

# Explaining public support for demanding activation of the unemployed: The role of subjective risk perceptions and stereotypes about the unemployed

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## Abstract

In recent decades, European welfare states have adopted demanding active labour market policies (ALMPs), aimed at increasing labour market participation through imposing stricter work-related obligations and benefit cuts in case of job offer rejection. This article investigates whether support for such demanding ALMPs is driven by risk perceptions of future unemployment and negative stereotypes about unemployed persons. Insights into the role of risk perceptions and stereotypes offer opportunities to gain a better understanding of the impact of structural variables. Drawing on data from the European Social Survey 2016 in 21 European countries, the analysis reveals that higher subjective risk of unemployment decreases support for these ALMPs substantially, whereas negative perceptions of the unemployed increase support. However, these factors play at the individual level only and do not explain country-level differences in support of demanding ALMPs. The notable cross-national variation in support of activation policies is found to be unrelated to economic factors and to the strictness of activation requirements for unemployment benefits.

## Keywords

demanding activation, public opinion, labour market risk, stereotypes, active labour market policy, European social survey

## Introduction

One notable trend in European welfare policies is the introduction of active labour market policies (ALMPs). ALMPs aim to enhance individuals' responsibility for their own economic sustainability and to reduce

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welfare dependency, through the activation of those who are not active in the labour market (Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011; Eichhorst et al., 2008). Among the broad realm of activation policies implemented, scholars usually distinguish two main approaches: enabling activation, designed for enhancing benefit recipients' skills and employability, and demanding activation, aimed at strengthening conditions attached to receiving social benefits (Bonoli, 2010; Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst et al., 2008; Kananen et al., 2006; Knotz, 2018a). With the goal of raising the 'cost-effectiveness' of the welfare systems (Knotz, 2018b), the majority of European countries have adopted strict measures belonging to this second approach in a field that is traditionally unpopular, namely that of unemployment benefits. Austerity-driven reforms (Bengtsson et al., 2017) and the current threat to employment due to the COVID-19 crisis call into question the popularity of such policies, leaving an open question on what brings individuals to support (or oppose) these measures.

To contribute to this debate, this article investigates the role of two frameworks – potentially operating at the individual as well as at the country level – that might explain this support among European citizens. First, if people's support for specific social policies is based on cost–benefit analysis, as self-interest theories postulate (Rehm, 2016), not only the current employment situation but also the perceived risk of becoming unemployed in the future may structure people's attitudes towards ALMPs. In this regard, we explore the role of the individual risk of being affected by the strict conditions attached to welfare benefits (Fossati, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2021). Second, support for these policies might be closely linked to moral and ideological considerations, and more specifically the stereotypical image that the unemployed fail to find a new job because of lack of effort (Danckert, 2017). Whether recipients of unemployment benefits are deemed to be deserving of help is embedded in societally shared images of this target group and in individual's deservingness perceptions (Van Oorschot et al., 2017). For these reasons, we argue that both the perceived risk of unemployment and public images of the unemployed are crucial factors shaping public attitudes towards demanding ALMPs.

Focusing on risk perceptions and stereotypes about the unemployed might also improve our understanding

of the effects of structural factors – both at the individual and the country level – on support for activation. Individuals with a lower socio-economic status are more likely to feel at risk and to identify with the unemployed, leading to less stereotypical thinking (Furåker and Blomsterberg, 2003; Maassen and De Goede, 1989). In other words, subjective risk and stereotypes potentially mediate the well-established effects of social-structural characteristics on support for demanding policies. At the macro level, we similarly investigate whether effects of a country's unemployment rates on the legitimacy of demanding ALMPs is mediated by shared risk perceptions and public images of the unemployed.

Hence, we address the following research questions: (1) To what extent can attitudes towards demanding ALMPs be explained by risk perceptions of future unemployment and negative stereotypes about unemployed persons? (2) To what extent do these factors mediate the effect of individual socio-structural variables (at the individual level) and unemployment rates (at the country level)? To answer these questions, we analyse a new multi-item instrument measuring activation support included in the European Social Survey wave 8 (2016) using multilevel structural equation modelling. By doing so, we introduce two novel and potentially relevant factors (that have received scholarly attention in other research areas) (Rehm, 2016; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014) in the emerging domain of support for activation policies.

## **Demanding active labour market policies in Europe**

Activation builds on a policy paradigm that implies a transition from an 'all-in-the-same-boat' logic to an individual responsibility in dealing with the jobless condition (Sachweh, 2016: 309). The objective of ALMPs is to (re-)integrate welfare recipients in the labour market as soon as possible, by giving them an active role in this process and thus making them no longer dependent on benefits (Daguerre, 2007). Two activation approaches have been identified in the literature: *enabling*, aimed at providing welfare recipients with resources for the development of their skills, and *demanding*, imposing stricter conditions

on welfare benefit receipt and sanctions if their behaviour falls outside the conditions imposed by the policy at issue (Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst et al., 2008). These approaches originate from different traditions. The first experience with the enabling approach dates back to the 1950s in Sweden, where activation policies were introduced with the aim of upskilling the workers and promoting full employment (Bonoli, 2010; Fossati, 2018; Weishaupt, 2011). From the mid-1990s, gradually all the European welfare states migrated towards an approach to ALMPs based on the idea that there is no welfare without work, typical of the workfare tradition which originated in the US in the 1970s (Handler, 2009). This demanding type of ALMP was implemented through tightened criteria for receiving benefits, sanctions for those who do not comply with the obligations and other strict measures (Knotz, 2018a). The pioneer of this new activation trend was Denmark, starting from 1994 with a cut in unemployment benefit duration, mandatory participation in labour market programmes and strengthened job-availability requirements, followed by the New Deal programme introduced in 1998 in the UK (Bonoli, 2010; Dingeldey, 2007). In continental Europe, the shift towards an activation paradigm was slower and delayed. In Germany, for instance, a major step towards activation was taken in 2001, with the Job AQTIV Act, and the subsequent Hartz reforms, which have strengthened the conditions of unemployment benefits (Bonoli, 2010; Buss, 2018). Notwithstanding country-specific measures, a trend towards demanding activation policies is notable across European countries, with cuts on benefit levels and duration as well as harsher sanctions in case of non-acceptance being the major measures adopted (Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst et al., 2008; Knotz, 2018a).

