posing a disincentive to work.

Since a UBI continues to be paid regardless of whether people are in jobs or not, they also emphasise its low adverse effects on work incentives.

Many liberal economists argue that a UBI generous enough to achieve its objectives would be too expensive. It is also inefficient, they reason, as it targets resources to those who may not need them most (Kay, 2017). Others on the Marxist left see a UBI as a politically dangerous legitimization of capitalism, while social democrats worry that the UBI represents an implicit abandonment of the full employment objective (Hassel, 2017).

An investigation into sources of support for a UBI is necessary to further understand the political feasibility of the policy.

Starting from the large and excellent literature on the UBI, this paper analyses empirically a broad range of explanatory individual and contextual factors that may affect popular support for a Universal Basic Income, using a recently conducted wave of the cross-national European Social Survey (ESS).

The ESS Round 8 module “*Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe: Solidarities under Pressure*” makes it possible to shed scientific light on these debates.

2. Data and methods

The analysis is carried out using microdata from the quantitative research “*European Social Survey*” (ESS Data, 2016)¹.

The ESS source questionnaire contains a “core” module, which largely remains the same each round².

In each round, there are also two short “rotating” modules, which are developed by competitively selected, multinational questionnaire design teams in collaboration with the Core Scientific Team.

In Round 8 these modules focus on:

- Public Attitudes to Climate Change, Energy Security and Energy Preferences;
- Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe: Solidarities under Pressure (repeat module with a number of new items).

¹ For more details: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

² For more details: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/questionnaire.

In particular, the core and rotating modules that form the backbone of the ESS questionnaires have addressed multiple topics, including attitudes toward the media, social trust, politics, democracy and citizen involvement; subjective well-being and human values; attitudes towards immigration; family, work and well-being, the timing of life and gender roles; economic morality, welfare attitudes and justice; public attitudes toward climate change.

More in details, the inclusion of the Welfare Attitudes in Europe module during Round 8 of the ESS, first of all allowed attitudes towards these services to be assessed in 23 countries, but also it addresses new solidarity questions fielded for the first time, most notably items assessing the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme and the implementation of a European Union-wide social benefit scheme³.

Round 8 of the ESS (about 44,000 individuals aged 15 or older) was fielded in 23 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Studying support for UBI, especially in a comparative perspective, was long hindered by the lack of availability of high-quality survey data.

Moreover, many questions hinting at a UBI were ambiguous, for example, asking about support for a “guaranteed minimum income”, which could be interpreted not only as support for a BI, but also as support for social assistance.

This is the first survey that introduces a comprehensive idea of UBI and its different aspects: its guaranteed minimum income, its universal character, its unconditionality, that it replaces other benefits and services and that it is paid for by taxes⁴.

Specifically, respondents are asked whether they are “against or in favour of the UBI scheme” being introduced in their respective country, which “some countries are currently talking about”, with the following characteristics and framing the question of UBI support in the following way:

“The government pays everyone a monthly income to cover essential living costs. It replaces many other social benefits. The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living. Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working. People also keep the money they earn from work

³ Public support for an EU-wide social benefit scheme is widely described and analysed in Cardone (2021) and Cardone et al. (2019).

⁴ The European Social Survey (ESS8) data wave is the first international academic survey to directly pose a question on UBI, thus allowing for a comparative inquiry into the determinants of UBI support while controlling for a range of individual and country level variables. By contrast, many previous studies have been limited to one or a few countries (Andersen, 1996; Andersson and Kangas, 2005) or the result of *ad hoc* surveys.

or other sources. This scheme is paid for by taxes. Overall, would you be against or in favour of having this scheme in [your country]?”

Survey participants select from a four-item scale to indicate whether they are “strongly in favour”, “in favour”, “not in favour” or “strongly not in favour” for the UBI (item E36).

As mentioned, the definition used in the ESS8 provides an accurate starting point for analysis, defining UBI as an income (1) paid by government to everyone on a monthly basis to cover living costs, (2) financed by taxes, (3) replacing many other social benefits to (4) guarantee a minimum standard of living, (5) with no variation depending on whether recipients are working and (6) allowing people to keep money earned from work or other sources.

