

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

COMPARING EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Differences and Similarities between
14 Social Democratic Parties

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European social democracy has gone through a number of profound transformations since the second half of the 20th century in terms of electoral fortune, ideological orientation, and electoral appeal.



In spite of competing in different political contexts and responding to a variety of ideological challenges, social democratic parties share a homogeneous ideological orientation, at least when their aggregate positions are considered. Although relevant differences emerge if we look at party stances on individual issues, there is largely an ideological overlap when it comes to the parties' aggregate positions.



The aim of this project is to portray the differences between 14 European social democratic parties by using expert coding on a number of relevant policy issues.

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INTRODUCTION

European social democracy has gone through a number of profound transformations since the second half of the 20th century in terms of electoral fortune, ideological orientation, and electoral appeal. Social democrats have experienced a decline throughout Europe in terms of their electoral performance. Without exception, social democrats across Europe have experienced a precipitous fall in their share of the popular vote. In four countries — France, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands — social democrats' share of the popular vote decreased by over a half from one election to the other.

Despite such electoral losses, social democratic parties across the continent have managed to maintain a relevant position in the political system as a major actor on the left with high coalition potential. Ideological moderation and governance expertise make social democratic parties a political force to be reckoned with in most European countries. Below, we review social democratic parties' transformation process and its impact on electoral performance. Despite moving in a similar direction marked by moderation and de-ideologization, centre-left parties across Europe have fostered differing stances and profiles, as evidenced by the analyses presented in this study.

Moderation in times of ideological polarization is both an asset and a liability for the traditional centre-left. The social democrats moderated their policy propositions during the 1980s and subsequently, under the influence of the Third Way ideology, moved to the centre of the political spectrum during the 1990s. There is evidence that centre-left parties are returning to more pronounced left-wing positions. Nevertheless, the centripetal movement of social democrats was substantial in the last two decades of the twentieth century. With the slow but steady decline of distinct left-wing positions, party politics in Europe is generally moving in the direction of more traditional, conservative, and authoritarian politics, albeit at a different velocity in each country.

During the post-war period, Western European social democratic parties relied on an ideologically driven but broad voter base of both working and middle classes (often with additional support from upper-class intelligentsia). These parties mobilised voters through large membership organisations with strict rank-and-file discipline. Over the subse-

quent decades, they slowly transformed into ideologically moderate catch-all parties, creating a more professional political class while appealing to a wider spectrum of voters by downgrading their traditional left-wing ideological convictions. This broad electoral appeal, the incorporation of many societal demands from various segments of society, accompanied by ideological moderation, initially increased the governability of social democratic parties. However, it also resulted in a loss of affiliation with and support from labour unions and the more radical working classes. The abandonment of efforts to intellectually and morally emancipate the more vulnerable segments of society and the substitution of grassroots organising with professionalised campaigning led to electoral successes well into the 1990s. Reducing the importance of ideology contributed significantly to the popularity of the social democrats. However, this wider appeal and professionalization did alienate the segments of the traditional centre-left voter base that appreciated the sense of belonging that comes with grassroots activities and transformative, ideologically driven politics. One could argue that social democrats redirected their focus from class identity and interest politics with an ideological zeal for a higher public purpose to an emphasis on representing different identities, interests, and private purposes. This incorporation of 'new left' politics, which went beyond the economic realm, did widen the parties' appeal and allowed some social democratic parties to escape from their original class character and win national elections. At the same time, in more globalised economies, the bargaining power of broad segments of the lower working and middle classes was weakened, substantially reducing their piece of the economic pie. While the success of social and Christian democratic welfare state policies had brought broad sections of society into the middle class, the functional loss of the centre-left in representing them eventually laid the groundwork for its electoral decline.

The transformation of social democratic parties created a space on the political fringes from where more radical parties have emerged. These new parties posed a direct electoral challenge to the established centre-left and include the far-left democratic socialist and communist parties. The agendas of these parties often resemble that of the social democrats after WWII. Moreover, green environmentalist parties emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on

post-materialist values. Additionally, far-right parties proliferated and shifted the discourse from economic issues to identity politics. These new political challengers eroded the electoral base and changed the profile of social democratic support, forcing the centre-left to adopt different response strategies suitable to the contemporary political reality and dependent on national party system characteristics. The strategies resulted in differing outcomes. Some social democratic parties managed to remain electorally successful government actors, such as the traditionally dominant Scandinavian parties, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS), and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). However, others, including the French Socialist Party (PS), the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), and the Greek Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), suffered resounding humiliation that saw them losing their incumbency and obtaining the lowest ever results in their history.

The situation in Eastern Europe is considerably different. Relying on a communist legacy for preserving their voter base, the Eastern European social democrats that emerged in the early 1990s have had a difficult time adopting the progressive cultural values of their Western European counterparts and have instead focused predominantly on economic policies. Their authoritarian legacy initially projected conservative values that did not resonate with younger voters, while their core electorate was often sympathetic to Russia and 'strong-hand' governance. After dominating the political competition in the 1990s and the early 2000s, many Eastern European social democratic parties experienced a profound electoral collapse that, at this point, appears too difficult to reverse (e.g. the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) in Poland).

