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Who Are the Neoliberals in Central and Eastern Europe? Assessing Public Support for Neoliberalism in 11 New EU Member States

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Abstract

Which groups in Central and Eastern Europe are more likely to support neoliberal ideas? This article uses quantitative evidence from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's *Life in Transition* surveys (2010 and 2016) in order to sketch the contours of public support for neoliberalism in the 11 new member states of the European Union. First, cross-country differences in economic attitudes are not very large. Second, consistent differences can be located within a single country. Neoliberal attitudes are more likely among business owners and people with a university education. The potential foundations for resistance to neoliberalism can also be located: churchgoers, for instance, are much more likely to be sceptical of neoliberalism.

THIS ARTICLE SEEKS TO UNCOVER THE INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DETERMINANTS OF support for neoliberalism in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Who are the neoliberals in the region? Which groups in which countries are more likely to support the main elements of neoliberalism, defined as a worldview that values free markets and individual competition while paying less attention to equality, solidarity and the public interest? In order to map the terrain of public opinion in the region, this article uses the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)'s *Life in Transition* surveys (LiTS), which focus explicitly on the post-communist region.

Scholars have approached the issue of neoliberalism in CEE in many informative ways. Some have used Gramscian international political economy to assess the degree of hegemony that elite actors, both domestic and

foreign, have managed to construct for the neoliberal project (e.g. Bohle 2006; Shields 2008, 2014). Others have inspected the varieties of capitalism that have emerged in the region, with a focus on the institutions that underpin economic performance (e.g. Feldmann 2006; Crowley & Stanojević 2011; Bohle & Greskovits 2012). Many others have produced various qualitative case studies that highlight particular neoliberal practices or instances of resistance (Sokol 2013; Pavlovskaya 2013; Dolenc *et al.* 2017; Matković & Ivković 2018). None of these approaches, however, investigates the extent of micro-level support for neoliberalism. What do ordinary people in the region actually think about neoliberalism? Which groups are more likely to be ‘neoliberals?’

Of course, framing the question in this way does not imply that these groups would necessarily call themselves ‘neoliberals’. Indeed, critics of the term reject it precisely because of this framing. Only rarely do such individuals or movements ‘come out’ as neoliberal. Respondents in surveys may not even be aware that such a thing as neoliberalism exists. Neoliberalism aims to present itself not as an ideology but as something natural, as ‘common sense’. In this, it has been rather successful. Indeed, one can argue that the less visible it is (and the less that people self-identify as neoliberals), the more successful it becomes. As Mirowski aptly phrases it, the pervasiveness of neoliberalism makes it to us like water is to fish (Mirowski 2016). We fail to see it because it is all around us.

Therefore, the goal of this article is to identify which respondents are more likely to accept neoliberal attitudes about the economy, regardless of how conscious they are of neoliberal attitudes in society and regardless of how ready they are to voluntarily align themselves with these notions. Neoliberalism is a set of ideas that does not have an authoritative codification, as was the case with Marxism during the Soviet era. Instead, it is a loosely connected set of ideas that privileges individual choice and market-based incentives. In order to pursue the questions outlined above, I do however assume that there is something ‘out there’, that is, that neoliberalism exists as a worldview that can shape social outcomes. As Gramsci said, ideas can have ‘the same energy as a material force’ (Gramsci 1971, p. 707). If this is the case, then using the term ‘neoliberalism’ can help articulate resistance by naming the phenomenon, even if we agree that the concept is not perfect (Hall 2011, p. 706). This assumption—that neoliberalism is indeed present as a social force—is a necessary assumption in order to proceed with empirical analysis.

The analysis itself is predominantly descriptive. As scholars have recently noted, social scientists may have focused too much on endlessly re-making theory when basic description may be more useful (Besbris & Khan 2017). The plea for less theory and more description is particularly relevant for those working close to a Marxist

tradition or a similar critical tradition of social research. For Marxist and critical scholars, the conversation has too often been plagued by endless definitional issues.

To summarise the conclusions at the outset, the analysis makes three central points. First, attitudes towards key elements of the neoliberal worldview do not differ much cross-nationally. Most of CEE has a left-leaning distribution on the issue of inequality (preferring more redistribution), a balanced distribution on the issue of privatisation (not decidedly in favour nor against it), and a right-leaning (more liberal) distribution on competition as the main organising principle of society (most seeing competition as a good thing). Second, there is a fair amount of volatility over time. Some opinions, especially regarding inequality, have swung dramatically in several CEE countries, notably Romania and Bulgaria. Third, consistent cross-sectional differences can be located. In particular, those respondents who own their own businesses or have a university education are more likely to adopt liberal attitudes. On the other side of the spectrum, leftist attitudes are more likely among one unexpected group in particular: active churchgoers.

These findings suggest several conclusions. First, cross-national differences in attitudes across CEE are not large. Though scholars of capitalism in the region have stressed diversity, the main contours of public opinion suggest similarity instead. It seems that the lived experience of capitalism is not all that different across the region. Second, the volatility that can be observed on issues such as inequality suggests the possibility that the attitudes observed are not fixed and may undergo further change. In that sense, the future attitudes of people in CEE are difficult to predict. Third, the main groups that support—and oppose—neoliberalism can be located with a fair degree of confidence. Business ownership and university education lead individuals to support neoliberalism. This suggests the importance of both class relations and the cultural capital that comes from social status. Opposition to some neoliberal ideas, most notably privatisation, can be located among active churchgoers. This suggests that there is scope for resistance to neoliberalism even among some rather unexpected segments of the population. Furthermore, leftist economic attitudes of (presumably conservative) churchgoers suggest the possibility that counter-hegemonic efforts can be successful if they reach out to groups not usually considered part of the leftist constituency.

Neoliberalism in CEE

Neoliberalism is certainly a contested term, one whose meaning has shifted over the years (Harvey 2005; Mudge

2008; Peck 2014; Brown 2015; Davies 2016). Nevertheless, it is possible to use the term as shorthand for a variety of political projects, assuming they encompass a firm belief in the beneficial power of market forces and a permanent scepticism towards the state. Neoliberalism traces its intellectual roots to the writings of political economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, though it was the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state in the 1970s that gave neoliberal ideas crucial momentum. Since then, neoliberalism has transformed the political agendas of all parties, even leftist ones, as manifested in the case of ‘third way’ social democracy (Beck 1992; Giddens 2008). After the financial crisis of 2008–2009 neoliberalism was discredited but experienced an unusual “non-death”, as described by Crouch (2011). Neoliberalism has continued to shape political agendas across the globe. Its grip seems so strong that some analysts see no way out, even as we continue to limp from crisis to crisis (Streeck 2016).

CEE has witnessed a great deal of neoliberal transformation since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, there are few regions in the world that have undergone such an ideological U-turn. The collapse of state socialism opened the door to new ideologies, and it was neoliberalism that proved to be most successful. The initial shock of regime change was used to implement the basic features of the neoliberal model while the carrot of EU membership was used to sustain the reform agenda over a longer period. After nearly three decades of transformation, CEE has been incorporated into European capitalism, albeit in a peripheral position, via the commodity chains organised by foreign capital (Bohle 2006; Bohle & Greskovits 2006).

Neoliberalism has been approached in several ways by scholars interested in the region. First, some contributions have been couched in the tradition of Gramscian international political economy.¹ For this body of work, neoliberalism is mostly seen as a project spear-headed by international actors—the EU, international lending institutions such as the IMF and foreign investors—as well as their domestic elite allies (Bohle 2006; Shields 2008, 2014; Onaran 2011; Hardy 2014). This body of work has emphasised the top-down dimensions of neoliberalism and the degree to which it has established a form of hegemony over the societies of CEE.

The second body of work where neoliberalism has featured prominently is comparative political economy. In particular, scholars have tried to apply the ‘varieties of capitalism’ approach (Hall & Soskice 2001), or at least critically engage with it in CEE (Feldmann 2006; Crowley & Stanojević 2011; Bohle & Greskovits 2012; Nolke & Vliegenthart 2009; Myant & Drahoukoupil 2012). For this body of work, the main goal is to map the differences across the region. Bohle and Greskovits, for example, locate the following capitalisms in CEE: a more neoliberal

type in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, and an in-between or ‘embedded’ type in central European countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, while Slovenia has gone furthest in the direction of a social democratic or corporatist type of capitalism. The less successful southeastern countries, such as Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, have proven more difficult to classify. The main focus of this approach is on the institutions governing economic performance.