### **Public attitudes towards demanding active labour market policies**

Demanding policies are considered to be part of the welfare state retrenchment reforms (Seikel and Spannagel, 2018), and have the potential to reduce public spending by scaling back expenditure on a

specific group of claimants who are considered to be ‘undeserving’ (Knotz, 2018b: 619). As such, this form of welfare conditionality, also called ‘negative approach to activation’ (Kananen et al., 2006: 87), has the potential to create social tensions that are rooted in self-interest mechanisms as well as moral considerations. In what follows, we construct a theoretical account combining the role of subjective risks of unemployment and stereotypes about the unemployed, and explain how these two crucial factors can help us to understand the relationship between structural variables at the micro- and macro-level and support for demanding ALMPs.

### *Subjective risk and stereotypes about the unemployed*

One of the traditional approaches seeks the origins of support for particular policies in economic self-interest: people are more likely to endorse policies from which they can benefit, and oppose those that disadvantage them (Andreß and Heien, 2001; Jæger, 2006). These self-interest arguments assume that people make rational cost–benefit calculations when judging whether to support a policy or not.

In the specific case of demanding ALMPs, these policies impose additional conditions and sanctions on benefit recipients. By consequence, unemployed persons are likely to see these measures as running against their personal interest. Existing empirical research has indeed shown that (past) experience of unemployment makes people more likely to oppose strict conditions for job acceptance and sanctions, even after controlling for one’s ideological position (Buss, 2018; Carriero and Filandri, 2018; Fossati, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2021). A broader interpretation of self-interest theory does not only focus on the current situation, but also takes the perceived probability of experiencing a ‘bad event’ in the future (Rehm, 2016: 60). From this perspective, subjective expectations that one will become unemployed might be an important factor in shaping welfare policy preferences (Naumann et al., 2016; Rehm, 2016). Fossati (2018) has indeed evidenced that perceptions of higher levels of labour market risks are associated with a lower support for demanding ALMPs. This

focus on subjective risks (rather than objective positions, such as education, occupational status or income) allows for a more direct test of the self-interest argument. True, individual perceptions of unemployment risk are closely related to objective economic position, as individuals with a higher objective exposure to job loss tend to have a higher subjective perception of risk (Cusack et al., 2006; Rehm, 2016). However, subjectively perceived risks provide a more direct indicator of the process of cost–benefit calculation, compared to objective socio-economic positions.

Besides self-interested evaluations of one's own risk position, attitudes towards social policies are known to be driven by individuals' ideological outlook and feelings of moral obligations underlying social solidarity (Van Oorschot, 2002). Various studies have pointed out that support for demanding ALMPs is strongly linked to ideological dimensions, such as egalitarianism and political left–right position (Houtman, 1997; Jæger, 2006; Rossetti et al., 2021). Our framework focuses on one ideological dimension that is particularly relevant to study activation support, namely negative stereotypes about the presumed lack of effort of the unemployed to find a job. The policy paradigm of demanding activation rests on the idea that unemployed people should take responsibility for their situation and for finding a new job. This assumption resonates with stereotypical imagery about unemployed people as an out-group with undesirable characteristics (Henkens, 2005; Reszke, 1996), namely as a group that is lazy, workshy, takes advantage of the system and is not willing to reciprocate the help they receive (Buffel and Van de Velde, 2018; Furåker and Blomsterberg, 2003; Furnham, 1983; Laenen and Meuleman, 2018; Van Oorschot et al., 2017). Persons who harbour negative stereotypes about the unemployed are more likely to support welfare sanctioning and demanding ALMPs. The relevance of negative stereotypes about the unemployed can also be understood from deservingness theory. According to this approach, people deem a target group as deserving of help on the basis of the so-called CARIN criteria, namely whether they think the beneficiaries have control over their needy situation, have a grateful and docile attitude, have contributed or be able to contribute to

the system, are close to one's situation and are in real need (Van Oorschot, 2006; Van Oorschot et al., 2017). The content of popular stereotypes about the unemployed contains a mixture of control over their own predicament, failure to reciprocate and an ungrateful attitude (Meuleman et al., 2020). Hence, those who see the unemployed as undeserving are more likely to support demanding activation measures (Buss, 2018; Laenen and Meuleman, 2018).

### *Linkages between structural characteristics, risk perceptions and stereotypes about the unemployed*

Subjective risk perceptions and stereotypes about the unemployed are not only relevant predictors of activation support in their own right: these factors might additionally help us to gain deeper understanding of the relation between individual and contextual structural variables (such as individuals' socio-economic position or national labour market indicators) and support for demanding activation.

