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Europe's Hidden Inequality[i]

Income distribution in the European Union (EU) is much more unequal than the EU itself avows: indeed, it is more unequal than in, for example, India. Although measuring inequalities is difficult, realistic estimates point to considerable inequality. This has decreased since 2005, despite the fact that in most member states it is growing. The fall is due to catch-up processes in the poorer EU countries, although this came to an abrupt end as a result of the financial crisis.

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The European Union (EU), in its founding treaties, set itself the aim of economic, social and territorial cohesion.[ii] This aim is generally interpreted to mean that the EU will strive to reduce income inequality within its area of integration. Reducing inequality is, as recent studies continue to show, an important and just goal since inequality blights the lives and prospects of those affected.[iii]

Unequal Income Distribution in Europe

As a result of a number of enlargement rounds since 1972 the EU consists of member states at widely varying stages of development and divergent income levels: besides small, rich countries, such as Luxembourg (annual per capita income: around 60,000 euros), there are also large, poor countries, such as Romania (annual per capita income: around 2,900 euros).[iv] A comparison of Europe's regions reveals even more egregious differences between the richest region (again Luxembourg) and the poorest: annual per capita income in the poorest regions of Bulgaria (Severozapaden and Yuzhen Tsentralen) and Romania (Nord-Est of Macroregiunea doi) is even lower than the national average.[v] Data up to 2007 show that regional income differences are increasing.

Functional income distribution between wages and profits has long been deteriorating in the EU, except in a few countries.[vi] The wage share has fallen, for example, in the countries of the Eurozone, from 68 per cent in the 1970s to 57 per cent in 2006.[vii] This deterioration in functional distribution, as well as more marked wage dispersion also partly explain the deterioration in personal income distribution in most member states. This is shown by Table 1, which presents the relationship between the income

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shares of the richest quintile of the population and that of the poorest. As can be seen, the values vary between seven and three. In the Scandinavian countries, in the 1990s the incomes of richer households were only three times higher than those of poorer ones, while in Portugal, Latvia or Romania, at times, they were more than seven times higher (see Table 1).

As far as the EU27 and the EU25 are concerned, the Eurostat figures given in Table 1 – between 4.5 and 5 – underestimate real inequality considerably. This is mainly because they present the (weighted) averages of the member states. These averages, however, abstract from the enormous differences in per capita income between the countries. Eurostat has not compared the incomes of what is really the richest quintile in the EU with those of the poorest, but erroneously assumes that the richest (or poorest) quintile is the sum of the richest (or poorest) quintiles of all member states.

In fact, the richest quintile consists predominantly of households in the richer member states, and includes even the second and third richest quintiles in those states, whose average income is still higher than that of the richest quintile in the poorer member states. Analogously, the poorest EU quintile consists of the richer quintiles of the poorer member states (in Bulgaria and Romania, for example, from all quintiles). To ensure real precision, in fact the 100 million (that is, about the size of one EU27 quintile) richest (or poorest) individuals in the EU would have to be identified and aggregated. The richest quintile in Romania does include a number of euro-millionaires, who belong in the richest EU quintile, but are not included because the average of their quintile is still very poor. To that extent, the (more) realistic calculation presented below also underestimates the true state of inequality.

Realistic Estimate of Income Distribution: The EU Is More Unequal than India!

If one makes the effort to construct realistic EU quintiles on the basis of the available EU data on national quintiles an entirely different picture emerges of the relationship between the richest and the poorest EU quintiles (cf. Table 2). The first such estimate (2007) for 2004, based on World Bank data, yielded relatively low values;[viii] however, a methodologically more precise estimate[ix] using EU data yields somewhat higher values. It makes a big difference whether incomes in the various member states are compared in terms of purchasing power or exchange rates. Since purchasing power in the poorer countries – primarily because of lower rents and services – is higher the differences are correspondingly lower. The ratio between exchange rate and purchasing power can be more than two (in other words, income measured in terms of purchasing power is twice as high as income converted into euros) and, generally speaking, falls in proportion to economic development and deepening integration. As a result, the differences between the inequality measures for the EU27 are markedly higher than for the EU25 (without Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, in 2008 a proportion of households in Germany for the first time formed part of the poorest EU quintile (measured by purchasing power) on account of the country's weak growth and increased inequality.