Third, there are many qualitative case studies tackling various aspects of neoliberalism, as well as resistance to it (Hirt *et al.* 2013; Sokol 2013; Pavlovskaya 2013; Dolenc *et al.* 2017; Matković & Ivković 2018). Within this body of work there is, of course, a wide variety of topics and approaches, but usually the focus is on specific country cases, on particular neoliberal practices or movements of opposition. Though all three approaches add something valuable, rarely do they address the micro-level determinants of support for neoliberalism. The goal of this article is to inspect survey evidence in order to locate the ‘neoliberals’: those groups more prone to accept neoliberal attitudes.

This article treats CEE as a coherent region, though the debate about the usefulness of CEE as a concept is ongoing (Bernhard & Jasiewicz 2015). The relevance of CEE in broader comparative research has ebbed and flowed (Ekiert 2015; Kubik 2015; Tucker 2015). Within the recently enlarged European Union, CEE occupies a peculiar place. Membership of the 11 eastern countries has made Europe whole, effectively ending Cold War divisions. Yet the region is still expected to embark on a process of ‘Europeanisation’, a process that entails learning the proper European norms and values (Schimmelfennig 2005). In other words, the region continues to be seen through orientalist discourses of Western superiority (Kuus 2004). This is particularly evident in southeastern Europe, where stubborn stereotypes about the ‘wild’ Balkans persist (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 2009). Such caveats are important to keep in mind, even if they do not directly affect the empirical analysis conducted here. For present purposes, however, the common denominator is the shared legacy of the communist past and the more-or-less contemporaneous entry into the European Union.

Viewed from a global perspective, CEE can be seen as broadly similar to other semi-peripheral regions of global capitalism, such as Southeast Asia or Latin America, the numerous differences between such areas notwithstanding (Haggard & Kaufman 2008; Caraway *et al.* 2015). All such regions occupy comparable positions in the global economic hierarchy. As the semi-periphery, CEE occupies a contradictory position: it both has the ambition of mimicking the West European core, while internalising a certain superior position *vis-à-vis* the poorer

countries of the periphery, as implied by world-system theory (Wallerstein 1974). In other words, its mediating and stabilising function may make the semi-periphery more susceptible to neoliberalism. At the same time, however, the semi-periphery is where internal movements for more democracy have historically tended to appear, in comparison with wealthier core countries, where change is less necessary, and poorer peripheral countries where it is more difficult (Markoff 1999). In other words, the structural position of such countries is such that public support for neoliberalism cannot be assumed in a straightforward manner. Ultimately, the analysis needs to be empirical.

In addition, the analysis needs to have a strong empirical grounding because of the way the concept of neoliberalism has been employed: Neoliberalism is a catch-all concept often used to paper over various empirical cracks. Analysts tend to see it everywhere, thereby weakening the explanatory power of the concept (Ganev 2005). In order to be more precise, the analysis needs to pay close attention to the data. This way, the concept can be used in a critically rigorous way.

Data

This article uses data from the *Life in Transition* survey (LiTS), a large comparative project launched by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Surveys were conducted in 2006, 2010 and 2016. The data-sets and the corresponding documentation are publicly available on EBRD's website.² The main goal of the surveys was to gauge the opinions of ordinary citizens of the post-communist region. As EBRD says on its website, its institutional goal is to 'foster the transition to an open market-oriented economy and to promote private and entrepreneurial initiative'. Most of the published work that has used these data-sets has investigated issues such as entrepreneurship and happiness (Nikolova *et al.* 2011; Cojocaru 2014; Djankov *et al.* 2016). This research has not investigated neoliberalism *per se*, but the data-set is sufficiently versatile to make this type of analysis possible.

LiTS encompasses the entire post-communist region: CEE as well as the former Soviet Union, usually around 30 countries per survey. Sample sizes are quite large, usually more than a thousand respondents per country. The most recent poll, in 2016, included a total of 51,000 households in 34 countries. Some Western and non-communist countries are included occasionally, but the focus is always on the former communist bloc. In order to focus the investigation, this article includes the following countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria—as they are now all EU member states and can be treated as belonging to the same group of countries. Naturally, interesting comparisons can be drawn with

countries further east, but this would extend the analysis beyond the scope of a single article.

From the battery of questions included in the survey, three appear to be particularly useful vis-à-vis the operationalisation of neoliberalism. All of these questions ask respondents to place themselves on a continuum from 1 to 10, that is, from the leftist end (1) to the liberal end (10), in a spectrum that corresponds with conventional perceptions of the left–right divide. The first question is about inequality. It offers two opposite statements: ‘Incomes should be made more equal’ (1) or ‘We need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort’ (10). The second question is about privatisation. The options are: ‘Private ownership of business and industry should be increased’ (1) and ‘Government ownership of business and industry should be increased’ (10). In the original data, the former option was coupled with the value 1, the latter with the value 10. The scale was flipped in order to correspond to the usual left–right division. The third question is about competition as way of organising society. The options are: ‘Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas’ (1) and ‘Competition is harmful. It brings out the worst in people’ (10). Once again, the scale was flipped.

Of course, these questions do not provide a perfect way of measuring neoliberal attitudes, but they do capture some key elements of the neoliberal worldview. The issue of inequality is important because it is a topic that has gained public prominence lately, even in CEE. For many, this is the entry point to any critique of capitalism. It is the least abstract of the three questions. This is an aspect of capitalism that most people can see around them: the expensive cars and the large houses of the new economic elite.

Privatisation also captures a relevant element of neoliberalism, namely, the power shift from the public sector to the private sector and the push to commodify as many social relations as possible. Moreover, the countries of CEE have had a lot of experience with the sale of state property, making this issue pertinent to the region. This issue is a little more abstract than the issue of inequality.

The issue of competition is most abstract. These three questions can therefore function at different levels of abstraction, which provides an advantage in measurement. The question on competition asks respondents to consider society more generally and captures a key imperative of neoliberalism, that is, the drive to supplant cooperative arrangements with market-based incentives. Asking this question can gauge how aware people are that alternatives to atomised competition can exist.

As a technical note, it should be mentioned that sample weights were applied for each country. Following that, a randomly selected 800 respondents were chosen per country in order to equalise sample sizes.

Comparisons over space and time

What are the main patterns in the data? Figure 1 presents three density plots—modified histograms—for the three questions introduced above: on income inequality, privatisation and competition. Density plots present an easily understandable way to graph the frequency of answers, ranging from most leftist (1) to most liberal (10). Figure 1 presents the data for 2016. In Figure 1, all 11 countries are included, and all are weighted the same, despite differences in population size. For example, both Estonia and Poland contribute to the findings to the same degree, despite the fact that Estonia has a population of only 1.3 million and Poland has a population of over 38 million.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Title: ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY, PRIVATISATION AND COMPETITION

Note: All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016.

As can be seen, the distribution of attitudes towards inequality is tilted to the left. Most people in CEE think that income differences should be reduced. The distribution of attitudes towards privatisation is balanced with most people placing themselves in the middle. Most respondents, in other words, did not favour privatisation or nationalisation. With regard to competition, the distribution is tilted to the right. Therefore, it seems that most people see competition as good rather than socially divisive and therefore negative. Only a small minority thinks that competition is harmful and brings out the worst in people, as the question specified. All in all, the picture that emerges is mixed. On income inequality, people have rather leftist views. On privatisation, they are more or less undecided. On competition, they express liberal views. The picture from 2016 is not very different from the previous survey administered in 2010. Figure 2 presents the distribution of attitudes on the same three issues in 2010. The distributions are rather similar.

Figures 1 and 2 treat the entire region as a bloc. An examination of distributions on all three issues for all 11 countries does not reveal any notable cross-country differences: there is actually very little variation, despite differences in national institutions and differences in economic performance. Most countries have a left-tilted distribution with regards to inequality, a generally balanced and centred one for privatisation and a right-tilted distribution on the competition question. In order to save space, the summary information is presented in Table 1,

showing the mean and median values for all 11 countries for 2016.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Title: ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY, PRIVATISATION AND COMPETITION

Note: All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2010.

