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UNEMPLOYMENT IN SELECTED EU COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare the dynamic of unemployment in the years 2000–2014 in selected EU countries. The subject of the present analysis is unemployment in total population and in subpopulations identified on the basis of gender, age, and education. The notion of unemployment rate was used throughout, and its values were taken from the Internet database Eurostat.

The analysis conducted makes it possible to draw the following conclusions. The differentiation of total unemployment rate among the selected EU countries was very high, and the shape of the curves reflected the impact of economic crisis. Around 2010 many countries saw stabilising tendencies (with the exception of Greece and the countries located in the Iberian Peninsula). In the countries with low unemployment rates the surplus of female unemployment is giving way to a gender balance, or even a slight surplus of male unemployment. Among the selected age categories, the youngest group was and continues to be most heavily affected by the situation on the labour market. A high level of education is still correlated with a lower risk of unemployment; nevertheless the growing differences between the countries constitute a troubling trend.

BEZROBOCIE W WYBRANYCH KRAJACH UE

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Słowa kluczowe: rynek pracy, stopa bezrobocia, dynamika bezrobocia, unijne badania siły roboczej

Abstrakt

Celem pracy było porównanie kształtowania się bezrobocia w latach 2000–2014 w wybranych państwach unijnych. Przedmiotem analiz było bezrobocie w populacji ogółem oraz subpopulacjach wyodrębnionych ze względu na płeć, wiek, wykształcenie. W analizach posłużono się stopą bezrobocia. Jej wartości zaczerpnięto z internetowej bazy danych Eurostatu.

Przeprowadzone analizy dają podstawy do następujących konstatacji. Poziom zróżnicowania ogólnej stopy bezrobocia wśród wyróżnionych państw UE był bardzo wysoki, w kształcie krzywych uwidocznił się wpływ kryzysu gospodarczego. Około roku 2010 w wielu państwach pojawiły się tendencje stabilizacyjne (wyjątek – Grecja państwa i Półwyspu Iberyjskiego). W krajach o niskiej stopie bezrobocia nadwyżki bezrobocia wśród kobiet ustępują miejsca sytuacji równowagi płci, a nawet niewielkiej przewagi bezrobocia po stronie mężczyzn. Spośród wyróżnionych kategorii wieku najmniej korzystna sytuacja na rynku pracy była i pozostaje nadal udziałem najmłodszych. Wysoki poziom wykształcenia wiąże się wciąż z niższym ryzykiem bezrobocia, ale stale wzrastające różnice między krajami napełniają niepokojem.

Introduction

Nowadays, the phenomenon of unemployment is commonly considered to be the main socioeconomic problem and counteracting it is one of the priority challenges for authorities at every level: from the local officials, through the state politicians to the EU decision makers. The size of unemployment is a composite result of numerous interconnected factors, among which of greatest importance are economic trends and the specific nature of the labour market. The latter is characterized not only by the proportions among the individual employment sectors, but also by the degree of its flexibility and the details of programs limiting unemployment (HAJDER 2013, p. 49).

The present article will discuss the results of analysing unemployment data in selected EU countries, which were obtained thanks to the international survey referred to as Labour Force Survey. In order to achieve that objective, we have investigated the dynamic of development of unemployment rates, a measure which helps to describe in a synthetic manner the phenomenon in the years 2000–2014[1].

The concept of obtaining information about the labour force by using surveys conducted in households is not new. In many countries questions referring to having the acquired profession were incorporated into the sets of questions attached to population censuses already in the second half of the 19th century. However, at that stage questions concerning the economic status (the working/unemployed/professionally passive person) were not yet asked. The ongoing industrialization, and the resulting change of social structure, created the need for new approaches and more refined methods of measuring labour market phenomena. The issue became particularly urgent in the thirties of the 20th century, with the advent of massive unemployment as a consequence of Great Depression (*Labour force*... 1998, p. 8). Having regularly updated information about the unemployment levels and trends became a necessity.

[1] An extended definition of the term will be provided in one of the subsequent parts of this article.

Monthly surveys of the labour force in new conceptual frames were first conducted in the United States in 1940. Europe proved to be much slower as regards this sort of research. First experimental surveys, named Labour Force Survey (LFS) and applied to countries of the European Community, were conducted in 1960, with the participation of six founding member states: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. They were not repeated until 1968, when the first series of annual surveys was conducted. Due to lack of commonly approved terminology, initially researchers relied on various and very different definitions. The situation in this respect improved thanks to the resolution[2] adopted in 1982 in Geneva at the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians under the auspices of International Labour Organization – ILO (*Quality report*... 2014, p. 5). The guidelines included in it are the current basis for LFS research conducted in all member states of the EU.

