

Proof positive? Testing the universal basic income as a post-COVID new normal: the cases of the Baltic and Canada

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Abstract The global response to the coronavirus has highlighted gaping holes in the social security net. Resultantly, the unconditional basic income (UBI) idea has gained traction worldwide throughout 2020, both among the public and politicians looking for solutions to address poverty and stimulate economic recovery. The shift from viewing the UBI as a utopia towards recognizing it as an internationally acceptable policy requires further exploration. By comparing the pandemic-sparked interventionist policies on both sides of the Atlantic, the paper analyses the de facto introduction of the UBI in socially progressive countries, taking Canada and the Baltics as test cases. The authors conclude that the global crisis, exposing the alarming state of affairs of social security, has reopened an intense debate over the role of government interventions and the scope of the welfare state and paved the way for reforms that would embrace better state funding, with an emphasis on social solidarity.

Keywords: UBI, EU, interventionism, welfare state, pandemic, wealth, poverty.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has presented the world with a colossal challenge. The globally mounted response against the coronavirus pandemic has included some critical elements of unconditional income. This idea gained significant traction throughout 2020, both as a solution for addressing a rising wealth gap and stimulating worldwide economic recovery. This paper argues that the Universal Basic Income (UBI) has been widely and rapidly adopted internationally as a policy tool thanks to the pandemic. That policy response reflects the burgeoning electorates' demand for a better social justice distribution, for greater economic equality and income security.

The rapid and massive shock of the crisis containment measure has plunged the global economy into a severe downturn. World Bank expected that in 2020 the planet's GDP would decrease by 5.2%, meaning the deepest recession since World War II when the largest part of the economies would face a decline in per capita production since 1870. OECD indicates a fall of 4,2 of global GDP % in 2020 of global GDP and its

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lift by 4,2 % in 2021 (OECD, 2020a.) The IMF made a similar forecast, expecting the global economy to grow 5.5 percent in 2021 and 4.2 percent in 2022 (IMF, 2021.) Economic activity in advanced economies in 2020 was expected to decline by 7%, as domestic supply and demand, trade and finance were seriously undermined. Per capita income was promised a 3.6% decline, plunging millions of people into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), labour markets around the world were disrupted in 2020 on a historically unprecedented scale. In 2020, 8.8 percent of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs (assuming a 48-hour working week), and the labour market disruption in 2020 far exceeded the impact of the global financial crisis of 2009 (ILO, 2021.)

Even before the pandemic, economic disparity in the world had levelled off very slowly. Caused by a coronavirus, the recession hit the population's poor and vulnerable segments the hardest way. They primarily faced diseases, loss of jobs and income, food supply disruptions, school closures, and reduced remittances' flows because of the recession-induced drop in demand for migrant workers' services (OECD, 2020b.) Simultaneously, the crisis has opened up new opportunities for humanity and probably brought the inevitable future much closer. It also applies to business and social technologies and innovations that companies and governments have delayed, and the virus has forced them to implement. For example, a sharp jump in the transition to digitalization around the world, which, in particular, has changed forever online shopping, has given the green light to remote work and education everywhere (UNCTAD, 2020.)

It is not surprising that the problem of supporting the most vulnerable categories, coming to the fore, has particularly highlighted the imbalances in the distribution of national wealth, leading to the erosion of the middle class due to the stagnation of its income in recent decades. Significantly, the approach adopted by developed Western countries - lavish spending by governments pouring money into the economic conflagration-was different from the fiscal austerity measures that governments resorted to as the main neoliberalism-inspired recipe in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which measures are not entirely useful and appreciated in 2020 due to different conditions provoked by the Covid-19 crisis. A move away from the neoliberal policies and neoliberal approach is unlikely to be the only policy remedy for overcoming this crisis. The actions taken by governments since the very beginning show that some lessons have been learned from the previous crisis and its management. As a result, an austerity policy is not applied to the public sector; the public sector and institutions consider themselves the guarantors of their citizens' safety and security. (OECD, 2020b.) By comparing the pandemic-sparked interventionist policies of governments in some Western countries on both sides of the Atlantic, the paper analyses political, regulatory, and social avenues and restraints manifested themselves to date, scrutinizing anti-crisis measures of social protection enacted by Canada and Baltic states - that are among the solid performers in the top league of socially progressive countries (The Social Progress Imperative, 2020) - as a test case for the de facto introduction of

unconditional basic income introduction in societies based around a market economy. The paper argues that the UBI has been widely and rapidly adopted internationally as a counter-pandemic policy tool. That policy response reflects the burgeoning electorates' demand for a better social justice distribution, greater economic equality and income security. Some specific measures that amounted to the UBI elements will be assessed by experts' and public opinion about this policy instrument, perception and criticism reflected in the mainstream media conversation, based on the policy enactments chronicled, and the government narrative.