Of course, there are some exceptions. With regard to income inequality, Table 1 suggests that the most notable exceptions in 2016 were Lithuania and Romania. Their distributions were much more liberal than in other countries. Their median answers—7 and 8 respectively—were further to the right than was the case elsewhere. With regard to the privatisation issue, no country stands out. The Czech Republic and Slovenia are perhaps the most liberal on this issue, but with a median of 6, they do not diverge much. The 11 countries of CEE are in this respect rather homogeneous, with a majority of respondents clustering in the middle of the spectrum. With regard to the competition issue, similarly, there is no divergence, as most countries feature distributions wherein respondents cluster on the liberal end of the spectrum.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In light of the existing literature on varieties of capitalism in CEE, these results are a little surprising. For instance, one would expect a more liberal population in the Baltic countries and a more leftist one in Slovenia, but no strong conclusions of that sort can be drawn from the analysis provided here. With the exception of Lithuanian opinions on inequality, the Baltic countries are not more liberal than the rest of the region. With regard to Slovenia, its population is not as leftist as one would assume, given the status of Slovenia as the sole social democratic or corporatist economy in CEE. Indeed, with regard to privatisation, Slovenians are actually a little more liberal than is the norm in the rest of the region. In short, it would appear that neither Baltic neoliberalism nor Slovenian leftism should be exaggerated. There is much more homogeneity in public opinion than one would expect.

What about changes over time? An answer to this question can be provided if the survey from 2016 is compared to the one from 2010. The overview presented in Table 1 was expanded to include both 2010 and 2016. Figure 3 shows the result of this analysis. It is based on a series of t-tests that compared the means for all three

issues and for all 11 countries. This scatter-plot shows where the change in average sentiment regarding inequality, privatisation and competition was both statistically significant and substantively large (a change in the mean of at least 1 on the scale, in either the leftist or the liberal direction). Before proceeding, a caveat is in order. Given that there are only two data-points, the conclusions drawn from this comparison should be treated as provisional. As subsequent surveys are conducted and data become publicly available, it will be possible to present more comprehensive trends over time.

As can be seen in Figure 3, three cases satisfy both conditions: attitudes towards inequality in Bulgaria and Romania, and attitudes towards privatisation in Hungary. In Bulgaria, attitudes have shifted to the left on the inequality issue. In Romania, they have shifted to the right, in the liberal direction. The reasons for such volatility of public opinion regarding the inequality issue probably lie in the unstable political constellations in both countries and the impact of the global economic crisis.³ With regard to Hungary, the country has witnessed a shift in attitudes towards privatisation, with more people now supporting it. In other words, there has been an apparent weakening of public support for the ruling party's policies of nationalising private pension funds, banks and the energy sector. No notable shift took place with respect to the competition issue in any country.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Title: OVERVIEW OF T-TESTS. WHERE HAS THE SHIFT IN ATTITUDES BEEN BOTH SUBSTANTIVELY LARGE AND STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

The fact that such volatile swings have taken place on the issue of inequality suggests that attitudes towards the main elements of the neoliberal worldview are not as fixed as might be assumed. In terms of the Gramscian literature on neoliberal hegemony in CEE, these findings suggest that this hegemony, to the extent that it depends on the bottom-up support of ordinary people, is incomplete and uneven. It is remarkable, for example, that Bulgarian and Romanian attitudes towards income inequality could have shifted from one extreme to the other in only six years. Yet, the instability of public opinion means that the direction of change is not guaranteed: it may go against neoliberalism or it may actually buttress it.

Comparisons within countries

Which groups are more inclined towards liberal and which towards leftist attitudes? To answer these questions, the data was broken down according to various categories. These variables are the basic variables of all survey research: age, income, gender, urban or rural residence, education, business ownership, employed, unemployed or retired status, trade union membership, political party membership and church-going activity. The last three variables are organisational variables that can help us examine the impact of civil society on economic attitudes.

Table 2 provides a summary. Figures 4–9 display the same findings visually. All variables were recoded into simple categorical variables, which eases interpretation, especially in logistic regression models.⁴ Table 2 examines which variables were statistically significant most often. First, linear regression models were estimated, the dependent variable being the scale from 1 to 10 offered for each of the three questions. Next, logistic regression models were estimated, the dependent variable being the likelihood that a respondent belonged to the leftist tail (answers 1 and 2). Finally, logistic regression models were estimated with the likelihood that a respondent belonged to the liberal tail as the dependent variable (answers 9 and 10). These models were estimated for all 11 countries, for both 2010 and 2016, and for each of the three questions, leading to a total of 66 models. Statistical significance in Figures 4, 5 and 6 can be inferred from the location on the graph: the dotted lines indicate the usual thresholds of statistical significance. Coefficients that fall within the range from -2 to 2 on the t or z statistic are not statistically significant.

First, what does Table 2 show? The first two rows are devoted to the linear regressions models: the first for statistically significant and negative, the second for statistically significant and positive. The former tracks left-leaning attitudes, indicated by lower values on the 1 to 10 scale, and the latter liberal-leaning attitudes, indicated by higher values. The last two rows in Table 2 are devoted to the logistic regression models: first for inclusion in the leftist tail and then for inclusion in the liberal tail. What findings can be gleaned from this? The information reported here concerns the question which of variables were statistically significant most often. As can be seen, leftist attitudes are most commonly found among respondents who have urban residences as well as those who are active churchgoers. However, urban residence is a somewhat ambivalent predictor, as it is also frequently associated with liberal attitudes. Which groups are more inclined to liberal attitudes? As can be seen in Table 2, two variables stand out: university education and business ownership.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The same patterns can be presented visually, as Figures 4, 5 and 6 attempt to do. Figure 4 graphs the size of the coefficients and the statistical significance for all the variables used in all 66 models. Variables that are below the lower dotted line are negative and statistically significant, that is, predictors of leftist attitudes, while variables above the upper line are positive and statistically significant, that is, predictors of liberal attitudes. As can be seen in the lower left part of the graph, churchgoers, union members and urban residents are more likely to be associated with leftist attitudes. However, these factors are also present in other parts of the graph, even in the liberal upper right corner. In other words, they are rather ambivalent, especially the urban residence variable. In terms of liberal attitudes, the two variables that appear most often in the upper right corner are university education and business ownership, just as Table 2 suggests.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Title: 726 COEFFICIENTS FROM 66 LINEAR REGRESSION MODELS. DEPENDENT VARIABLES ARE ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY, PRIVATISATION AND COMPETITION, 2010 AND 2016

Figures 5 and 6 bring forward similar points. As these models present the results produced by logistic regression models, odds ratios are used since they provide an easy way to assess effect size. Odds ratios larger than 1 indicate a positive relationship; those smaller than 1 a negative result.⁵ As can be seen in Figures 5 and 6, churchgoing status seems to be most consistently associated with inclusion in the leftist tail, while university education and business ownership are once again most commonly associated with inclusion in the liberal tail. All in all, Figures 4, 5, and 6 suggest the same lessons as Table 2. Figure 4 examines the entire spectrum (from 1 to 10), Figure 5 examines the leftist tail, and Figure 6 the liberal tail.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Title: 726 COEFFICIENTS FROM 66 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS. DEPENDENT VARIABLE IS INCLUSION IN THE LEFTIST TAIL (ANSWERS 1 AND 2) ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY, PRIVATISATION AND COMPETITION, 2010 AND 2016

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Title: 726 COEFFICIENTS FROM 66 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS DEPENDENT VARIABLE IS INCLUSION IN THE LIBERAL TAIL (ANSWERS 9 AND 10). ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY, PRIVATISATION AND COMPETITION, 2010 AND 2016

What if the analysis zooms in more closely on the type of issue? Which factors are most commonly associated with leftist/liberal attitudes towards inequality, privatisation and competition, respectively? These questions are addressed in Figures 7, 8, and 9. All three types of models were estimated—linear regressions for the entire scale from 1 to 10, logistic regressions predicting inclusion in the leftist tail, and logistic regressions predicting inclusion in the liberal tail—this time taking the entire region as a whole. In order to narrow down the relevant variables, only those variables that were statistically significant in all three models (one linear and two logistic) were included in Figures 7, 8, and 9. The analysis was also conducted for 2010 but produced the same list of relevant variables.