In this study 10 out of 28 EU countries were selected and assigned to three groups. The first group encompassed countries which in 2014 had the lowest rate of unemployment: Germany, Austria and Great Britain, whereas the third group consisted of the countries in which the rate was the highest: Greece, Spain and Portugal. The group in the middle was, in accordance with the authors' intentions, supposed to consist of the countries which border with our country and which entered the Union together with Poland in 2004[3]. Eventually, Hungary replaced Lithuania, because the statistical series of the latter country frequently suffered from lack of data in less numerous categories, and the volatile run of curves may have signified a dangerously high sampling error. For the same reasons some of the analyses were limited to the sets of persons between the ages of 15 and 64.

According to Eurostat estimates in the year 2000 the number of persons aged 15–64 in the countries belonging to the European Union amounted to 319 million, while in 2014 it increased by further 10 million. From the point of view of the labour market, each of those persons could be assigned to one of three categories: employed, unemployed (understood jointly as professionally active) or professionally passive (inactive). In the course of 15 years the number of active persons increased by more than 19 million and reached the level of 238 million (employed – 213 million, unemployed – ca 25 million), while the number of those professionally passive decreased by 9 million and totalled 91 million.

[2] *Resolution concerning statistics of the economically active population, employment, unemployment and underemployment.*

[3] Due to a low rate of unemployment, the Czech Republic could have been assigned to the first group.

In most of the countries taken into account in this analysis the number of persons employed increased[4]. Greece and Portugal were exceptions since they registered half-million losses. However, at the same time the number of unemployed persons has also been on the rise. An unprecedented growth of this population took place in Spain (over 3 million), and a smaller one – in Greece, Portugal and Great Britain[5], while an even smaller increase was observed in Austria and Hungary. On the other hand, unemployment decreased by over 1,0 million in Poland and in Germany, whereas Czech Republic and Slovakia saw a decrease of only slightly more than 100 thousand. Changes also took place as regards professionally passive persons. Their number decreased considerably in Germany (4,2 million) and Spain (1,6 million), and to a lesser degree in Poland and Hungary (less than 600 thousand). On the other hand, Great Britain and Slovakia were the countries in which a slight increase in the number of professionally passive persons was registered.

Total unemployment rate

We will start the analysis proper by presenting the dynamic of total unemployment rate in a harmonised manner. The rate is a result of the standardised, Eurostat-approved[6] method of determining this index for each of the member states. The coefficient expresses the percentage of unemployed persons in the labour force, which is the total number of employed and unemployed persons[7].

In the years 2000–2014 the first of the selected groups of countries was characterized by a relatively narrow range of unemployment rates (until the moment of the outbreak of economic crisis they oscillated around 5%). The exception was Germany, which in the years 2004–2006 had an over 10% unemployment rate. After 2008 the value of this index in Germany was steadily decreasing; in Austria it did not change, while in Great Britain it increased slightly, as a result of which the difference between Germany and the remaining countries decreased and, in addition to that, Germany became the leader (5,0%).

[4] In Germany by nearly 3 million, in Great Britain by 2,7 million, in Spain by 2 million, in Poland by 1,5 million.

[5] From 0,4 to 0,7 million.

[6] The data are calculated on the basis of quarterly results of the labour force survey (LFS) and seasonally adjusted monthly data on registered unemployment.

[7] An unemployed person aged 15–74 has to meet three conditions at the same time: be without work in the reference week; be available for work before the end of the two weeks following the reference week; be actively seeking work.