3. Results

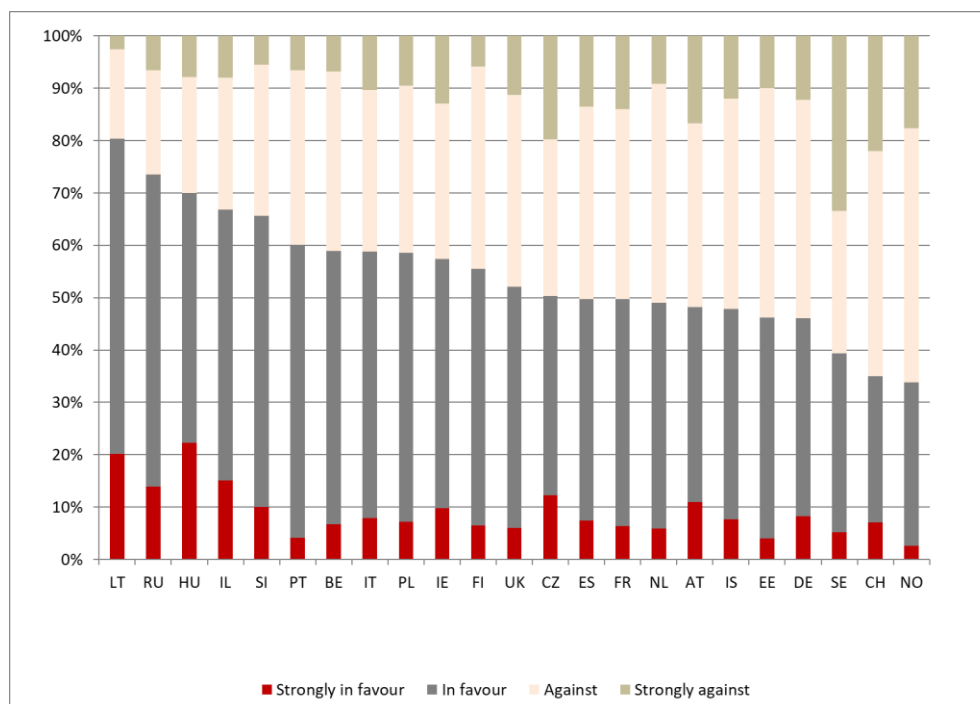
We first present descriptive findings on countrylevel support for a UBI. Figure 1 presents mean values of support across the 23 countries examined. Here, we separate and stack the share of respondents proclaiming to be “in favour” and “strongly in favour” of a UBI. Norway, Switzerland and Sweden stand out as the countries with the least level of support for a UBI. In either country, around one-third of respondents indicated favourable attitudes towards a UBI.

Conversely, more than two-thirds of respondents in Lithuania, Russia, Hungary, Israel and Slovenia are in favour of a UBI.

As shown in figure 1, we see ample variation in support for UBI with the highest level of support in Lithuania (over 80% indicates to be in favour of a UBI) and the lowest level of support in Norway (over 66% indicates to be against a UBI).

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that support for such a radical alternative to the current welfare system gains so much support in European countries. In total, about 56% of the respondents in this selection of countries indicates support, while 44% is against a UBI. As figure 1 illustrates, sizable crossnational differences exist, but in 20 out of 23 countries, support is higher than 45%. Overall, it seems that populations in Eastern European countries are more in favour than their counterparts in Nordic and Western European countries, although there are some exceptions (for instance, Estonia being more against UBI and Finland more in favour compared with their respective region).

Over 50% of Russian and Lithuanian respondents think that they are not likely to have enough money for their household necessities in the next 12 months. In Norway and Sweden, less than 10% of respondents share this fear.

Figure 1 - Public support for a Universal basic Income, by country (% values).

Source: own elaboration on ESS data Round 8.