At the individual level, previous work has established a link between individuals' socio-economic position and perceptions about whether people are personally responsible for becoming unemployed (Danckert, 2017). Individuals with a lower socio-economic status, who are at higher (perceived) risk of becoming unemployed, might have greater awareness of the difficult situation that the unemployed face, resulting in feelings of empathy and solidarity with the unemployed (Furåker and Blomsterberg, 2003; Maassen and De Goede, 1989). Moreover, when unemployment affects a person to whom they feel relatively close – their partner, for instance – people tend to attribute the causes of unemployment to structural circumstances. Subjective risk perceptions and (in)direct experiences with unemployment could thus temper negative stereotypes about the unemployed (Danckert, 2017) and incite the view that the unemployed are a deserving group (Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014). Thus, people's socio-economic position and risk perceptions are likely to influence support for activation, not only because of self-interest mechanisms, but also indirectly via the mediating effect of ideological dimensions (such as stereotypes about the unemployed).

At the country level, shared risk perceptions and a climate of stereotypical thinking about the unemployed might enhance our understanding of the link between the economic context<sup>1</sup> and public support for demanding policies. Previous empirical studies have presented mixed findings regarding the relationship between the national unemployment levels and public attitudes towards conditional benefits (Buss et al., 2017; Carriero and Filandri, 2018; Naumann et al., 2020). Taking into account that this relationship might be mediated by risk perceptions and the climate of imagery about the unemployed could help solve this puzzle. On the one hand, a high unemployment rate could instil higher levels of subjective unemployment risk in the population. Yet at the same time, worse labour market conditions might also lead people to be more sympathetic towards the unemployed and to see them as more deserving (Uunk and Van Oorschot, 2019). These higher levels of subjective risk and a more positive attitude towards unemployed people would, in turn, undercut support for demanding ALMPs. In addition to the labour market situation, support for welfare policies might be shaped by the public policies in place in that specific context, according to policy feedback theory (Pierson, 1993; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014). Hence, one could expect that the strictness of activation requirements for the unemployed that prevails in a country influences public attitudes towards ALMPs. Despite not being the focus of this study, the potential effect of policy legacy on demanding ALMPs' attitudes will be taken into account, to rule out possible biases in the estimated effects of unemployment levels on support for demanding ALMPs.

## Hypotheses

Our theoretical arguments clearly distinguish between micro- and macro-level processes. At the individual level, we expect that people with a high perceived risk of becoming unemployed in the near future are less likely to support demanding ALMPs (H1). Based on the deservingness literature, we expect that individuals who hold negative stereotypes of the unemployed are more likely to support demanding ALMPs (H2). We additionally hypothesize that the effects of socio-

economic characteristics on activation support are mediated by the stereotypes about the unemployed (H3). We also include two other ideological dimensions – left–right position and egalitarianism – as mediating factors, because they are linked to stereotypical thinking as well as attitudes towards demanding ALMPs (for example, Fossati, 2018).

At the country level, we hypothesize that in countries with a higher share of people feeling at risk of becoming unemployed, support will be lower (H4), while there will be stronger support in countries with a stronger negative opinion climate towards the unemployed (H5). Regarding the effect of the labour market context, we formulate two hypotheses about the mediation effects: support for demanding activation is expected to be lower in contexts with higher unemployment levels, because people feel at risk of becoming unemployed (H6a) and because people develop more positive attitudes towards the unemployed (H6b).

## Data and methods

### Data

To investigate the hypothesized relations, we use data from the European Social Survey (ESS) round 8 (European Social Survey, 2016).<sup>2</sup> We include 21 countries in the analysis:<sup>3</sup> Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), Iceland (IS), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE), Switzerland (CH) and the United Kingdom (UK). For each country, face-to-face interviews were conducted between August 2016 and December 2017 on probability-based samples of adult population aged 15 or older. National response rates range from 30.6% (Germany) to 69.6% (Poland).

### Indicators

Attitudes towards the demanding activation of the unemployed are measured by a multi-item instrument: 'Imagine [someone] who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost

their job and is now receiving unemployment benefit. What you think should happen to this person's unemployment benefit if this person...

- (1) turns down a job because it pays a lot less than they earned previously?
- (2) turns down a job because it needs a much lower level of education than the person has?
- (3) refuses to regularly carry out unpaid work in the area where they live in return for unemployment benefit?

This instrument furthermore included an experiment varying the characteristics of the unemployed person mentioned. Concretely, in the introductory part of the question 'someone' was replaced by other descriptions ('someone in their 50s', 'someone aged 20–25', 'a single parent with a 3-year-old child'), and these four conditions were randomized across respondents. Since we are not interested in the differences in support for these categories, we treat the experimental conditions in the models as control variables (using the neutral group as reference category). Answers are registered on a scale from 1 ('this person should lose all their benefits') to 4 ('should be able to keep all their unemployment benefits') and recoded so that high scores indicate stronger support to cut benefits of non-compliant unemployed persons. We measure support for demanding activation as a latent variable based on these three items (a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis is reported in [Supplemental Appendix, Table A3](#)).

*Subjective risk* is measured by asking respondents: 'How likely it is that during the next 12 months you will be unemployed and looking for work for at least four consecutive weeks?' Responses are categorized in three groups: likely or very likely, not at all or not very likely, and not working (this includes people who have never worked or are no longer working and not looking for a job). To measure *negative stereotypes towards the unemployed* we use agreement with a statement tapping into a popular negative perception of the unemployed: 'Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job' (5-point scale ranging from 1 (agree strongly) to 5 (disagree strongly) and recoded so that

higher values correspond to more negative perceptions).

