

Allison McKenna

Wealth, Power, and Justice in the EU

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Which EU Member State is the Best and Worst to Pursue a Career with an Appealing Work/Life Balance?

The European Union (EU) is composed of 27 member states, each one bringing a unique set of beliefs, rules and regulations, and cultures. There has been little to no success in truly defining the EU, or at least the personality that their political and economic status shall take on (McCormick 2020, p. 1). Though the EU has been around for a long period of time and are considered to be of “the world’s most advanced and ambitious examples of international cooperation”, they have faced, are currently facing, and will continue to face many challenges and hardships(McCormick 2020, p. xvi). As we have learned about and analyzed the past and current economic and political stance of the EU in its entirety and Eu member states individually, I believe Sweden is the best state to pursue a career while maintaining a good work/life balance while Bulgaria is the worst state to do so.

Sweden became a member of the EU in January 1995 and has a current population of over 10 million(Lindvall 2019). Bulgaria became a member of the EU more recently in January 2007. Bulgaria has a population of almost 7 million and makes up around 1.6% of the total EU population. The membership of Bulgaria into the EU was of major concern and was, in fact, put into question by other member states due to their crime, corruption, and judicial reform(Matthews-Ferrero 2019). These concerns and hostilities towards some member states, like Bulgaria, has caused slight feelings of

detachment to the rest of the EU. The involvement, relationships, and stance within the EU is not consistent across each member state. According to Euractiv, 82% of the Swedish population feel like citizens of the EU whereas only 51% of Bulgarians feel that way (Lindvall 2019, Matthews-Ferrero 2019). As someone who is looking deeper into member states to pursue a career with an appealing work/life balance, I question how this information affects that.

Throughout this paper, I will highlight specific details and evidence that supports my thesis statement claiming Sweden would be the best state to pursue a career in while maintaining a work/life balance and Bulgaria would be the worst state beginning with initial research questions and findings followed by a deeper analysis of qualitative and quantitative research and evidence. It is also crucial to discuss the current pandemic our world is currently dealing with and how that may influence my opinions looking into the near and distant future. By collecting, analyzing, and interpreting a wide variety of data and information, I will be able to make a stronger and more educated decision for my future.

Prior to beginning my research, I asked myself and my peers a thought-provoking and opinionated question: What would be considered to be the most prevalent factors that affect, both negatively and positively, a work/life balance? After discussing the various answers to this question, I determined overall quality of life, corruption, GDP per capita and economic status, work flexibility, and leisure activity participation were among the most important factors to look into.

Overall life satisfaction can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the individual, the country they reside in, their living conditions, and even their health. As I

looked at the overall quality of life for all the EU states, I focused on the variation between a high to medium level and a low level of satisfaction. As you can see in Figure 1 in the Appendix, the variation between Sweden and Bulgaria is quite large. The percentage of Swedish people that are satisfied with their life is 88.6% whereas the percentage of people that recorded a low level of satisfaction was only at 11.4%(EuroStat 2018). The variation between Sweden's responses is 77.2% which is quite a large gap, but it is an extremely positive gap to have. Looking at the data, it is evident that the majority of Swedish people are satisfied with life and I believe level of life satisfaction says a lot about a country and the potential it has to be a great place to live and pursue a career.

In contrast to Sweden's life satisfaction, Bulgaria is the only EU state that has a higher percentage of citizens who believe their lives to be of low satisfaction compared to high-medium. 54% responded with low life satisfaction while only 46.1% responded with high to medium life satisfaction(EuroStat 2018). This made me question why the majority of their citizens say they have low life satisfaction and what factors, both economically and politically, may have affected this response. Following the analysis of level of satisfaction for both Sweden and Bulgaria, I decided that looking into their individual government and economic policies and status would be beneficial to uncover other insights regarding life satisfaction and provide me with further evidence as to why Sweden is the best state to pursue a career with a work/life balance and Bulgaria is the worst.

The roles governments play in the lives of their citizens varies from country to country, but there will always be some level of control no matter what country you live in.

This control spans from positive and supportive to negative and deceitful. One major negative aspect of governmental control is the large potential for corruption. Corruption is a major issue that a lot of countries within the EU face. Oftentimes governments hold such high power over their people and want to compete at such a high level with other countries that they become dishonest and even fraudulent. With that high power, especially in lower-income countries, it is easier for the government to take advantage and spin the truth to continue to gain more power and control over their people.

In 2019, Sweden held the highest control of corruption percentile among all EU states while Bulgaria sat in the 50th percentile which was by far the worst among the EU states(EuroStat 2019), (Figure 2). Personally, I would want to reside in a country that has little to no corruption as that would have the possibility to increase my overall life satisfaction, trust, and pride in my country. I believe having trust in the leaders of my country is very important as they are essentially the gates to being able to provide for my family, participate in life activities, and feeling the freedom one should feel. Corruption can also play a major role in the overall economic status of an individual country, thus having an effect on the GDP per capita as well.