This project uses expert coding on relevant policy issues to portray the differences between 14 European social democratic parties. Though all social democratic parties followed a general pattern of political moderation, it manifested to a different degree in each European country. Some parties adopted a clear Third Way position, incorporating many neoliberal instruments in their economic governance, while others maintained a more statist approach. By using the same issues to code all parties, this project unearths the underlying differences within the centre-left party family. These parties compete in differing political contexts and have to respond to a range of political challenges. Nevertheless, many policy-issues are universally relevant despite the country-specific differences. We compare parties based on their positions on a set of such issues in a manner that allows for the assessment of each party in its respective political environment. While we acknowledge that these parties compete in differing political contexts and have to respond to a range of political challenges, the adoption of identical statements across countries allows for the assessment of how each party has responded to the situation in its respective political environment.

1

HOW WERE THE GRAPHS CREATED?

The graphs show the aggregate positions of European social democratic political parties in a two-dimensional political space, based on their stances on 27 salient policy issues. A larger number of country-specific issues were proposed by a team of academics and experts in each country based on a close examination of the parties' most recent election manifestoes, websites, and media discourse. The selection of the final 27 issues was chosen because of their comparability across countries and relevance for social democratic politics.

Each issue statement is framed in such a manner that it relates to the economic left-right dimension or the cultural libertarian-authoritarian divide. The horizontal axis represents the economic dimension, differentiating political parties on policy issues related to state intervention in the economy,

redistribution, income and taxation policy, and the welfare state, among others. The vertical axis represents the cultural, post-materialist cleavage that juxtaposes libertarian/progressive and authoritarian/conservative positions. Here, typical issues include multiculturalism, immigration, national identity, gender equality, European integration, and environmentalism. Parties were positioned on the issues with a 5-point scale ("completely disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", "completely agree") based on their official stances on the issues as expressed in their party manifestos, websites, reports in the media, and other campaign materials.

The main landscape (Figure 1) is constructed by plotting the aggregate positions of all parties on both cleavage dimensions. The precise average party position is located in the