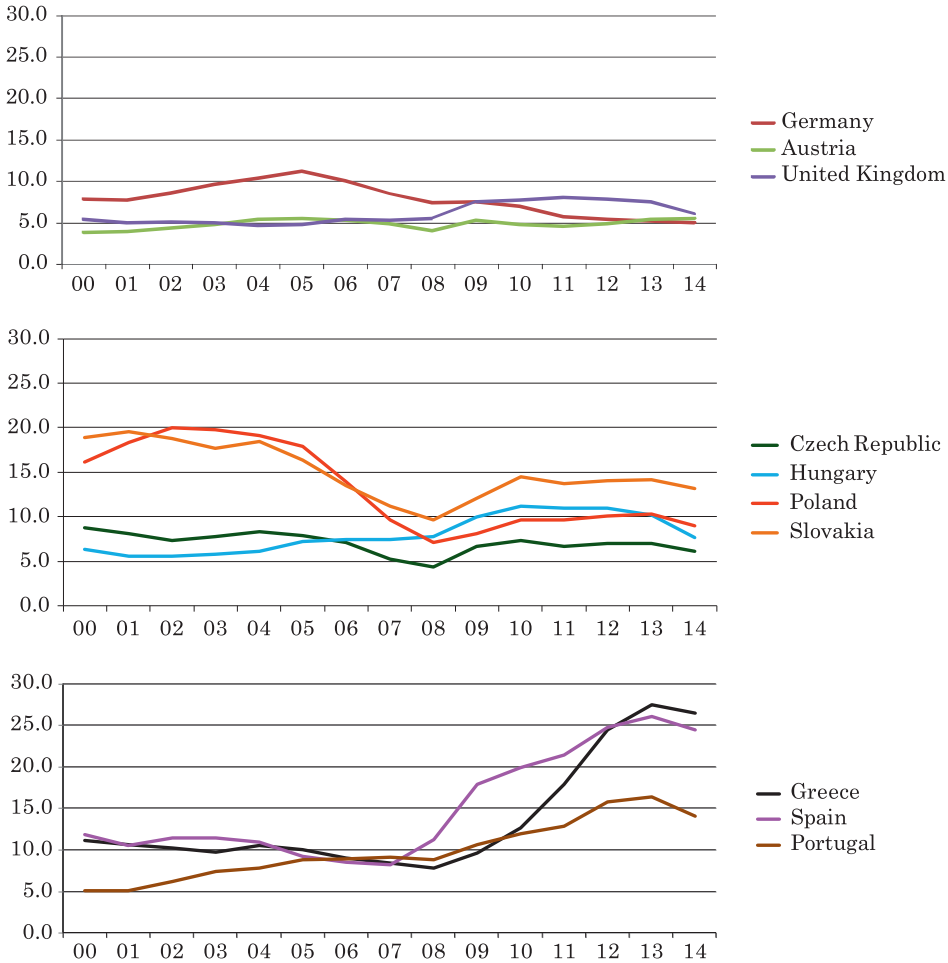

Chart 1. Total unemployment rate in selected EU countries in the years 2000–2014
Source: Author's own study on the basis of data from the Eurostat database.

In the second group of countries, which includes Poland, in the course of eight consecutive years a considerably wide range of unemployment rates could be observed. The quite good and relatively stable situation of Czech Republic and Hungary contrasted sharply with what was happening in Slovakia and Poland, where the unemployment rate was then at its record high. 2008 was a breakthrough year. During that year Poland recorded the lowest unemployment rate in its most recent history (ca 7%), followed by increase and stabilisation at the level of ca 10%. Since 2007 until the present day the highest unemployment rate has been registered in Slovakia. Similarly

