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Welfare reform by stealth? Cash benefit recipiency data and its additional value to the understanding of welfare state change in Europe

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Abstract
Trends in social protection schemes have been one of the main subjects in comparative welfare state research, not least since the financial crisis and the austerity measures that many European countries implemented in its aftermath. One of the key debates in literature is about how to measure the extent of public welfare provision as an indicator of welfare state change. Many quantitative researchers have used macro-level data on programmatic social expenditure or on the generosity of benefit rights, bringing forth major theories of welfare state retrenchment, system convergence, path dependency and paradigm changes in social policies. Recently, however, micro-level data on cash benefit receipt is seen as an alternative measure of welfare state change. Instead of gauging the cost reality of spending trends or the law reality of social rights reforms, this indicator is claimed to provide insight into changes of actual welfare receipt. This article studies benefit recipiency data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, covering 14 European countries for the period 2003 to 2013. It investigates cross-national welfare state dynamics by analysing national receipt-based benefit access rates and transfer shares and how they relate to dynamics in the prevailing indicators. Results show how much the choice of the indicator for the dependent variable affects the results of descriptive accounts of welfare state change. In addition, findings indicate what could be called welfare state reform by stealth. In several countries, levels of unemployment benefits stay significantly behind the development of median household incomes. This observation applies particularly to countries that are believed to have generous welfare systems, and it has not been revealed by research based on disaggregated social spending data or social rights data.

Keywords
Benefit recipiency data, dependent variable problem, EU-SILC, welfare state change

Introduction

Comparative research into welfare state change is not new in the social sciences. Investigations concerning the emergence and subsequent expansion of

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social protection schemes in Europe up to the 1970s (Flora, 1986a, 1986b), as well as reflections on welfare state retrenchment in the mid-1990s (Pierson, 1994, 1996), inspired major theories about the nature, content and dynamics of welfare state change. With the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the subsequent austerity measures, interest in the development and the (re-)configuration of public welfare arrangements in Europe were revitalised. This adds importance to the question of finding suitable indicators to assess what characterises the welfare state. How do we actually measure the extent or the generosity of social protection systems? Labelled as the 'dependent variable problem' in literature (Clasen and Siegel, 2007), the issue at stake is how to conceptualise, operationalise and measure differences between, and change within, welfare states. One way of addressing the problem is through the use of disaggregated social expenditure data to compare functional differences in welfare spending across countries and over time. Another approach is the comparison of social rights data to understand functional differences in legislative stipulations regarding, for example, benefit access, benefit levels and benefit duration. A third way consists of using survey-based or administrative data on benefit receipt.

In this article, we propose that the potential of benefit recipiency data as an indicator of the extent of public welfare provision is far from being exhausted in comparative welfare state research. Building on recent explorations of the capacity of this hitherto underused indicator (De Deken and Clasen, 2011; Van Oorschot, 2013), we can add to existing knowledge in a twofold way: first, by comparing welfare state dynamics of all three indicators, and second, by doing so for a recent time span of 10 years across 14 Western European countries.

Thus, in the first step, on the basis of all three indicators, we compare the extent of public welfare provision and address the question: how did the extent of public welfare provision develop in Europe throughout the years 2003–2013? The results reveal not only national differences as measured by the three indicators but also large cross-country variation in how the different indicators relate to each other, and how this can affect the interpretation of welfare state change. In the second step, we further elaborate on benefit recipiency data by exploring the question: what does benefit recipiency data as a currently underused indicator of the extent of public welfare provision add to the understanding of welfare state change? One finding is that in some countries, unemployment cash benefits have not actually been reduced, but have lost out in relative terms compared with wider income development, suggesting welfare reform by stealth. In addition, there appears to be a policy trade-off between the access to and the levels of benefits, which might reflect two policy options to manage and control overall expenditure.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: the next two sections elaborate on the various indicators that are subject to the 'dependent variable problem', by briefly elucidating them theoretically and describing how they have been used in previous research. This is followed by an empirical analysis of aggregated unemployment benefit receipt in 14 European countries for the period 2003 to 2013. The concluding remarks elaborate on the answers to the research questions and indicate possible directions for future research.

Indicators for the comparative study of changing extents of public welfare provision

Social expenditure and social rights data

The 'dependent variable problem' is mainly an issue of conceptually operationalising the extent and quality of welfare provision. This issue has been addressed in existing literature mainly by suggesting two proxy indicators: the financial 'effort' made by a state to provide welfare to its population (Castles, 2002; Hicks and Swank, 1984; Pierson, 1996, 2001; Wilensky, 1975), and the 'generosity' of social rights in granting welfare benefits (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Scruggs, 2007; Scruggs and Allan, 2006). Indicators of the cost side are either total or programmatic social expenditure as a proportion of GDP or in Purchasing Power Standards. Both are provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Social Expenditure (SOCX) database or by Eurostat's European System of Integrated Social Protection

Statistics (ESSPROS, n.d.) database. Indicators of the generosity of social rights are indexes including information on entitlement conditions, replacement rates and the maximum duration of benefit payments. Indexes with this type of information are central components of the Social Citizenship Indicator Programme (SCIP) and the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Dataset (CWED II, Scruggs et al., 2017).

The implicit assumption of the expenditure indicator is that more generous welfare states are characterised by comparatively higher levels of social spending. For the social rights indicator, it is assumed that in more generous welfare states, legal provisions grant cash benefits that are more accessible in terms of their entitlement criteria, relatively higher in terms of their replacement rates and are paid for a comparably longer period of time. In both cases, the conceptualisation of *change* is often referred to as 'expansion' or 'retrenchment' of social expenditure or social rights provided through the major existing social policy programmes. However, as Clasen and Siegel (2007) highlight, research on 'retrenchment' and related concepts, such as 're-commodification', 'cost-containment', 'convergence' or even 'path dependency', 'has rarely been matched by reflections as to how to conceptualise and measure "retrenchment" [or change] within or across welfare state programmes' (p. 10).