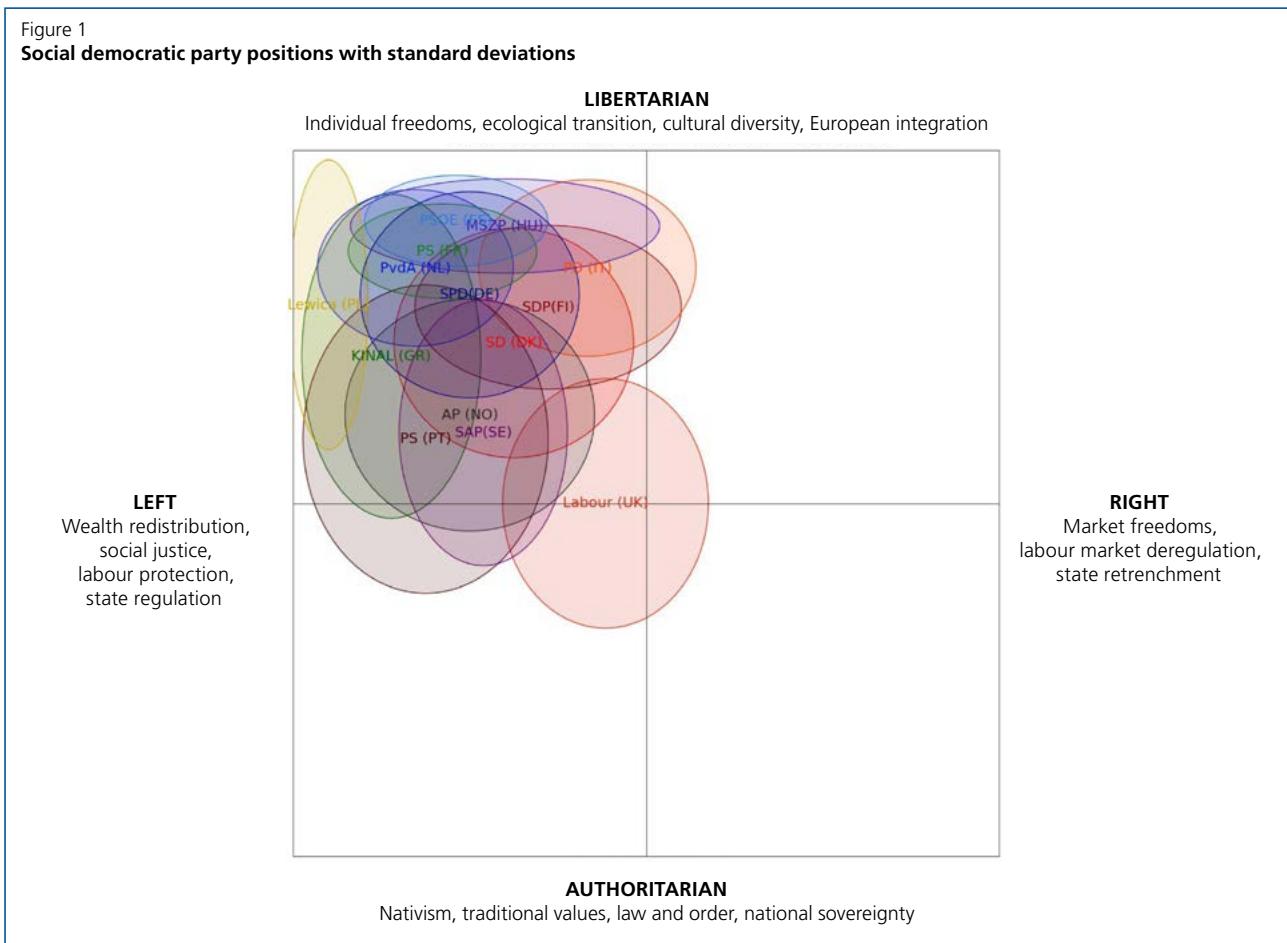
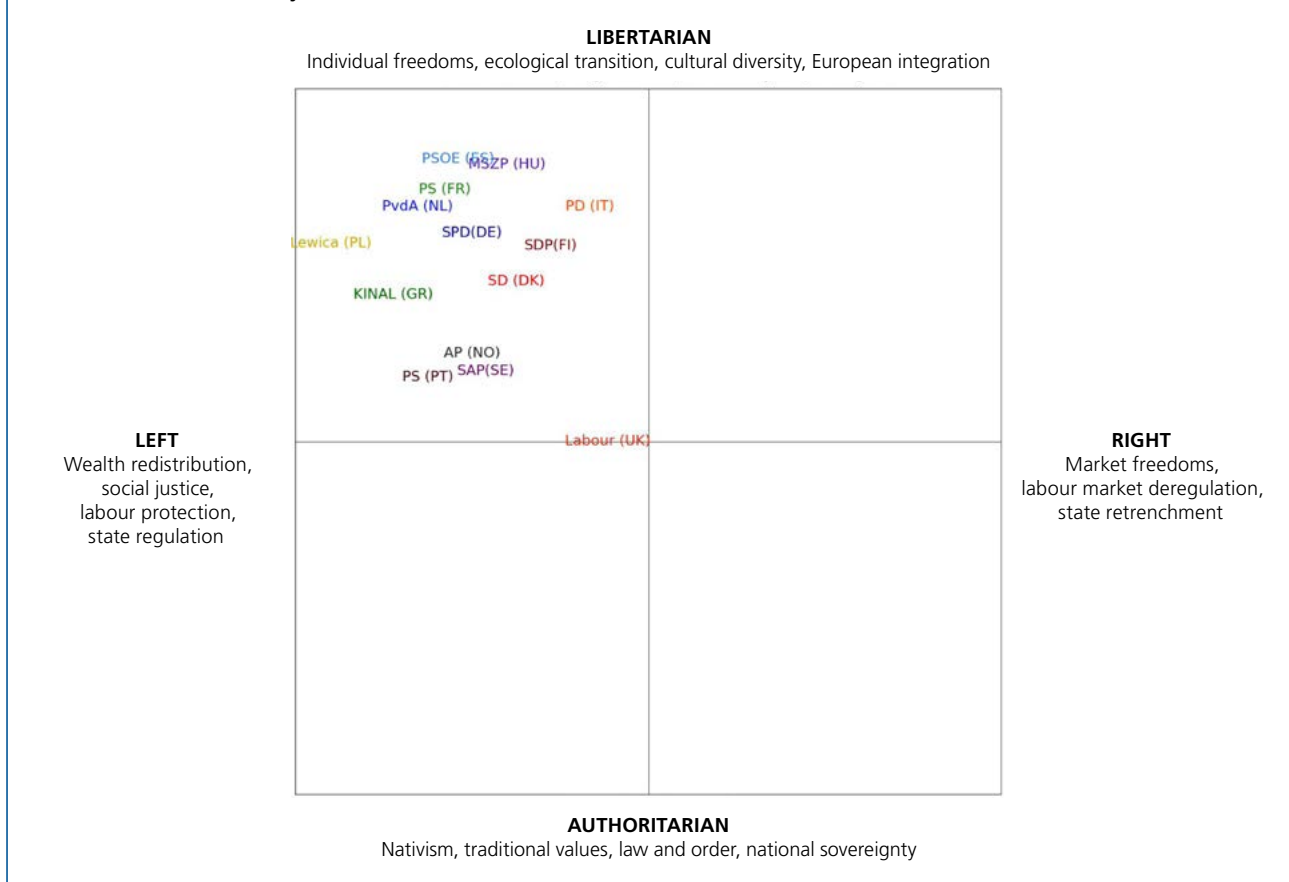


Figure 2

Exact Social Democratic Party Positions

centre of the ellipses. The ellipses represent the standard deviations over all party positions on the 27 statements, indicating the level of consistency across all issues. Thus, when social democratic parties adopt both left-wing and relatively right-wing policy positions, the ellipse will be wider on the economic left-right axis. Parties in favour of both liberal/progressive and conservative/authoritarian policies will have a wider ellipse on the cultural axis.

As can be seen in the landscapes, all social democratic parties in this study end up in the left-progressive quadrant, with the UK Labour Party being the most centrist party on both dimensions. Figure 2 shows only the average aggregate position in the landscape. Here, we can better distinguish social democratic parties in terms of their relative positions. Clearly, despite belonging to the same party family, European social democratic parties differ substantially from one another while also showing a high level of overlap.

