

A club of high and severe unemployment: the single market over the 21 years 1993–2013

Michael Burrage

The distinctive characteristics of unemployment in the single market can only be seen and analysed in a comparative perspective. We will first compare the rate of unemployment over the entire life of the single market of its 12 founder members with ten independent countries, which seem to be most similar – in terms of their labour market institutions and productivity – to those of the EU 12: Australia, Canada, Iceland, Korea, Japan, New Zealand,

Norway, Singapore, Switzerland and the United States.

The three European countries among these ten independent countries – Switzerland, Norway and Iceland – are also given separately since they are of particular interest in any attempt to identify the impact of the EU, since comparison with them provides the best chance, indeed the only chance, of distinguishing European characteristics from EU

Figure 1: 21 years of unemployment: inside and outside the EU 1993–2013 (weighted mean annual rates)

The ten independent countries are Australia, Canada, Iceland, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Switzerland and the United States. The three independent European countries are Iceland, Norway and Switzerland.

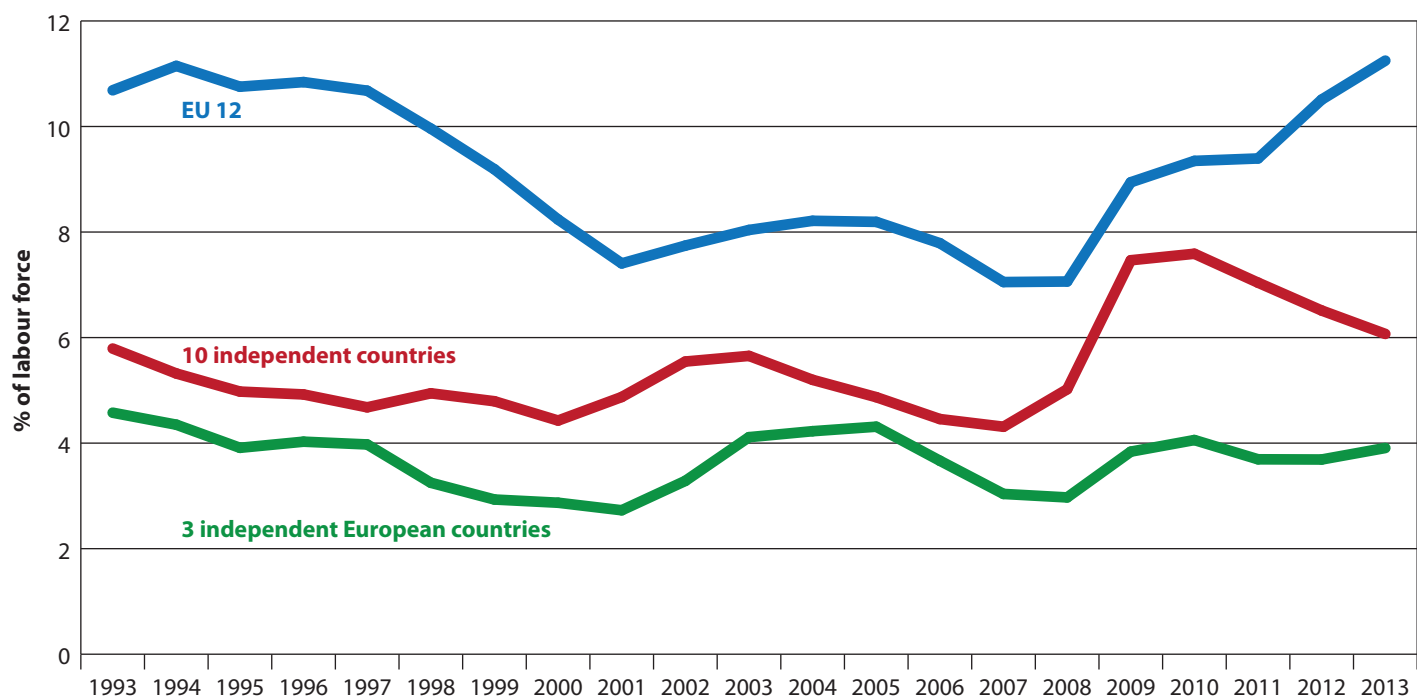


Table 1: Annual Unemployment Rates of the 12 founder members of EU single market vs 10 independent countries 1993–2013