The UBI experiments: the lessons of history

The novel coronavirus has caused unprecedented government interventions in many Western countries, the EU Member States included. The challenges are similar to a large extent in every Member State. All governments have to mobilise resources to provide post-disaster health and financial services to communities, businesses and individuals. Strategies developed for preventing, managing and mitigating the stress and anxiety for Europeans, even with some uncertainty, can lead to socio-economic recovery. That quickly gave rise to a discussion about unconditional income for everyone as an urgent element of well-being in the modern world, which needs mechanisms to dampen social frustration, arming populists with trump cards in the political arena, as demonstrated by the success of Donald Trump in the United States, and that of his associates in other Western countries (Eisler, 2016). The idea of state interventionism's increased role in eliminating accumulated imbalances is increasingly taking hold of minds when discussing the welfare states. It is seen as a critical tool in the arsenal of post-pandemic economic recovery and a contemporary manifestation of the humanistic idea: 'My hope is that governments understand that technocratic paradigms (whether state-centred or market-driven) are not enough to address this crisis or the other great problems affecting humankind,' the head of the Catholic Church wrote. In a letter dated Easter Sunday, on 12 April 2020, Pope Francis, reflecting on 'life after the pandemic,' has urged to consider a widespread introduction of a Universal Basic Wage 'that would ensure and concretely achieve the ideal, at once so human and so Christian, of no worker without rights' (Vatican News, 2020.)

The bell sounding from the temple resonates with merchants' attitudes, too. Tesla Inc chief and billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, who at the start of 2021 surpassed Amazon.com Inc's top boss Jeff Bezos to become the world's richest man, with a net worth of more than \$188.5 billion, has been an advocate for a UBI for years. In 2018, he envisaged that unconditional wages would be necessary for the future amid the growing robotization of jobs worldwide. Worth mentioning that Bezos, the second richest man on the planet, has also, reportedly, made a case for a universal guaranteed income (Pendleton, 2021; Space News Pod, 2019; Galloway, 2017.) Last but not least, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has become just one more billionaire campaigning for what he called universal basic income as a means of 'giving everyone a cushion to try new things' in a society that measures progress not just by economic metrics (The Harvard Gazette, 2017.)

The Stanford Basic Income Lab defines the UBI as a ‘distinct forms in different historical and geographic contexts. It varies based on the funding proposal, the level of payment, the frequency of payment, and the particular policies proposed around it. Each of these parameters are fundamental, even if a range of versions still technically count as UBI (a universal, unconditional, individual, regular and cash payment).’

Indeed, the idea of guaranteed income for everyone has been on the surface for decades. Nevertheless, it was the extraordinary 2020 that gave a boost to it as a policy with growing currency. The notion is seeing a rapid and widespread shift from viewing the universal basic wage concept as a dreamland towards recognizing it as a workable choice in the after-Trump era, which saw the rich being made richer, partly thanks to the tax cuts introduced by the evidently most controversial president in the US history, while deepening overall income divisions (US Department of the Treasury, n.d.; Drucker and Tankersley, 2019.)

That said, the practical realisation of the programmes rooting in the unconditional state welfare in the context of the international answer to the COVID-19 requires further exploration. The debates, both scholar and political ones, regarding the UBI’s relevance as a policy response are heated, indeed. A new backdrop for it is provided with the growing automation of jobs, putting pressure on wages and working hours, with low-skilled people and youth, are among those most at risk (OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2019). This technological revolution makes a goal of full employment even less attainable, pushing more politicians, policy advisors and business leaders to advocate for unconditional income as a natural development of a welfare state. Furthermore, according to recent opinion, a re-orientation of welfare distribution would mitigate the effects of changes in the nature of the labour and labour market, “it might facilitate a break away from neoliberal capitalism and towards a post-work condition” (Mathers, 2019). It can be seen that the notion of the UBI invites a strong moral and political critique that generally revolves around two main lines of argument: first, when given money for nothing, people turn deprived of stimuli for a job and even lose the meaning that work provides in life while the overall situation is harmful to economy; second, the supposedly exorbitant cost of such policy (Matthews, 2017.)