Figure 7 focuses on the inequality issue. It presents distributions for each of the groups that emerged as statistically significant in the multivariate analysis and graphs them along with the general distribution. The variables that emerged as consistently statistically significant in predicting leftist/liberal attitudes towards inequality are: gender (men as more liberal), urban residence (urban residents as more leftist), university education (those with a university education as more liberal), business ownership (business owners as more liberal) and active churchgoers (more liberal). Yet, statistical significance does not say much about substantive relevance. Graphing the distributions provides an easily interpretable way to inspect the actual divergence of attitudes for each of these groups from the sample as a whole. As can be seen, some of these distributions do not pass the visual test, in other words, do not seem very different from the general distribution. However, distributions for respondents who have a university education or run their own business are notably more liberal with regard to the inequality issue.

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE]

Title: ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY

Note: All 11 Eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

Figure 8 presents the same analysis for the privatisation issue. Only two variables passed the test outlined above: business ownership and active churchgoers. The former had much more liberal attitudes towards privatisation—they approved of it—while the latter had much more leftist attitudes towards privatisation: they did not approve of it. Figure 9 presents the same analysis for the competition issue. The only variable that passed the statistical test was university education (those with a university education were more liberal on the issue). Yet, a visual comparison of the distributions for those with a university education and the sample as a whole suggests that the difference is not stark. This suggests that, with regard to the competition issue, there really is no group that diverges from the neoliberal consensus.

[INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE]

Title: ATTITUDES TOWARDS PRIVATISATION

Note: All 11 Eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016.

[INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE]

TITLE: ATTITUDES TOWARDS COMPETITION.

Note: All 11 Eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

In summary, the likelihood of liberal attitudes increases among business owners and those with a university diploma, that is, groups defined by class and status distinctions. With regard to leftist attitudes, churchgoers stand out, especially on the privatisation issue. With regard to the competition issue, no group diverges from the consensus.

Discussion

What can be concluded from the analysis? First, there is relatively little cross-country variation in attitudes. Although comparative economic analysis of the region has stressed diversity, popular opinion on key economic issues does not reflect this. People in the Baltic countries could be expected to be more liberal and Slovenians could be expected to be more leftist, but the differences between them and the rest of the region are modest at best. This

may suggest that most people in CEE have broadly similar attitudes towards capitalism. Therefore, the region of CEE is actually more homogenous than is often suggested. However, based on the LiTS data alone it is not possible to say how different these attitudes are from those in Western Europe.⁶

Next, changes over time do happen. Once again, there are only two points in time, so this comparison can only go so far, at least until future surveys are conducted. Nonetheless, some of the changes observed have been rather dramatic, as in the case of attitudes towards income inequality in Bulgaria and Romania. The issue of inequality has recently been politicised in rich democracies, with the work of economists like Thomas Piketty and Branko Milanovic enjoying high public visibility. This debate now encompasses Eastern Europe as well (e.g. see Blanchet *et al.* 2019). Therefore, the hegemony of neoliberalism in the region is not complete. However, whether the issue of inequality will lead to a broader critique, one that will take issue with other aspects of the neoliberal worldview, is yet to be seen. So far, this has not been the case.

Finally, consistent cross-group differences can be located as well. Such an analysis aims to approximate Gramsci's 'reconnaissance' of the 'fortresses and earthworks' that make up society (Gramsci 1971, p. 494): where is neoliberalism strong and where is it weak? All in all, liberal attitudes can be located among those who run their own businesses and among those who are educated to university level, in other words, those who possess class and status distinctions. That class matters is not surprising. The importance of status, on the other hand, suggests a complementary emphasis on the importance of symbolic resources. This finding was emphasised in the initial transformational period, when CEE embarked on the process of creating capitalism without capitalists (Eyal *et al.* 2000). Without a propertied bourgeoisie, neoliberalism had to rely on the educational bourgeoisie, that is, the possessors of cultural capital. The analysis here confirms the continued relevance of this group in supporting the neoliberal project.

On the leftist side of the spectrum, one factor was consistently associated with resistance to neoliberalism: going to church. The importance of religiosity was especially relevant with regard to the issue of privatisation. Churchgoers were much more likely than other groups to reject privatisation. The variable stood out in countries where the majority religion is Catholicism (Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary) or Orthodox Christianity (Bulgaria).⁷ It is quite probable that religiosity overlaps with social conservatism and that this conservatism leads people to oppose neoliberal encroachments on national resources (Worth 2002). This suggests a defensive stance of groups that are opposed to the manner in which the neoliberal project aims to privatise and commodify as many aspects of social

life as possible.

It is telling however, that out of all the organisational variables—church activity, political party membership and labour union membership—only the role of the church stands out. Membership in a party or a union does not lead people to adopt more leftist attitudes. This can be taken as a further symptom of the weakness of civil society in CEE (Howard 2003; Sissenich 2010). The role of unions in particular is surprising, since the labour union is by definition an organisation that is meant to protect its members from the market and promote solidarity. However, unions in the region tend to be quite weak, as has been noted many times (Crowley & Ost 2001; Ost 2015). Despite this well-documented weakness, it is still surprising to see how little union membership influences economic attitudes. The relevance of the church in this analysis not only suggests that resistance to neoliberalism (privatisation, in this case) may be found in some rather unusual places, but that scholars of post-communist capitalism need to pay more attention to religious institutions, which have only rarely featured in their work (Wittenberg 2006; Grzymala-Busse 2015).

A final note of caution is in order. As with all surveys, one can never be entirely sure why people make particular choices and whether these issues are actually pertinent to their own lives. For example, the fact that so many East Europeans choose the middle option on the privatisation question suggests that they may not have thought about this issue much. Or, they may feel that it requires a certain level of economic expertise, which they lack. So, instead of reflecting a genuinely held moderate stance on the issue, the observed distribution of attitudes may reflect a lack of knowledge or interest. Of course, this is partly symptomatic of neoliberalism, which privileges supposedly depoliticised elite expertise. The left-tilted distribution on the inequality issue suggests that, once an issue is politicised more broadly, people can indeed adopt leftist attitudes.

If this is the case, how can we make sense of the right-tilted distribution on the competition issue? One possibility is that respondents truly believe that competition is good for society. In this case, the position would contradict attitudes towards inequality. In itself, it would not be surprising that people hold contradictory views. Indeed, incoherence is the rule, not the exception, in public opinion research. Another option is that, once again, respondents had not thought about the issue much and were choosing what they perceived as the socially desirable answer. Regardless of which of these inferences is correct, the conclusion is the same: neoliberalism is not under attack on this front. Perhaps most importantly, this finding indicates that most people in CEE have had little (positive) experience with cooperative socio-economic institutions.

Finally, there are no traces of a rival to neoliberalism. The strange ‘non-death’ of neoliberalism after the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 is in part a function of this. However, this article suggests that a possible counter-hegemonic project does not have to start from zero. Attitudes towards inequality are already leftist, and other attitudes, such as those towards privatisation, seem malleable. Furthermore, there are some groups within society—such as churchgoers—that may be rather unexpected allies in a counter-hegemonic project. However, any such attempt will probably be hampered by the weakness of society, in particular the current state of political parties and labour unions.

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1 For the founding contributions see Gill (1993), Cox and Sinclair (2001).

2 Available at: <http://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/economic-research-and-data/data/lits.html>, accessed 18 February 2018.

3 It should also be mentioned that inequality is rising in Bulgaria and decreasing in Romania, according to World Bank figures (see the data available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>, accessed 27 July 2019). For a broader discussion, see the briefs produced by the Bertelsmann Foundation, available at: <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/>, accessed 23 November 2017.

4 This entailed the following changes: data on age was used to construct a categorical variable, with a respondent receiving 1 if they were 35 years old or younger and a 0 otherwise; data on income was transformed into a simple category for wealthy people (if they belonged to the top 10% of the income distribution); data on education was shaped into a simple variable that tracked if a respondent had a university diploma (BA or higher). The other variables (see Table 1 for an overview) are self-explanatory.

5 For example, the largest odds ratio in Figure 5 is the one furthest to the right, for Bulgaria in 2016. It is pink, that is, it tracks churchgoers. The dependent variable is inclusion in the leftist tail on the issue of inequality. The odds ratio is 10.5, which means that active churchgoers were 10.5 times more likely to fall in the leftist tail of the distribution compared to Bulgarian respondents who were not active churchgoers. In order to interpret odds ratios smaller than one, it is necessary to subtract from one. For example, the smallest odds ratio in Figure 5 was for the university education variable (green) in Hungary in 2010, predicting inclusion in the leftist tail on the competition issue. The odds ratio was 0.12. This means that Hungarian respondents who had a university education were 88% less likely to be included in the leftist tail, compared to respondents who did not have a university education.