EU 12 mean annual unemployment																					
Shaded cells indicate that the rate equals or is below the mean annual rate of the 10 independent countries																					
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Belgium	8.1	9.6	9.3	9.5	9.0	9.3	8.6	6.6	6.2	7.5	8.2	8.4	8.4	8.2	7.5	7.0	7.9	8.3	7.1	7.6	8.4
Denmark	10.7	8.0	7.0	6.8	5.4	5.0	5.1	4.5	4.2	4.6	5.4	5.5	4.8	3.9	3.8	3.4	6.0	7.5	7.6	7.5	7.0
France	11.4	12.7	11.9	12.4	12.6	12.1	12.1	10.2	8.6	8.7	8.5	8.8	8.9	8.8	8.0	7.4	9.1	9.4	9.3	9.8	10.4
Germany	7.9	8.4	8.1	8.9	9.8	9.2	8.4	7.7	7.8	8.6	9.3	10.3	11.1	10.3	8.6	7.5	7.7	7.1	5.9	5.4	5.3
Greece	9.0	8.9	9.1	9.7	9.6	10.8	11.7	11.1	10.2	10.3	9.7	10.5	9.8	8.9	8.3	7.7	9.5	12.5	17.7	24.5	28.0
Ireland	15.8	14.8	12.2	12.0	10.3	7.8	5.9	4.5	3.9	4.4	4.6	4.5	4.7	4.6	4.6	5.7	12.0	13.6	14.3	14.7	13.9
Italy	10.0	11.0	11.5	11.5	11.6	11.8	11.3	10.5	9.5	9.0	8.7	8.0	7.7	6.8	6.1	6.7	7.8	8.4	8.4	10.7	12.3
Luxembourg	2.3	3.5	2.9	3.3	2.5	2.8	2.4	2.3	1.8	2.6	3.7	5.1	4.5	4.7	4.1	5.1	5.1	4.4	4.9	5.1	6.9
Netherlands	6.1	6.8	7.0	6.4	5.4	4.3	3.5	3.0	2.5	3.1	4.1	5.0	5.3	4.3	3.6	3.0	3.7	4.5	4.4	5.3	6.7
Portugal	5.3	6.5	6.8	6.8	6.3	4.9	4.4	3.9	4.0	5.0	6.3	6.7	7.6	7.7	8.0	7.6	9.5	10.8	12.7	15.8	16.3
Spain	22.4	23.9	22.7	22.0	20.6	18.6	15.6	13.9	10.5	11.4	11.3	11.0	9.2	8.5	8.3	11.3	18.0	20.1	21.6	24.8	26.2
UK	10.3	9.6	8.6	8.1	7.0	6.1	5.9	5.5	4.7	5.1	4.8	4.6	4.7	5.4	5.3	5.3	7.7	7.8	7.8	7.9	7.7
W'td Mean of 12	10.8	11.4	10.9	11.0	10.8	10.1	9.4	8.4	7.5	7.9	8.0	8.2	8.2	7.8	7.1	7.1	9.0	9.5	9.5	10.5	11.2
10 independent countries annual unemployment rates																					
Shaded cells indicate that the rate equals or is above the mean annual rate of the EU 12																					
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Australia	10.9	9.7	8.5	8.5	8.5	7.7	6.9	6.3	6.8	6.4	5.9	5.4	5.0	4.8	4.4	4.2	5.6	5.2	5.1	5.2	5.7
Canada	11.4	10.4	9.5	9.6	9.1	8.3	7.6	6.8	7.2	7.7	7.6	7.2	6.8	6.3	6.0	6.1	8.3	8.0	7.4	7.2	7.1
Japan	2.5	2.9	3.2	3.4	3.4	4.1	4.7	4.8	5.0	5.4	5.2	4.7	4.4	4.1	3.9	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.5	4.4	4.0
Korea	2.9	2.5	2.1	2.0	2.6	7.0	6.3	4.4	4.0	3.3	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.6	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.1
New Zealand	9.8	8.4	6.5	6.3	6.8	7.7	7.0	6.2	5.4	5.3	4.8	4.0	3.8	3.9	3.7	4.2	6.1	6.5	6.5	8.1	7.4
United States	6.9	6.1	5.6	5.4	4.9	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.7	5.8	6.0	5.5	5.1	4.6	4.6	5.8	9.3	9.6	8.9	6.9	6.2
Singapore	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.2	3.4	4.8	2.7	2.7	3.6	4.0	3.4	3.1	2.7	2.1	2.2	3.0	2.2	2.0	2.0	2.2
Iceland*	5.3	5.3	4.9	3.7	3.9	2.7	2.0	2.3	2.3	3.3	3.4	3.1	2.6	3.0	2.3	3.0	7.2	7.6	7.1	3.2	3.5
Norway*	6.0	5.3	4.9	4.8	3.9	3.2	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.9	4.4	4.4	4.6	3.4	2.5	2.6	3.2	3.6	3.3	6.0	5.4
Switzerland*	3.7	3.8	3.3	3.7	4.1	3.6	3.1	2.7	2.5	2.9	4.1	4.3	4.4	4.0	3.6	3.4	4.1	4.5	4.1	4.2	4.1
W'td Mean of 10	7.3	6.6	5.5	5.4	5.7	6.6	6.3	5.6	5.2	5.3	5.0	4.4	4.2	4.1	3.9	4.2	5.7	5.9	5.7	6.5	6.1
W'td Mean of 3*	4.6	4.3	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.2	2.9	2.9	2.7	3.2	3.3	4.1	4.2	3.7	3.0	3.0	3.8	4.1	3.7	3.7	3.9