However, further knowledge related to socio-economic consequences of the UBI is planned to be gained and analysed by the Basic Income Pilot Project started in spring 2021 by scientists at the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin, the non-profit association Mein Grundeinkommen e.V., the University of Cologne and the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods. The project suggests studying whether unconditionally guaranteed income leads to fundamental changes in the context of health, work, digital revolution, cohesion, politics and consumption and to estimate possible social consequences of an unconditional basic income as well as to derive bases for the calculation of models for the realistic financing of a basic income for everyone. Such models could be developed when jobs would be slashed due to ongoing digitalization and automation. The assumption is “people get more creative and become freer and happier if they do not constantly face the pressure to earn enough money to get by” (Deutsche Welle, 2020.)

The UBI concept gained popularity on the global stage as a theoretical remedy for fighting inequality and poverty. According to the UN, ‘the feasibility of financing a UBI that would substitute for other public transfers and the trade-offs it would entail dependent on the country context, even in countries of the OECD, current spending on social protection would not be enough to cover a UBI at or even close to the poverty line- estimated at 50 percent of the median disposable income’ (UNDESA, 2020.) In the context of ongoing debates on changes in the world of work, the interest in a universal and unconditional cash transfer as a potential to compensate workers for increasingly insecure employment and to avoid overly bureaucratic social protection systems is growing. Moreover, this trend is associated with income inequality and poverty, which governments across the world tackle in different ways and use various universal and targeted social protection schemes. These include income tax regulation, social benefit programs and minimum wage regulation. Even before the pandemic, economic inequality in the world levelled off very slowly (UNDESA, 2020a) that stimulates debate on the UBI, which provides a safety net for every individual without any precondition (Van Parijs, 2013.) The concept of UBI implies a lump sum payment by the government to all members of the community, regardless of their age, employment or social status.

Several nations have experimented with the introduction of guaranteed income so far. The most famous case has been offered by Finland, which conducted the world’s first statutory, nationwide and randomized basic income trial that has produced somewhat encouraging preliminary results: a perception of improved well-being. In the experiment, which lasted from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018, 2,000 randomly selected unemployed persons aged 25-58 were paid a monthly tax-exempt basic income of 560 euros regardless of any other income they may have had or whether they were actively looking for work. The experiment was launched by Finland’s Prime Minister Juha Sipilä center-right government, mulling over the possibility to reform the Finnish social security system so that it better meets the challenges for the future of jobs, amid slow recovery from a three-year recession that ended in Finland in 2015 (Forsell, 2016.) The funding recipients consequently experienced less financial insecurity, having fewer stress symptoms, fewer difficulties concentrating, and fewer health problems. Respondents who received a guaranteed basic income had more trust in other people and societal institutions – political leaders, parties, police and the courts. The researchers found that confidence in fellow citizens and institutions is essential to individual well-being and society’s functioning at large. What is crucial, receiving a basic income did not decrease the recipients’ willingness to look for employment (Kansaneläkelaitos - The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, n.d.) However, the government found the trial a useful source of data and evidence for the future reform of the Finnish social security system (Yle, 2020.)

Apart from Finland, offered arguably the most comprehensive pilot, several nations have tried basic income experiments, albeit mostly short-lived and small-scale ones: the United States, Brazil, Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, Iran, Kenya, Namibia, India, China (Hong Kong and Macao), and Japan (Samuel, 2020.)

In an EU-wide survey from 2016, 64% of respondents supported the idea of ‘A basic income is an income unconditionally paid by the government to every individual regardless of whether they work and irrespective of any other sources of income. It replaces other social security payments and is high enough to cover all basic needs (food, housing, et cetera) according to the survey results in April 2016 (Jaspers, 2016.) A new European Citizens Initiative (ECI), “Start Unconditional Basic Incomes (UBI) throughout the EU” (ECI 2020), registered at the beginning of the crisis on the 15 May 2020, with the collection dates from 25 September 2020 to 25 December 2021. The aim is to introduce unconditional basic income throughout the EU, which ensures every person’s material existence and opportunity to participate in society as part of its economic policy. This shall be reached while remaining within the competencies conferred to the EU by the Treaties. The prime objective is to reduce regional disparities to strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU and to the joint statement by the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, stated in 2017, in its response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that “the EU and its MS will also support efficient, sustainable and equitable social protection systems to guarantee basic income” to combat inequality and to help to shape the EU by calling on the European Commission to propose new laws (Official Journal of the European Union, 2017.)