A set of variables represents several socio-economic characteristics. *Occupation* is measured through a variable combining information on the main activity done for the last 7 days and the name/title of their main job for those in paid work (recoded into the EGP occupational class scheme) ([Ganzeboom et al., 1992](#)). This results in eight categories: higher service class, white-collar workers, blue-collar workers, self-employed, students, retired, unemployed, other (including those doing housework, military service, disabled). The dichotomous variable *receiving benefits* measures whether respondents' main income is a social benefit, among which are unemployment or redundancy benefits (and excluding pensions). *Income* is measured in quartiles, calculated (for each country separately) on the basis of the distribution of equivalised total net household income, using the OECD-modified scale ([OECD, 2013](#)). *Educational level* is measured by the highest level of education completed (lower secondary, upper secondary, tertiary). We also introduce the *employment status of the partner* (in a paid job, unemployed, not in a paid job, no partner) and we control for *age* and *gender*.

To account for additional ideological mechanisms, we include two variables as mediators: *political orientation*, measured by the scores given to the self-placement scale (0 (left) to 10 (right)); and *egalitarian values*, measured as a mean of the answers to the items (a) for a society to be fair, differences in people's standard of living should be small, and (b) large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts.

At country level, to measure *subjective 'at risk of unemployment'* rate, we calculate the share of respondents who indicated that they felt likely or very likely to be unemployed in the following 12 months (using the same question employed at the individual level) on the economically active population (that is, the sum of respondents indicating to be employed or unemployed as their main activity). The annual *unemployment rate*, as a percentage of the labour force (15–64 years old), is taken from Eurostat, referred to 2016. We control for the real *gross domestic*

*product (GDP) growth*, taken from Eurostat for 2016, to take into account the economic development of the country. Additionally, we control for the (potential) effect of policy legacy, including in the model an indicator that measures how strict the availability requirements, the job-search requirements and sanctions are for the jobseekers (OECD, 2020). This indicator – *strictness of activation requirements for unemployment benefits* – is based on benefit administrations and corresponding institutions in EU countries, and on consultations with national officials. An overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables is reported in [Supplemental Appendix Table A1 and A2](#).

### Statistical modelling

To allow for the analysis of hierarchical data structure while using latent variables controlling for measurement error, we use multilevel structural equation modelling (MSEM) (Meuleman, 2019). In contrast to standard multilevel regression, MSEM is able to disentangle the mediation mechanisms at the individual and country level (conflating the two can lead to biased results, see Preacher et al., 2010). This is an essential feature, given that the research questions at hand distinguish between individual-level explanations and mechanisms at the societal level. The proportions of country-level variance equal 7.7% for the item on lower paid and the item on lower education job, and 5.8% for the item on unpaid work. This indicates that differences between individuals outweigh cross-national differences by far, but that there are nevertheless substantial differences between countries.

The modelling strategy proceeds in two steps. First, we conduct a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MLCFA) to test the measurement properties of the latent variable measuring support for demanding activation. To test cross-level isomorphism (that is, the equality of the factor structure at both levels) (Ruelens et al., 2018), we constrain the factor loadings to be equal across levels. Standardized factor loadings are quite strong both at the individual level (above 0.7 for the first two items, above 0.5 for the unpaid work obligation) and country level (all above 0.8), indicating that the items

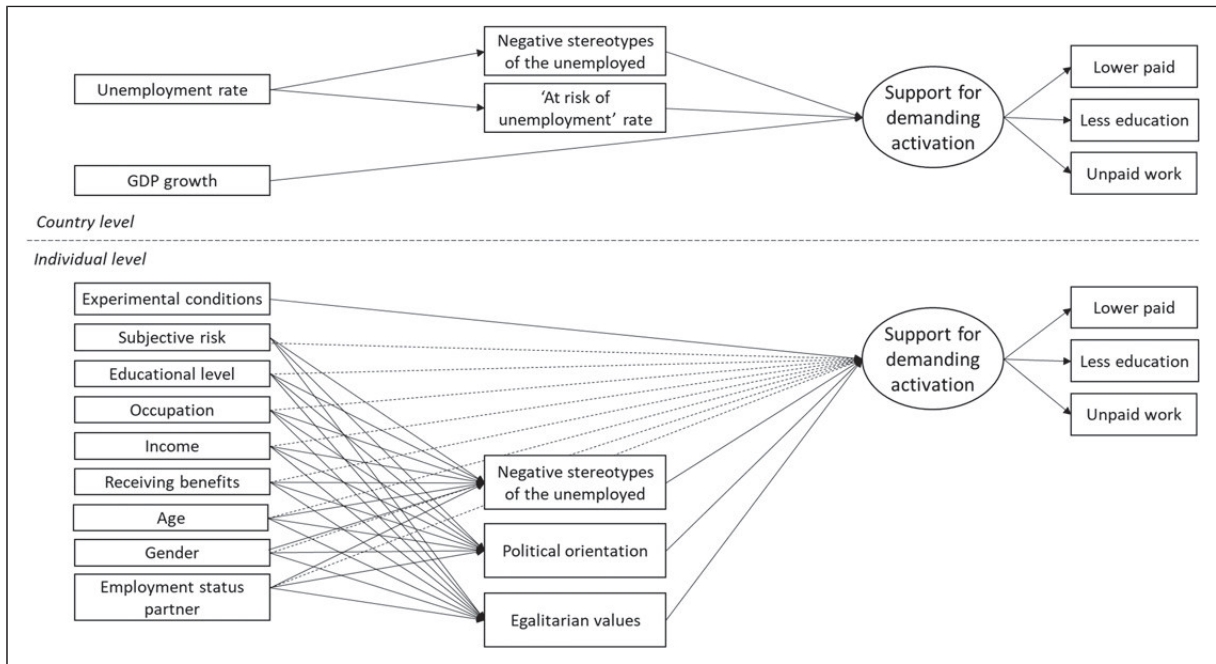
indeed measure a singly underlying latent variable that can be compared across levels (see [Supplemental Appendix Table A3](#) for factor loadings and fit parameters). Second, we test our hypotheses by means of two-level mediation models. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the hypothesized effects at individual and country level.