2

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES AND THE ECONOMIC LEFT-RIGHT DIMENSION

Different patterns of competition and historic trajectories will inevitably lead to ideological variation between European centre-left parties when it comes to their economic priorities and policies. Important differences that impact the format and generosity of welfare arrangements emerge, for example, when the main centre-right competitors are Christian democratic and liberal parties (like in Germany, The Netherlands, and Belgium) or strong conservative parties (like in Scandinavia, France, Spain, and the UK). An important transformation occurred during the 1980s and 1990s when many social democratic parties adopted the “Third Way” ideological strategy. In particular, the UK Labour party, which endorsed various elements of the neo-liberal economic agenda, differs from the Scandinavian social democratic approach that remains rooted in economic regulation, generous welfare provision, and statist economic intervention, expressed by the protection of welfare-state arrangements, the promotion of trade unionism, and collective bargaining for better working conditions and higher wages. Naturally, many economic statements that measure social democrats’ willingness to give way to various market forces, such as privatization, deregulation, and budget cuts, create sufficient variation and impact their aggregate stances in the comparative political landscape presented in the current project. Newer issues are also incorporated into the comparative questionnaire. They are reflected in statements related to workers’ rights in the gig economy, environmental issues, digital taxation, and funding for law-and-order institutions.

Despite the variation in challenges and political environments, the differences in issue-positions on the economic dimension are not large enough to scatter social democrats across the political landscape. In fact, all social democratic parties in our study ended up on the left-progressive side of the horizontal axis. It may not come as a surprise that the UK Labour Party is the most moderate economically, even though the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn had drawn the Labour Party to more radical left positions. Under Keir Starmer, Labour adopted a very centrist economic platform. Similarly, the Italian PD also has a very centrist economic profile: the party, which is essentially a coalition of ideologically diverse formations, has even refrained from officially using the social democratic label in its party manifesto. On the other end of the centre-left spectrum, the Polish Lewica and the Greek KINAL have the most radical left economic profile. However, it is worth mentioning that Lewica’s stances on

most economic issues are still unknown because it is a relatively new and minor party. The Scandinavian parties, all of which are incumbents, and the German SPD have a rather balanced economic position. These parties are located between the moderate centrists and the more economically radical social democratic parties in the political landscape.

The standard deviation of party positions on the economic dimension determines the size of the ellipse horizontally. Parties with coherent positions (i.e. if the party consistently agrees with left-wing propositions and disagrees with right-wing ones) have smaller standard deviations than parties that support policies inconsistently.

Looking at the shape of the ellipses, the social democrats with the most coherent economic stances are Sweden’s Social Democratic Party (SAP), the PSOE in Spain, and the Socialist Party (PS) in France. The SAP strongly favours universal welfare benefits, retaining the number of public sector employees, minimising the pay gap between salaries, improving the rights of gig economy employees, introducing a wealth tax for funding the ecological transition, and an EU-wide minimum wage. Nevertheless, the Swedish social democrats are opposed to the public ownership of key industries. Similarly, the PSOE supports nearly all the aforementioned policies, apart from tackling wage gap differences and introducing an ecological tax — issues about which the party has not yet expressed an opinion. In addition, PSOE favours the business-friendly measure of transitioning to renewable energies only if enterprises are compensated. The French PS also has largely coherent positions on the economic left-right dimension: the party is in favour of nearly all left-wing propositions, apart from introducing an EU-wide minimum wage and heavier taxes for companies that pollute the environment. However, the PS is also strongly supportive of increasing funding for law enforcement, a traditionally right-wing policy.

On the other hand, parties with more “flexible” economic positions and thus larger standard deviations and subsequently a larger ellipse include Finland’s Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the MSZP in Hungary. The Finnish social democrats are opposed to raising the minimum wage in the country. At the same time, they support increasing the funding for law enforcement and only transitioning to renewable energy if businesses are compensated. MSZP is also in favour

of the abovementioned right-wing propositions while also strongly opposing universal welfare, as it prefers a selective approach to welfare provision.

Issues on which the 14 parties all agree include support for improving the conditions of gig economy workers, decreasing the pay gap between the lowest and highest salaries, state regulation of the economy, introducing a digital tax for tech giants, and increasing the budgets of state-run health institutions. On the other hand, there are considerable differences between party stances with regard to adhering to European Union (EU)'s budgetary rule (keeping the budget deficit below 3 per cent), compensating businesses for the cost of transition to renewable energy, the provision of universal rather than income-based welfare, and the state ownership of key industries and services. The results suggest that belonging to the same party family does not necessarily translate to complete position overlap in terms of economic stances and that the national political context is still instrumental in defining party stances.

3

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES AND THE CONSERVATIVE-PROGRESSIVE DIMENSION

The cultural vertical axis is comprised of statements predominantly relating to moral and post-materialist issues, such as immigration, gender equality, and European integration. Here too, there are considerable differences between social democratic parties. Again, the UK Labour Party is the outlier with a less progressive and very centrist aggregate stance compared to other parties. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that several of the statements in this pole pertain to the topic of EU integration. In the wake of Brexit, the party does not have an opinion on these issues since they are no longer relevant for the UK. In addition, Labour's lack of clear positions on issues related to immigration and its support for more defence spending are pushing it more towards the conservative/authoritarian side of the vertical axis and away from its continental counterparts.

The social democratic centre-left is unequivocal in its support for progressive policies, such as gender equality, the rights of same-sex couples, deepening European integration, and making hate speech illegal across the EU. The parties that have expressed an opinion regarding the aforementioned issues all agree that policies resulting in their achievement should be implemented.