Interest in UBI has fuelled as a possible answer to social challenges resulting from the Covid-19 crisis, which accelerated discussions about the governments’ role in an economic and social situation. Due to the adverse socio-economic effects caused by the crisis, governments across the world have implemented different ways to tackle already existing trends related to income inequality, poverty and rising fears of job losses due to automation and structural changes in labour markets; the so-called new deprived social class while facing insecurity and unemployment, could trigger a severe threat to political stability and democratic values.

The Baltic States: a re-orientation of welfare distribution?

The region’s economic development path is not socially cohesive. According to the European Commission, Lithuania is taking progressive steps to reduce poverty and inequality, but the tax and benefit system’s effectiveness is limited (European Commission, 2020b.) In Latvia’s case, recent reforms to the taxing and redistributive policies have shown little progress in addressing income poverty and inequality issues, which calls for alternative remedies (European Commission, 2020c). In Estonia, the income tax reform would have an insignificant effect on reducing income inequality. However, the preliminary estimates suggest that the reform somewhat reduced the previously relatively high tax wedge for low and middle-income earners (European Commission, 2020d.) All three countries have exceptionally high rates of relative poverty risk and income inequality. According to the latest statistics, in 2019, at risk of income poverty (more than 1 in 5 persons) in Latvia (22.9%) - the second-highest among the EU members, fourth-highest Estonia (21.7%) and the sixth highest in Lithuania (20.6%). Furthermore, as confirmed by Eurostat, these data refer to the

year before EU MS introduced the measures against the spread of COVID-19. It will serve as one of the benchmarks for analysing the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the next period (Eurostat, 2020.)

EU cooperation is essential in supporting the Baltic States' economies and population as the small states with small institutions and limited administrative capacity are vulnerable to external shocks. The UBI could be an instrument to the list of remedies to overcome the current multidimensional crisis. Furthermore, the Unconditional Basic Income suggested by the European Citizens Initiative has attracted public attention in times of the ongoing unique, global and multidimensional crisis. The Baltic States citizens support the Initiative and the share of their countries' thresholds on collected signatories by 25 January 2021 in Lithuania accounted 2.59%; however, Latvia and Estonia made 49.22% and 40.24%, respectively. The numbers are increasing daily, showing citizens' support of changes in the social protection system inclined by the Covid-19 emergency (European Union, 2020.)

The analysis by experts in the Baltic States considers the UBI's implementation from the perspective of improving the well-being of people at risk of poverty, social inclusion, and the efficiency of existing social security systems in critical situations of 2020 and 2021. However, the UBI implementation needs further considerations as it could negatively affect an existing income inequality because the state budget and social insurance resources are not sufficient to provide both UBI and social benefits. Furthermore, a small amount of the UBI would not balance the existing benefits, and according to studies, the UBI implementation could even lead to deteriorating effects on income equality and the risk of poverty (Laurinavičius and Laurinavičius, 2016).

However, there are arguments in favour of the UBI related to inefficiencies of the existing social support systems. The UBI, in turn, is aimed to provide greater income security and even more, it would also have a positive effect on the labour market by reducing the unemployment trap and the low-income trap, people could more actively engage in activities, such as starting a business, re-training, and engaging in education – a very important trend when digitisation and automation are rapidly changing the requirements for workers' skill sets. The existing social protection systems are not always meeting the demands of the modern labour market, as evidenced by the growing popularity of “gig jobs” and self-employment. Some basic income model elements could simplify and improve the existing social security systems (The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018.) However, the experts of the Swedbank suggested considering the feasible size of the UBI in case of its implementation in the Baltics, ‘if all government social protection spending were distributed equally across the population, this would yield monthly UBI payments of only EUR 117-166, around 48-55% of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. If only non-elderly spending were to be distributed in equal amounts to those below the retirement age, then the monthly UBI payments would be below EUR 100. Paying only half of UBI to children increases the UBI paid to those older than 16 only marginally - in the range of 9-12% for both alternatives - but UBI remains significantly below the poverty line’ (Swedbank, 2017.) These estimates confirm that the UBI model is not fully convincing from the economic and social perspectives.