The majority of Sweden's economy is focused on exporting goods to the rest of the EU and beyond. The automotive and transportation industry are among the most profitable manufactured goods in Sweden accounting for 9/10's of industrial output(Norman 2021). Sweden's GDP per capita is \$54,608 USD which is one of the highest in the EU(EuroStat 2018). Though Sweden has a high GDP per capita, it is also one of the most expensive countries to live in due to high taxation. Many citizens are

okay with this, though because of their high-quality education and healthcare that result from those high taxes.

Bulgaria's GDP per capita is only \$9,273 which is clearly much lower than Sweden(Eurostat 2018). The fact that Bulgaria's GDP per capita is so low is a direct indicator of an underperforming economy. This also has direct correlation to the fact that they are quite corrupt. In fact, allegations have been made against Bulgaria's judiciary branch regarding nepotism, corruption, and inappropriate political and business influence which is believed to have affected the use of their individual country funds along with the use of EU funds(Heritage Foundation 2020). Not only does this decrease economic and political freedom which then decreases standards of living, but it also causes major issues in overall trust of the government and other officials. According to EuroStat, only 21% of Bulgarians reported that they trust their national legal system and only 49% trust their police(EuroStat 2019). This is not somewhere that I would feel comfortable visiting for a longer period of time let alone living and pursuing a career in.

Oftentimes work becomes so overwhelming that one needs to take some personal time. This allows for de-stressing, taking care of family, or just having fun and improves overall quality of life. If taking time off was not an option, it would be hard to have a good work/life balance as work would always take priority over life's big and small moments. Figure 3 in the Appendix shows the responses for every EU member state. You must keep in mind that there are a different number of respondents within each country which will skew the data, but still represents the big picture quite well.

The four categories, or responses, presented in this dataset from EuroStat include generally possible, rarely possible, and no working time flexibility. The blue line represents the total number of responses for each country. 54% of the respondents in Sweden say that it is generally possible to take whole days off from work and only 33% of Bulgarians have the same response. In Bulgaria, there was a slightly higher percentage who reported that it was rarely possible to take full days off. Personally, this is quite important for me when determining if I could maintain a good work/life balance. The United Kingdom is one of the only other EU member state who has a much higher “generally possible” response percentage than the other two response categories.

Not only is it more generally possible to take whole days off in Sweden, but they also work an average of 36 hours per week(EuroStat 2020). In comparison, Bulgarian’s work an average of 41 hours per week and still have a much lower GDP than Sweden(Eurostat 2020). To put those numbers into perspective, the average working hours per week for the EU as a whole is about 37 hours. In the United States, a vast majority of the working population work 40 or more hours a week. They are constantly consumed by work and trying to be as successful as they can be. They are driven by titles and money which takes away from a work/life balance, even when that isn't the intention. To only have to work an average of 36 hours per week would be an extremely large benefit to achieving the work/life balance and having the time and energy to enjoy life outside of the office.

Even though you need the time and energy to be able to enjoy life, you also need the funds to do so. With a high GDP per capita, only 10.8% of the Swedish respondents could not afford to participate in leisure activity(EuroStat 2015). Shown in Figure 4,

Sweden is among the top 5 countries who have very low percentages of people who cannot afford to participate in leisure activity. In contrast, many more Bulgarians respondents could not afford to participate. As you can see in the chart, approximately 47.8% can not participate, which is among one of the highest percentages in this dataset (EuroStat 2015). This information is quite important when determining which EU States would have the best work/life balance. If individuals or households don't have good opportunities to make money, they will have to give other things up, like indulging in extra leisure activities, to be able to provide funds for the essentials.

GDP per capita and work flexibility may have once been the main determinants of having the ability, or lack of, to participate in leisure activities, but now countries face a much larger determinant. COVID-19 has made an extremely large impact around the world and it is something I must take into consideration when determining where I would think to be the best and worst member state to pursue a career in. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the EU faces many challenges, many of which the EU has been built on. The major crisis that the EU has faced is referred to as the seven crisis. According to McCormick, "The EU had been through many crises before, but never of such breadth and depth as these seven, capped by the Covid-19 crisis that broke in early 2020. The pressures created have been enormous, and have been made more serious by more general stresses such as a growing disenchantment with government, criticism of the effects of globalization, concerns about international terrorism, and a revival of the anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiments that the EU had – in part – been created to address" (McCormick 2020, p. xvi). Sweden's response to COVID-19 was quite different compared to a majority of the EU. They implemented a risk-tailored

strategy which allowed schools, businesses, and other public places to remain open and running. Even though a decrease in GDP per capita was inevitable, they were able to bounce back better than Bulgaria. Bulgaria took a different approach and implemented a late-term suppression-strategy response. This response was quite similar to the US as it caused the country, and the economy, to shut down. Figure 5 shows the comparison between Sweden and Bulgaria's % change in GDP across the last year with Sweden being the yellow line and Bulgaria the blue. Both economies took a hit between quarter 1 and 2 of 2020, but Sweden experienced a +6.4% increase from Q2 to Q3 while Bulgaria also experienced a positive change, but only +4.3%(EuroStat 2021). Figure 6 in the Appendix shows the excess mortality rate for both Sweden and Bulgaria in the last year.