The non-economic topic that generates the largest rift between social democrats across Europe is immigration. Despite their general historical support for humane immigration policies and accepting asylum seekers in particular, some centre-left parties reversed their stances on immigration after the 2015 European refugee crisis and the consecutive widespread backlash against immigration among European voters. With the ensuing electoral gains of far-right populist parties, many political moderates argued in favour of a more cautious approach towards immigration that would limit the number of newcomers by enforcing strict criteria for legal immigration and curbing illegal entry. The Danish Social Democrats were among the first on the centre-left to adopt positions hostile to immigration, referencing economic and social integration in their justification. Nowadays, other social democratic parties have adopted a similarly restrictive approach, albeit with a different degree of opposition to immigration. The parties in Greece (KINAL), Sweden (SAP), Italy's Democratic Party (PD), and Norway's Labour Party (AP) all agree that their countries should not accept more foreigners than those who can be efficiently integrated. Nevertheless, all social democratic parties remain

largely supportive of legal immigration while opposing economic immigration from non-EU countries: the Danish, Greek, Norwegian, and Swedish parties are all opposed to welcoming economic immigrants from outside the EU.

Another issue of contention within the social democratic party family is the energy transition. While some parties prioritise implementing stricter climate legislation, even if it stands in the way of economic growth, others prefer to keep economic development intact (in order to finance the transition). Similarly, the centre-left is divided when it comes to energy prices: while most parties support transitioning to renewable energy sources even if it leads to higher energy costs, some are concerned that such a transformation will have a negative impact on the financially vulnerable and precarious sectors of the population. This is an outcome that many prefer to avoid, considering that high energy costs sparked the 2018 "Yellow Vests" protests in France. Another divisive issue is defence spending. Although social democrats are traditionally opposed to high spending on the military, recent scepticism regarding the reliability of the US as a strategic military partner has resulted in obvious opinion shifts on the matter.

The standard deviation of party positions on the cultural dimension determines the size of the ellipse vertically. Parties with coherent positions (i.e. if the party consistently agrees with libertarian/progressive propositions and disagrees with authoritarian/conservative ones) have smaller standard deviations than parties that support inconsistent policies.

The parties with the most coherent stances on this dimension are the PSOE (ES), PS (FR), and PvdA (NL). The PSOE is strongly in favour of wage equality between genders, deepening European integration, protecting the rights of same-sex couples, limiting funding for EU member-states that do not uphold the rule of law, and banning hate speech within the Union. In addition, the party is opposed to limiting immigration. In sum, the PSOE is in favour of all libertarian/progressive statements and is opposed to all authoritarian/conservative ones. While the PS (FR) does not have a clear stance on immigration (the party has not clearly communicated positions on the matter), it is strongly supportive of equal pay for men and women, renewable energy sources even at a higher energy cost, and changing the voting age to 16 from 18. The Dutch social democrats are opposed to

curbing immigration and strongly support equal pay for women, deepening European integration, equal rights for same-sex couples, sanctioning EU member-states that do not uphold the rule of law, and lowering the voting age.

On the other hand, parties with more “flexible” positions and thus larger standard deviations on the vertical axis include the Portuguese Socialists (PS) and KINAL (GR). The Portuguese socialists are generally progressive, especially in terms of their support for immigration, yet they opposed introducing stricter climate legislation if it would hamper economic growth. The PS (PR) is also opposed to lowering the voting age to 16 and sanctioning EU member-states that undermine democracy while being strongly supportive of increasing the budget for defence. KINAL also has a variety of stances when it comes to the issues on which the vertical axis is based: the party is opposed to immigration while at the same time supporting climate legislation and deepening European integration.

There are considerable differences between the aggregate party stances on both economic and cultural issues. These differences may result from the nature of domestic political competition, the incumbency of the parties, or the geographical location of the countries they compete in. Nevertheless, despite all differences, the results confirm that social democracy is headed in one direction: towards implementing progressive and fair policies that would benefit society at large, with a focus on its most vulnerable sectors. The findings in this study are suitable for comparing both the aggregate and individual stances of European social democrats. Moreover, they help assess the differences between parties which can help determine which policy proposals will inspire contention or cooperation for the common European agenda put forward by the centre-left.

Figure 3
The Spatial Position of AP (NO)