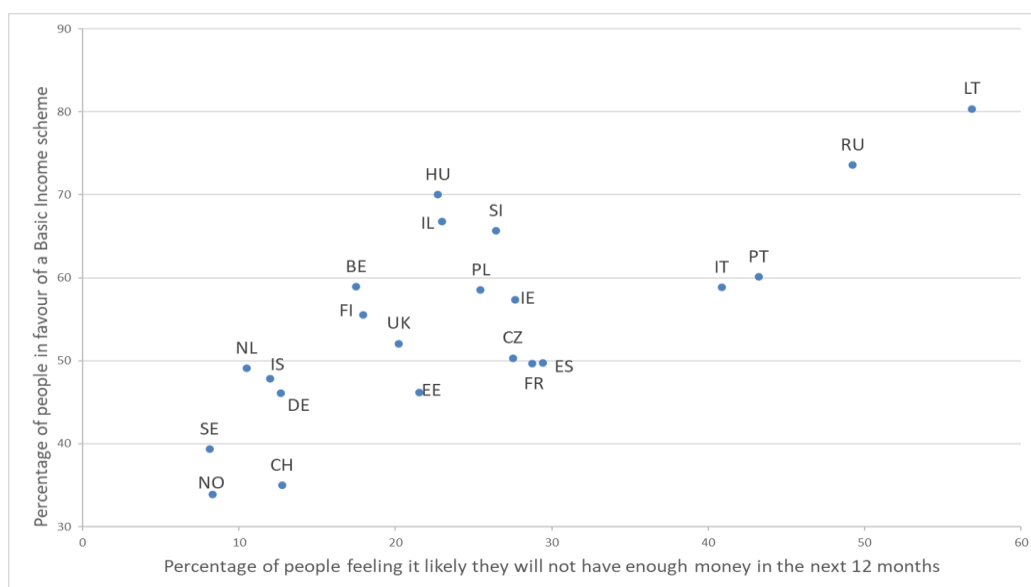
Note: Design weights are applied.

Legend: LT=Lithuania; RU=Russia; HU=Hungary; IL=Israel; SI=Slovenia; PT=Portugal; BE=Belgium; IT=Italy; PL=Poland; IE=Ireland; FI=Finland; UK=United Kingdom; CZ=Czech Republic; ES=Spain; FR=France; NL=Netherlands; AT=Austria; IS=Iceland; EE=Estonia; DE=Germany; SE=Sweden; CH=Switzerland; NO=Norway.

This relationship generally holds true for the sample of European countries: the stronger the concern for future unstable economic conditions in a country, the stronger the preference for a basic income scheme (figure 2).

With a few exceptions, we can identify the different Macro-Regions in the figure: the Nordic countries are distinguished by low to medium support for a basic income while the fear for not having enough money is low; in Western European countries, the fear is slightly stronger as is the support for a basic income; in Eastern Europe, the fear is relatively high as well as the support for a basic income; while the Southern European countries are characterized by having a strong fear but a comparatively low, but still strong, support for a basic income scheme. Russia and Lithuania form a group of their own, distinguished by a strong fear of not having enough money in the future, as well as strong support for a basic income scheme.

Figure 2 - Support for basic income scheme and perceived unstable financial future (% values).



Source: own elaboration on ESS data Round 8.

Note: Design weights are applied.

Percentage of respondents in favour or strongly in favour of a basic income scheme, answered on a 4-point scale: "strongly against", "against", "in favour" or "strongly in favour" (item E36, N=40.592).

Percentage of people feeling it likely or very likely they will not have enough money to cover household necessities in the next 12 months, answered on a 4-point scale: "not at all likely", "not very likely", "likely" or "very likely" (item E40, N=40.612).

The ESS asks respondents about their history of unemployment: over 63% of respondents who have experienced a period of unemployment and work seeking within the last five years are favourable to a UBI compared to 54% for those who have not (table 1).

The difference between temporary and permanent workers in their support for a UBI is not trivial: 56 % of respondents with "limited duration" contracts favour a UBI compared to 49.4 % for those with "unlimited duration" employment contracts (table 2).

Table 1 - Any period of unemployment and work seeking within last 5 years and support for a UBI.

Period of unemployment?	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour	Total
Yes	9.93	26.90	50.31	12.86	100.00
No	10.58	35.25	46.08	8.08	100.00

Source: own elaboration on ESS data Round 8.

Note: Design weights are applied.

Table 2 - Employment contract and support for a UBI.

Employment contract unlimited or limited duration	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour	Total
Unlimited	11.85	34.67	44.99	8.48	100.00
Limited	10.45	33.33	45.96	10.26	100.00

Source: own data Round 8.

Note: Design weights are applied.

Using multivariate analysis (logistic regression models with Stata software) it was possible to estimate the different attitudes among countries for UBI support more accurately. The model includes, first of all adults' socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, number people living in the household, citizenship, domicile, education level, voted or not), secondly, economic and work-related (worked or not, total household income).