There was a slight spike in excess mortality early on for Sweden, but the rate leveled out and only saw one more even smaller spike in November 2020 while Bulgaria saw an extremely large spike in November 2020 and has only decreased slightly since. Both charts indicate some amount of success in the different strategic decisions, but it is clear that Sweden's is more suitable to maintain a work/life balance and overall mentally stable life as they tried hard to keep the economy alive and the well-being of their citizens in-tact.

Though all COVID-19 responses do have strengths, weaknesses, successes, and failures, I believe Sweden's response has seen much better results than other countries who suppressed their country. With that being said, the current pandemic did not retract my initial thesis, it only made me that much more confident in my decision.

Sweden's current economic, political, and social status also makes me quite confident that it would be the best EU member state to pursue a career with a good work/life balance. Though there may be other states with almost, or equally as appealing working and living conditions, I believe I would be happier in Sweden, especially as they are one of the most simplistic and happy countries to live in. (Modak 2020). On the other side of it, Bulgaria would be my last choice to pursue a career with a good work/life balance because of its poor quality, uncertain, and corrupt economic, political, and social status. The inability to define the EU has not stopped individual countries from struggling, thriving, and making their own paths moving forward, especially with COVID-19. I can only hope that countries, like Sweden, will be able to reach out a helping-hand to countries like Bulgaria and finally allow the European Union to align and become a strong and positive world force.

Appendix:

Figure 1

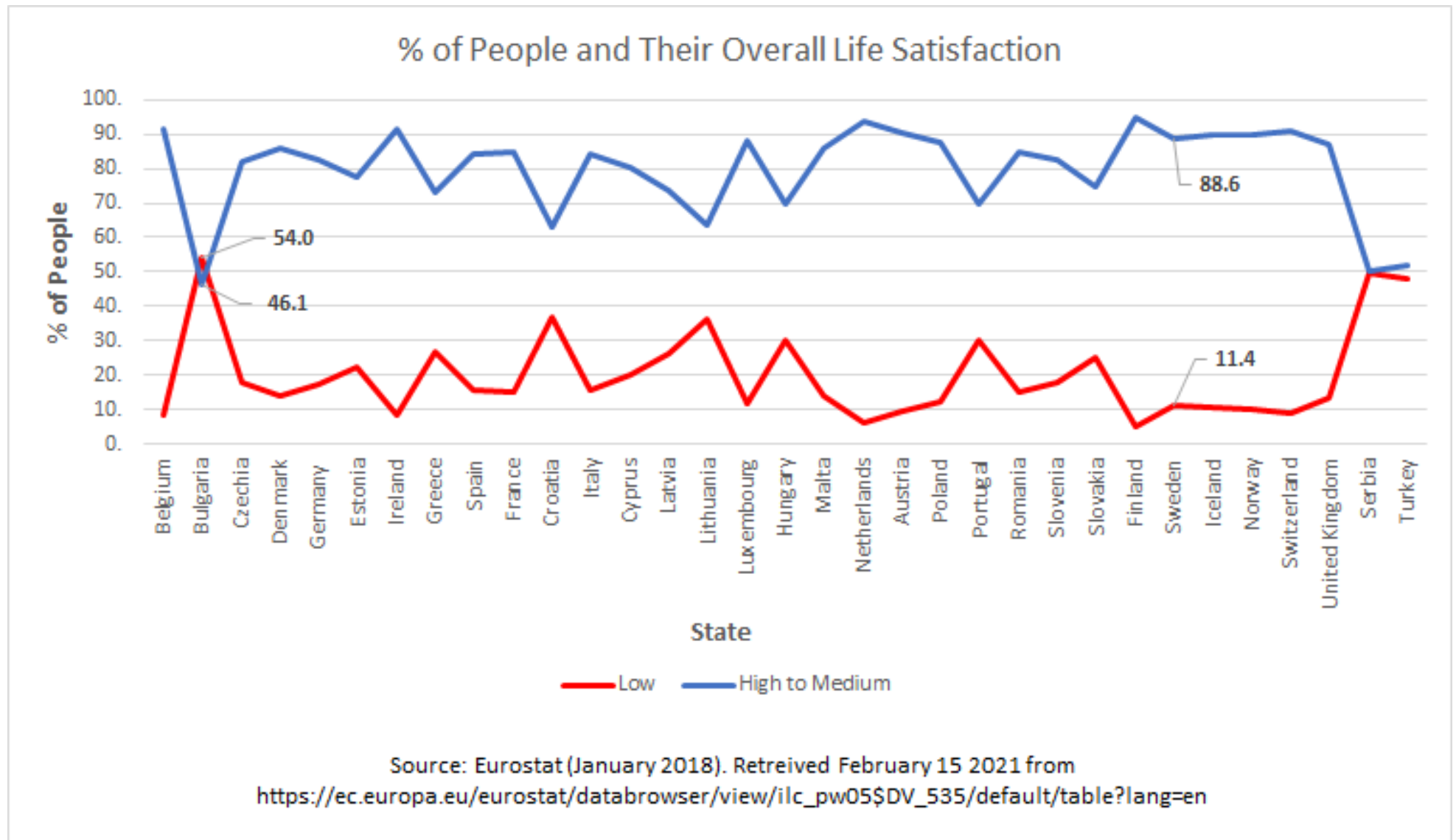


Figure 2