Following this line of reasoning, several authors have criticised the fact that many comparative welfare state studies are too limited in their conceptualisation of welfare state change as an increase or decrease in social spending or social rights. For example, this approach ignores shifts in the content or institutional structural of welfare states, such as the development of programmes addressing new social risks (Bonoli, 2005; Gingrich and Ansell, 2015; Morel et al., 2011). Other authors suggest (also) using different types of data than 'rights' or 'costs', namely benefit receipt information (De Deken and Clasen, 2013; Van Oorschot, 2013), since the 'paper reality' of social rights and the 'financial cost reality' of social expenditure only reveal particular aspects of public welfare provision. The following paragraph elaborates on the proposal of this alternative, additional indicator: benefit recipiency data.

Benefit recipiency data

The idea that information on the receipt of social (cash) benefits in national populations – whether the data originates from administrative records or social surveys – can be essential for understanding the character and change of welfare states is not new (Flora, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Kaim-Caudle, 1973). However, to date, it has received surprisingly little attention in comparative welfare state research. This type of data has only recently been brought into the dependent variable discussion, with studies that elaborate on the indicator from a conceptual and methodological point of view and that provide new insights into how welfare states compare cross-sectionally and longitudinally with regard to particular welfare benefits (Arents et al., 2002; De Deken and Clasen, 2011, 2013; Immervoll et al., 2004, 2015; Van Oorschot, 2013).

When studying the relative value of benefit recipiency data in conceptual, methodological and empirical terms, Van Oorschot (2013) highlights the close interaction of this micro-level indicator with the two prevailing macro-level indicators in literature. In line with these reflections, actual benefit receipt can be considered the result of social rights addressing social needs in a national population and the driver of social expenditure (Van Oorschot, 2013: 230). Accordingly, it mirrors (changing) access to and levels of cash benefits more directly than the hypothetical paper reality of social rights data or the pure cost of social expenditure. Therefore, the key advantage of this indicator is that it reveals the actual extent of welfare provision in national contexts, rather than the legally intended extent or the financial expenditure resulting from the legal intentions. Moreover, being individual level instead of national level data, benefit recipiency data enables the study of public welfare conferment to different social groups (e.g. the total as well as the working age population, and to various social categories) and is not limited to the 'typical case' assumptions underlying existing social rights data (i.e. benefit rights of a full-time production worker in the manufacturing sector with a long working record preceding the loss of income or the benefit period, living in two types of fictive single earner households). In addition, benefit recipiency

data enables the study of more policy programmes than are currently included in social rights indexes and facilitates the investigation of multiple welfare benefit receipt at the individual or household level.

Notwithstanding its apparent advantages, this alternative indicator also has shortcomings, which are related to both administrative and survey-based data. However, when bringing together the various conceptual and methodological strengths and weaknesses, Otto (2017) concludes that the use of any of the three indicators of the extent of public welfare provision can entail problems. Benefit recipiency data has, however, the potential to complement the main prevailing indicators and to deliver new insights into welfare variations across countries and over time.

Social expenditure, social rights and benefit receipt in the study of welfare state change

In existing research, welfare state change has either been studied as an explanation for various distributional results and policy responses or as an outcome. In the latter case, studies include analyses of general trend lines based on social rights, social expenditure or administrative caseload data (Castles, 2002; De Deken and Clasen, 2011; Ferrarini et al., 2013; Pierson, 1998; Siegel, 2002) and investigate factors that could explain these trends (Castles, 2008; Danforth and Stephens, 2013; Moene and Wallerstein, 2003; Pierson, 1994, 2001).

The use of social expenditure data to study trends in welfare states is theoretically defended by the argument that it provides a means to measure retrenchment levels in the form of government cutbacks to budgets. National governments and international organisations require annual accounting of expenditure categories for budgeting purposes, which means this data is routinely produced and readily available (Castles, 2002). However, as Green-Pedersen (2004) points out, changes to social spending are not only related to legal changes in social security provisions but are also affected by the extent of social need. For instance, spending on unemployment benefit depends not only on benefit regulations but also on the number of unemployed people. It could therefore be inappropriate to rely solely on social expenditure figures as an operational definition of welfare retrenchment or expansion. Instead, corrections should be made for changes to, for instance, unemployment spending levels due to a greater number of unemployed people. These so-called 'need-adjusted' spending levels are calculated by dividing expenditure figures by the respective unemployment rates (see Siegel, 2001). However, this still does not provide information about the extent to which changing expenditure levels are an expression of changes in access-related and/or level-related benefit rights.

To obtain a better picture of these changing rules and to understand the legislative impact of organised class interests, collecting social rights data emerged as an alternative with which to study the shape and direction of the changing extents of (cash) welfare state provision (Stephens, 2010). Such data is believed to more directly reflect government intentions concerning the access to and levels of cash benefit provision. Average net replacement rates as one important measurement of social rights are, however, influenced by a number of other factors, such as wage developments and the tax system (Schmitt and Starke, 2011). Interpreting the lowering of replacement rates as representing official cutbacks would thus not be appropriate. In addition, there is a discrepancy between nominal entitlement, benefit administration and actual take-up rates, which social rights data is unable to reflect but that can be expected to affect the actual realisation of rights and the expenditure.

Empirically, the overall conclusion that can be drawn from literature based on social rights analyses is that the social risk coverage of the population expanded in many Western European countries until the mid-1980s (Flora, 1986a, 1986b), after which replacement rate levels of unemployment, sickness and pension benefits – as well as social assistance benefits – appear to have declined or levelled off in most countries (Kuitto, 2016; Scruggs, 2007; Van Vliet and Wang, 2016; Wenzelburger et al., 2013). This is often explained as being the result of cost containment measures during the 'silver age of welfare capitalism' (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

Somewhat contrary to these findings, the mean levels of total social cash expenditure as a proportion

of GDP increased in Europe until the mid-1990s. They only stabilised at a lower level after this (Siegel, 2007), before showing another rise with the onset of the Great Recession of 2008–2009 (Taylor-Gooby, 2016). To some extent, these trends can be related to economic cycles and the subsequent changes in social need. On the programmatic level, however, the picture is less clear and reveals the complex architecture of welfare states (Nikolai, 2012). Whereas old age pension expenditure increased in many European countries, disability benefits proportionally declined or stagnated in most of them. The patterns of expenditure on unemployment benefits in turn show greater fluctuations, with a modest decrease in spending until 2007 and an increase in 2008 that either continued subsequently or stabilised at a higher level in many European countries. With regard to unemployment benefit expenditure, this does not suggest a massive rollback of the welfare state in recent years.