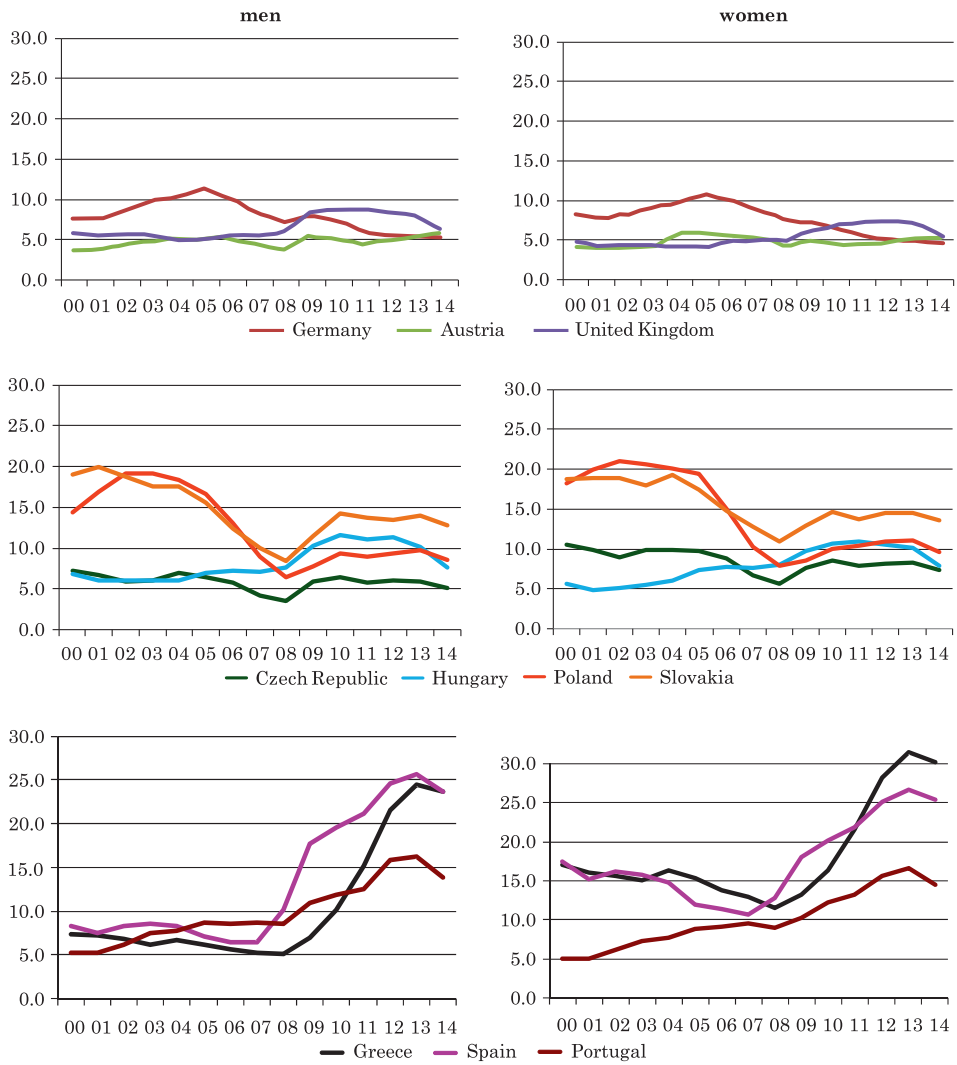

Chart 2. Unemployment rates by gender in selected EU countries in the years 2000–2014
Source: Author's own study on the basis of data from the Eurostat database.

to the countries of the first group, in 2014 the differences among the countries were significantly lower in comparison with 2000.

The third group of countries – initially characterized by relatively low unemployment rates[8] – started to experience a sharp increase of this index since 2008. The phenomenon affected Spain first and, after some time, Greece

[8] Spain – ca 12%, Greece – 11%, and Portugal – as low as 5%.

(at the height of the crisis the unemployment rate there exceeded 26%). In comparison, Portugal proved to be in a much better situation (the maximum unemployment rate there reached 16%). 2014 brought to each of the three countries a slight decrease in the total unemployment rates.

Unemployment by gender

It has long been observed that combining professional activities with taking care of one's children (mostly by women) inevitably leads to temporary absences of women, related to maternity and parental leaves, which resulted in their being less flexible. The justified social protection of women against the market mechanism that marginalizes them required each country to adopt relevant legislation and other remedies conducted under public policy, which to a large degree (though not exclusively) is responsible for the differences on the European labour markets[9]. Chart 2 below presents unemployment rates in reference to both genders.

In the first group of countries the differences between the values of unemployment rate depending on gender were relatively small. A situation nearing balance can be found in Germany (although for the majority of temporal points the unemployment rates were slightly higher for men). Until 2008 in Austria a slight surplus of female unemployment was registered; after a few years of fluctuations it gave way to an almost complete gender balance. On the other hand, in Great Britain male unemployment was higher nearly in the whole observation period. Ultimately, then, in this group of countries a balance was maintained or male unemployment rate was slightly higher. In the second group Poland, as well as Slovakia and Czech Republic, had a permanent surplus of female unemployment. However, its level in Czech Republic was unexpectedly high. In Hungary after a few years of the surplus of male unemployment, since 2004 the unemployment rate of both genders remained balanced. As regards the third group, in the years 2000–2014 an almost perfect balance existed in Portugal. Spain managed to move from the very high level of female unemployment (over two times higher than in the case of men) and in 2009 it achieved the level of Portugal. In the following years the proportions of unemployment of women and men in both countries remained at almost the same level. In Greece after the initial stage, when female unemployment was nearly two and a half times higher, since 2007 a sharp decrease of the differences was observed, although this country is still

[9] In European countries one can observe a considerable differentiation in this respect. As regards the European Union, legislation which is particularly favourable towards women can be found in Scandinavian and Benelux countries.

experiencing too much female unemployment. The reasons for this state of affairs should be ascribed not only to legislation, but also to centuries of tradition.

Unemployment by age

The stages of growing-up and school education on the one hand, and maturity and growing old on the other, are the factors differentiating individuals' situation on the labour market. In this article differences are shown using one of the most popular classification methods of categorizing unemployment rates (BALCEROWICZ-SZKUTNIK 2014, p. 139):

a) Persons aged 15–24 (assumed to be "graduates"),
b) Persons aged 25–49[10] (assumed to be professionally "mobile"),
c) Persons aged 50–64 (assumed to be at pre-retirement age).

We will begin with the youngest age group which, due to its specific nature, will be covered in greater detail. This age group comprises both persons receiving education at various levels and graduates who, for various reasons, have not yet taken up employment, and those two populations constitute the highest share of the group, which certainly influences the values of the index. Because of that fact we will include a few related remarks in the subsequent sections.

In source literature it has been observed that the relation between professionally active (especially working) persons and professionally passive persons is crucial for the assessment of the conditions of the given labour market (KRYŃSKA, KWIATKOWSKI 2013, p. 38). Between the years 2000 and 2014 among the youngest persons in all countries, with the exception of Austria, the total number of working persons decreased, although the losses differ enormously depending on the country (from ca 40 thousand in Great Britain, to over one million in Spain). In general, the number of professionally passive persons decreased as well; the greatest decrease was registered in Poland – ca 730 thousand (among the exceptions there was Great Britain – an increase by almost 800 thousand). As a result of the changes, in 2014 the structure of the youngest age group looked as follows. Only in the countries belonging to the first group the percentage of professionally active persons was slightly higher than the share of professionally passive persons, while in the countries belonging to the second and the third groups the professionally active persons constituted a minority, oscillating between 28% in Greece and 36% in Spain (in both countries the percentage of working persons turned out to be

[10] The upper limit moved by 5 years in relation to the usual limit of 44 years.