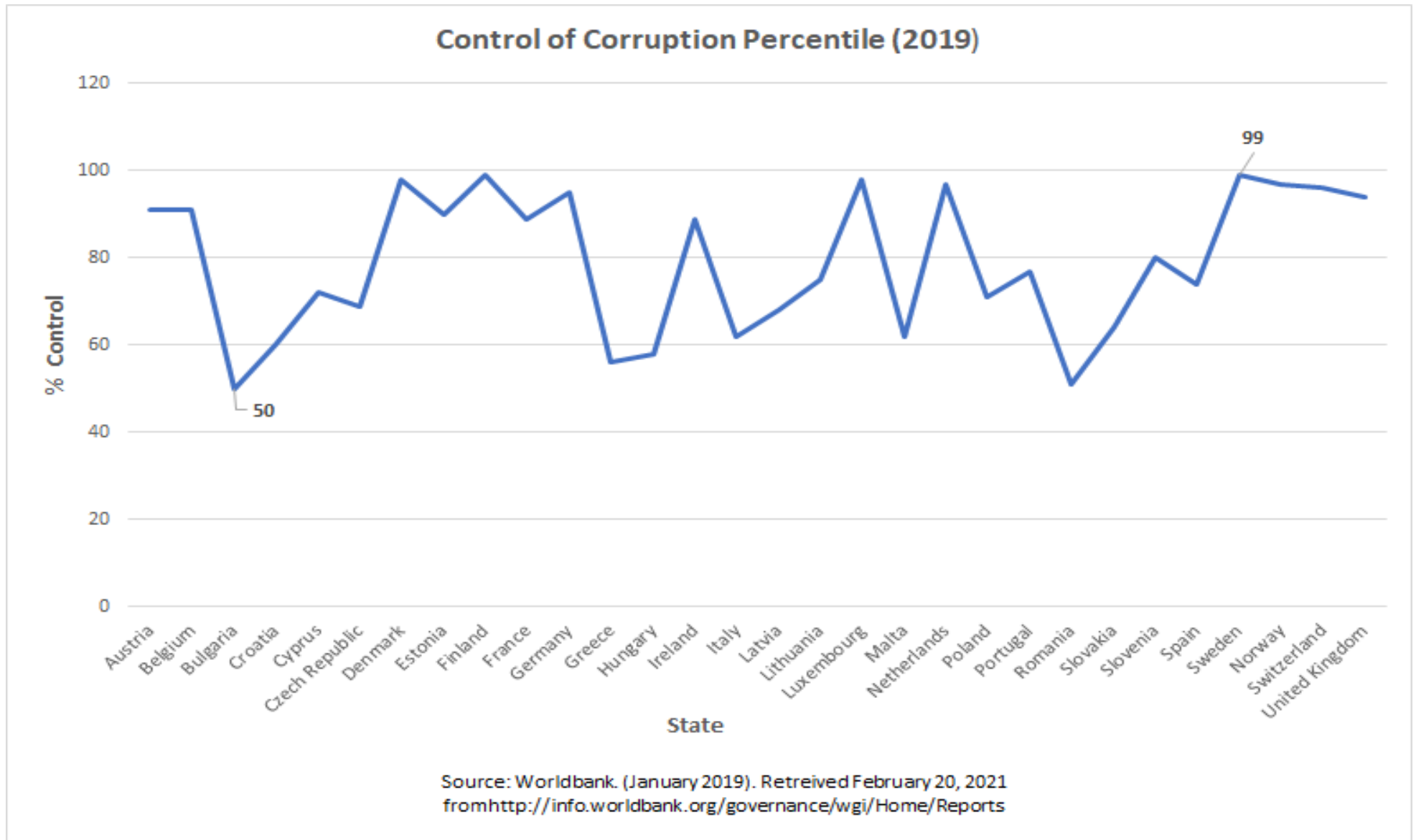


Figure 3

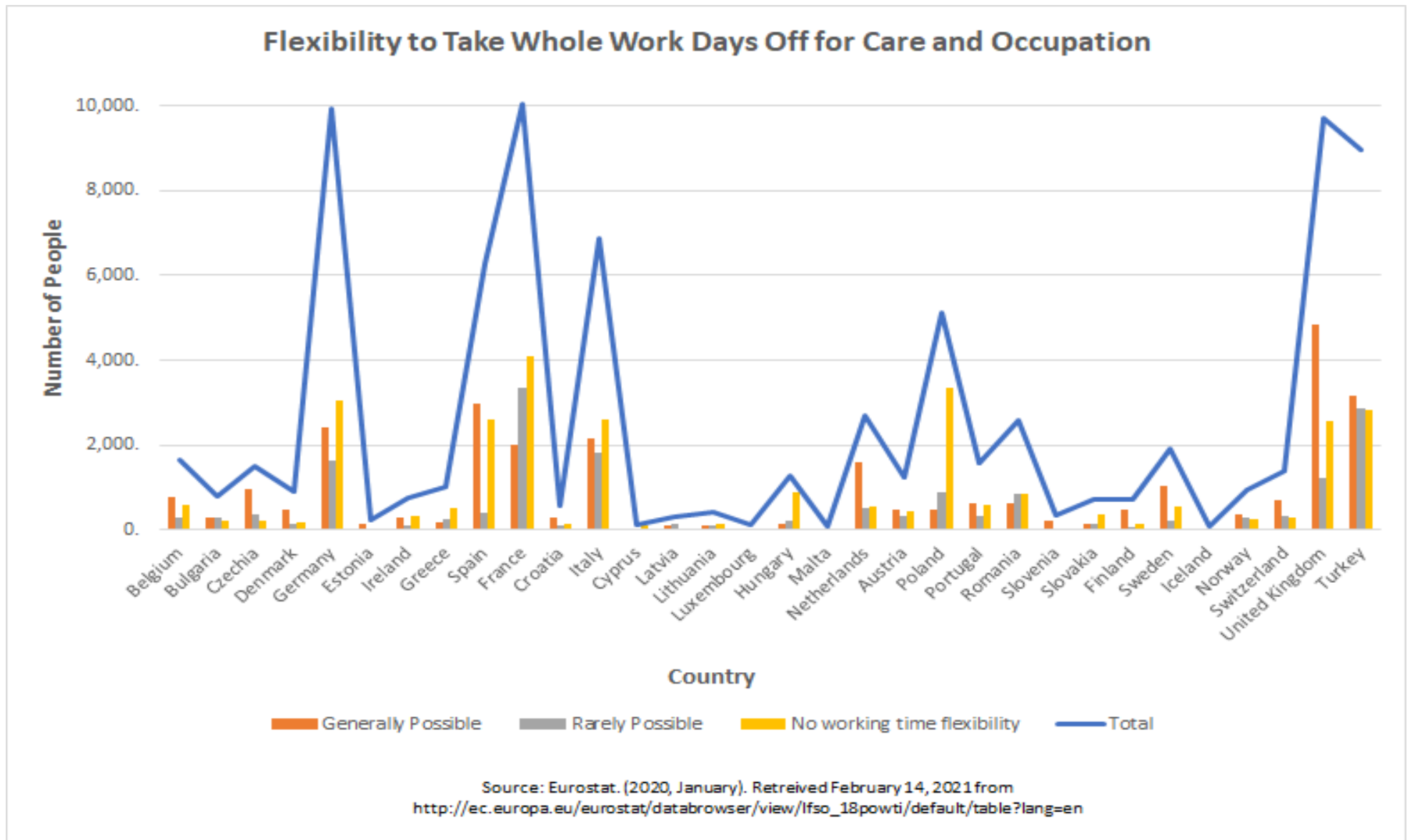