ones. Figure 1 shows the weighted mean rates of unemployment in the three groups of countries over the years 1993-2013.

Over these 21 years, the 12 EU countries have had a significantly higher rate of unemployment than the ten independent countries

The contrast between the unemployment rate of non-EU European countries and that of the EU 12 is still more marked. In 18 of these 21 years, EU unemployment has been *more than double* that of these three countries, and in the other three years, 2004-6, it has been only fractionally less than double. This comparison does not therefore support the idea that there is a peculiarly European high unemployment profile. On the contrary, it suggests that high unemployment is a distinctive and enduring EU characteristic, not a European one.

Weighted means of groups may, of course, hide considerable variations within groups, and these may best be seen in the table below which gives in full the data from which the graph is drawn. The shaded cells of the entries for the EU countries indicate the years in which they have had unemployment rates equal to, or lower than, the weighted mean of the ten independent countries:

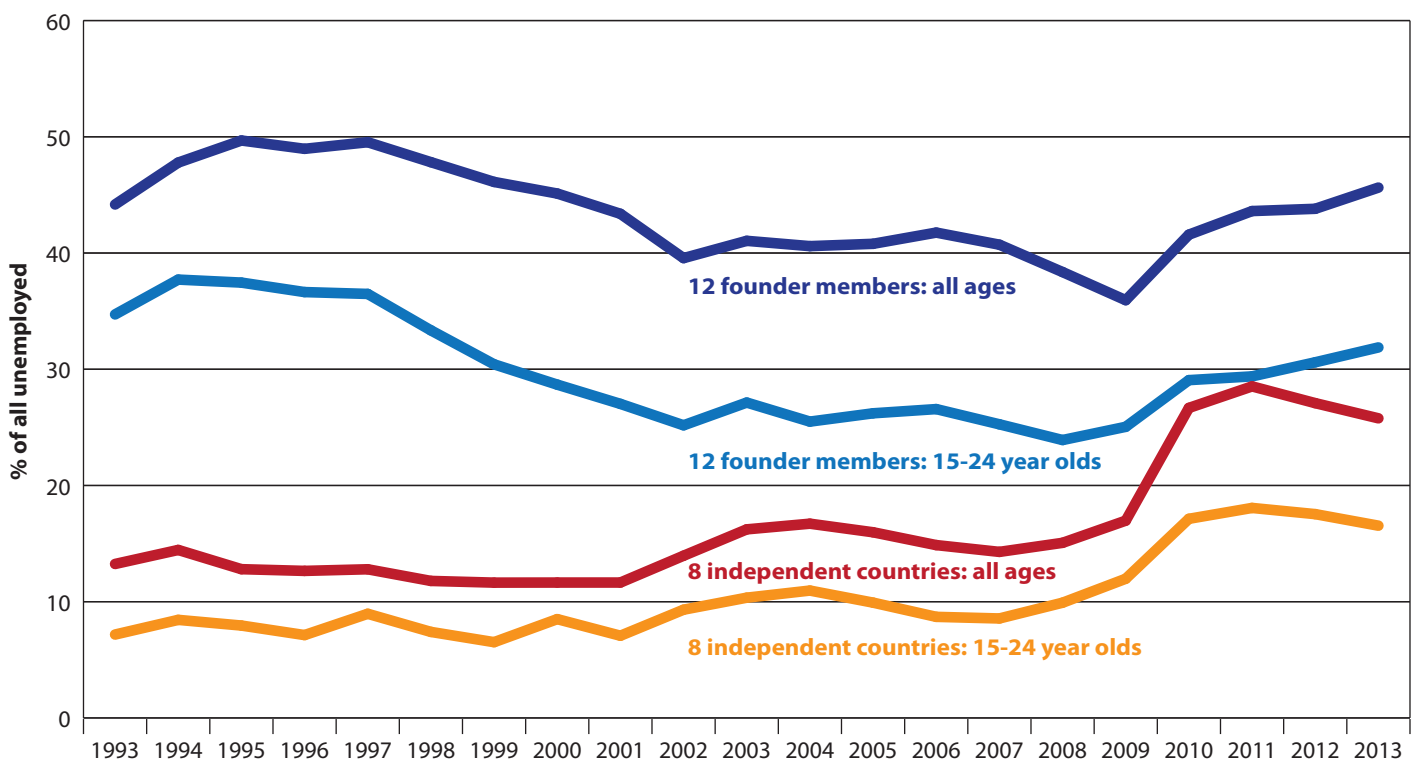
High unemployment is a distinctive and enduring EU characteristic, not a European one.