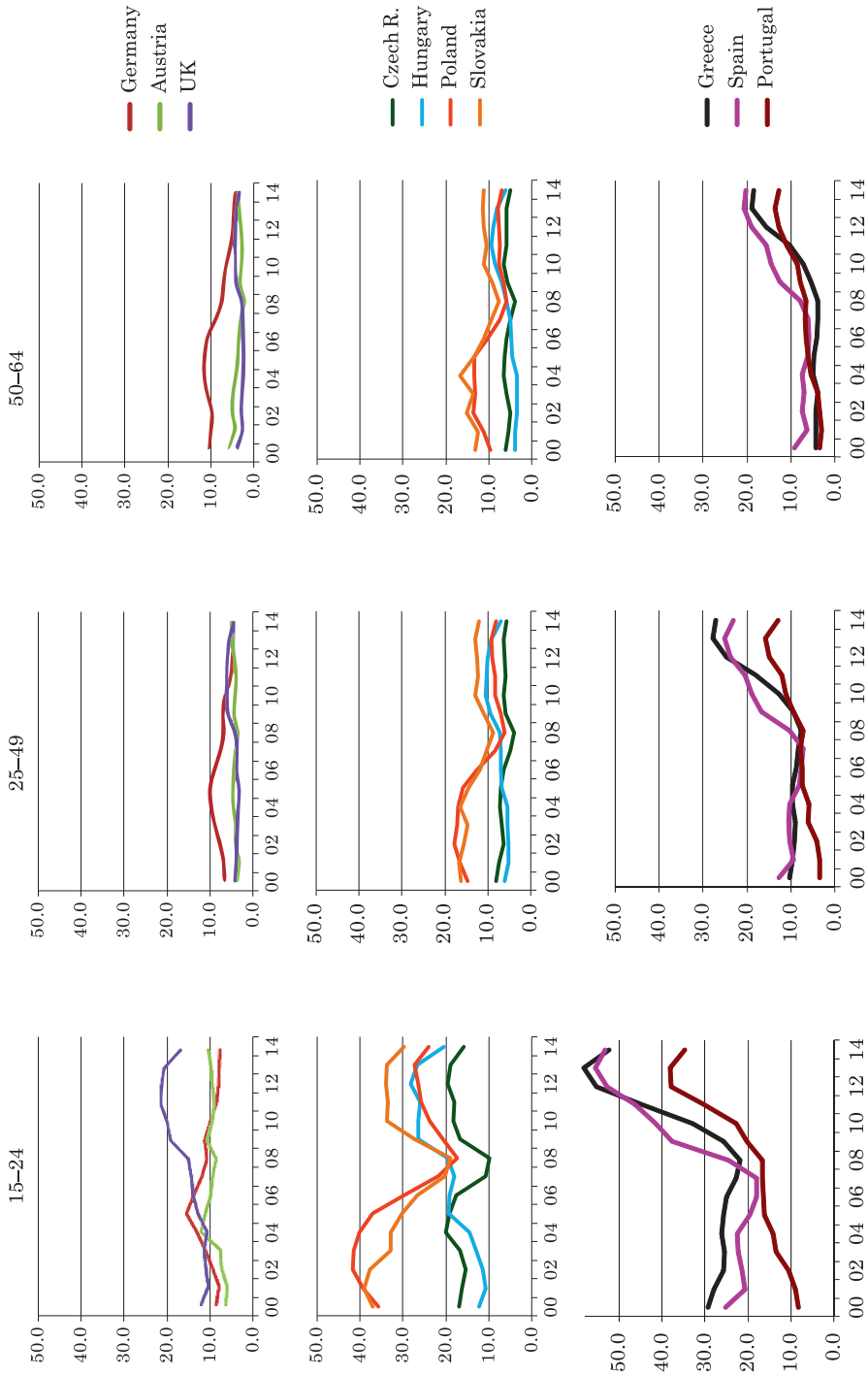

Chart 3. Unemployment rate by age in selected EU countries in the years 2000–2014

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data from the Eurostat database.

surprisingly small: 13% and 17%, respectively). Professionally passive persons were dominant, constituting more than 2/3 of the whole population in the second group and 3/4 in the third group. Another step in the analysis should be the identification of the internal structure of this subset; unfortunately, the available statistical data proved to be decisively insufficient[11]. We shall, then, return to the analysis of unemployment rates.

