Abstract

This study provides insights into the attitudes of the Austrian population towards the policy measures taken by the government to mitigate the direct economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. Based on a representative survey of 2,000 individuals aged 20-64 and living in Austria (carried out in June 2020), the findings show a rather strong support for the state interventions. More than 60% of respondents felt that the welfare state has become more important since the onset of the crisis. The strongest support was found among the higher educated and the older population. The majority of respondents and again especially older individuals indicated to worry about a further widening of social inequality between the rich and the poor due to the crisis.

By international comparison, support for income redistribution is strong in Austria. This continued to be the case during the Corona crisis. The support for income redistribution grew even stronger compared to 2018/19 (data from the European Social Survey). Those who felt their own social status to be rather low were the ones who were most strongly in favour of income redistribution; but also among those with a higher subjective social status support for income redistribution was widespread.

Three out of four respondents agreed that the state should do more to prevent people falling into poverty. A smaller share of the population (just below half) thought that the state should provide the unemployed with a decent standard of living (with a stronger support from younger and older individuals as compared to the mid-aged). The current level of social assistance (‘bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung’) was deemed ‘too low’ by about half of the respondents and a gross minimum wage for full-time employees of 1.700€ per month was deemed ‘too low’ by more than 60% of respondents.

The wealth distribution in Austria was evaluated as unfair by the majority of respondents (i.e. too large a difference between the top and low end of the distribution), which is in line with recent findings from the European Social Survey (2018). About two thirds stated that the state should take measures to reduce wealth inequality. Again, those of higher age and those who subjectively felt their social status to be ‘rather low’ were among those most strongly in support of such measures.

Asked about the preferred means for financing the crisis, the stronger taxation of wealth and high incomes received strong support (by about half of the population). The share of respondents supporting the higher taxation of large enterprises was even higher (about 64%). These redistributing options for financing the crisis costs received much stronger support compared to welfare retrenchment (support from less than 20%).