Luxembourg qualifies in 15 years, the Netherlands in 14, and Denmark in nine of them, but these are a deviant minority of just over six per cent of the total labour force of the EU 12. Other EU countries have occasionally joined them, Portugal in seven years, the UK in six, Ireland in five and Germany in two. In all, in 58 of the 252 individual years measured, EU members have had unemployment rates equal to or lower than the mean rate of the ten independent countries.

Deviance on the other side – meaning one of the ten independent countries having an unemployment rate equal to, or higher than, the mean rate of the EU 12 – is far less common, the exceptions being Australia and Canada in 1993, and the United States in 2009 and 2010. Otherwise, clear blue water separates the independent countries from the EU over all 21 years.

We can delve further into these figures by comparing the rates of long-term unemployment in the 12 EU countries with independent countries for which there is age-specific data over the years 1993 to 2013. Switzerland and Singapore cannot therefore be included in this comparison.

Figure 2: 21 years of long-term unemployment: inside and outside the EU 1993–2013
Percentage of all unemployed who have been unemployed for one year or more, weighted mean annual rates



The results are given in Figure 2. Long-term unemployment is here defined as being unemployed for a year or more, and is expressed in the figure, first in the darker lines, as percentages of the total unemployed in the two groups of countries, and second in the lighter lines, as percentages of all the unemployed 15-24 year olds.

The proportion of the unemployed of all ages suffering this fate in the EU 12 is substantially *more than double* the proportion in the eight independent countries. The average of the weighted means over the 21 years in the EU is 43.6 per cent, while in the independent countries it is 16.4 per cent. That such a large difference has continued over 21 years reinforces the impression that we are dealing with two sets of economies that differ from one another in some fundamental and enduring manner, which does not seem altogether consistent with the vaunted ‘social model’, or ‘social models’ of EU countries, which are thought to distinguish the EU from other countries and in particular from the United States.

The full Table 2 (p.5) shows that the weighted means used in the graph are not hiding major variations within each group. Only one EU country, Denmark, has had a lower proportion of long-term unemployed than the mean of the independent countries. Its record over all 21 years is quite distinctive compared with other EU members, but over the four years 2008-2011, and again in 2013, which for most EU countries were particularly bad years for long-term unemployment, it achieved what no other EU country has ever been able to do. The proportion of its unemployed who remained unemployed for a year or more was lower than the mean proportion of the eight independent countries.

There are also noticeable variations among the independent countries. Over all 21 years a distinctively high proportion of Japan’s unemployed have been long-term. By itself, given its size, Japan

has been responsible for boosting the weighted average of the group as a whole. By contrast, the US has had a remarkably low proportion of long-term unemployed until 2010 when the proportion shot up, and has remained high till 2013. However, the main point is that over the 21 years not a single independent country has ever had a proportion of long-term unemployed as high as that of EU countries, a quite remarkable contrast. The option of shading the years when an independent country equalled or surpassed the EU mean therefore remains unused.