Table 2 presents comparative figures based on World Bank data for China, India, Russia and the USA. World Bank data may be based on other measurement methods, but a comparison seems justified to the extent that the World

Bank data on inequality in individual EU member states come very close to those of the EU. If one measures EU inequality in euros it comes out significantly higher for the EU27 than for all four large countries of comparison. The picture is rosier for the EU25, coming out at around the same level. Measured in purchasing power terms things look rosier still. However, since inequality within countries – therefore also in the countries of comparison – is measured in the respective national currency without taking into account regional purchasing power, a comparison with euro figures seems obvious.

The new estimates also make possible a more realistic view of the dynamics of inequality. While the official EU statistics report rising inequality, actual inequality between 2005 and 2008 was on a downward trend. This was due to the fall in inequality between countries which, for the EU, more than compensated for the increased inequality within states. It remains to be seen whether this trend survives the recent crisis, which has severely reined in or even put into reverse the catch-up processes of some poorer member states. The final outcome will depend on how much growth has fallen in the richer countries in comparison to that.

From Inequality to Social Cohesion

The high inequality between states is increasing – mediated by the integration of the markets for goods, services, capital and labour in the EU – the inequality within states. This effect was to be expected in the richer member states since wages there have come under pressure due to cheap imports, immigration and relocation of production. The same mechanisms should have improved distribution in the poorer countries. However, to the extent that it was visible at all, this effect could be observed only very late in the wake of strong – and apparently not sustainable, unfortunately – periods of growth from 2004.

The reduction of inequality therefore requires a dual approach, in the form of measures to reduce inequality both between and within member states. Domestically, wages should rise with productivity (plus the target inflation rate) in order to give workers a decent share in economic growth, which would also ensure more stable domestic demand and impede harmful competitive devaluations in real terms. Besides primary distribution, however, state redistribution also affects the extent of inequality. Transfers which substitute market incomes, where they are lacking (for example, pensions, social security, unemployment benefit, sick benefit), should increase in step with average per capita income (»corridor model«).

The EU should monitor wage policy and issue clear warnings with regard to divergence in either direction (unrealistic wage increases or severe wage restraint). There should be a minimum wage policy to underpin this goal and to prevent a race to the bottom by paying immigrants and service providers at the wage level of the relevant host country. These problems will be assuaged to the extent that income and wage levels rise in the countries of origin. The reduction of inequality between states therefore makes a twofold contribution to social cohesion in Europe. As already mentioned, this has also been responsible for the progress made in recent years. However, if these catch-up and convergence processes were to slow down or even go into reverse, these successes would be put in jeopardy. Against the background of the crisis, therefore, the following policies are appropriate:

- Investment in poorer member states should be less dependent on the herd instinct of the capital markets and be funded to a greater extent through public financing channels, such as the European structural funds or the European Investment Bank. To that end, the EU's own resources should be increased, with the raising of European taxes. Stricter regulation of the financial markets should avert the emergence of debt-driven bubbles.
- Admission to the Monetary Union or the adoption of the euro should no longer depend on attaining narrow inflationary and exchange rate goals since this forces countries to restrain appreciation of the national currency in real terms, which is a key element in catch-up processes.
- Enlargement policy should demand of candidate countries, besides the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, a minimum level with regard to income and income distribution, since the accession of poor and unequal countries hinders and even jeopardises social cohesion in the EU.

Finally, the EU should make available better and clearer statistical information on inequality in Europe.[x] Eurostat should regularly publish data not only on relations between quintiles, but also on average per capita incomes for all quintiles in all member states, if possible going back to 1995 in order to make possible a realistic assessment of the development of income distribution. Detailed information for the EU27 as a whole, as well as for subregional entities, such as the Eurozone, the EU15 and the EU25, should be calculated, using the appropriate methodology and taking into account the criticisms and alternative estimates presented here.