6 Unfortunately, LiTS does not systematically include West European countries. In 2016, the only Germany and Italy were included. When the same analysis is performed for Germany and Italy, the results that emerge are slightly different from CEE, but not drastically. Overall, the distributions of attitudes towards income inequality, privatisation and competition are similar to those observed for CEE: a little more left-leaning for income inequality and a little more right-leaning for privatisation and competition. In terms of the multivariate analysis, nothing quite as systematic emerges for variables that measure class, education or active church participation, as in CEE. In Germany, the most robust finding concerns the more leftist opinions of the unemployed, especially with regard to the income inequality issue. In Italy, the leftist attitudes of union members stand out, regarding both the privatisation and the competition issue. It is difficult to suggest broader conclusions based on only two countries, but this supplementary analysis shows that education need not always lead people towards neoliberal attitudes and that old-fashioned organisational factors, such as union membership, can play the expected role of supporting leftist attitudes.

7 Interestingly, Poland, which could be expected to stand in out in terms of the church variable, is actually different from other CEE countries. In Poland, the impact of church activity on economic attitudes is not as strong as in: Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, or Slovakia.

TABLE 1
Measures of central tendency for all 11 countries, all three survey questions (2016)

	Income inequality		Privatization		Competition	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Estonia	5.11	5	5.65	6	7.79	8
Latvia	4.84	5	4.79	5	7.38	8
Lithuania	6.48	7	5.60	6	7.42	8
Poland	4.13	4	5.00	5	6.38	7
Czech Republic	4.63	5	6.23	6	7.43	8
Slovakia	3.51	3	4.88	5	6.99	7
Hungary	3.98	3	5.95	6	6.56	7
Slovenia	3.10	2	6.56	6	7.67	9
Croatia	4.64	4	5.89	6	7.14	8
Romania	6.83	8	5.31	5	7.97	9
Bulgaria	3.80	3	5.57	6	7.29	8

Note: Scales from 1 to 10. Smaller values indicate more leftist attitudes, larger values indicated more liberal attitudes.

Source: Life in Transition Survey.

TABLE 2.

Statistically significant coefficients from regressions

(Out of 726 variables in 66 models, i.e. 2 years x 3 dependent variables x 11 countries x 11 variables per model)

	For linear regression, out of all negative and stat. sig. coefficients, i.e. determinants of leftist attitudes, 38 stat. sig. coefficients out of 726	For linear regression, out of all positive and stat. sig. coefficients, i.e. determinants of liberal attitudes, 100 stat. sig. coefficients out of 726	For logistic regression, out of all positive and stat. sig. coefficients, i.e. determinants of inclusion in the leftist tail (answers 1 and 2), 40 stat. sig. coefficients out 726	For logistic regression, out of all positive and stat. sig. coefficients, i.e. determinants of inclusion in the liberal tail (answers 9 and 10), 82 stat. sig. coefficients out of 726
Young (age<=35)	3 out of 38 (7.9 percent)	8 out of 100 (8.0 percent)	1 out of 40 (2.5 percent)	3 out of 82 (3.7 percent)
Wealthy (top 10 percent)	1 out of 38 (2.6 percent)	12 out of 100 (12.0 percent)	2 out of 40 (5.0 percent)	10 out of 82 (12.2 percent)
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	0 out of 38 (0 percent)	2 out of 100 (2.0 percent)	1 out of 40 (2.5 percent)	8 out of 82 (9.8 percent)
Retired	7 out of 38 (18.4 percent)	2 out of 100 (2.0 percent)	2 out of 40 (5.0 percent)	1 out of 82 (1.2 percent)
Urban residence (1=urban, 0=rural)	10 out of 38 (26.3 percent)	8 out of 100 (8.0 percent)	8 out of 40 (20.0 percent)	9 out of 82 (11.0 percent)
University education (1=bachelor diploma or more)	0 out of 38 (0 percent)	30 out of 100 (30.0 percent)	0 out of 40 (0 percent)	16 out of 82 (19.5 percent)
Business owner	0 out of 38 (0 percent)	26 out of 100 (26.0 percent)	3 out of 40 (7.5 percent)	25 out of 82 (30.5 percent)
Unemployed	5 out of 38 (13.2 percent)	3 out of 100 (3.0 percent)	8 out of 40 (20.0 percent)	2 out of 82 (2.4 percent)
Trade union member	3 out of 38 (7.9 percent)	2 out of 100 (2.0 percent)	4 out of 40 (10.0 percent)	0 out of 82 (0 percent)
Political party member	2 out of 38 (5.3 percent)	4 out 100 (4.0 percent)	3 out of 40 (7.5 percent)	5 out of 82 (6.1 percent)
Active church goer	7 out of 38 (18.4 percent)	3 out of 100 (3.0 percent)	8 out of 40 (20.0 percent)	3 out of 82 (3.7 percent)

Source: Life in Transition Survey.

Figure 1
Attitudes toward income inequality, privatization and competition
All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

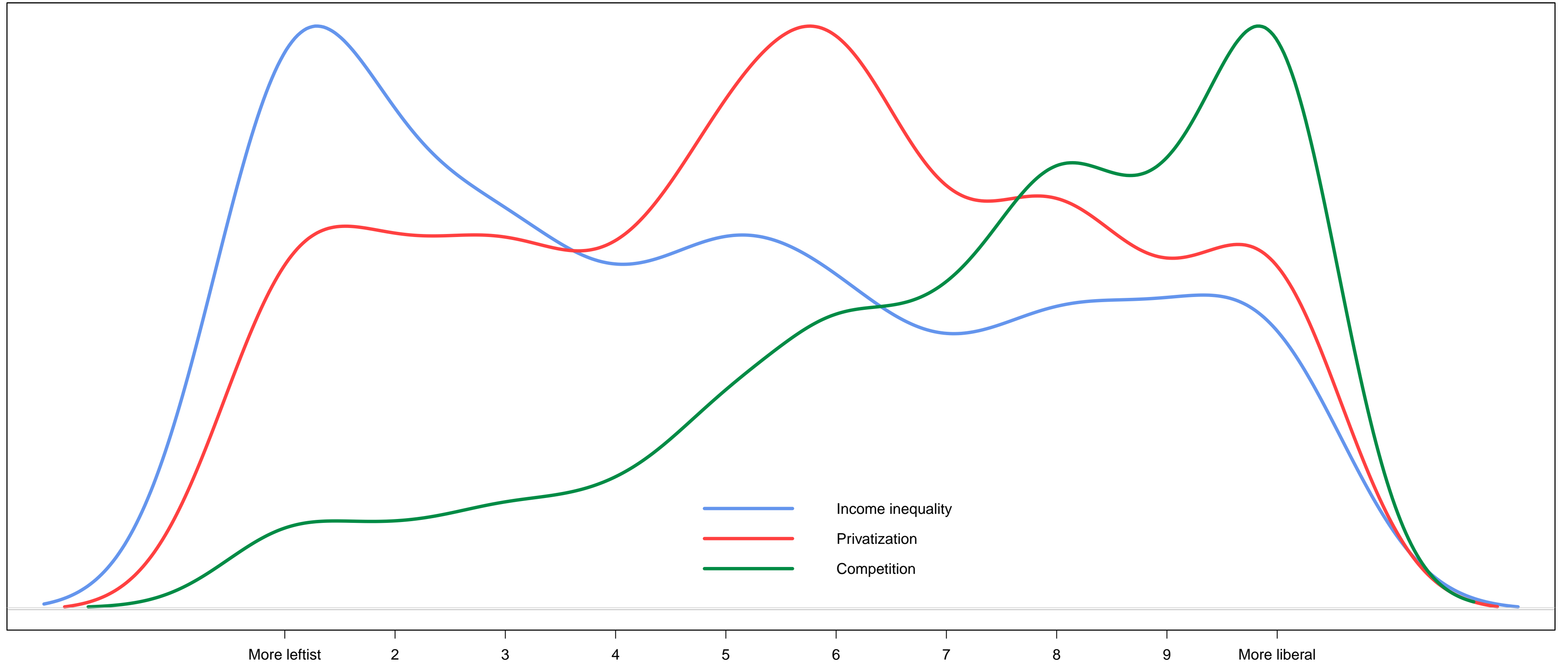


Figure 2
Attitudes toward income inequality, privatization and competition
All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2010