Research investigating welfare state dynamics by means of administrative caseload data seems to confirm the findings of social rights analyses: apart from short-term fluctuations, there was a nearly universal rise in Western European working age benefit caseloads until the early 1980s (Flora, 1986a, 1986b); with a further increase until (mid-) [1990], after which a period of consolidation set in (De Deken and Clasen, 2011; Immervoll et al., 2004; OECD, 2003).

This brief literature review demonstrates how much the choice of the key indicator for the dependent variable affects the results of descriptive accounts of welfare state change (see also Siegel, 2007). The objectives of these indicators might be the same, but their focus, operationalisation and measurement differ, and are thus likely to lead to different observations. This does not make their use invalid, but it does raise the vital questions of how the various indicators of dynamics compare with each other, and what wider conclusions this allows with regard to welfare state change. The review also shows that there is considerable information about welfare state change for the two decades prior to the Great Recession of 2008–2009, but that little is known about more recent dynamics in public social security provisions. Against this background, this article addresses the following two questions: (1) How did the extent of public welfare provision develop in Europe throughout the years 2003–2013, when assessed using social expenditure, social rights and benefit recipiency data as indicators of the extent of provision? and (2) What does benefit recipiency data as a currently underused indicator of the extent of public welfare provision add to the understanding of welfare state change?

Data and methods

For this study, the focus is on individually granted public unemployment cash benefits (UE). This selection represents an important working age population benefit in European welfare states, for which data is available for the years and countries studied across the different indicators.

Referring to the three central indicators of the extent of public welfare provision discussed above, in this article we study the following variables over time and compared with each other: (1) unemployment cash benefit expenditure as a proportion of GDP, (2) unemployment cash benefit rights and (3) unemployment cash benefit receipt. The next sections will elaborate on the data sources and the operationalisation of each indicator separately. Generally, the data covers 14 European countries[1] and all the cross-sectional observations that are available for the years 2003–2013. The choice of the country sample and the time period was based on the availability of data across the different indicators.

To obtain a comparable idea of changes in the different indicators over time, the yearly national values for each of them are indexed up to the year 2003 – the starting year of the period under consideration – or to the years in which the annual EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC, 2015) data first became available for the 14 countries studied.[2]

Unemployment benefit expenditure

Data for unemployment cash benefit expenditure as a proportion of GDP is taken from Eurostat's ESSPROS dataset (variable spr_exp_gdp). For the further analysis, the yearly values of this indicator (UESOCX in this article) are divided by the

respective yearly unemployment rates (ESPROSS variable lfsa_urgaed; UER in this article). These need-adjusted unemployment expenditure figures (UESOCX.na; all the data is available in Table A1 in the Appendix) serve as the basis for the comparison across time and between indicators. The need correction is inspired by previous research (Elsässer et al., 2015; Siegel, 2001, 2002) and is necessary where countries' expenditure figures aim to reflect national differences in the extent of public welfare provision, rather than in social needs for benefit provision. If this is not done, a stronger influx of people in need – for example, in unemployment – could easily increase the expenditure measurement without the welfare state actually being more generous in its welfare provision.

Unemployment benefit rights

Data regarding the generosity of unemployment benefit rights is derived from the CWED II. This social rights index includes national access-related and amount-related information on unemployment benefit rights (e.g. the qualification period, coverage and replacement rates), which are combined in a single measurement ('UEGEN' in the CWED II). The figures for the 14 European countries included in this study (here UERGEN; all the data is available in Table A2 in the appendix) were recalculated on the basis of the equation provided by the methodological genealogy in the CWED project (Scruggs, 2014: 17–19). This was carried out to ensure that only information for these countries is used for the calculation of the various index components, rather than for all the countries included in the CWED. Moreover, since benefit access and benefit amount are two central elements in benefit rights (see, for example, Jensen et al., 2018) and analogous to the two benefit recipiency aspects that will be explained in the subsequent paragraph, cross-sectional values for two more variables were calculated: benefit access generosity (UERGEN.AG) and benefit level generosity (UERGEN.LG; all the data is available in Table A2 in the appendix). Both are established on the various index components of UERGEN, separating access-related from level-related benefit rights information. In the same way as for the composite indicator, the formulas for their calculation[3] are based on the methodological genealogy of the CWED project (Scruggs, 2014: 17–19).

Unemployment benefit receipt

The analysis of unemployment benefit receipt is based on the user database (UDB) of the EU-SILC, the annual EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (variable PY090). Since the EU-SILC measures all income components for the year prior to the survey, cross-sectional data for the survey years 2004 to 2014 is used, referring to the measurement years 2003–2013.[4] To account for differences in the national sample sizes in the database, all the data was weighted using the EU-SILC's personal cross-sectional weight (variable tag PB040) in the further operationalisation process.

For the operationalisation of benefit receipt, a distinction between two aspects is made: whether an individual has access to a benefit (1 = yes, 0 = no) and if so, the amount received. Aggregated at the country level, the 'benefit access rate' (UEAR; all the data is available in Table A3 in the appendix) represents the national proportion of the total working age population (16–64 years of age) that has actual access to unemployment benefits (access = 1). Since social need inflation does not only affect expenditure figures, yearly national access rates are divided by the respective yearly national unemployment rates. This generates need-adjusted unemployment benefit access rates (UEAR.na; all the data is available in Table A3 in the appendix) per country and year, which serve as a basis in the analysis.

Individual-level benefit amount is measured as a transfer share; that is, as the proportion an individual's personal benefit income takes relative to the median total household income in a country's working age population. The measurement indicates the relative amount of a benefit received by a person compared with the level of income that is a minimum for half of the national working population. At the national level, the transfer share (UETSg, with 'g' reflecting that it is computed on the basis of gross incomes) is calculated as the median of the individual-level transfer shares.