Given the small number of countries included in the analysis, we use Bayesian estimation (with uninformative priors), which provides more accurate parameter estimates and credibility intervals with a better coverage compared to the maximum likelihood estimation (Hox et al., 2012). We use two chains of the Gibbs sampler (10,000 iterations) and the Gelman-Rubin criterion to check convergence, setting the cut-off value to 0.01. Since the Bayesian approach does not provide fit indices, we re-estimate the model using maximum likelihood estimation, and the indices show a good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 642.922$ ;  $df = 75$ ; CFI = 0.955; SRMR<sub>within</sub> = 0.005; SRMR<sub>between</sub> = 0.044; RMSEA = 0.014). The analyses are performed using Mplus version 8.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017).

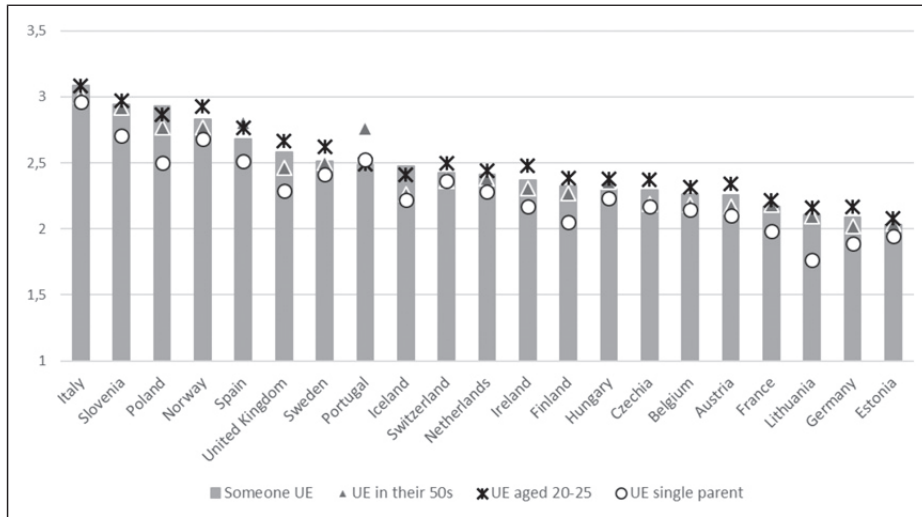
## Results

### Descriptive results

[Figure 2](#) reports the country averages of support for demanding ALMPs (measured as the mean over the three items – lower paid job, lower education, unpaid work), separately for each of the experimental conditions. The countries are ranked according to the mean score on the control group ('someone who is unemployed' as target of the activation measures). In this condition, Italy scores the highest on support for demanding activation (3.08 on a scale from 1 to 4), followed by Slovenia, Poland and Norway (2.94, 2.92 and 2.83 respectively). The lowest levels of support are found in Lithuania, Germany and Estonia (2.11, 2.09 and 2.03 respectively), where respondents are least inclined to cut the benefits of the unemployed who do not comply with activation requirements. While we observe substantive cross-national variation in support for demanding ALMPs, these differences do not follow a clear-cut pattern in terms of geographical regions or welfare regime



**Figure 1.** MSEM of support for demanding activation of the unemployed.



**Figure 2.** Country means of support for demanding activation, for each of the experimental conditions. Source: ESS 8, questions E21–E32; design weights are applied. Note: Response categories are recoded 1 ('The person should keep all the benefits') to 4 ('Should lose all the benefits'). UE = unemployed.

types. Among the countries with the highest level of demanding activation support, we mainly find southern European countries, but also countries with a very different institutional set-up and labour market situation, such as Norway and Poland. Most eastern European countries – with a shorter tradition of ALMPs compared to the Nordic countries – are situated among the lower end of the activation support ranking.

Although the differences across experimental conditions (that is, mentioning different groups of the unemployed) are not the focus of our analysis, we briefly point to a couple of relevant observations. People are generally more lenient towards the unemployed who are in their 50s and unemployed single parents, whereas they are stricter towards younger unemployed people.<sup>4</sup> These differences in support for obligations can be understood in terms of deservingness theory: people's evaluations about whether an unemployed person should receive benefits are contingent on the deservingness-related personal characteristics and conditions. Previous research (Buss, 2018; Larsen, 2008) shows that young unemployed people are considered to have control over their situation (they can more easily find a new job) and to have contributed less to the system than older unemployed workers. Single parents, on the other hand, are more likely to receive support and lenience because they are perceived to be more in need and to have less control over finding a new job (Buss, 2018).

### *Individual- and country-level predictors of support for demanding activation*

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of MSEM, respectively with within-level (individual) and between-level (country) predictors of the dependent variable support for demanding ALMPs. The model includes both direct and indirect effects of the socio-economic variables (that is, the part of the effects that runs through the mediators).<sup>5</sup> By disentangling direct and indirect effects, we gain a detailed understanding of the mechanisms that explain socio-economic differences in support for ALMPs. For completeness, the total effects (the sum of direct and indirect

effects) are reported in [Supplemental Appendix Table A4](#). The effect parameters reported are fully standardized estimates in the case of continuous variables, and semi-standardized estimates (that is, difference with the reference category expressed in terms of standard deviations) for categorical variables predictors.