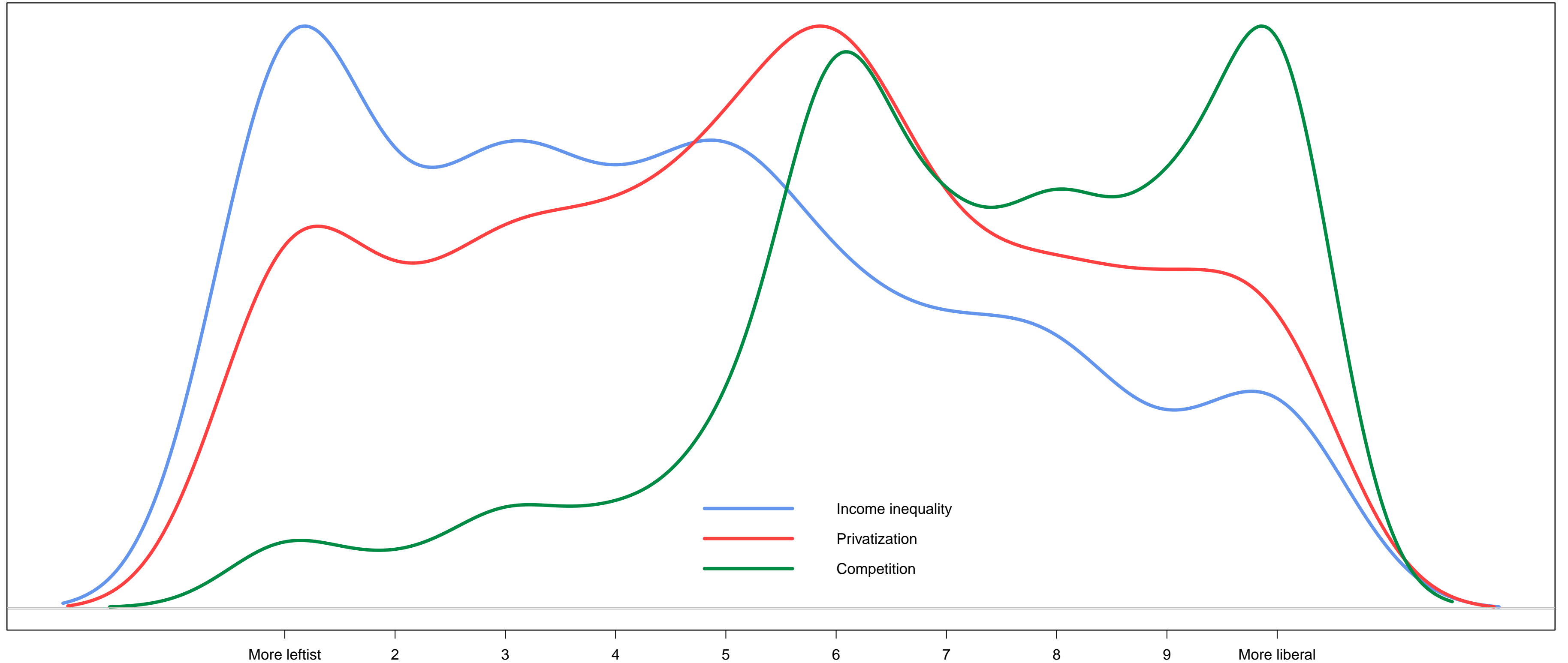


Figure 3
Overview of t-tests

Where has the shift in attitudes been both substantively large and statistically significant?

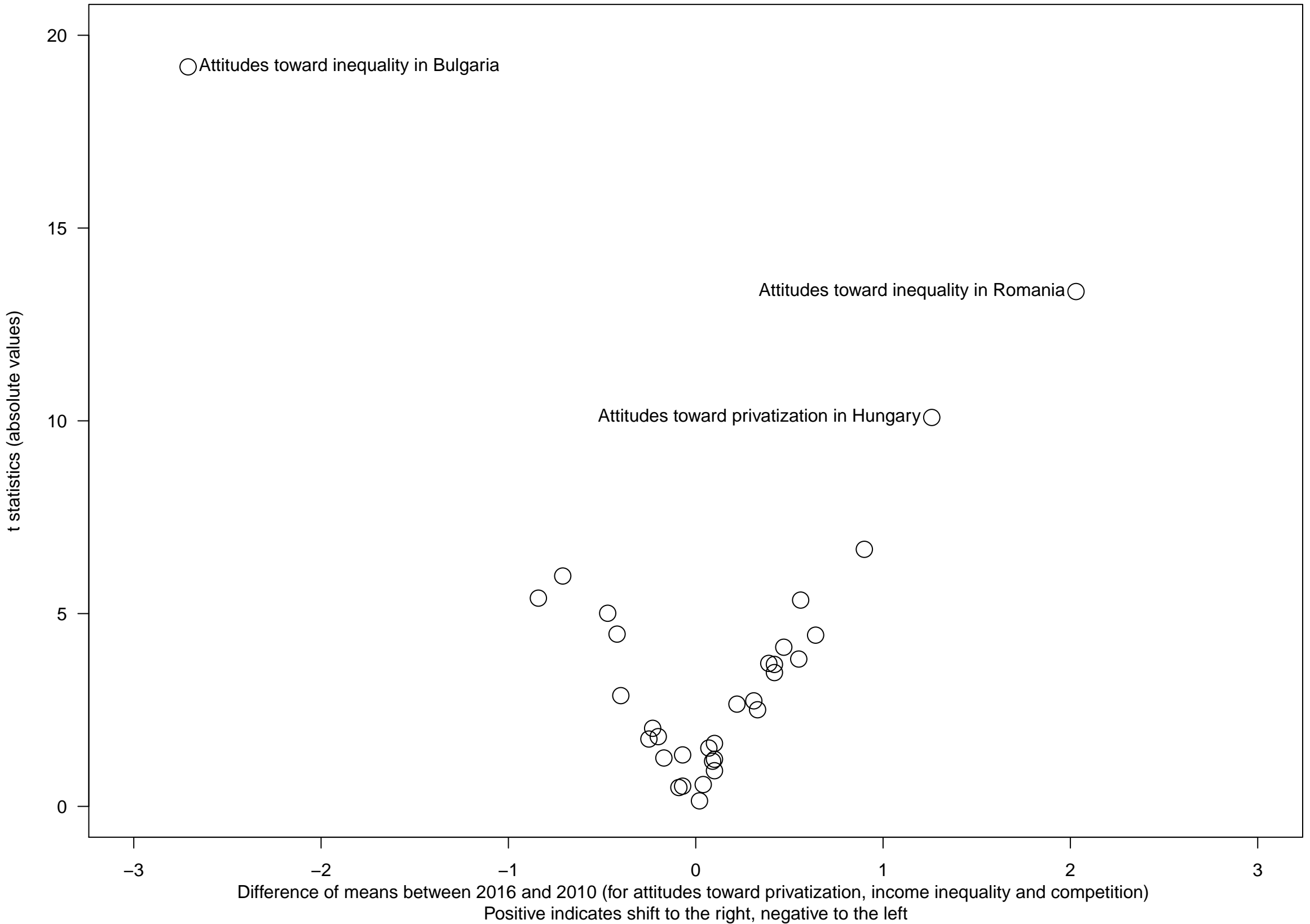


Figure 4
726 coefficients from 66 linear regression models
Dependent variables are attitudes toward income inequality, privatization and competition, 2010 and 2016