Additionally, social insurance programmes are based on contributions and expected benefits, which could conflict with the UBI concept. Furthermore, at a political level, a decision-making process should be based on a consensus between social partners based on an institutional setting as a tripartite social dialogue.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, the Baltic governments applied different emergency measures to deal with the crisis's impact on society and most vulnerable groups. During the first wave of the crisis, the governments have been taken the following steps:

Box 1

Estonia launched a 2-billion-euro support programme to provide different economic stimulus. The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund compensated employees' wages in March-May 2020. The offering was 70% of the average monthly salary of the employee but no more than 1000 euro. The employer must pay a wage of at least 150 euro to the employee.

Lithuania launched a 5-billion-euro support plan. The government also foresees subsidies totaling 500 million euros to ensure laid-off workers or workers with reduced working time (+salaries) still receive the minimum wage. It includes the 500 million euros for workers' fixed payments to the self-employed who have previously contributed to the social security system.

Latvia announced coverage of 75% of the costs of outbreak-induced sick leaves or workers' downtime, or up to 700 euros per month. There is also support for "employee downtime" whereby the government made monthly payments of 75% of their salaries, capped at 700 euros (not subject to payroll taxes) if the employer cannot secure work for the employee because of COVID-19

Source: The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, 2020.

Overall, the Bank of Latvia's estimates, Latvia spent less money than its neighbors in the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis for aid measures in general and much less to maintain the population's income. Latvia had paid money to keep household income at 0.3% of GDP, Estonia – 0.8%, Lithuania – 0.9% (Latvia's national public broadcaster LSM, 2020.) The crisis has shown that the Baltic States governments are ready to intervene to mitigate social and economic consequences in the emergency to ensure economically critical support to citizens; however, the states' fiscal ability is relatively small. Consequently, the UBI would not replace the current social security systems based on the constrained security budgets with a flat basic income.

Whatever the outcome of the debate on a UBI and state intervention in the economy as well as in the social security system is, it opens up a platform for rethinking the fundamental role of the welfare state.

UBI past experiments and Canada

Several nations have experimented with the introduction of guaranteed income so far.

The most famous case has been offered by Finland, which conducted the world's first statutory, nationwide and randomized basic income trial that has produced somewhat encouraging preliminary results: a perception of improved well-being.

In the experiment, which lasted from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018, 2,000 randomly selected unemployed persons aged 25-58 were paid a monthly tax-exempt basic income of 560 euros (US\$ 676; C\$863) regardless of any other income they may have had or whether they were actively looking for work. The experiment was launched by Finland's Prime Minister Juha Sipilä center-right government, mulling over the possibility to reform the Finnish social security system so that it better meets the challenges for the future of jobs, amid slow recovery from a three-year recession that ended in Finland in 2015 (Forsell, 2016).

The funding recipients consequently experienced less financial insecurity, having fewer stress symptoms, fewer difficulties concentrating, and fewer health problems. Respondents who received a guaranteed basic income had more trust in other people and societal institutions – political leaders, parties, police and the courts. The researchers found that confidence in fellow citizens and institutions is essential to individual well-being and society's functioning at large. What is crucial, the receiving a basic income did not decrease the recipients' willingness to look for employment (Kansaneläkelaitos - The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, n.d.)

Apart from Finland, offered arguably the most comprehensive pilot, several nations have tried basic income experiments, albeit mostly short-lived and small-scale ones: the United States, Brazil, Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, Iran, Kenya, Namibia, India, China (Hong Kong and Macao), and Japan (Samuel, 2020.)

Canada has not been a stranger to this sort of experiment, too. In 1974-1979, one of three Canadian Prairies provinces, Manitoba, with the support of the federal government, has launched a pilot project named The Manitoba Basic Annual Income Experiment (MINCOME) in an attempt to assess the impact of a guaranteed annual income (GAI) on the work behaviour of recipients, through an application of so-called a negative income tax (NIT). The experiment's goal, targeting low-income households, was to understand whether an unconditional annual wage helped the working poor or reduced employment motivation. However, the \$17-million pilot was terminated by Ottawa, discontinuing its political support to the initiative and expressing concerns about the cost and ethical considerations; meanwhile, the analysis of the impacts of the GAI has been considered inadequate (University of Toronto Libraries, 1988; CBC News, 2010; Simpson, Mason and Godwin, 2017.)