We start with the individual level effects (Table 1), referring to differences between individuals within societies. The direct effects show that both subjective risk perceptions and negative stereotypes about the unemployed are important predictors of individuals' support for demanding ALMPs, net of social-structural characteristics and ideological controls. Compared to working people who do not feel at risk, individuals who feel that they are (highly) at risk of losing their job are less in favour of sanctioning the unemployed who do not comply with the obligations ( $\beta = -0.098$ , second column of Table 1). This finding confirms H1, namely a broad interpretation of the self-interest theory: the feeling that they might fall into unemployment makes people more prone to reject strict conditions on the benefits they will potentially receive if they become unemployed.

Negative perceptions of the unemployed are also a decisive ideological factor to explain activation support ( $\beta = 0.237$ ). People who believe that the unemployed do not try to find a job are significantly more in favour of cutting benefits of beneficiaries who reject job offers or are unwilling to perform unpaid community service. This supports H2 and illustrates that deservingness considerations regarding the unemployed inform support for conditions attached to unemployment benefits (Buss, 2018; Laenen and Meuleman, 2018). In turn, stereotypes of the unemployed prove to be significantly influenced by socio-economic characteristics (first column of Table 1). Higher socio-economic status – namely those with a higher education, a higher income, and belonging to the service class – hold less negative perceptions of the unemployed. The same holds true for those who are unemployed themselves and benefit recipients.

These last two categories, who are at the same time direct targets of the conditionality of welfare benefits, show stronger opposition against demanding ALMPs, even when controlling for the negative

**Table 1.** Multilevel structural equation model explaining attitudes towards demanding activation of the unemployed, individual-level variables ( $N = 37,199$  in 21 countries).

	Negative stereotypes of the unemployed		Support for demanding ALMPs (direct effect)		Indirect effect via stereotypes of the unemployed		Total indirect effect	
	St. Est.	p C.I.	St. Est.	p C.I.	St. Est.	p C.I.	St. Est.	p C.I.
<b>Conditions (ref. someone UE)</b>								
UE in their 50s	-0.072 *	[-0.104; -0.044]						
UE aged 20–25	0.052 *	[0.020; 0.082]						
UE single parent with 3 years old child	-0.238 *	[-0.270; -0.211]						
Age	-0.046 *	[-0.062; -0.030]	0.040 *	[0.022; 0.059]	-0.011 *	[-0.001; 0.000]	-0.012 *	[-0.001; 0.000]
Gender (ref. male)	0.023 *	[0.001; 0.045]	0.034 *	[0.010; 0.057]	0.005 *	[0.000; 0.009]	-0.005	[-0.010; 0.000]
<b>Educational level (ref. lower secondary)</b>								
Upper secondary	-0.107 *	[-0.134; -0.080]	-0.024	[-0.054; 0.007]	-0.025 *	[-0.026; -0.015]	-0.023 *	[-0.025; -0.013]
Tertiary	-0.357 *	[-0.387; -0.325]	-0.079 *	[-0.115; -0.045]	-0.085 *	[-0.076; -0.062]	-0.088 *	[-0.080; -0.064]
<b>Occupational status (ref. white-collar workers)</b>								
High service class	-0.100 *	[-0.153; -0.045]	-0.017	[-0.076; 0.042]	-0.024 *	[-0.030; -0.009]	-0.016 *	[-0.025; -0.001]
Blue-collar workers	0.120 *	[0.085; 0.155]	-0.013	[-0.051; 0.025]	0.028 *	[0.016; 0.030]	0.025 *	[0.013; 0.029]
Self-employed	0.181 *	[0.140; 0.222]	0.014	[-0.032; 0.060]	0.043 *	[0.027; 0.043]	0.063 *	[0.042; 0.061]
Unemployed	-0.252 *	[-0.309; -0.194]	-0.113 *	[-0.175; -0.048]	-0.060 *	[-0.060; -0.038]	-0.071 *	[-0.072; -0.045]
Student	-0.159 *	[-0.210; -0.109]	-0.051	[-0.108; -0.005]	-0.038 *	[-0.041; -0.021]	-0.037 *	[-0.042; -0.019]
Retired	0.165 *	[0.123; 0.208]	0.005	[-0.042; 0.053]	0.039 *	[0.024; 0.041]	0.044 *	[0.027; -0.046]
Other	0.058 *	[0.015; 0.100]	-0.006	[-0.053; 0.042]	0.014 *	[0.003; 0.020]	0.012 *	[0.001; 0.020]
<b>Equalised income (ref. 1<sup>st</sup> quartile)</b>								
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile	-0.063 *	[-0.095; -0.032]	-0.029	[-0.063; 0.007]	-0.015 *	[-0.018; -0.006]	-0.012 *	[-0.017; -0.003]
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	-0.086 *	[-0.119; -0.053]	-0.008	[-0.045; 0.029]	-0.020 *	[-0.023; -0.010]	-0.011 *	[-0.017; -0.002]
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile	-0.130 *	[-0.165; -0.096]	0.017	[-0.021; 0.054]	-0.031 *	[-0.032; -0.019]	-0.009	[-0.016; 0.001]
Missing	-0.086 *	[-0.122; -0.051]	0.007	[-0.034; 0.046]	-0.020 *	[-0.024; -0.010]	-0.001	[-0.009; 0.007]
Receiving benefits	-0.173 *	[-0.226; -0.121]	-0.170 *	[-0.228; -0.112]	-0.041 *	[-0.044; -0.023]	-0.046 *	[-0.050; -0.026]
<b>Risk of being unemployed (ref. not likely)</b>								
(Very) likely	-0.084 *	[-0.115; -0.053]	-0.098 *	[-0.133; -0.064]	-0.020 *	[-0.022; -0.010]	-0.028 *	[-0.030; -0.016]
Not working	-0.054 *	[-0.085; -0.022]	-0.032	[-0.067; 0.003]	-0.013 *	[-0.017; -0.004]	-0.014 *	[-0.019; -0.004]