The above charts confirm the commonly known fact that unemployment among the youngest population is the highest. Only in Germany until 2003 the highest unemployment rates characterized the oldest persons. The exceptional situation on the German labour market is also visible as regards the continually decreasing unemployment rates among the young persons after 2006. In Austria during the whole observation period a stable trend was maintained, oscillating around 10%. In Great Britain after a relatively mild increase, 2009 brought its acceleration and then stabilisation (at a level two times higher than in Austria). In the second group of countries the situation was varied. The most difficult situation occurred in Poland and in Slovakia. In the first half of the decade in Poland the unemployment rates among youths exceeded 40%, after which a decisive decrease took place, followed by yet another increase and a small decrease in the recent years. In Slovakia (apart from the "concavity" characteristic for the majority of countries in the pre-crisis period) the unemployment rates never decreased below 30%. In the same period the best conditions existed in Hungary, and after 2006 – in Czech Republic. The highest unemployment rate – in this age category – was registered in the countries belonging to the third group. Although Greece started with a lower level than Poland, nevertheless its rate was very high for an EU country in those times (29%). In the same period the value of this index in Spain was slightly lower. Around the year 2007 both countries saw a slight decrease, but after two years their unemployment rates skyrocketed in an almost vertical manner, crossing the threshold of 50%. Until 2007 the situation of Portugal was decidedly better; however, afterwards, after a relatively mild increase the rate of unemployment grew in an accelerated manner (to 38%), as a result of which Portugal was placed in the ranking of 28 EU countries at the third position from the bottom (after Greece and Spain).

As was expected, the situation observed in the most numerous, middle, so-called professionally mobile age category reflected the picture obtained for

[11] The data available in the Eurostat database made it possible to establish that in 2014 in the whole EU every tenth professionally passive person aged 15–24 belonged to the NEET set (Not in Education, Employment, or Training); the maximum value of 20% was registered in Bulgaria, and the 4% minimum – in Luxembourg. As far as the selected countries are concerned, a considerable differentiation could also be seen: from the 15% maximum in Great Britain to the 6% minimum in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Portugal. The percentages quoted above were calculated for the persons who answered the question concerning their educational status.

the whole population. Let us, then, reiterate its main parameters. Until 2008 in Austria and Great Britain unemployment rates were low and after a small increase they stabilised at the level of ca 5%. In the post-crisis years Germany achieved an equally low rate. In the second group before the crisis comparatively comparably low rates (ca 6–7% in average) were registered in Czech Republic and Hungary, whereas Poland and Slovakia saw the highest rates (over 16%). In the years 2006–2007 this index decreased in both countries, with the permanent 4 percentage point difference for Poland. In the post-crisis phase the difference between the relevant countries' unemployment rates was visibly smaller. In the years 2000–2008 the situation of Greece and Spain was stable (9–10%)[12], but soon after, first in Spain, and then in Greece, the unemployment rates quickly started to increase (25–27%). In Portugal the value of this index grew systematically, although slowly (from 3% to over 15%). In the last year unemployment decreased in each of the three countries.

As regards the persons in the pre-retirement age (aged 50–64), we have been witnessing a spectacular, more than a threefold decrease of unemployment rate in Germany (to 5%). In the remaining countries of that group, the unemployment curves constituted a compact cluster (the most advantageous situation was registered in Austria – less than 5%). In Czech Republic the situation was stable practically in the whole observation period (ca 5,5%), while in Hungary, which initially was similar to Czech Republic, an increase was observed and, as a result, the highest value in the group was registered (almost 10%). In Poland and Slovakia the unemployment of older persons in the years 2002–2007 decreased by over a half[13], and afterwards a small increase was registered. In the third group of countries the highest unemployment rate (20%) was registered, almost uninterruptedly, in Spain. In the last two years the values of unemployment rates in Greece – in comparison to the years 2007–2008 – grew almost fivefold and became almost equal to those in Spain. Compared with this trend, Portugal, again, performed relatively well.

Unemployment by education

The correlation between the level of education and remaining jobless for persons at the age of professional activity is commonly acknowledged these days. A high level usually accompanies a better situation on the labour market, a low level – a worse one (ORGANIŚCIAK-KRZYKOWSKA 2013, p. 34–35). In our study a division into three categories was applied: primary, secondary, and

[12] A slightly decreasing tendency was even identified.
[13] From 14% to 6% and from 17% to 8%, respectively.