Some four decades later, the basic income trial is back in Canada. Ontario, the country's most populous province and the industrial heartland, generating 37% of the national GDP, in March 2016 announced the creation of a Basic Income Pilot Project, acknowledging the domestically and internationally mounting interest in the UBI as a sustainable way to reduce poverty. The province has enrolled over 4,000 people in the pilot, and, besides, over 2,000 people will be participating in the comparison group without being paid. Participants are persons aged 18 to 64 years, living in selected areas on a low income, under C\$34,000 (US\$26,673) per year if single or under C\$48,000

(US\$ 37,000) per year if a couple. Following a tax credit model, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot will ensure that participants receive up to \$16,989 per year for a single person, less than 50% of any earned income; and \$24,027 per year for a couple, less 50% of any earned income. People with a disability will also receive up to \$500 per month. The provincial government states a goal to measure how a basic income might help people living on low incomes better meet their basic needs while improving their food security, reducing stress and anxiety, providing housing stability and encouraging labour market participation (Government of Ontario, 2017.) However, after the Ontario Liberal Party lost June 2018 general election to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, the incoming government of the 14.6-million province led by the party leader Doug Ford has terminated the project, scolding it as costly and insufficient in helping two million Ontarians who were ‘trapped in the cycle of poverty’ (Government of Ontario, 2018.)

Nevertheless, it took only two years for Canada to give the universal basic income idea one more try amid an extraordinary crisis. The measures, satisfying most (except for the unconditionality) of the Stanford Basic Income Lab criteria for the UBI, have been applied and rolled out on an unprecedented, country-wide scale, overshadowing all previous domestic and international experiments, Finnish one included.

For Canada, the pandemic resulted in a recession in the first quarter of 2020, with national GDP falling unprecedentedly, by 11.6% in April of that year. Thirty percent of the workforce or 5.5 million Canadians either lost their jobs or saw their working hours significantly reduced over March and April, with an expected economic contraction of 6.8 percent in 2020, its sharpest drop since the Great Depression, before rebounding by 5.5 percent in 2021, according to the official forecast (Gordon and Johnson, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020.)

Prime minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party only won a narrow victory to form a minority government in the 2019 federal election in October, just months before the pandemic hit. The government came up with a comprehensive Canada’s Economic Response Plan, emergency support measures, and spending levels not seen since World War II. The federal government expected the deficit to hit C\$343 billion (US\$257 billion) in 2020 due to pandemic-related support programs. The government rejected the subsequent criticism, stressing the primary goal of the anti-crisis expenditures: the protection of the health and economic well-being of the nation, with policymakers’ inaction fraught with the risk of loss of millions of jobs while ‘putting the burden of debt onto families and jeopardizing Canada’s resilience’ (John Paul Tasker, 2020) Notably, Canada’s economic response plan, representing nearly 14 percent of GDP, included more than \$230 billion in 107 government measures to protect the health and safety of Canadians and provide direct support to citizens and employers, and up to \$85 billion in tax and customs duty payment deferrals to meet the liquidity needs of households and entrepreneurs. However, upon recovery from COVID-19, Canada was expected to maintain its low debt advantage among the G7 countries. As a result of the government’s handling of the pandemic, the popularity of governing parties across Canada skyrocketed, including Trudeau’s federal Liberals, which enjoyed a boost in

support; the biggest seen for a minority government since the 1950s (Grenier, 2020.) By the end of the year, the federal government and provinces spent at least C\$382 billion through more than 100 various anti-crisis measures and programs. Overall direct payouts to individuals totalled C\$105.66 billion, which was \$9.5 billion higher than all significant federal transfers to individuals in 2018–19 combined. The government called this extraordinary spending affordable against the backdrop of historically low borrowing costs (Vieira and Mackrael, 2020; CBC, 2020a.)

The pandemic-fighting funding has targeted individuals differentially but covered a wide range of households. The highest expenditures were administered via the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which offered monthly payments of \$2,000 to Canadians who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. These payments were received by some 8.9 million people or a third of all Canadian adults.

In addition to it, the federal government has implemented the following measures:

Box 2

- increased employment insurance payments; doubled the federal Goods and Services Tax (GST) credit payments for eligible 2019 tax filers;
- launched the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) targeting post-secondary students who did not qualify for the CERB program, with more than 700,000 people receiving at least \$1,250 payouts for four weeks, with a maximum of 16 weeks;
- introduced the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), replacing CERB and providing income support for employed and self-employed individuals and those not eligible for employment insurance benefits. As of 15 November, this program has received more than 2,7 million applications for C\$500 per week, for up to 2 weeks, for workers who are unable to work because they are sick or must self-isolate due to COVID-19;
- begun payments under the new Canada Recovery Caregiver Benefit, providing C\$500 per week, for up to 26 weeks per household to eligible Canadians;
- transferred a one-time \$300 bonus payment from Old Age Security, a universal retirement pension, to more than 6.6 million individuals.