In order to achieve this goal, the dependent variable of this study is the "basic income scheme": we recode respondents' answers into a binary outcome variable which receives a value of 1 if the respondent supports or strongly supports a UBI and takes a value of 0 if the respondent does not support or strongly does not support a UBI.

Concretely, in the study analyzed variables are:

- *Gender*. Categorical. Dummy variable: Female, Male (reference cat.).
- *Country*. Categorical. Twentythree countries. Netherlands (reference cat.), Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Ireland, Belgium, Estonia, Germany, France, Czech Republic, Sweden, United Kingdom, Finland, Austria, Russia, Israel, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland.
- *Domicile*. Categorical. Four levels. A big city/Suburbs or outskirts of big city (reference cat.); Town or small city; Country village; Farm or home in countryside.
- *Work*. Categorical. Dummy variable: Yes, No (reference cat.).

- *Income*. Categorical. Ten levels: 1st decile (reference cat.), 2nd decile, 3rd decile, 4th decile, 5th decile, 6th decile, 7th decile, 8th decile, 9th decile, 10th decile.
- *Household*. Categorical. Five levels: 1 individual (reference cat.), 2 ind., 3 ind., 4 ind., 5 ind. or more.
- *Vote*. Voted in the last election. Categorical. Three levels: No, Not eligible to vote, Yes (reference cat.).
- *ISCED*. Categorical. Three levels: Low (Isced 0-1-2), Medium (Isced 3-4), High (Isced 5-6, reference cat.).
- *Age group*. Categorical. Three intervals. From 15 to 40; 40 to 60; over 60 (reference cat.).

First of all, we test the goodness-of-fit using a postestimation tool, the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic. This test follows a chi-square distribution with the degrees of freedom equal to the number of groups minus 2. A not significant *p value* indicates that the model fits the data well since there is no significant difference between the observed and expected data (Liu, 2016). In this case, the Hosmer-Lemeshow chi-square test has a value of 12.68 with the degrees of freedom equal to 8. The associated *p value* is 0.1235 which is not significant. Therefore, the model fits the data well.

Logistic model for “*basic income scheme*”, goodness-of-fit test:

Number of groups = 10

Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 12.68$

Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.1235$

Table 3 shows odds ratios of logistic model and this means that the coefficients (*Beta*, not showed) in logistic regression are in terms of the log odds because the coefficients can be expressed in odds by getting rid of the natural log. This is done by taking the exponential for both sides of the equation, because there is a direct relationship between the coefficients produced by logit and the odds ratios produced by logistic: a logit is defined as the natural log (base *e*) of the odds.

Table 3 - *Logistic regression model*.

Number of obs = 33,576; LR $\chi^2(46) = 2,151.21$; Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$

Log likelihood = -22,106.42 Pseudo R2 = 0.0464

Variables		ODDS	Sign.
• Gender	Male	1 (base)	
	Female	0.96	0.041

Table 3 - Logistic regression model (continued).

• Country	AT	0.75	0.000
	BE	1.36	0.000
	CH	0.51	0.000
	CZ	1.07	0.341
	DE	0.90	0.107
	EE	0.81	0.003
	ES	0.93	0.378
	FI	1.27	0.001
	FR	0.89	0.117
	UK	0.95	0.496
	HU	2.05	0.000
	IE	1.17	0.036
	IL	1.72	0.000
	IS	0.83	0.045
	IT	1.04	0.637
	LT	3.78	0.000
	NL	1 (base)	
	NO	0.47	0.000
	PL	1.29	0.002
	PT	1.42	0.000
RU	2.43	0.000	
SE	0.63	0.000	
SI	1.82	0.000	
• Domicile	A big city/Suburbs	1 (base)	
	Town or small city	0.92	0.003
	Country village	0.87	0.000
	Farm or home in countryside	0.82	0.000
• Work	No	1 (base)	
	Yes	0.88	0.000
• Income	J - 1st decile	1 (base)	
	R - 2nd decile	0.91	0.063
	C - 3rd decile	0.94	0.252
	M - 4th decile	0.88	0.017
	F - 5th decile	0.74	0.000
	S - 6th decile	0.73	0.000
	K - 7th decile	0.73	0.000
	P - 8th decile	0.69	0.000
	D - 9th decile	0.59	0.000
	H - 10th decile	0.54	0.000
• Household	Single person / lone parent	1 (base)	
	2	1.10	0.005
	3	1.19	0.006
	4	1.12	0.009
	5 or more	1.10	0.058
• Vote	Yes	1 (base)	
	No	1.11	0.001
	Not eligible to vote	1.12	0.015
• ISCED	Low	1.03	0.424
	Medium	0.93	0.008
	High	1 (base)	
• Age group	15 – 40	1.44	0.000
	40 – 60	1.23	0.000
	Over 60	1 (base)	
	cons.	1.22	0.008

Source own elaboration on ESS data Round 8.