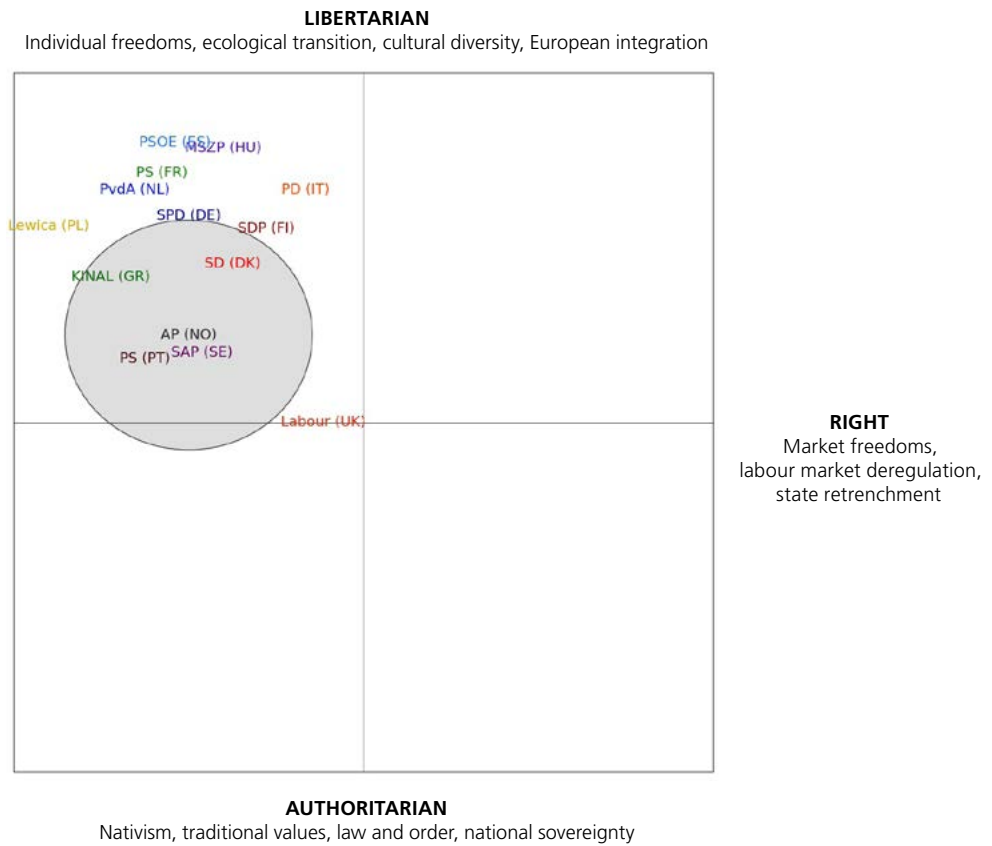


Figure 4
The Spatial position of KINAL (GR)

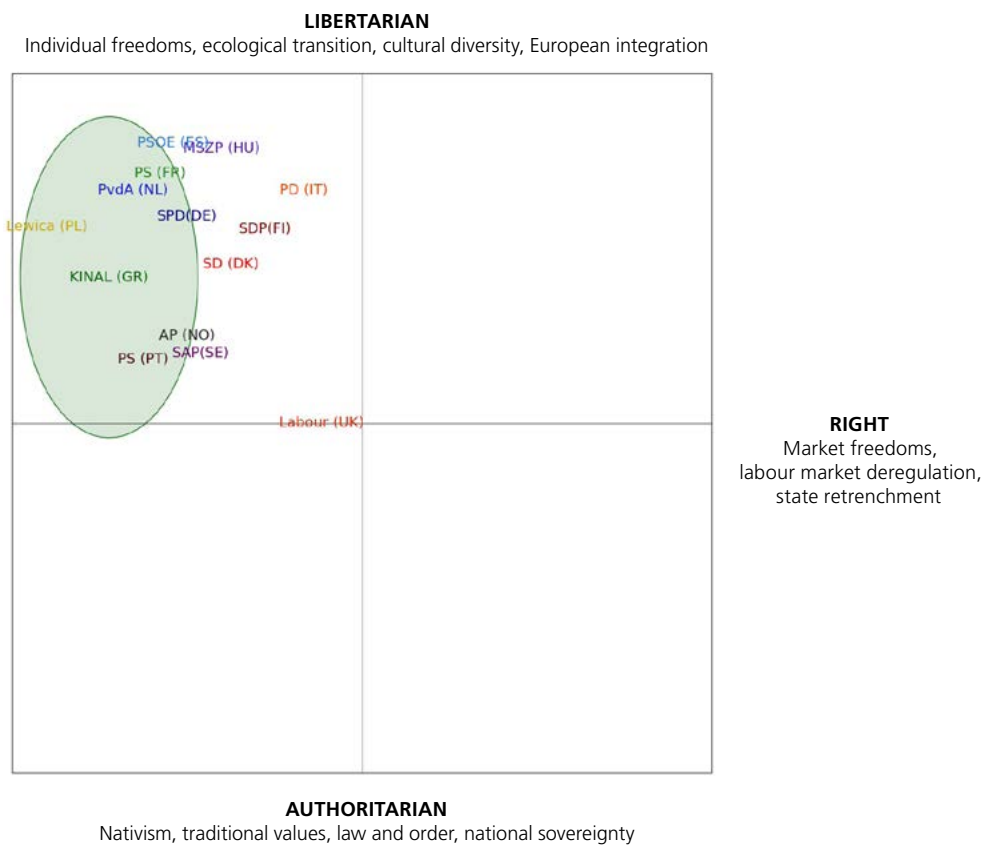


Figure 5
The Spatial Position of Labour (UK)