Source: Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020.

With more than C\$118 billion allotted to businesses, non-profits and charitable organizations, and C\$16 billion went to government departments/agencies, the payouts estimated at C\$6,320 per Canadian between mid-March and the end of November 2020 (CBC, 2020b.) While those ‘individuals, regular and cash payments’ have still been conditional, thereby not meeting all criteria for UBI, the unprecedented rollout of the helicopter money strategy has sparked a national discussion on whether this extraordinary generosity should be extended indefinitely and morph into the permanent, unconditional basic income for everyone in the G7 country. According to a poll released in late June 2020 by the Angus Reid Institute, most Canadians would back

the extension of a universal basic income beyond the current pandemic, at proposed levels of C\$10,000, C\$20,000 or C\$30,000 annually if the related burden of taxation is shifted onto wealthier. As to political constituencies, three-quarters of those who supported the Liberal Party in the last federal election, and more than four-in-five New Democrat voters supported the UBI as a permanent solution. Those who had voted for Conservative Party were against the UBI (Angus Reid Institute, 2020). A year earlier, before the pandemic, most Canadians also favoured the UBI idea as a cushion for those workers displaced by artificial intelligence adoption, according to a survey by Gallup and Northeastern University (Inc, 2019.)

The idea has been gaining popularity provincially, too. At the unicameral legislature of Newfoundland and Labrador, the UBI implementation idea has met support, with all parties supporting the plan to weigh the costs and benefits of running a pilot program in the province governed by liberals (Mullin, 2020.) Even before the pandemic, the government of British Columbia commissioned a comprehensive study of the basic income approach as a means to reduce poverty, defining the ‘basic income’ as income payments provided to eligible people unconditionally by the government, delivered through direct payments or the personal income tax system (The Government of British Columbia, 2019.) The experience acquired thanks to the COVID-19 crisis has given a new context to the research, said the province’s social development minister Shane Simpson: ‘I think it is pretty timely to be doing this now,’ he said, adding that British Columbia would welcome consultations with the federal government on the issue of basic income for the post-pandemic world (Meyer, 2020; Shaw, 2020.)

A parliament member from the New Democratic Party, Leah Gazan, has tabled a motion in the House of Commons to convert CERB into a permanent guaranteed liveable basic income, having consulted with local and national lobby groups advocating for the implementation of the unconditional wage. She stressed that it was the COVID-19 that ‘has demonstrated that we do have the resources’ to ensure ‘all individuals in Canada can thrive in dignity’ (McGuckin, 2020.) Almost half the Senate of Canada, 50 members (from the left, right and centre), including the former mayor of the country’s biggest city, Toronto, have urged the government to draft a basic income plan, pointing at the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) as a government-instituted program that comes close to being a permanent basic income as ‘the new normal’ for the post-pandemic world (Eggleton and Segal, 2020).

On a federal level, the minor parties represented in the parliament have been advocating for the UBI. The New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh has been calling for the CERB to be made a universal benefit. Annamie Paul, chosen to lead the Green Party amid the pandemic crisis, has come with a solution to create a comprehensive benefit: Guaranteed Livable Income. She cited international experience, pointing out to Spain that became the first in Europe to announce a plan to introduce a UBI to help families during the pandemic, with the intention that UBI becomes a permanent instrument. The main electoral rival of Trudeau’s liberals, the leader of the Conservative Party Erin O’Toole, soon after his victory in the leadership race amidst the pandemic, has styled himself as a strong backer of wage subsidies as well as

income support for ‘everyone,’ while scolding liberals for what he called insufficient income assistance through the CERB (Global News, 2020). The conception of UBI as an instrument of eliminating poverty and improving the economy had been occupied the attention of the party top brass years before the pandemic crisis (Archer, 2020).

For his part, the prime minister has been extremely cautious when grilled by the questions on whether the UBI was considered a permanent social security mechanism and made it clear that he did not feel this transformation as an immediate need. ‘In the short-term, our focus must be on ensuring the CERB is available for all who need it,’ the prime minister was quoted by news media as saying in English in April. He elaborated, responding to the same question in French, reflecting on the UBI after being further pressed by reporters. ‘It’s not as easy as saying we’re going to send out a cheque to every Canadian regardless of their age or region; it’s more complex than that,’ Trudeau was quoted as saying in translation from French to English by Canadian newspapers. - ‘Our measures from the beginning recognized that some people lost their jobs because of COVID-19, not through any fault of their own, but they require revenue to pay for their groceries, their rent. That’s why we chose to go ahead in a targeted, rapid fashion to put in place what was necessary to help these people in dire need’ (Wright, 2020.)