This fitted model says that, holding covariates at a fixed value, the odds of being in favour of a public support for a UBI scheme for female over the odds of being in favour of a public support for a UBI scheme for male (reference category) is 0.96. In terms of percent change, we can say that the odds for female are 4% lower than the odds for male. In other words, the hazard to be in favour of a public support for an EU-wide social benefit scheme is slightly higher for male rather than female.

Regarding the citizenship, the odds of being in favour of a public support for a UBI scheme for ten countries (Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Russia and Slovenia) are higher over the odds of being in favour of a public support for a UBI scheme for The Netherlands (reference category). In particular, the odds for Lithuania are almost four times higher than the odds for The Netherlands (OR=3.78) and the odds for Russia and Hungary are double (OR=2.43 and OR=2.05). On the other side, the odds for six countries (Austria, Switzerland, Estonia, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) are lower than the odds for The Netherlands. In terms of percent change, the odds for Slovenia (OR=1.82) are 82% higher than the odds for The Netherlands and the odds for Switzerland are 49% lower (OR=0.51). Please note that the odds for Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Italy and United Kingdom are not significant (p value > 0.05).

The hazard to be in favour of a public support for a UBI scheme is higher for young people (younger ones have more confidence than the elderly, “over 60” reference cat.) and lower for those who have a medium education level (Isced 5-6 reference cat.). Moreover, it decreases with household income (1st decile reference cat.), for those who live in a small town, country village or farm (big city reference cat.) and for workers (not workers reference cat.). On the contrary, the hazard to be in favour increases for those who do not vote or are not eligible (those who vote reference cat.) and for individuals who belong to families of 2 or more people (single persons/lone parents reference cat.).

4. Conclusions

This study contributes to the wider debate surrounding “Social Europe”. The main conclusion is that support for UBI is high across Europe but it can observe important cross-national variation in support for a UBI. Support for basic income seems to be lower in more affluent countries in Northern and Western Europe, and higher in the less wealthy welfare states in the East. Countries with more limited and less generous welfare states (southern, liberal and central and eastern European welfare regimes) tend to exhibit higher support. Belgium and Finland are outliers in this cluster, probably due to their long standing unemployment problems in their labour market. Moreover, adults’ socio-demographic, economic and work-related

characteristics play an important role. Basic income is favoured more by the young than the olders while high incomes tends to reduce support for UBI if compared with low incomes. As previously seen, labour market status significantly predicts basic income support: people who have experienced a period of unemployment and work seeking within the last five years are more favourable to a UBI compared to those who have not.

Finally, research community need more studies to ask people about their exact understandings of UBI, which elements of the policy they support or reject, and their argumentations to be in favour or against it.

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SUMMARY

Europeans' attitudes towards the idea of a Universal Basic Income

The idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) has gained increasing attention in public debates and among policymakers across Europe. The inclusion of the Welfare Attitudes in Europe module during Round 8 (2016/17) of the European Social Survey (ESS) - for the first time in academic cross-national research - allowed attitudes towards the introduction of a Universal Basic Income to be assessed in 23 countries. Aim of this article is to explore and understand the different aspects and predictors of UBI support. In particular, this paper analyses a broad range of explanatory individual and contextual factors that may affect popular support for a UBI. Main findings shows that the stronger support for a European minimum income benefit in less generous welfare states is explained by more optimistic expectations about the EU's domestic impact and lower socioeconomic status groups are more supportive of this policy proposal. Moreover, the analysis reveals that diverging national experiences and expectations are crucial in understanding why Europeans are widely divided on the implementation of such a benefit scheme. Secondly, in almost all countries, the younger age group is more supportive of activation and a universal basic income than the older age group. Finally, using logistic regression model it is possible to estimate the different attitudes among countries for a UBI more accurately.