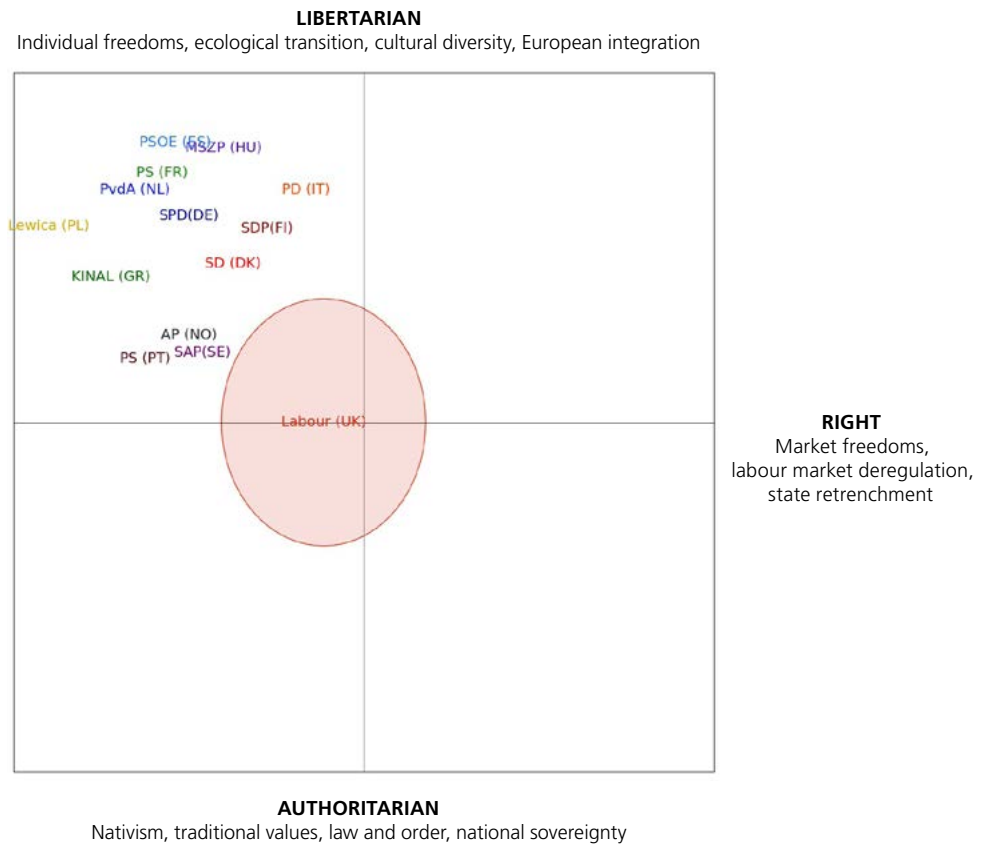


Figure 6
The Spatial Position of Lewica (PL)

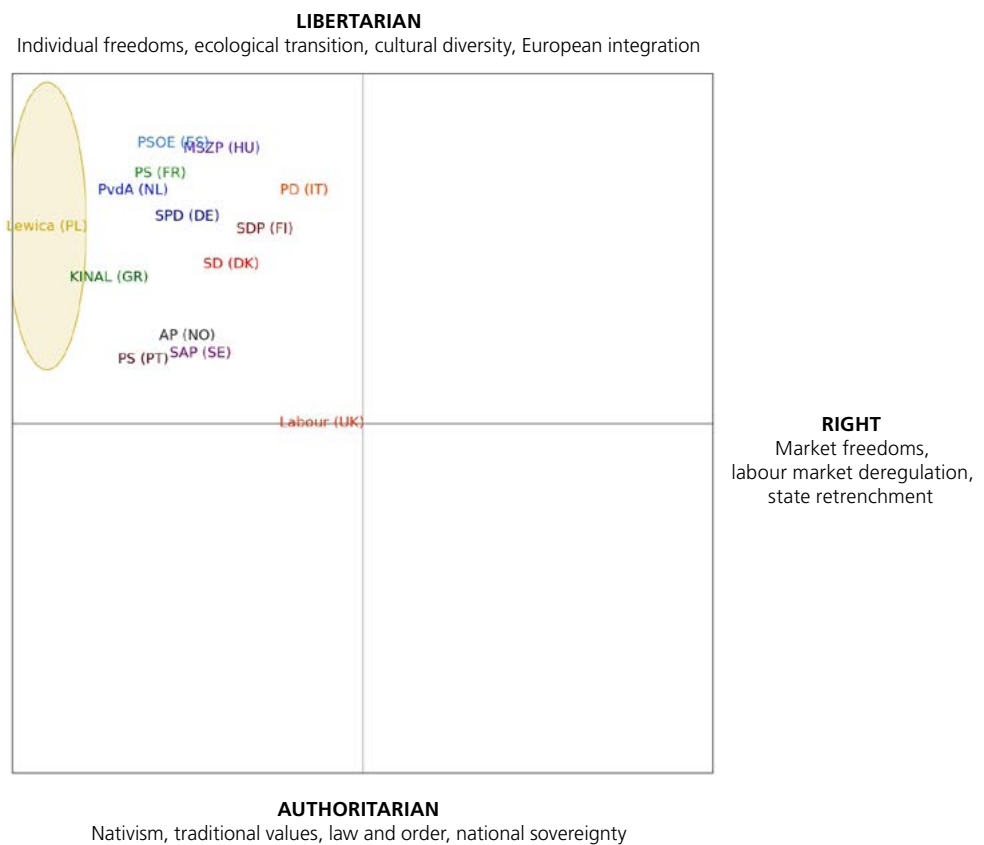


Figure 7
The Spatial Position of MSZP (HU)