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Negative stereotypes of the unemployed		Support for demanding ALMPs (direct effect)		Indirect effect via stereotypes of the unemployed		Total indirect effect		
	St. Est.	p	C.I.	St. Est.	p	C.I.	St. Est.	p	C.I.
Employment status of partner (ref. in paid job)									
Partner not in paid job	-0.017		[-0.047; 0.015]	-0.005		[-0.041; 0.030]	-0.004		[-0.009; 0.003]
Partner unemployed	-0.176	*	[-0.250; -0.104]	-0.087	*	[-0.167; -0.007]	-0.042	*	[-0.049; -0.020]
No partner	-0.034	*	[-0.059; -0.008]	-0.063	*	[-0.091; -0.035]	-0.008	*	[-0.012; -0.002]
Negative stereotypes of the unemployed				0.237	*	[0.226; 0.248]			
Left-right political orientation				0.081	*	[0.068; 0.093]			
Egalitarianism				-0.040	*	[-0.053; -0.029]			
R <sup>2</sup> within-level				0.104					

Note: \* = One-sided  $p < .025$ . Total indirect effect is the sum of the indirect effects through all the mediating variables (negative stereotypes, political orientation and egalitarianism).

**Table 2.** Multilevel structural equation model explaining attitudes towards demanding activation of the unemployed, country-level variables ( $N = 37,199$  in 21 countries).

	Negative stereotypes of the unemployed			'At risk' rate			Support for demanding ALMPs (direct effect)			Total indirect effect		
	St. Est.	$p$	C.I.	St. Est.	$p$	C.I.	St. Est.	$p$	C.I.	St. Est.	$p$	C.I.
Unemployment rate	-0.055		[-0.520; 0.420]	0.730 *		[0.386; 0.889]	0.360		[-0.377; 0.984]	-0.018		[-0.063; 0.055]
Negative stereotypes of the unemployed							-0.141		[-0.579; 0.427]			
'At risk' rate							-0.035		[-0.757; 0.709]			
GDP growth							0.031		[-0.405; 0.457]			
$R^2$ between-level							0.298					

Note: \* = One-sided  $p < .025$ . The total indirect effect is the sum of the effects of unemployment rate on support for demanding ALMPs through negative stereotypes about the unemployed and 'at risk' rate.

stereotypes about the unemployed and the two other ideological dimensions (second column in Table 1). People whose partner is unemployed, compared to those with a partner in a paid job, are also less in favour of demanding policies. Furthermore, people with tertiary education are less in favour of demanding policies compared to the lower educated. Regarding the ideological dimensions, our findings corroborate previous research (Fossati, 2018; Kootstra and Roosma, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2021). Left-wing people, compared to those who are right-wing oriented, are less supportive of ALMPs, and holding stronger egalitarian beliefs raises opposition to demanding policies.

Besides these direct effects, social-structural characteristics also have an indirect effect on support for demanding activation, mediated by negative stereotypes of the unemployed (third column in Table 1). To a certain extent, individuals' perceptions of whether the unemployed really try to find a job are a linchpin between socio-economic characteristics and support for demanding policies (confirming H3). The mediation effects are strongest with respect to the occupational categories: blue-collar workers and the self-employed harbour more negative perceptions of the unemployed, which indirectly leads to stronger

support for demanding activation. This indicates that it is their particular beliefs about the job-searching efforts of the unemployed that lead them to approve punitive measures for the unemployed. Being unemployed or receiving benefits has a significant indirect effect on attitudes towards ALMPs as well. Unemployed persons' and benefit recipients' opposition to demanding activation can thus be partly explained by the fact that they are less susceptible to negative stereotyping vis-à-vis the unemployed. However, these indirect effects are comparatively smaller than the direct effects. The finding that the higher educated are less in favour of demanding policies is largely explained by the fact that they are less inclined to hold negative stereotypes about the unemployed (the indirect effects via perceptions are quantitatively larger than the direct effect).

Table 2 reports the country-level effects, reflecting differences between countries. These effects should conceptually be distinguished from the individual effects (failing to do so might lead to an 'individualistic fallacy') (Diez-Roux, 1998). Rather than referring to the impact of individual positions and preferences, they capture how the labour market context and the nationally shared opinion climate relate to aggregate support for demanding activation.

To start, we do find that the unemployment rate systematically affects risk perceptions. In countries with a higher unemployment rate, the share of persons feeling at risk of losing their job is substantially higher ( $\beta = 0.730$ , see also [Supplemental Appendix Figure A1\(a\)](#)), indicating that people's perceptions of future job loss are rooted in the actual economic situation of the country. Contrary to hypothesis 4, however, these aggregate perceptions of risk do not lead to stronger support for demanding policies – no clear-cut relationship is found between aggregate risk perceptions and average support for activation. Furthermore, we find no evidence that the opinion climate towards the unemployed is related to the average support for demanding ALMPs (thereby disconfirming hypothesis 5) or to the unemployment rate. In sum, at the country level risk perceptions and negative stereotypes do not play the anticipated mediating role (disproving H6a and H6b).