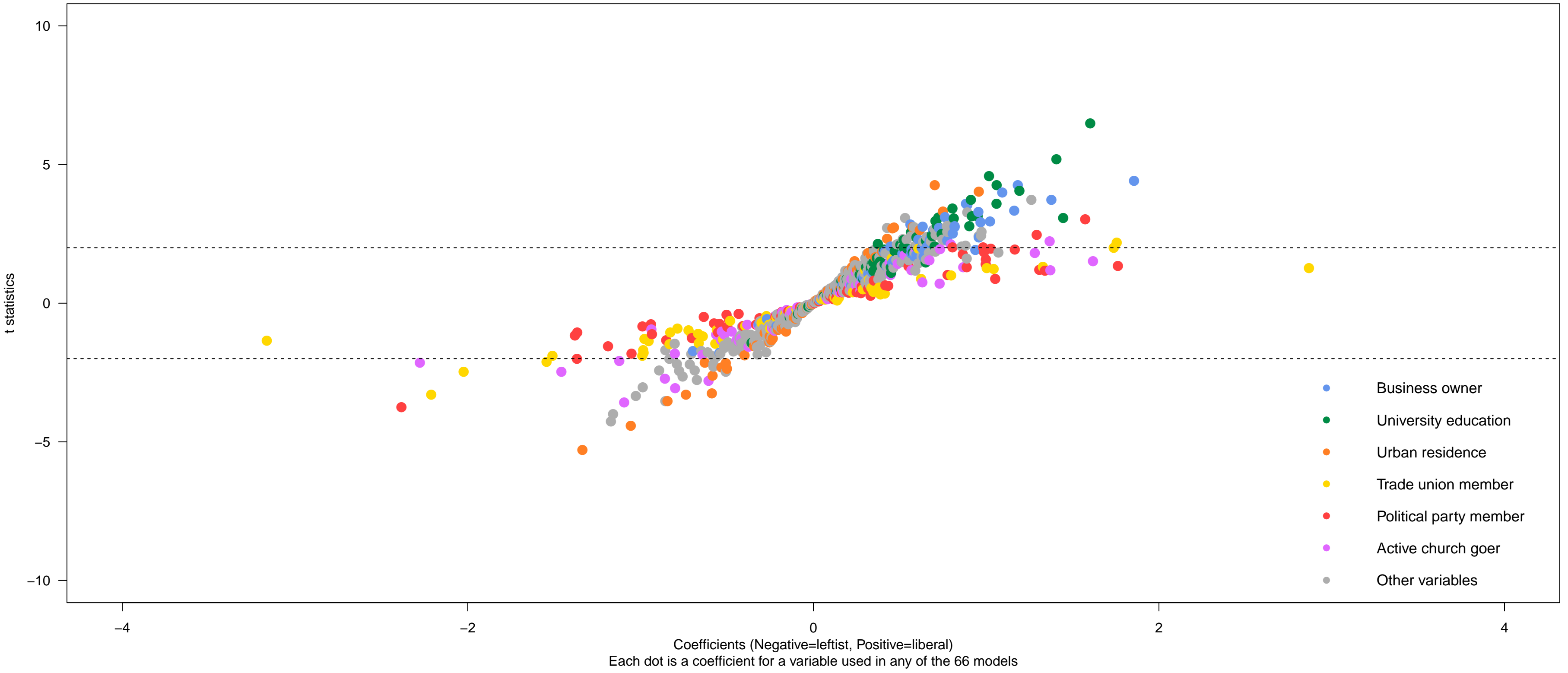


Figure 5
726 coefficients from 66 logistic regression models
Dependent variable is inclusion in the leftist tail (answers 1 and 2)
Attitudes towards income inequality, privatization and competition, 2010 and 2016

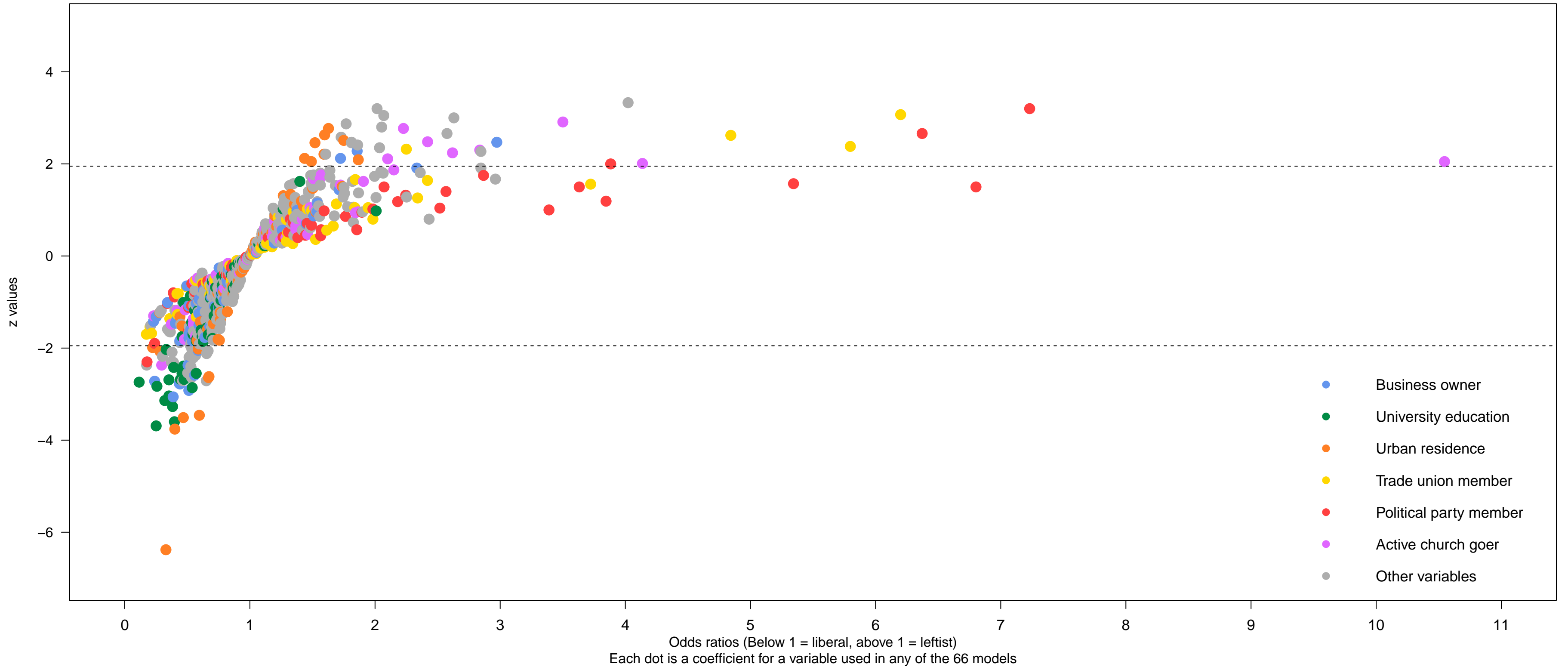


Figure 6
726 coefficients from 66 logistic regression models
Dependent variable is inclusion in the liberal tail (answers 9 and 10)
Attitudes towards income inequality, privatization and competition, 2010 and 2016