Some data limitations

As highlighted in previous research (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010; De Deken and Kittel, 2007; Goedemé, 2013a, 2013b; Graf et al., 2011; Iacovou et al., 2012; Lohmann, 2011; United Nations, 2014; Van Oorschot and Reinstadler, 2013), using information from the databases mentioned above requires some caution and consideration. As a reminder, the most important aspects concerning the present research are mentioned hereafter. However, since the aspects discussed regard structural issues inherent to the design of the databases, this study is not able to overcome or correct for them. Furthermore, it would not be directly possible to assess their effects on the outcomes of the study.

With regard to the CWED II and other social rights indexes, several authors (Kvist et al., 2013; Scruggs, 2006) have questioned the representativeness and generalisability of data based on the 'typical case', for instance, benefit replacement rates. In the CWED II, these rates are generated for a fictive average full-time production worker in the manufacturing sector who is 40 years old, was working for the 20 years preceding the loss of income or the benefit period, and for two different household types assuming a single earner model. This approach not only ignores policy nuances in the social protection and incentive structure for different social groups but also the rise of atypical employment, changes in the economic sectors and the increasing diversity in the constellation and work intensity of households. Choosing these typical cases can have implications for the observation and interpretation of change in welfare state generosity, namely an underreporting of changes in benefit rights for other groups of workers and household constellations. Furthermore, replacement rates annualise the benefit for an initial 6-month period of unemployment (i.e. calculating the benefit for the first 26 weeks and multiplying this by 2), before calculating taxes and deducting tax liability from social insurance. As pointed out by Ferrarini et al. (2013), this can lead to an overestimation of replacement rates in cases where they are reduced after an initial period of unemployment, or where benefits are not paid for the duration of 12 months.

Using ESSPROS and EU-SILC to compare the extent of welfare state provision between countries and over time also requires careful consideration. First, in contrast to social rights indexes such as the CWED II, both EU-SILC and ESPROSS unemployment cash benefit data usually includes information about more than one single benefit. In line with the Eurostat definition for both databases (Eurostat, 2016), unemployment cash benefit is a 'target variable' compiling income information from various unemployment programmes. Unfortunately, it is not possible for data users to deconstruct the target variables. Second, several countries report income in the EU-SILC benefit target variables only as gross income. This limits this study to the calculation of gross rather than net income figures, which risks underestimating – in the same way as for unemployment benefit rights and unemployment expenditure information – the importance of taxes, tax rebates and tax credits.

Changing extents of unemployment cash benefit provision

Generally, across the period of observation (2003–2013), the indexed values shown in Figure 1 indicate that the extent of public welfare provision by means of unemployment cash benefits steadily decreased when looking at the average scores of need-adjusted unemployment expenditure (avgUESOCX.na) and of the generosity of unemployment benefit rights (avgUERGEN). This generally confirms earlier research for this time period (Elsässer et al., 2015; Scruggs, 2014), for which a retrenchment and levelling-off of unemployment expenditure and unemployment benefit rights generosity in Europe is claimed. The two rights-based generosity components of benefit access (avgUERGEN.AG) and benefit level (avgUERGEN.LG) show very little change over the period until 2008, after which the level-related component increased slightly.

More variation over time can be found with the benefit recipiency indicators, with two particularly interesting observations. One is that after the 2008–2009 crisis, the average benefit access component (avgUEAR.na) increased, while the average benefit level component (avgUETSg) decreased. In addition, over the whole time period the two components

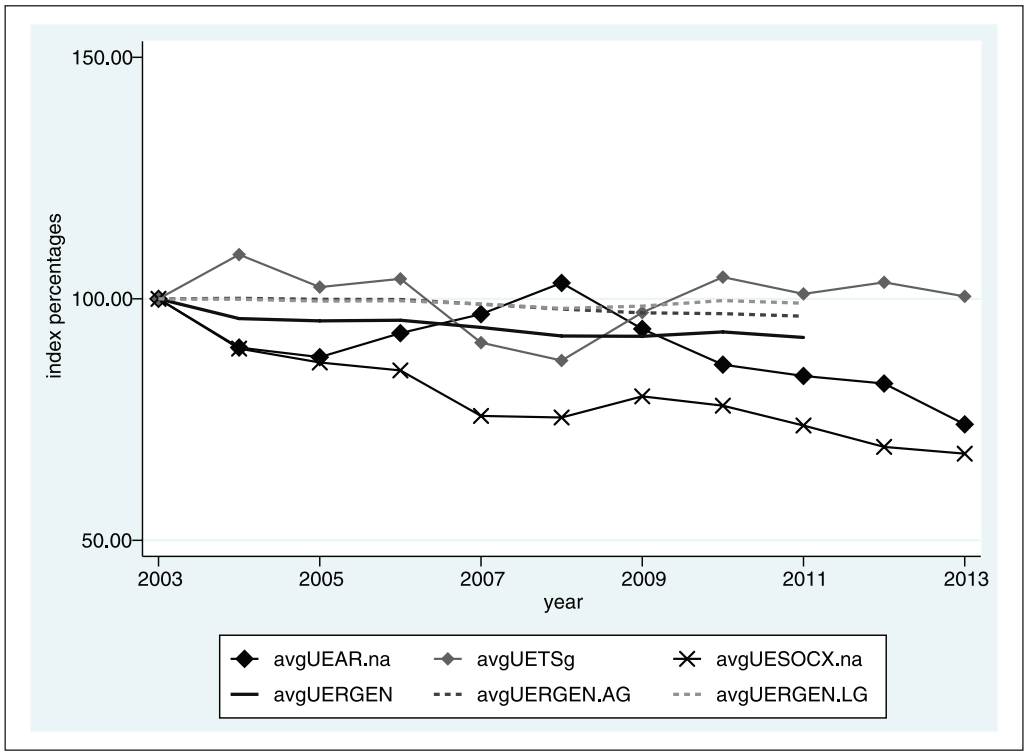

Figure 1. Trends in indicators measuring unemployment cash benefit provision in Europe (indexed averages of 14 countries).