These findings illustrate the relevance of distinguishing individual-level and country-level effects. Within a country, we find a significant influence of risk perceptions and negative stereotypes on attitudes towards demanding ALMPs. However, these effects cannot be generalized to the country level: between-country differences in activation support cannot be understood in terms of aggregate risk perceptions or shared stereotypical images. The effects of risk perceptions and negative stereotypes operates purely at the individual level.

The absence of effects of unemployment rates, aggregate risk perceptions or shared stereotypes, raises the question of which factors can explain the observed cross-national differences in support of demanding ALMPs. In countries where ALMPs are implemented more extensively, people would be more inclined to accept these policies ([Fossati, 2018](#)), in line with policy feedback mechanisms. To rule out that such mechanisms would affect our findings, we test a model that includes, in addition to the unemployment rate, the strictness of activation requirements for unemployment benefits ([OECD, 2020](#)). We find that attitudes towards ALMPs are not significantly affected by how strict activation requirements for the unemployed are (see [Supplemental Appendix Table A5](#)), which contradicts a policy feedback effect.

To conclude, the model explains a small part of the individual (10%) and a larger proportion of the country-level variance (29.8%) of support for demanding ALMPs.

## Conclusion and discussion

The large-scale adoption of demanding activation policies during recent decades, in combination with a steady threat of rising unemployment levels in the European context, has fostered questions on whether and why the public support these policies. The current article makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to the welfare attitudes research by investigating the role of subjective risk and stereotypes of the unemployed in shaping public support for demanding activation policies.

First, our findings indicate that the expectation of becoming part of the target group addressed by demanding ALMPs is an important indicator for explaining why individuals oppose these strict policies. The effect of subjective risk perceptions is somewhat smaller compared to objective indicators for economic risk, namely being unemployed and receiving social benefits. These socio-economic characteristics, traditionally used in welfare attitudes research as indicators for self-interest, have a direct, negative influence on activation attitudes. Second, we find that negative stereotypes about the job-searching behaviour of the unemployed stimulate support for sanctions. This resonates with the principle behind demanding ALMPs, as the unemployed are expected to be self-reliant and to quickly re-enter the labour market, as well as with deservingness considerations that people develop regarding the characteristics of this target group. At the individual level, negative stereotypes about the unemployed have an effect that exceeds other ideological dimensions – egalitarianism and left–right position – considerably.

While risk perceptions and stereotypes about unemployed persons are relevant predictors in explaining differences between individuals, we do not find evidence that the share of individuals at risk of unemployment, nor collective negative images of the unemployed explain cross-national variations in attitudes towards demanding ALMPs. They also do not

act as mediators between attitudes and countries' unemployment rates. A country's unemployment level affects aggregated fears of falling into unemployment, however these fears do not translate into specific policy preferences regarding activation. Furthermore, we do not find evidence that support for demanding ALMPs is higher in countries where activation requirements are stricter, which contradicts policy feedback theories.

The absence of substantial country-level effects might be due to the fact that activation policies targeted at the unemployed are relatively new, and they might not be well known among the population. Country-level differences in support for demanding ALMPs might be driven by other factors, such as the political context, rather than more tangible economic factors such as the unemployment levels. Activation has been framed differently by governments across Europe, thus we speculate that political parties – especially populist parties – might have mobilized the electorate in favour of strict rules and sanctions towards welfare recipients, depicted as 'welfare scroungers'. The different emphasis given to these policies in public debates, as well as the qualitatively different interpretation of work obligations in different countries (for example, southern versus northern European countries) might be responsible for the non-significant effect of national unemployment rates. Where there are fewer jobs available, people might be more inclined to see a job refusal as a form of disregard for work that the unemployed have. In such contexts, refusing any kind of job might translate into a willingness to punish even more these 'workshy' people, who are believed to misuse the welfare benefit system. This could cancel out the mechanism that high unemployment rates increase risk perceptions and lower support for demanding activation. Yet, the study of such more intricate mechanisms is hampered by a small-N problem, which could also explain the different results found by [Naumann et al. \(2020\)](#). When using multilevel analysis with a small number of countries, attention needs to be paid to the presence of possible outliers and leverage points that might distort the observed patterns at the country-level.

Whereas this article focused on demanding policies, future research should investigate public support for enabling ALMPs, such as personalized

training, counselling and work incentives ([Eichhorst et al., 2008](#)). Given that the enabling approach to activation has not been as extensively adopted as the demanding approach, it might be difficult to study cross-national support for these policies: in some countries people do not have experience with these policies.

Our study thus confirms the high popularity of demanding ALMPs across European countries. Nevertheless, we also have to keep in mind that our study has been conducted in a period of increasing unemployment rates since the economic crisis. It is possible that the current risk of another recession – even more dramatic than before – would change once again public support for demanding ALMPs, perhaps paving the way for a public support retreat.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. In welfare attitudes literature, it is acknowledged that there are three contextual aspects that might influence people's attitudes: economic factors, cultural factors and institutional or policy context. The focus of our article is on the first one, because we expect the

mentioned mechanisms to explain the relation between unemployment rate and attitudes towards demanding activation.

2. <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>
3. We limit our analysis to European countries, because of two main reasons. Theoretically, Israel and Russia are generally reckoned as non-European countries, given their geographical position and their particular welfare systems. From a methodological perspective, macro-level indicators of these two countries are not available.
4. For a more detailed analysis of the comparison between the experimental groups, see [Naumann et al. \(2020\)](#).
5. Subjective risk is a categorical variable, for this reason we do not include it as a mediating variable at the individual level. The calculation of mediation effects with categorical variables is, indeed, suboptimal, as we would need to calculate separate equations for each of the steps ([Iacobucci, 2012](#)).

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