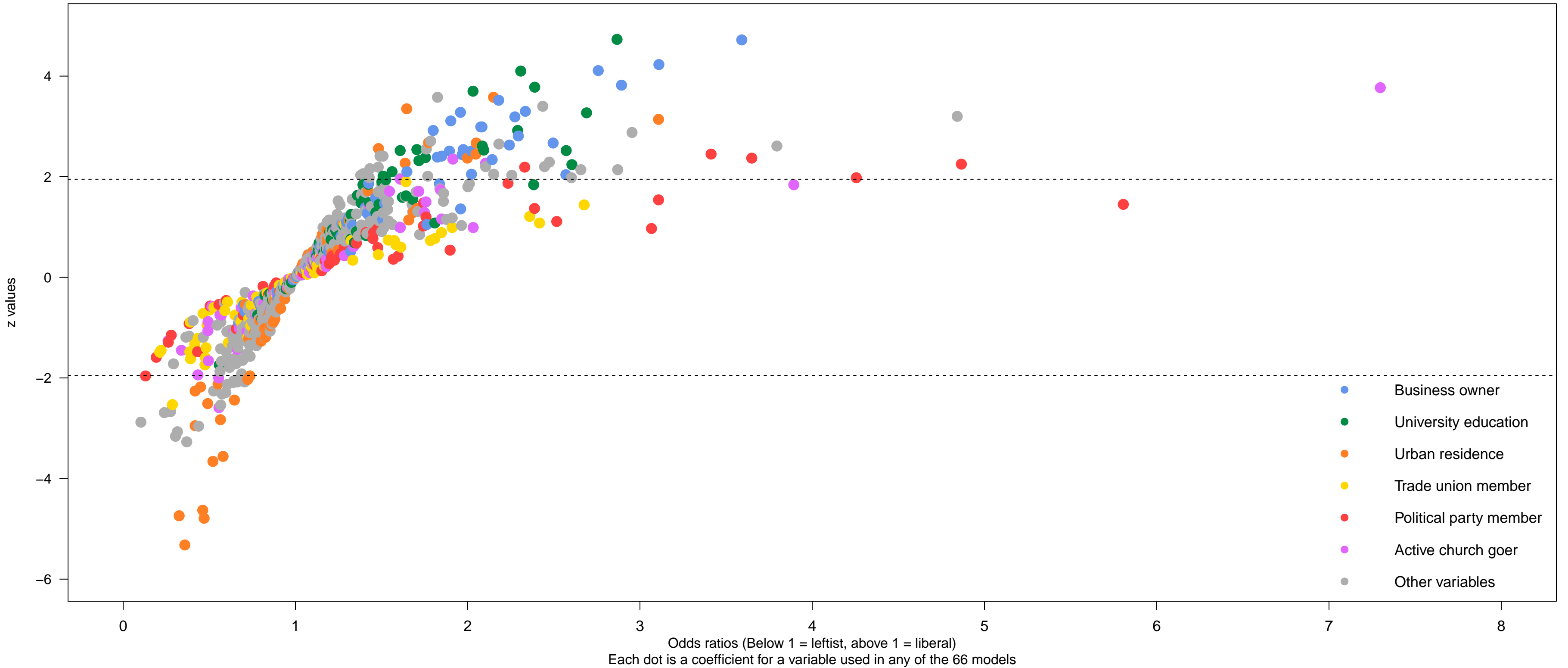


Figure 7
Attitudes toward income inequality
All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

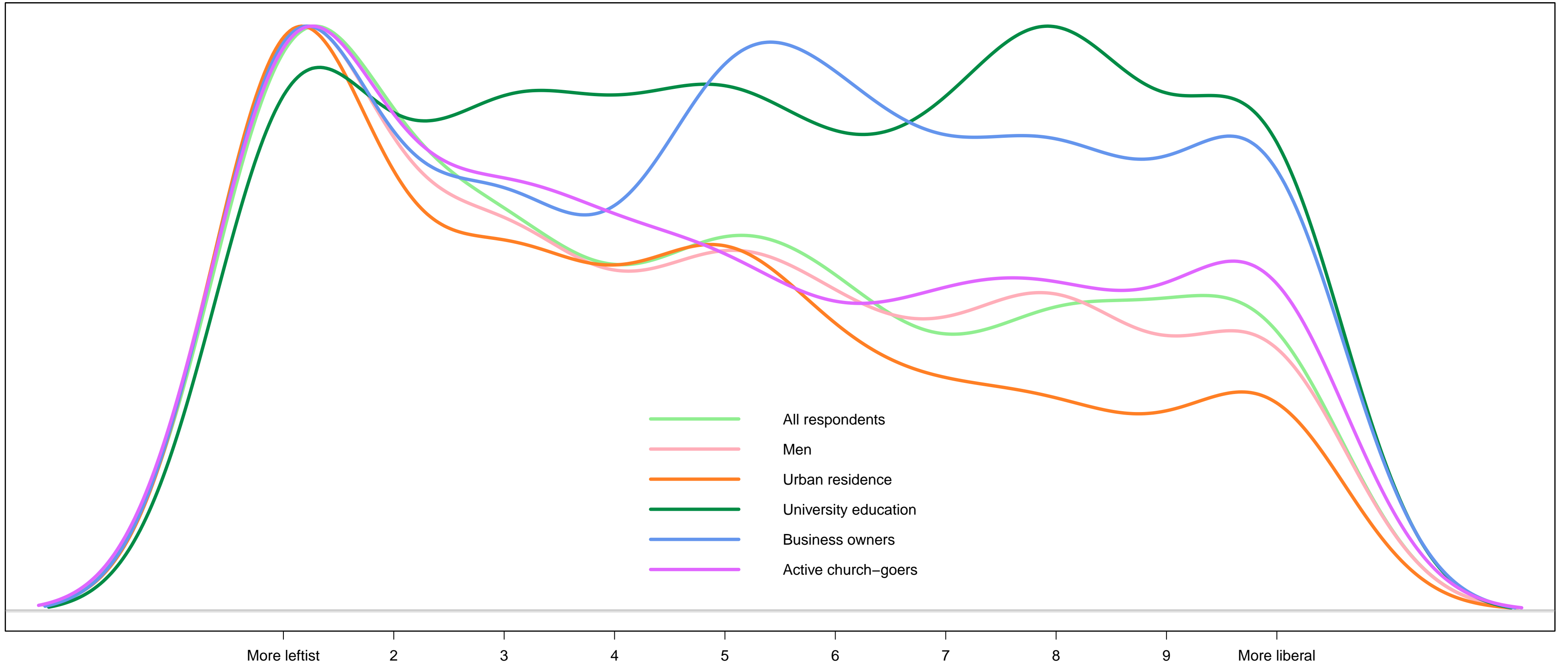


Figure 8
Attitudes toward privatization
All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

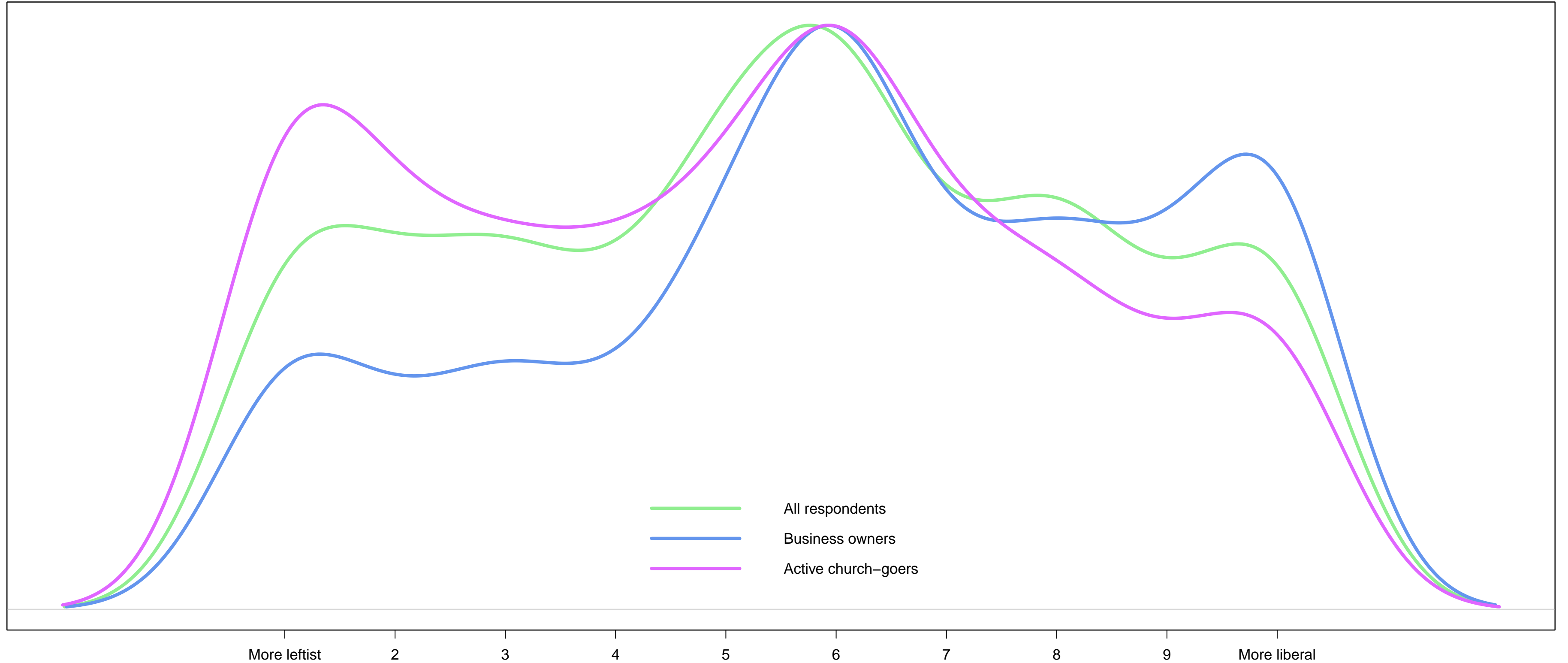


Figure 9
Attitudes toward competition
All 11 eastern EU member states weighted equally, 2016