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The EU has, we may conclude, not only suffered from a higher rate of unemployment than independent countries, but its unemployment has been especially severe, as measured by the proportion unemployed for a year or more, especially among young people. The average of the weighted means over the 21 years indicate that about 10.4 per cent of young unemployed people in the independent countries remained unemployed for a year or more, whereas 29.9 per cent of young people in the single market countries did so. They have been, in other words, about three times more likely to be scarred by this experience.

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As the euro crisis has unfolded, UK media have given increasing attention to the previously unimaginable rates of unemployment found in some EU countries, and especially among young people. However, the experience of long-term unemployment is not simply the consequence of that crisis. As the light blue line in the graph indicates, although the rate of long-term unemployment in the 15-24 year old cohort was *declining* over the years 1997-2008, it was always at a higher level than in the independent countries over the pre-crisis years. While recent rates of long-term youth unemployment are astonishingly high, they were almost as high in some countries over the first decade of the single market. Unnoticed by the UK media, well over half of young, Italian men and women were unemployed for more than a year over the 11 years from 1993-2003, as were over half of young Greeks over the five years from 1996-

Table 2: Long-term unemployment in the single market 1993–2013

Percentage of the unemployed who have been unemployed for a year or more: 12 single market founder members vs 8 independent countries

Long-term unemployment in 12 single market founder members.																					
Shaded cells indicate a rate that is equal to or below that of the mean of 8 independent countries																					
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Belgium	53.0	58.3	62.4	61.3	60.5	61.7	60.5	56.3	51.7	48.8	45.4	49.0	51.7	51.2	50.4	47.6	44.2	48.8	48.3	44.7	46.0
Denmark	25.2	32.1	27.9	26.5	27.2	26.9	20.5	20.0	22.2	19.1	20.4	21.5	23.4	20.8	16.1	13.5	9.5	20.2	24.4	28.0	25.5
France	33.3	37.5	40.2	38.2	39.6	41.6	38.7	39.6	36.8	32.7	39.2	40.6	41.1	41.9	40.2	37.4	35.2	40.2	41.5	40.4	40.4
Germany	40.3	44.3	48.7	47.8	50.1	52.6	51.7	51.5	50.4	47.9	50.0	51.8	53.0	56.4	56.6	52.5	45.5	47.4	48.0	45.4	44.7
Greece	50.9	50.5	51.4	56.7	55.7	54.9	55.3	56.4	52.8	51.3	54.9	53.1	52.1	54.3	50.0	47.5	40.8	45.0	49.6	59.3	67.5
Ireland	59.1	64.3	61.6	59.5	57.0	(56.0)	55.3	(44.0)	33.1	30.1	32.8	34.9	33.4	31.6	29.5	27.1	29.1	49.1	59.3	61.7	60.6
Italy	57.7	61.5	63.6	65.6	66.3	59.6	61.4	61.3	63.4	59.6	58.1	49.2	49.9	49.6	47.3	45.7	44.4	48.5	51.9	53.0	56.9
Luxembourg	31.6	29.6	23.2	27.6	34.6	31.3	32.3	22.4	28.4	27.4	24.7	21.0	26.4	29.5	28.7	32.4	23.1	29.3	28.8	30.3	30.4
Netherlands	52.4	49.4	46.8	50.0	49.1	47.9	43.5	(38.0)	(32.0)	26.5	27.8	34.2	40.2	43.0	39.4	34.4	24.8	27.6	33.6	33.7	35.9
Portugal	43.5	43.4	50.9	53.1	55.6	44.7	41.2	42.9	38.1	34.6	35.0	44.3	48.2	50.2	47.1	47.4	44.1	52.3	48.2	48.7	56.3
Spain	46.2	52.7	54.6	52.9	51.8	49.9	46.3	42.4	36.9	33.7	33.6	32.0	24.5	21.6	20.4	18.0	23.8	36.6	41.6	44.4	49.7
UK	42.5	45.4	43.6	39.8	38.6	32.7	29.6	28.0	27.8	21.7	21.5	20.6	21.0	22.3	23.7	24.1	24.5	32.6	33.4	34.8	36.3
wtd mean	44.2	47.8	49.7	49.0	49.5	47.8	46.1	45.1	43.4	39.6	41.0	40.6	40.8	41.8	40.7	38.4	35.9	41.6	43.6	43.8	45.6