Average values of need-adjusted unemployment cash expenditure (UESOCX.na), generosity of unemployment cash benefit rights (UERGEN) with its access and level-related components (UERGEN.AG and avgUERGEN. LG), need-adjusted unemployment cash benefit access rate (UEAR.na) and unemployment cash benefit transfer share (UETSg). Non-indexed data is available in Table A4 in the appendix.

have a reverse relationship with one another: when one is high(er), the other is low(er).

This points to earlier research (Otto, 2017; Van Oorschot, 2013), which found that the provision of personal cash benefits by European countries seems to be subject to a general trade-off between access and amounts, creating a policy dimension that runs from 'low benefit access, high benefit amounts' to 'high benefit access, low benefit amounts'.

Figure 1 shows the averages across 14 countries, which may blur underlying differences between countries. To further explore the relationship between the benefit recipiency measurements and how they relate to the other two indicators, country-specific figures are indexed to the year 2003[2] and compared across time. The results in Figure 2 reveal substantial cross-country variation in the development of the various indicators, with some countries deviating notably from the average picture apparent in Figure 1.

With regard to the benefit recipiency measurements, need-adjusted unemployment benefit access rates (UEAR.na) in Germany, Spain, Finland and Greece show particularly notable deviations. In contrast to the average European development, German rates increased substantially. This trend continued beyond the year 2008 and might relate to several legal changes, as well as the financial crisis. In 2005, eligibility conditions became more generous, as the qualification period for unemployment insurance benefits was reduced from 36 to 24 months. At the same time, reforms of the labour law facilitated

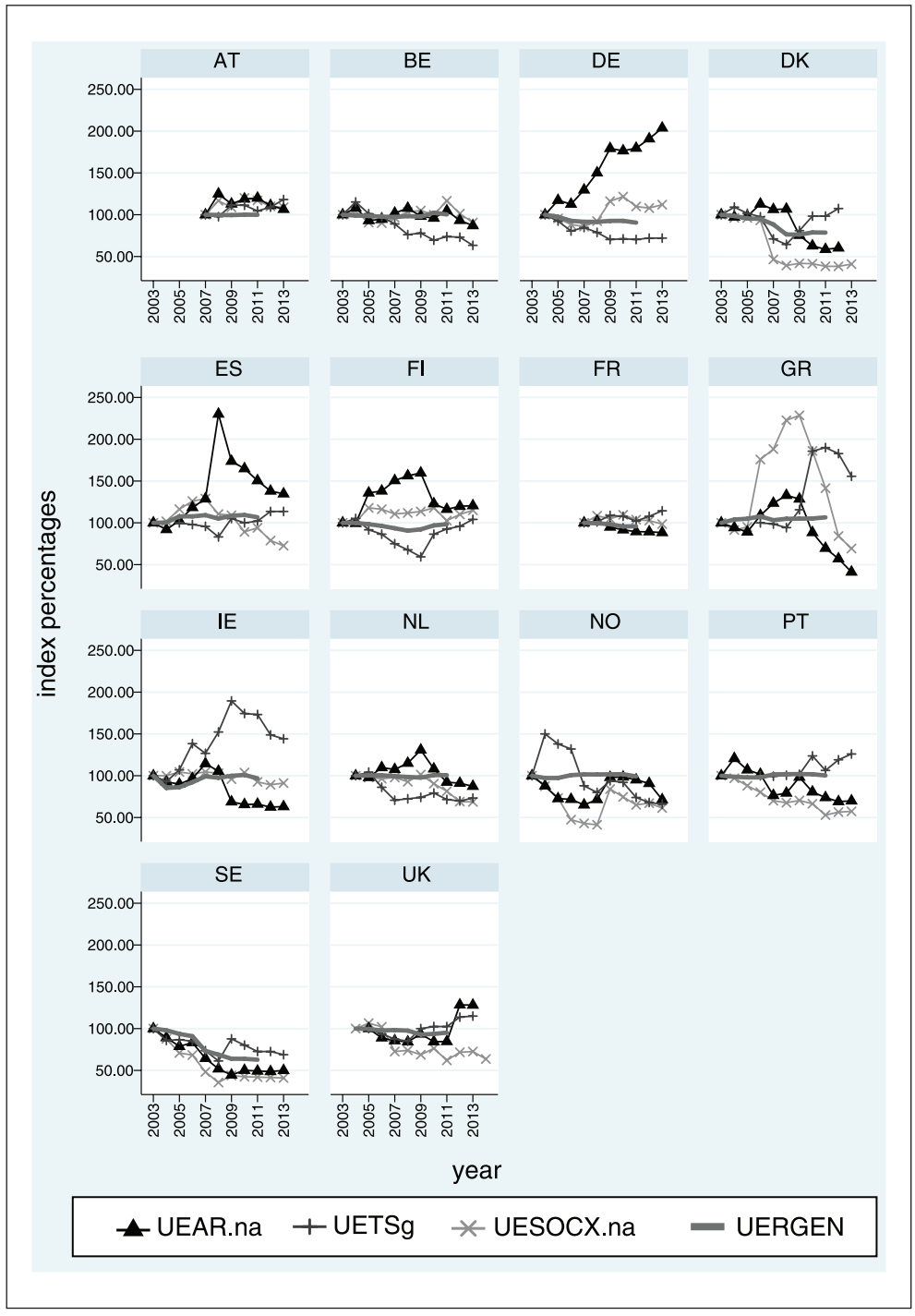

Figure 2. Trends in indicators measuring unemployment cash benefit provision in 14 European countries (indexed). Need-adjusted unemployment cash benefit access rate (UEAR.na), gross unemployment cash benefit transfer share (UETSg), need-adjusted unemployment cash expenditure (UESOCX.na) and generosity of unemployment cash benefit rights (UERGEN). Non-indexed data is available in Tables A1–A3 in the appendix.

atypical employment, such as very short duration part-time work and temporary agency work (Bothfeld and Rosenthal, 2018), which can be expected to have increased the need for unemployment benefits. In addition, during the Great Recession of 2008–2009, unemployment insurance funds financed the massive use of short-time work schemes. In Spain, the major increase in the access rate in 2008 might be related to the introduction of crisis-response measures, such as the 'temporary programme for unemployment protection and integration', aimed at expanding unemployment benefit receipt for those having reached the maximum benefit duration (Natili, 2016). The Finnish increase in access rates up to 2009 is difficult to explain. However, the strong decrease in 2010 could be the result of major changes to the occupational and geographical mobility requirements for unemployment benefit claimants, or the increased qualification period (OECD, 2016). In contrast to these previous country cases, Greek unemployment benefit access rates decreased, but to a much greater extent than average European values suggest. This parallels recent research into Greek austerity measures, which suggests a strong decrease in unemployment benefit caseloads due to changes to the entitlement and eligibility criteria (Matsaganis, 2018).