In turn, Canada’s employment minister Carla Qualtrough, when asked if the government was considering an introduction of any guaranteed livable income, said that while there were ‘more pressing issues that we need to address as a government and as a country,’ the pandemic crisis lent itself the opportunity to have the UBI as part of the future conversation about the reconceiving the ‘Canadian social safety net’ (UBI Works, 2020.) Meanwhile, his government has been proceeding with the ‘helicopter drop’ of money policy for the whole year, budgeting money for more ‘cheques to every Canadian’ as the situation required. Later on, in the summer, the federal parliamentary budget office made calculations in response to senators and MPs asking about the UBI concept’s relevance in improving Canada’s patchwork of social safety net; it estimated that it could cost more than \$98-billion to provide almost all Canadians with a basic income for six months beginning 2020 fall, though the total cost of the program might be higher than the budget office’s approximations (The Canadian Press, 2020.)

Some of the most vocal critics say that introducing the UBI would be costly and fraught with unintended consequences such as undermined work incentives; will not do enough to fix inequality without market control to keep low costs on the public services; that Canada and that the current taxation procedures and social system require reforms before adopting basic income as a comprehensive approach (Thomson, 2020; Loreto, 2020; Cameron and Petit, 2020.)

Nonetheless, it is apparent that the pandemic crisis has reignited an intense public debate over the role of the UBI as a policy option that is seemingly favoured in the steadily being more predominant political narrative, with support being widespread and mounting, including in the federal parliament (Regehr, 2021). In December, UBI Works, a Canadian non-profit pressure group for a universal basic income, uniting a number of hi-tech entrepreneurs, economists, and other ‘civic-minded Canadians,’

presented a 96-page report on the matter, noting that ‘in 2020, the idea of a universal income guarantee has been thrust into the spotlight by the COVID-19 pandemic and the programs that have been created to provide economic relief to Canadians’ (The Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis, 2020.) Months earlier, the Senate Committee on National Finance, in an interim report on the Federal COVID-19 response, recommended that Trudeau’s cabinet, with provinces, territories and Indigenous governments, consider a basic income guarantee, noting that having a basic income in place before the pandemic could have reduced the need for the CERB (Standing Senate Committee on National Finance, 2020.) It is apparent that the pandemic has stimulated a wide-ranging discussion on the social security mechanisms’ effectiveness and development tools.

Conclusions

The spread of the novel coronavirus has underscored some fundamental problems related to state vs market. One of the crucial instruments of state intervention during the pandemic time is an option as a possible answer to social, socio-economic effects caused by the crisis when governments across the world have implemented different measures to support those who have lost either their employment or business income as a result of pandemic measures. This trend is observed in similar political, social, and economic settings in the EU, the Baltic States, and Canada at the federal and provincial levels. “Whatever it takes” is the motto to preserve lives and reduce economic declines. We conclude that the UBI remains a controversial topic; however, governments’ responses to losses in job markets in a time of crisis show that the UBI model could be applied as a policy choice in avoiding growing income inequality and providing greater income security.

Increased interest in the UBI model and accelerated discussions could be explained in the context of governments’ role in an economic and social situation, triggered by existing trends related to fears of job losses due to automation, digitalisation and structural changes in labour markets. The existing social protection systems seem to be outdated and not meeting the modern labour market’s demands. Some elements of the basic income model could be used to simplify and improve the efficiency of the existing social security systems, as shown by this paper, which delves into the practical applications of related measures taken by certain socially progressive countries in a fairly short term, within a year since the onset of the pandemic. It has been shown that the UBI as a policy option could be complementary to the existing schemes and mechanisms. The authors assume that the ongoing national debates on the UBI, the powers of governmental intervention, and the state of the social security nets open up a platform for rethinking the welfare state’s fundamental role.

The pandemic has made the political environment worldwide more conducive to adopting the UBI as a policy option for greater economic equality and income security and responding to the mounting demand for a better social justice distribution. Reforms must embrace better state funding, more flexibility in the labour market and more emphasis on social solidarity.

The above-indicated aspects are subject to further research, and some fundamental questions persist: is the UBI the right way to replace the benefit system? Can it create an even more significant gap between the poor and the rich? Will the UBI promote job mobility and encourage people to acquire new skills?

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