() guesstimates to fill missing entries

Long-term unemployment in 8 independent countries.																					
Shaded cells indicate a rate that is equal to or above that of the mean of 12 single market founder members																					
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Australia	36.7	36.1	32.0	28.5	31.2	32.9	31.3	28.3	23.9	22.4	21.5	20.6	18.2	18.1	15.4	14.9	14.7	18.6	18.9	19.0	19.2
Canada	16.5	17.9	16.8	16.8	16.1	13.8	11.7	11.3	9.5	9.6	10.0	9.5	9.6	8.7	7.4	7.1	7.8	12.0	13.5	12.5	12.7
Iceland	12.2	15.1	16.8	19.8	16.3	16.1	11.7	11.8	12.5	11.1	8.1	11.2	13.3	7.3	8.0	4.1	6.9	21.3	27.8	27.9	21.9
Japan	15.6	17.5	18.1	19.3	21.8	20.3	22.4	25.5	26.6	30.8	33.5	33.7	33.3	33.0	32.0	33.3	28.5	37.6	39.4	38.5	41.2
Korea	2.6	5.4	4.4	3.8	2.6	1.5	3.8	2.3	2.3	2.5	0.6	1.1	0.8	1.1	0.6	2.7	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.4
NZ	33.6	32.9	25.6	21.0	19.8	19.6	21.1	19.8	17.2	14.8	13.6	11.7	9.7	7.8	6.1	4.4	6.3	9.0	9.0	13.2	12.1
Norway	27.2	28.8	24.2	14.2	12.4	8.3	7.1	5.3	5.5	6.4	6.4	9.2	9.5	14.5	8.8	6.0	7.7	9.5	11.6	8.7	9.2
US	11.5	12.2	9.7	9.5	8.7	8.0	6.8	6.0	6.1	8.5	11.8	12.7	11.8	10.0	10.0	10.6	16.3	29.0	31.3	29.3	25.9
wtd mean	13.2	14.5	12.8	12.7	12.8	11.8	11.6	11.6	11.6	14.0	16.2	16.7	16.0	14.9	14.3	15.1	17.0	26.7	28.5	27.1	25.8

Source: www.oecd.library.org OECD (2014), "Labour Market Statistics: Labour force statistics by sex and age", OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics (database), DOI: 10.1787/data-00309-en

2000. More than a third of young people in several other EU countries, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, had a similar experience, and even, surprisingly, though for fewer years, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The financial crisis not only brought the scale of the problem to media attention, it also provided a convenient and plausible explanation of it. The crisis was often portrayed as some external, primarily Anglo-Saxon, event with little to do with any of the inherent characteristics of single market, and hence diverted attention away from searching for possible causes within the EU itself. There can be little doubt that the financial crisis exacerbated the problem, but it can hardly provide a satisfactory explanation of why the EU unemployment has exceeded that of other OECD countries over the entire 21 years of the single market, and indeed for some years preceding it.¹ To return to the boom pre-crisis year of 2007 would hardly eliminate the problem.

The reason for this continuous disparity is an intriguing intellectual puzzle that has still to be

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answered. Part of the reason for its persistence seems to be political. EU leaders and cheerleaders have been reluctant to recognise it as a chronic condition that has accompanied the single market throughout its life, and to discover whether any policies, institutions and behaviour that distinguish member countries from other capitalist democracies could be responsible, or to debate and evaluate possible explanations and solutions. They have been rather too busy predicting further employment gains of the single market and celebrating its achievements.

In a working paper to mark the tenth anniversary, *The Internal Market – Ten Years without Frontiers*, published by the EC in 2003, Patricia Hewitt, the UK Minister for Trade and Industry at the time, claimed that: ‘The Internal Market is the major economic success of the European Union.’ Frits Bolkestein, then Commissioner for the Internal Market, patted himself on the back by saying: ‘the Internal Market has transformed Europe beyond recognition in ten years. It has created millions

Spanish left-populist party Podemos on a ‘March for Change’ through Madrid. Adult unemployment was at 23.1% and youth unemployment over 50%.

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of jobs and hundreds of billions of euros of extra prosperity.²

Another ten years and more have passed since then, and EU enthusiasts can often commend its benefits for UK employment without even mentioning that it has itself been suffering throughout its existence from chronic and severe unemployment. To pick one of many at random, the Conservative MP for the City of London and Westminster recently hailed the single market as 'one of the finest examples in global economic history of international cooperation to the benefit of hundreds of millions of Europeans.'³ The tens of millions whose lives have been blighted by unemployment in 'one of the finest examples of international co-operation' did not rate a mention.