With regard to transfer shares (UETSg) as the second benefit recipiency measurement, notable deviations from the average dynamic can be observed in the Nordic countries of Norway and Sweden. After 2003, both recorded decreasing transfer shares rather than a stabilisation. These two countries, together with Denmark, are also interesting as they show decreasing extents of welfare provision across the different indicators. Other deviations from the average picture are Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as Greece, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The last three countries are notable as they recorded substantial increases in transfer shares, which in the case of Greece and Ireland might be related to the economic and financial crisis negatively affecting median household incomes. In the British case, the alterations coincided with the change of government in 2011, which suggests an increasing extent of unemployment benefit provision. This is related to growing claimant numbers for the Jobseeker's Allowance (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2017) and reflects the increase the Jobseeker's Allowance experienced in real values and as a proportion of average earnings (Rutherford, 2013).

As for their relationship to each other, in some countries (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands after 2010; Portugal, Sweden until 2008; UK until 2008) need-adjusted unemployment benefit access rates (UEAR.na) were followed by need-adjusted expenditure figures (UESOCX.na) and, to a smaller extent, by unemployment benefit transfer shares (UETSg). However, where we can observe a converging trend (Sweden since 2009) or diverging trend between both benefit recipiency measurements (Germany, Denmark since 2009; Finland until 2010; France, Ireland, the Netherlands until 2009; and Portugal after 2009), spending remained stable. From a policy perspective, both in the case of divergence and convergence, this could imply that in order to control expenditure, some countries chose broader benefit access to the detriment of smaller relative benefit amounts, or the reverse. It also suggests an interaction between unemployment benefit receipt and unemployment expenditure.

Typically, in most countries the generosity of unemployment benefit rights (UERGEN) shows remarkable stability, which has already been observed in previous research (Kuitto et al., 2012; Starke et al., 2008). Denmark and Sweden are exceptions, where across the different three indicators a decreasing trend can be observed that appears to drive the overall decreasing trends of the cross-country averages apparent in Figure 1. A similar observation of over-time stability can be made for the two sub-components of benefit access and benefit level rights generosity (UERGEN.AG and UERGEN.LG, graphs not in included in Figure 2. All the data is available in Table A2 in the appendix). Accordingly, the deconstruction of the unemployment benefit rights indicators UERGEN into an access-related and a level-related component does not lead to the expected analogy between benefit access rate and transfer share.

One reason for the surprising stability of the indicator (the composite indicator as well as its components) might be the short period of observation and

the indicator's focus on one rather than various unemployment cash benefits. Another possible explanation could be the operationalisation of the indicator, which is insensitive to decreasing replacement rates over the course of a period of unemployment, and which might underreport recent legal changes to the unemployment benefit rights of certain parts of the working age population due to its ideal-typical worker and household case assumptions.

The observations above stress the value of studying benefit recipiency information in addition to the existing indicators of the extent of public welfare provision. Benefit receipt dynamics reveal policy choices that are not necessarily visible by means of expenditure or social rights data, but can have massive effects for the population in need: where expenditure remains stable, this might actually involve either a combination of more targeted benefits (a lower proportion of the working age population having access to unemployment benefits) and relatively high benefit amounts for those eligible, or a combination of extended benefit access and relatively lower benefit amounts. This trade-off between benefit access and benefit amount might indeed reflect different policy options to manage and control overall expenditure.

Welfare reform by stealth?

Another advantage of using benefit recipiency data to investigate the changing extent of public welfare provision is that transfer share trends give an idea of changes to the relative living standards that a benefit guarantees. This is because at a national level, the transfer share is the median percentage that individuals' cash benefit income (in this study, unemployment benefits) provides in relation to the median total household income in a country's working age population. Social expenditure data does not allow any such conclusions to be drawn regarding relative living standards guaranteed by benefits. Furthermore, replacement rates in existing social rights indexes only give indications via legal changes to benefit levels of typical cases. These levels are assumed to remain constant over a full year, ignoring the fact that in many countries, replacement rates provided by unemployment benefit systems decrease after a few months, when the maximum benefit duration has been reached. At the same time, it might be misleading to interpret trends in transfer shares directly in terms of relative living standards, without looking into what is actually going on. Is the transfer share of a particular benefit in a country really increasing or decreasing due to higher or lower benefit amounts (the numerator), or is this the result of lower or higher median household income (the denominator) with benefit levels staying constant? To further investigate the issue, changes in national transfer shares are compared with developments in general measurements of benefit amounts and household incomes. For this purpose, two variables are calculated for all countries and years in the study on the basis of the EU-SILC UDB: the median gross unemployment cash benefit amount (median UEBAg) and the median gross household income (median HHIg) in the working age population.[5] To better identify trends, all three variable values are indexed to the year 2003 or to the year in which the data first became available (Figure 3).

The trend lines reveal that in Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden – as well as in Denmark and Finland before 2009 – median household incomes increased, while the reported median benefit amounts either stayed constant or effectively decreased. For benefit recipients, this non-adaptation of benefit amounts to rising overall incomes effectively means a decreasing living standard compared with the minimum for 50 percent of the working age population. From a policy perspective, such a development looks like welfare reform by stealth: even where rights-based replacement rates indicate little or no change, the relative benefit value – and thus the relative living standard of people living on that benefit – decreases.