Figure 4

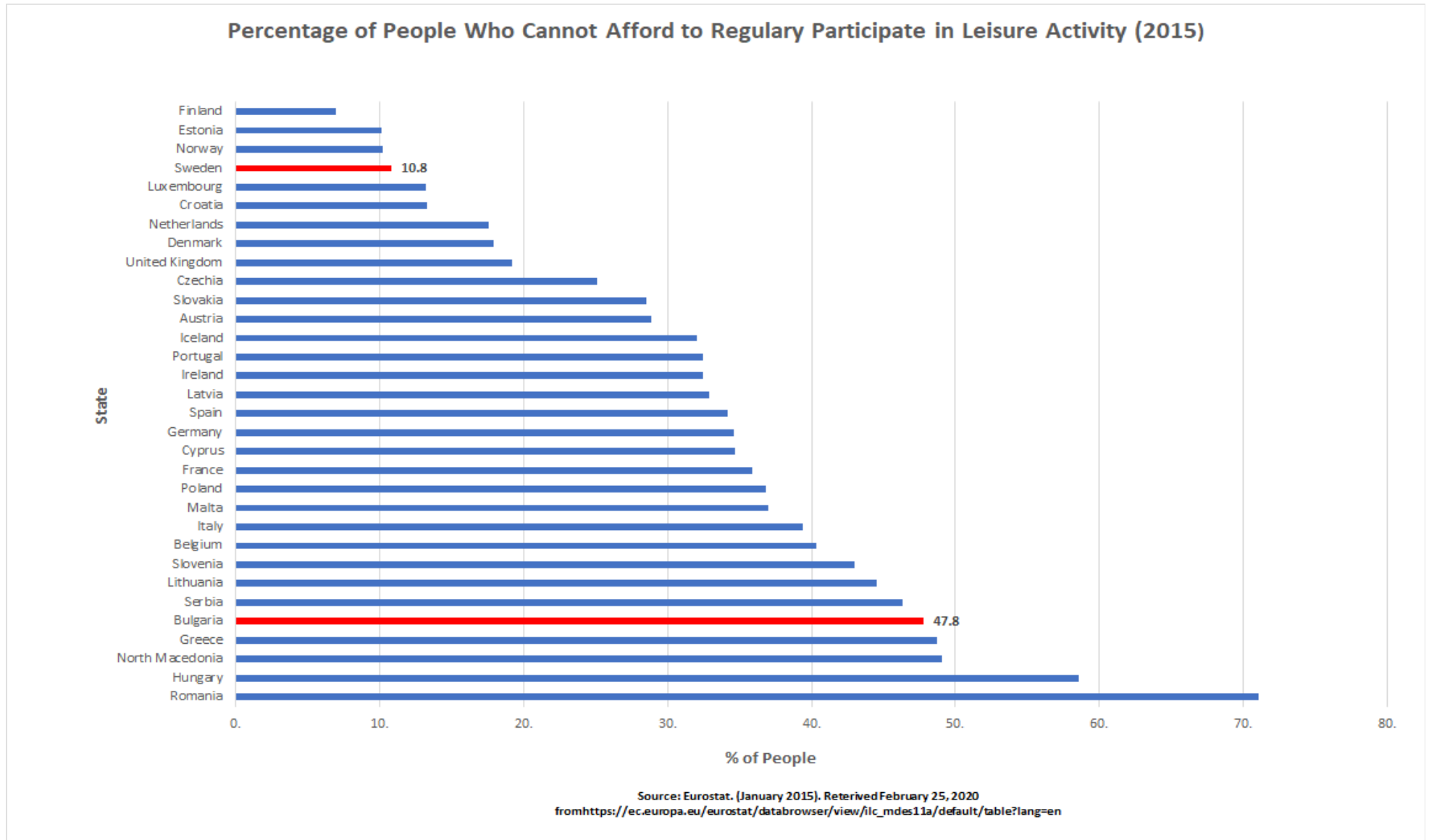