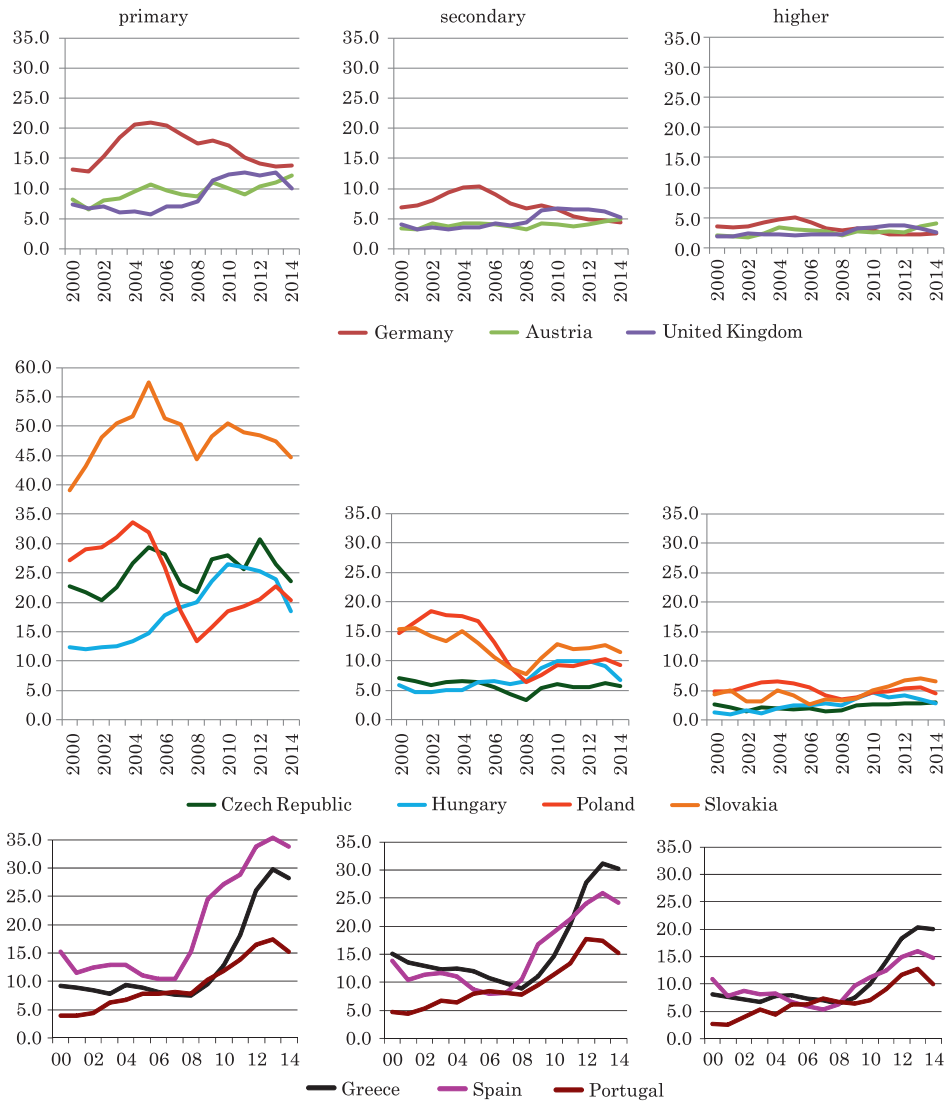

Chart 4. Unemployment rate by education
Source: Author's own study on the basis of data from the Eurostat database.

higher[14]. We have decided to analyse the professionally mobile population, which, from the point of view of legislation, is the most homogeneous and, at the same time, the most numerous population.

[14] In accordance with the recommendations of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), they comprise the following levels: 0–2, 3–4, 5–8.

Among the countries assigned to the first group, in almost the whole observation period the highest unemployment of persons with primary education was registered in Germany (periodically – over 20%). After a short-term stabilization the unemployment rate in this country continually decreased, while it was continually on the rise in Great Britain and Austria, thanks to which in 2014 the situation of Germany did not significantly deviate in this respect from the remaining countries (the range of 10–12%). In the second group, Poland registered a high value and considerable fluctuations of this index: the initial increase (from 27% to nearly 34%), then sudden decrease (to 13%), and then yet another increase. Similar temporary fluctuations were observed in Czech Republic[15] and in Slovakia (an increase to a record-breaking 57% level, slight decrease, and stabilisation below 50%). Hungary experienced a systematic growth of unemployment rates until 2011 and, after a short-term stabilisation – their decrease. In the third group of countries, the least advantageous situation for the persons with primary education existed in Spain (starting from ca 15% level, after 2008 this country went through sudden increase – up to 35%). The unemployment rates in Greece evolved in a similar way – though at a slightly lower level. As far as Portugal is concerned, the increase was not taking place at such a fast pace, but it went on uninterruptedly and, as a result, the unemployment rate increased by four times (to 17%).