Interestingly, this development seems to be present particularly in the Nordic countries. One possible explanation for this might be income ceilings for benefit purposes or changes to the assessment base for benefits, which are often underestimated in comparative welfare state analyses. For instance, in Sweden, the replacement rate of income-related unemployment benefits might appear as relatively generous at a first glance. However, income ceilings determine a maximum entitlement level, thus limiting the actual

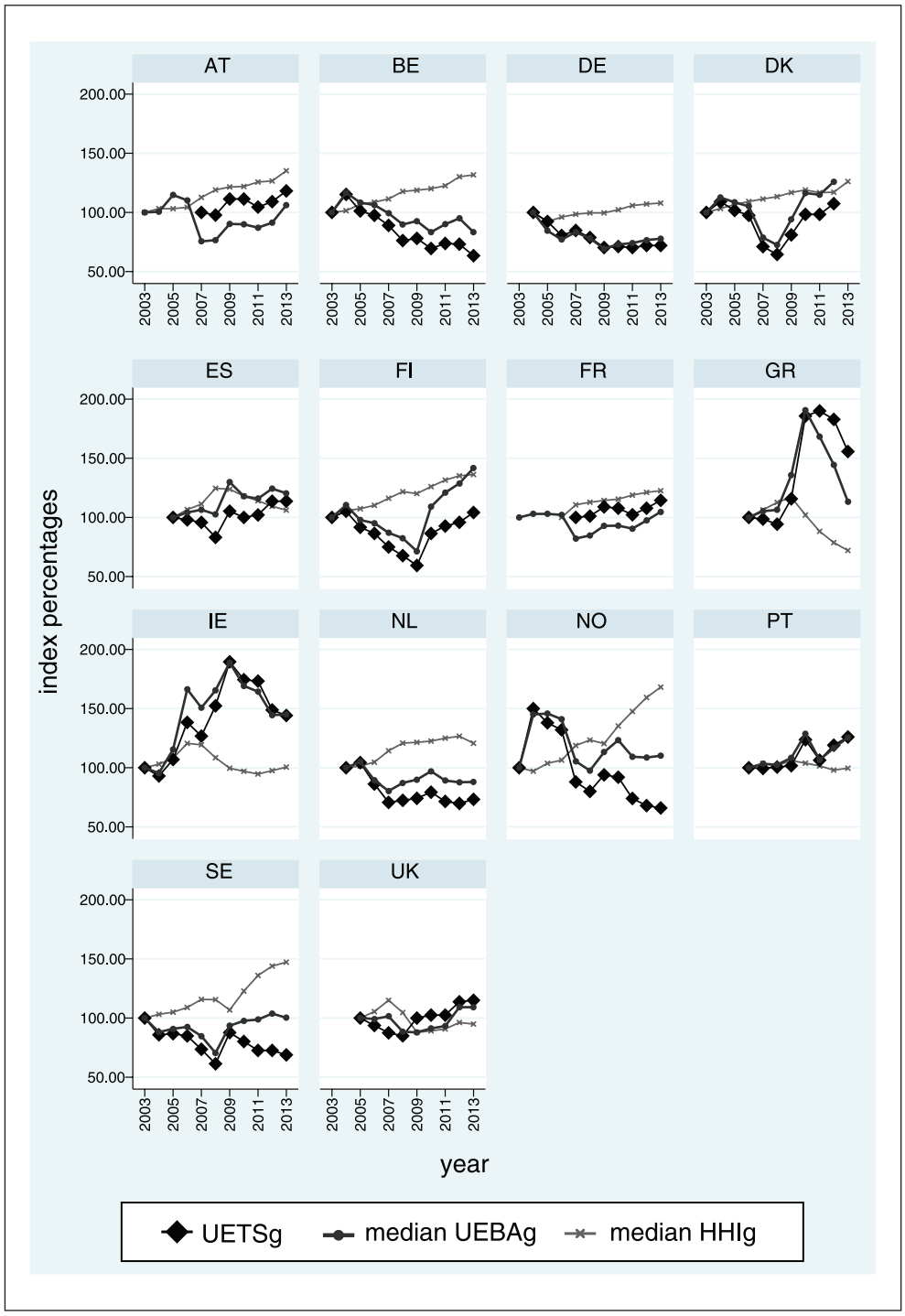

Figure 3. Indexed development of transfer shares, median benefit amounts and median household incomes in 14 European countries.

Gross unemployment cash benefit transfer share (UETSg), median gross unemployment cash benefit amount (median UEBAg) and median gross household income (median HHIg).

benefit receipt. These ceilings decrease, together with the replacement rates, throughout the course of the benefit receipt. Esser et al. (2013) found that Swedish income ceilings for unemployment benefits substantially lagged behind wage increases, and since they had not been adapted for years, the benefit had basically become close to a flat rate cash transfer. A second possible explanation might relate to what Bonoli and Natali (2012) discovered for Danish, Swedish and Belgian unemployment insurance schemes: the 'non-upgrading of the (already relatively low) benefit ceiling has resulted in a compression of benefit levels, which also tend more and more towards the level of social assistance' (p. 146). In Belgium, it seems that benefit generosity has always been more a function of assumed need than of previous earnings and contributions (Marx, 2007). This continues to be the case by, among other things, a third possible explanation: the non-adjustment of benefit levels to compensate for inflation and wage developments as well as by a reinforced categorical regressiveness of benefits (Dekkers et al., 2013).

More recent research on welfare state reforms further supports this third suggestion of welfare reform by stealth. Jensen et al. (2018) found that governments prefer to make use of 'invisible' policies when cutting back on welfare, in order to escape electoral backlash. According to the authors, typical invisible policy instruments include indexation of benefits at a lower rate than inflation, or changes to the assessment base for calculating benefits. Unfortunately, their study only covers Denmark, Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom. It thus remains unexplored to what extent welfare retrenchment by means of invisible policies can also be found in other European countries.

Apart from what could be interpreted as welfare reform by stealth, another interesting relationship can be observed from Figure 3: in contrast to Austria, Spain and France (as well as Denmark and Finland after 2008), where benefits developed in correspondence with the national median income, the strong increase in Greek transfer shares until 2009 was the combined effect of a strong increase in median benefit amounts and a strong decrease in median household incomes. Within a country, higher transfer shares can thus still be interpreted as an expression of a relatively higher living standard for benefit recipients, but they need to be seen in relation to the overall economic development and income situation in the country. A similar observation can be made in Portugal and Ireland, as well as in the United Kingdom after 2008. Here, the increase in transfer shares was also strongly related to the increase in median benefit amounts, while median household incomes remained relatively constant.