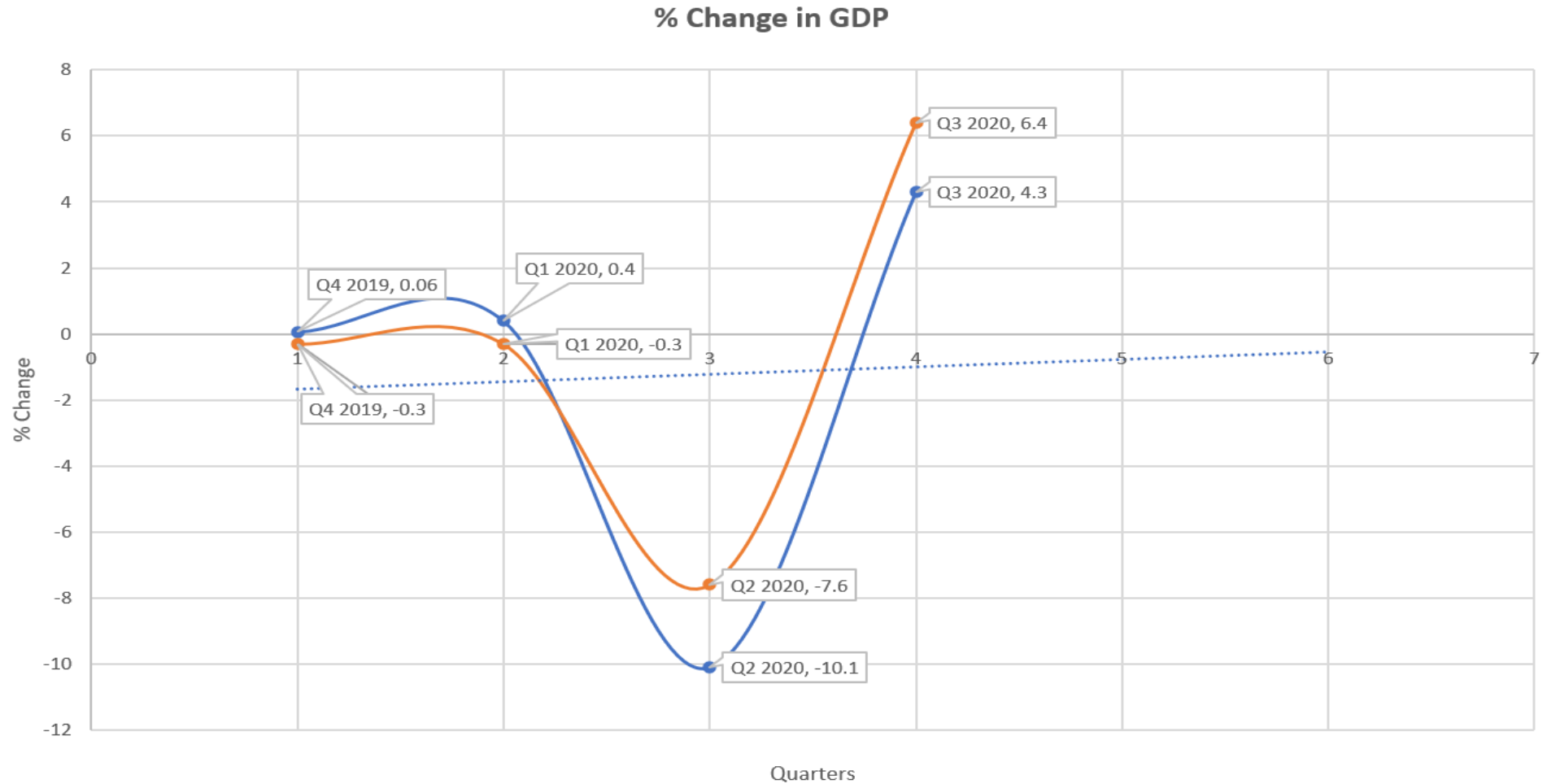
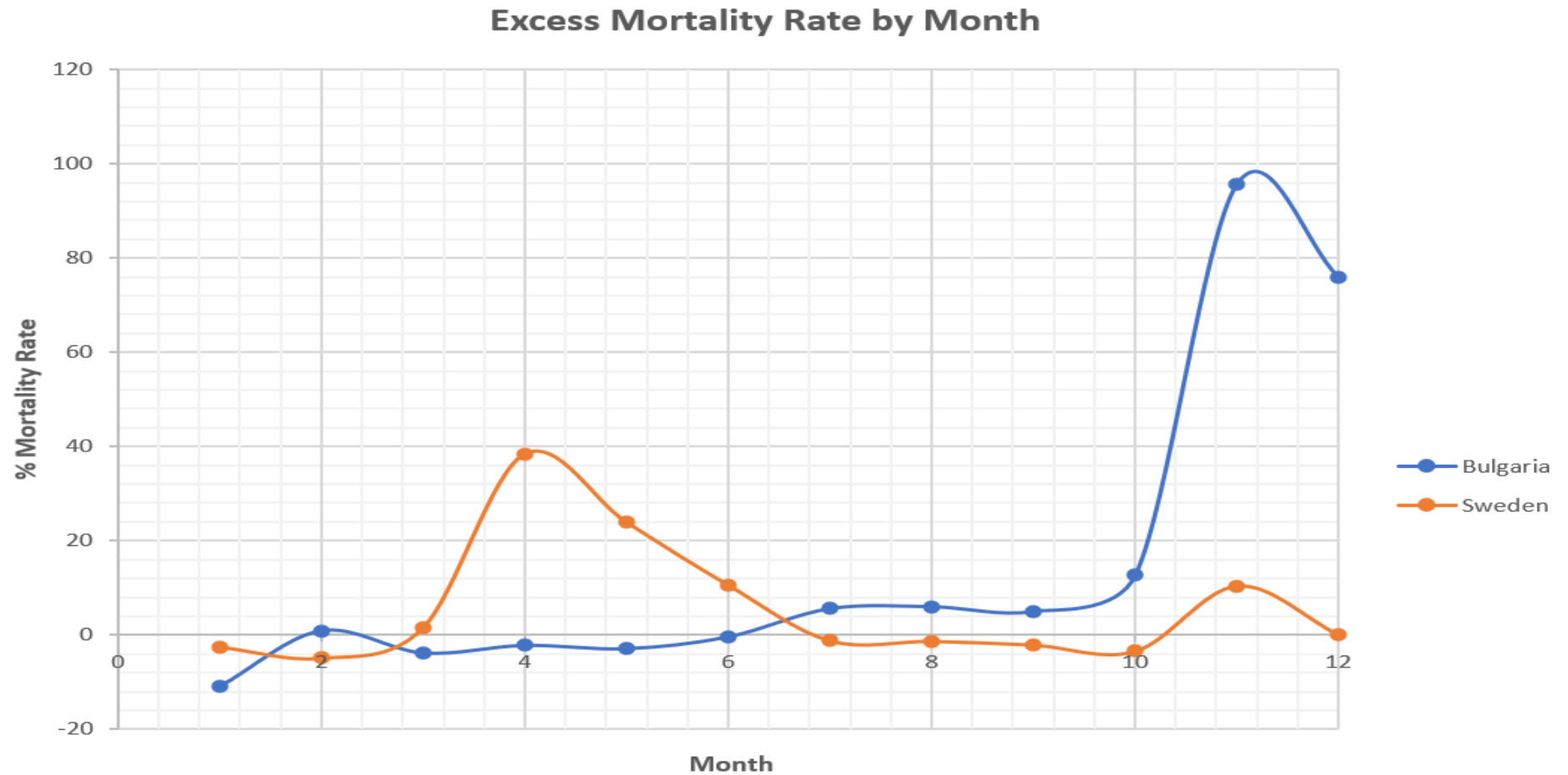