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Table 1: Income Distribution in Europe, 1997–2008 (official EU statistics)

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
EU (27)									4.9	4.8	5	5
EU (25)		4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5		4.6	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.8	4.8
EU (15)	4.7	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5		4.6	4.8	4.8	4.7	4.9	4.9
Bulgaria				3.7	3.8	3.8	3.6	4	3.7	5.1	6.9	6.5
Germany	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.6				3.8	4.1	5	4.8
Estonia				6.3	6.1	6.1	5.9	7.2	5.9	5.5	5.5	5
Greece	6.6	6.5	6.2	5.8	5.7	:	6.4	5.9	5.8	6.1	6	5.9
Spain	6.5	5.9	5.7	5.4	5.5	5.1	5.1	5.1	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.4
France	4.4	4.2	4.4	4.2	3.9	3.9	3.8	4.2	4	4	3.8	4.2
Italy	5.3	5.1	4.9	4.8	4.8			5.7	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.1
Latvia				5.5					6.7	7.9	6.3	7.3
Hungary				3.3	3.1	3	3.3		4	5.5	3.7	3.6
Poland				4.7	4.7				6.6	5.6	5.3	5.1
Portugal	6.7	6.8	6.4	6.4	6.5	7.3	7.4	6.9	6.9	6.8	6.5	6.1
Romania				4.5	4.6	4.7	4.6	4.8	4.9	5.3	7.8	7
Finland	3	3.1	3.4	3.3	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.8
Sweden	3		3.1		3.4	3.3		3.3	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.5
UK	4.7	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.4	5.5	5.3		5.8	5.4	5.5	5.6

Source: Eurostat (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database; [ilc_di11] – inequality of income distribution (income quintile share ratio) (accessed on 28.7.2010).

Table 2: Income Distribution in the EU25 and EU27 by international comparison

	EU25		**EU27**		**India**	**China**	**Russia**	**USA**
	Euro	**PPS**	**Euro**	**PPS**				8.42 (2000)
2004			(9.8)	(5.5)	5.61	8.34		
2005	8.85	6.21			5.61	8.34		
2006	8.07	5.75						
2007	8.05	5.93	11.20	7.23			8.96	
2008	7.58	5.67	10.13	6.79				

Source: For the EU 2004: World Bank, Eurostat and author's own calculations (Dauderstädt 2008); for the EU 2005–2008 Eurostat and author's own calculations (Dauderstädt and Keltek); non-EU: World Bank.

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Endnotes:

[i] This paper is based on the results of a more comprehensive and more technical paper by Michael Dauderstädt and Cem Keltek, entitled »Immeasurable Inequality in the European Union«, which is likely to appear in 2011 in the periodical *Intereconomics*.

[ii] See Art. 3 (ex Art. 2) of the TEU.

[iii] See R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better,* London, 2009.

[iv] Data from Eurostat, Table: Real GDP per capita – [tsdec100] (accessed on 13.9.2010).

[v] See the last Cohesion Report from 2007. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffi c/official/reports/cohesion4/index_en.htm (accessed on 22.7.2010).

[vi] See A. Arpaia, E. Pérez and K. Pichelmann, »Understanding Labour Income Share Dynamics in Europe«, European Economy, Economic Papers 379, May 2009, Brussels. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/publication15147_en.pdf (accessed on 13.9.2010).

[vii] Engelbert Stockhammer, »Wage Moderation Does Not Work: Unemployment in Europe« (available at: http://gesd.free.fr/stockham.pdf; accessed on 13.9.2010), and »Labour Market and Wage Developments in 2009« (provisional version), European Economy, 5|2010 (available at: http://www.bizkaia.net/ogasuna/europa/pdf/documentos/lmwd1007.pdf; accessed on 13.9.2010).

[viii] M. Dauderstädt, »Ungleichheit und sozialer Ausgleich in der erweiterten Europäischen Union«, *Wirtschaftsdienst*, Vol. 88, 4, April, 261–269.

[ix] Dauderstädt and Keltek (2010) (see endnote 1).

[x] As called for by the European Commission in Communication 443 of 20 August 2009, entitled »GDP and Beyond: Measuring Progress in a Changing World«, in Section 3.3, »More Accurate Reporting on Distribution and Inequalities«.