No doubt, the considerable variations between unemployment rates of member states encourage leaders, and media within any one member state, to consider it a national problem, and electorates therefore hold their own national governments responsible for it rather than the EC. However, if the EU is to take the credit for increases in the level of employment, and receive substantial funds to tackle the unemployment problem as a European issue, then it is difficult to see why we should not also consider the possibility that it also bears some responsibility for the high level of unemployment. In any case, since the figures, especially those of long-term unemployment, distinguish EU member countries collectively, there is every reason to consider it is an EU-wide problem.

The problem of unemployment is often mentioned in statements of presidents of the European Commission, and occasionally in the European Council and the European Parliament, but it is difficult to avoid the feeling that it has come over the past two decades to be accepted as a normal, non-political and therefore settled part of life within the EU. Its persistence is a rather good illustration of the limitations of the political process within the EU. It is difficult to think of a more serious social problem, blighting the lives of millions, and yet it has not generated any impassioned, partisan debates

about the causes or solutions of it, or rival claims about which particular European leader or party best speaks on behalf of those who have suffered from it. Thus the problem which dominated capitalist democracies for generations has become, in a European context, curiously non-political or apolitical. The European Commission is, it seems, to be left alone to solve it, in its own good time, and in ways that it thinks best, without being disturbed by angry and outraged partisan interruptions.

It therefore did not figure as a defining issue of the 2014 European election, with rival candidates offering alternative explanations and solutions. It does not regularly appear at the top of anyone's European agenda or anyone's European media coverage. It never figures in UK debates about the merits of the EU. There is no particular interest or urgency in research to discover why the EU countries have become a club of economies with high and severe unemployment. There is no particular interest in the EU funds, policies, programmes and personnel that are addressing the problem. No one

cares to identify those policies that may have been effective, or where they occurred, or to distinguish them from the ineffective. The names of the EU commissioners responsible for these policies over the years are barely known to the media, let alone to the wider public, and it is therefore unclear who

Protest in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2011. Unemployment was running at 12.7% and worsening.

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might be held responsible, or if anyone at all should be blamed or replaced.

The long silence on this issue in the UK, prior to the financial crisis at least, may be because it suffered rather less from unemployment than many other member countries. Moreover, its political leaders have their own reasons for keeping quiet for so long about the single market's number one problem. Over these same years, they have been trying to persuade the British people that the single market has brought 'astonishing benefits' in the words of Kenneth Clarke both to them, and to everyone else within it. Discussing why the EU has become a club of high and severe unemployment would hardly help.

Notes

1 The data series used to generate the graph in Figure 1 shows that 1977 was the first year when the unemployment rate of these 12 EU members surpassed that of the 10 independent countries, and it has never been lower since that date. An unemployment rate double that of the three independent European countries started even earlier, from 1973 at least, the earliest year with a full set of data.

2 This 'working paper' went on to make extravagant claims about increases in GDP and employment supposedly due to the single market without citations, evidence, comparison, or indeed any attempt to distinguish the impact of the single market from concurrent economic changes over the previous decade. However, perhaps one should not complain. The introduction did contain the warning that it 'deliberately focuses on the positive side of the balance sheet'.

<http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/top_layer/historical_overview/docs/workingdoc_en.pdf>

I infer the date of publication was 2003, but there was no date on it, and no directorate parent is named.

3 Mark Field, 'A European good news story', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 December 2014:

<<http://www.votemarkfield.com/news-a-articles/a-european-good-news-story/>>



Michael Burrage is a director of Cimigo, which is headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City and conducts market and corporate strategy research across the Asia Pacific Region.

He has been a lecturer at the London School of Economics and the Institute of United States Studies; a research fellow at Harvard, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, Uppsala, the Free University of Berlin, Hokkaido University, Japan, and University of California, Berkeley; and a visiting professor at the universities of Kyoto, Hosei and Kansai. He has written about the political determinants of professional institutions in Revolution and the Making of the Contemporary Legal Profession in France, the United States and England (OUP, 2004); about the relationship between the states, civil societies and class relationships in Class, State & Civil Society in France, the United States, Russia & England (Macmillan, 2008) and about higher education in the U.S and the UK as the editor of Martin Trow: Twentieth Century Higher Education: From Elite to Mass to Universal (Johns Hopkins, 2010).

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CIVITAS: Institute for the Study of Civil Society
55 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QL
Phone: +44 (0)20 7799 6677
Fax: +44 (0)20 7799 6688
Email: info@civitas.org.uk

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