Figure 5



Source: Eurostat. (January 2021). Retrieved March 7, 2021 from:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMQ_10_GDP__custom_77309/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=b74febcd-e664-4f22-9c93-2ef510fe371f

Figure 6



Source: Eurostat. (January, 2021). Retrieved March 7, 2020 from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_MEXRT_custom_342641/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=7c411664-aa81-460c-aa40-22472512fe8b

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Baral, Stefan., Chandler, Rebecca., Gil Prieto, Ruth., Gupta, Sunetra., Mishra, Sharmistha., Kulldorff, Martin. 2020. "Leveraging epidemiological principles to evaluate Sweden's COVID-19 response" *Annals of Epidemiology*, No 54 (October): 21-26. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33242596/>

This scholarly article written by Baral, Chandler, Gil Prieto, Gupta, Mishra, and Kulldorff discusses and evaluates the response to COVID-19 that Sweden had. Not only do they discuss and evaluate the responses, but they do it in regard to epidemiological principles. Sweden implemented a risk-tailored approach and the article provides graphs and charts showing COVID-19 deaths as well. They discuss specific details of this approach and how there were both successes and failures. This is a reliable source as it is an academic article and backs up their opinions and discussions with data.

Eurostat. Jan, 2020. *Average Number of Weekly Hours of Other Types of Care by Age Group - Children with at Least One Hour of Other Types of Care*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_camnothg0/default/table?lang=en

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EuroStat. Jan 15 2021. *Percentage of the population rating their satisfaction as high, medium or low by domain, sex, age and educational attainment level*, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_pw05\\$DV_535/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_pw05$DV_535/default/table?lang=en)

EuroStat. Jan, 2015. *Persons who cannot afford to regularly participate in a leisure activity by age, sex and income group*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdes11a/default/table?lang=en

EuroStat, March, 2021. *Average number of usual weekly hours of work in main job, by sex, professional status, full-time/part-time and economic activity (from 2008 onwards, NACE Rev. 2) - hours*,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsq_ewhun2/default/table?lang=en

Numbeo, March 2021. *Cost of Living In Sweden*,
https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Sweden

This source is in the form of a database rather than an informative article. It provides an in-depth breakdown of Sweden's cost of living and also provides various graphs and the top 5 most expensive Swedish cities to live in.

Lindvall, Franny., Steeland, Robert. 2019. "EU Country Briefing: Sweden." *Euractiv*, March 11, 2019.
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/eu-country-briefing-sweden/>

This article from Euractiv is a brief of Sweden's economy and politics. It provides a brief history of Sweden in the EU and various statistics and data to dive deeper into their position including GDP, unemployment rate, the government structure, and ends with various predictions moving forward. This article is reliable as there is a wide variety of data that is provided. It also provides information, like authors and dates, for further trust.

Matthews-Ferrero, Daniel., Stoyanova, Marta., Steenland, Robert. 2019. "EU Country Briefing: Bulgária." *Euractiv*, April 18, 2019.
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/eu-country-briefing-bulgaria/>

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Modak, Sebastian. , Morton, Caitlin. "10 Happiest Countries in the World, Ranked."
Conde Nast Traveler, April 10, 2020.

<https://www.cntraveler.com/gallery/the-10-happiest-countries-in-the-world>

This brief article from Conde Nast Traveler provides a list of the top happiest countries in the world followed by a brief summary of why it is one of the happiest. This is more of an opinion article, but the information provided, for Sweden specifically, is general but very agreeable.

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