Conclusions and discussion

This article aimed to investigate how the dynamics of the extent of public welfare provision compare when using social expenditure and social rights data as the two prevailing indicators in existing literature, together with benefit recipiency data as a hitherto underused indicator. To this end, data on unemployment cash benefit expenditure, on the generosity of unemployment cash benefit rights, and on unemployment cash benefit receipt was examined in order to study trends in the extent of this welfare provision in 14 European countries between 2003 and 2013. Two questions guided the research: (1) How did the extent of public welfare provision develop in Europe throughout the years 2003–2013, when studying dynamics on the basis of the three types of indicator, and (2) What does benefit recipiency data add to our understanding of welfare state change?

With regard to the first research question, the average figures for need-adjusted unemployment cash benefit expenditure as a share of GDP and of the generosity of unemployment cash benefit rights in Western Europe indicate a decrease in the extent of public welfare provision during the period under consideration. This confirms existing knowledge of what is often referred to as a retrenchment of 'welfare state generosity' and it suggests that Western European welfare states are less change-resistant than envisioned in 'new politics' literature (Pierson, 1994, 1996). When employing benefit recipiency data as a third and hitherto underused indicator, average European values indicate a decrease in need-adjusted unemployment benefit access rates, except for the period of the financial crisis, and a decrease in unemployment benefit transfer shares until 2008. After this, transfer shares increased to

their 2003 level. It can thus be concluded that average European trends for the two benefit receipt-related aspects are situated somewhere between the average European trends in social rights and social expenditure data.

Furthermore, studying the trends for the indicators in 14 European countries diversifies the average European picture: in some countries, access to and relative amounts of unemployment benefits decreased, together with unemployment expenditure and the generosity of unemployment benefit rights, whereas in others they increased together or showed little change over time. This could be due to changes in employment or unemployment structures, or because of policy reforms that affected the indicators differently. In line with the average picture, several of the countries included in our analyses demonstrate an interesting inverse relationship between access rates and transfer shares, whereby a rise in one is often paired with a fall in the other. Thus, in the period of observation, it appears that in some countries broader benefit access was chosen to the detriment of relative benefit amounts and vice versa. The fact that at the same time expenditure figures remained constant in these countries could be interpreted as a deliberate policy of budgetary control. With regard to the second research question, this is an interesting and relevant insight into welfare state development that cannot be gained by means of the prevailing indicators.

To further address the second research question, transfer shares were studied in greater detail. This revealed that in the Nordic European countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, median gross household incomes increased while the reported median gross benefit amounts either stayed the same or effectively decreased. For benefit recipients, this non-adaptation of benefit levels to median income meant a decreasing transfer share or – to put it differently – a decreased living standard compared with the minimum for 50 percent of the working age population. From a policy perspective, such a development looks like welfare reform by stealth: even where visible policies such as those concerning replacement rates indicate little change, the relative benefit value – and thus the relative living standards of benefit recipients – decreased by means of less visible policies, such as the non-adaptation of benefit ceilings to inflation, or the lowering of the assessment base for calculating the benefit. This new insight is interesting and relevant for the study of welfare state change; however, it needs to be assessed with caution. In the same way as for social rights and social expenditure data, benefit recipiency data does not include information about tax rebates and tax credits, which are important redistributive welfare state instruments to support lower income groups. In several countries, they might indeed make a huge contribution to median net household incomes.

Taken together, the results suggest that there is more to the usual story of welfare states growing at slower pace, of being frozen or of being retrenched. Aggregated data on individual-level benefit receipts makes a valuable addition to the understanding of welfare state change, for instance in terms of the interaction between benefit access and relative benefit levels. Accordingly, it deserves its theoretical as well as its empirical place in literature on the dependent variable problem.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (GR),

Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE) and the United Kingdom (UK).

2. Earlier data is available for Austria and France. However, since the data collection method in these countries changed from survey to administrative caseload data for the benefit income variables in the EU-SILC, we only included the recent years in which the data collection method is similar to that in the other countries.
3. The de-construction of the composite unemployment benefit generosity indicator in the CWED II into an access-related (UERGEN.AG) and a benefit level-related (UERGEN.LG) generosity measurement follows the calculation of the composite components as explained in the CWED II genealogy, but separates access-related from level-related information. The calculation formulas are as follows

$$UERGEN.AG_{cy} = \left(uescorequal+uescorewait+12.5\right)*uecov$$

$$UERGEN.LG_{cy} = \left(uescorerr*2 + uescoredur\right)$$

where $UERGEN.AG_{cy}$ stands for the access generosity of unemployment benefit rights of c (a specific country) in y (a specific year), which is the sum of the CWED's variables *uescorequal* (the standardised log value of the unemployment qualification period based on the mean and standard deviation for the years 1980 to 2007) and *uescorewait* (the standardised unemployment waiting days based on the mean and standard deviation for the years 1980 to 2007) and 12.5 (to make the sum in brackets take a minimum value of zero), multiplied by *uecov* (the rate of the population covered for the risk). Where further, $UERGEN.LG_{cy}$ stands for the level-related generosity of unemployment benefit rights of c (a specific country) in y (a specific year) and is the sum of the CWED's variables *uescorerr* (the standardised value of the replacement rates based on the mean and standard deviation for the years 1980 to 2007) multiplied by two and of *uescoredur* (the standardised log value of the unemployment benefit duration based on the mean and standard deviation for the years 1980 to 2007).
4. Except for the United Kingdom, where the income reference period is the survey year itself, and Ireland, where it is the 12 months prior to the interview.
5. The calculation of the median gross unemployment benefit amount (UEBAg) is based on the unemployment benefit variables in the EU-SILC (PY090g). The calculation of median gross total household income (HHIg) is based on the EU-SILC variable HY010. The 'g' reflects the fact that both calculations are carried out on the basis of gross incomes.

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