In the first group of countries, the fluctuations of unemployment rates for persons with upper secondary education were small. In Austria and Great Britain they ranged between 3% and 6%, while in Germany an increase was followed by a long-term decrease, as a result of which in 2014 this country had one of the lowest rates in the entire EU (4,6%). In the second group of countries, initially Poland distinguished itself in a negative manner[16]. However, in 2008 Poland was slightly "surpassed" by Slovakia (by 2 percent points). In Hungary and Czech Republic the curves reflecting the values of unemployment rates initially had very similar shapes, but later on they were no longer close to each other, and in 2014 they returned to their original positions (5–7%). Just like in the previous cases, here, too, the highest unemployment rates were registered in Spain and Greece. Although they decreased by almost half in the middle of the decade, by its end they started to grow exponentially. The year 2013 turned out to be the worst in these countries' recent history as regards their labour markets. The unemployment rates skyrocketed to as high as 25% in Spain and 30% in Greece. Until 2010 the situation in Portugal was very similar to the ones in Czech Republic and

[15] Increases alternating with decreases, with the value of the measuring index never falling lower than 20%.

[16] The unemployment rate decreased from ca 17% in 2008 to 6%, and after yet another increase it stabilised at the level of ca 10%.

Hungary, however, in the following years it got significantly worse. Nevertheless, the last year of the observation period showed a slight improvement for this country.

The relatively high unemployment rate for persons with the highest level of education (BALCEROWICZ-SZKUTNIK 2014, p. 141) shows the deficiency of the labour market and/or its inability to match the needs of the educational system. Also in this case the countries assigned to the first group had the best situation. In the course of fifteen years the value of this index in Great Britain and Austria never exceeded 4%. Since 2011 Germany enjoyed the same stable trend. In the second group – through the whole observation period – Czech Republic was close to the leaders, while Hungary registered a slightly wider range of fluctuations. In Poland and in Slovakia unemployment rates in the first and the last five-year periods fluctuated between 5 and 6%. Until 2008 Greece and Spain had rather low and relatively stable values of unemployment rates for persons with higher education, and in 2008 Portugal, as a result of systematic growth, was able to reach the level of the above mentioned countries (at 6%). Since that moment each of the countries followed its own path (while the situation in Portugal worsened only slightly, Spain and Greece saw considerable deterioration). Although in the last year unemployment started to decrease, nevertheless this new trend did not change the position of those countries and they continued to rank low among the 28 EU countries.

Summary

During almost the whole observation period, in the first group countries (with the exception of Germany) low values of total unemployment rate were registered and they were not widely differentiated. The countries comprising the second group were more disparate in this respect. They had a higher level of unemployment and their performance could be clearly divided into two subperiods: the first one – until the year 2008, and the second one, after that turning point. In the first period the differentiation of the values of unemployment rates was high, while in the second period it decreased considerably. In the last of the three identified groups the division into two subperiods was even more obvious. However, in the case of this group the first stage was generally characterized by a low level of unemployment, whereas in the second subperiod it more or less "exploded".

In the whole observation period in the majority of the selected countries women were generally more affected by the situation on the labour market. Among the exceptions, there were all three countries from the first group and one from the second group (Hungary). The shapes and runs of the curves related to both genders were very similar, with different levels.

The values of unemployment rates in individual age categories indicated the highest concentration of unemployment in the younger populations, and the lowest – in the oldest populations. Through the whole observation period a minimal value of the unemployment rate among youths was registered in Austria (ca 10%), and after the year 2008 also in Germany, whereas the highest values, especially in the recent years, occurred in Greece and Spain (over 50%).

The analyses conducted confirmed the existence of negative relation between education and unemployment. Unemployed persons with primary education are more vulnerable to the risk of staying unemployed. Slovakia set a record in this respect, since its unemployment rate exceeded 45% (at times it was even higher than 55%). Higher education generally minimized the risk of unemployment, but the difference of values of unemployment rates between Greece (20%) and Germany (slightly above 2%) suggests a limited protective effect ascribed to the completion of higher education.

Conclusion

The study presented above is treated as one of many contributions to the research on the phenomenon of unemployment. Basing these remarks on the comparison of unemployment rates in selected countries (while using a measure which is, after all, considered to be a synthetic indicator of the phenomenon), does not justify offering far-reaching generalizations. In the article we have not discussed the limitations of the applied measure, because its detailed analysis would exceed the space allotted to this article. Nevertheless we hope that the above gathered data, which confirm a number of already available findings and highlight those which have been promoted less frequently, will encourage more people to become interested in improving comparative methods and enrich the discussions on the subject.

The economic crisis seems to affect the situation of labour market in the whole EU in a similar manner, but the distinction of separate indicators of unemployment – in particular sex, but also age and education – makes it impossible to talk about one single labour market. The most important areas of research that need to be carried out in a more detailed manner are undoubtedly the convergence processes of labour markets in the EU countries. Our analysis can serve as an inspiration for research regarding situation of women on the labour market, which, according to unemployment rates, is not always worse than that of men.

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