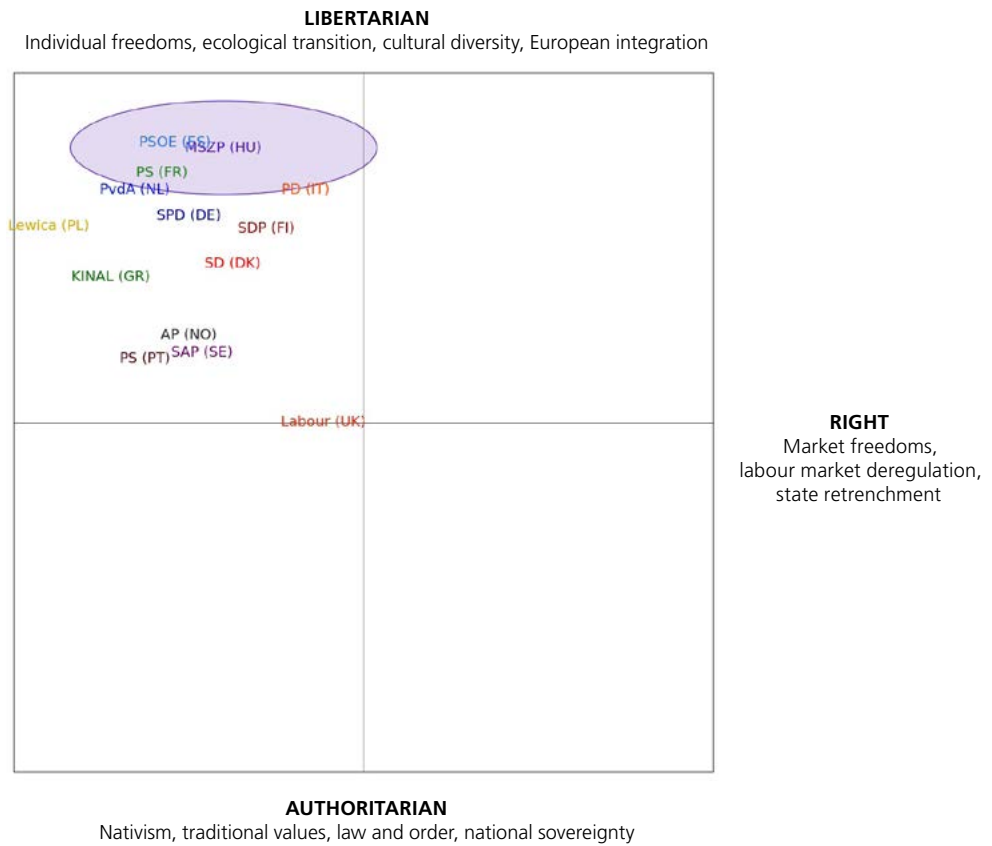


Figure 8
The Spatial Position of PD (IT)

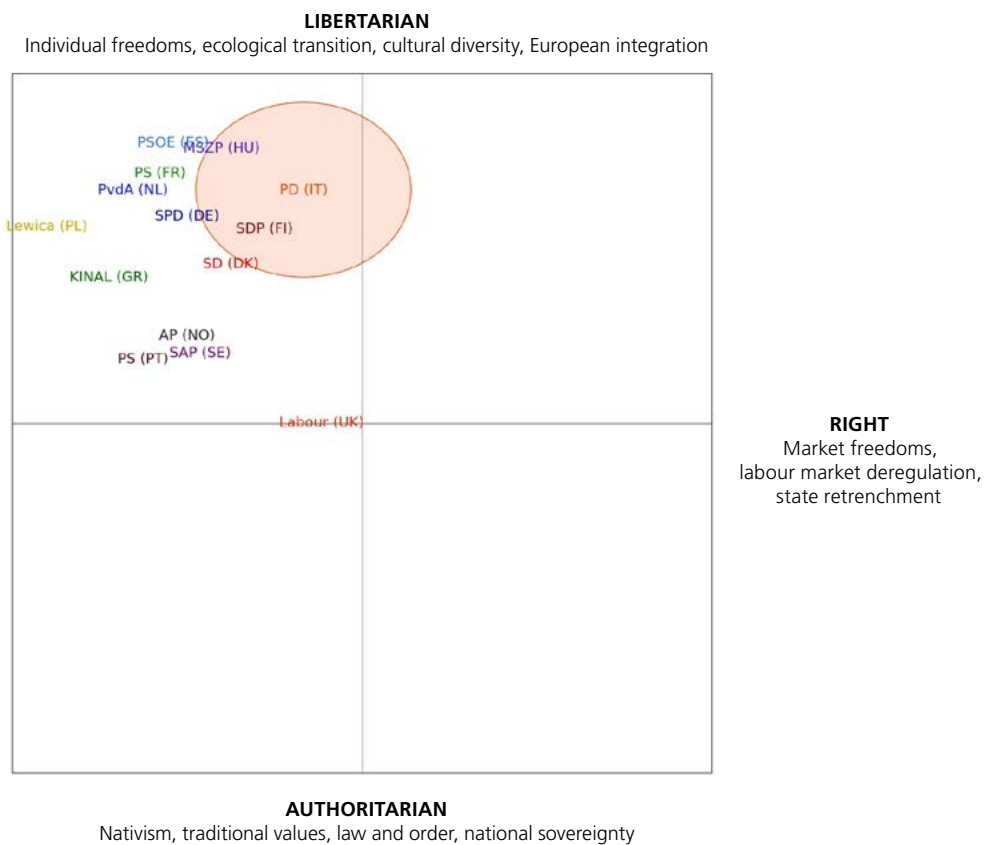


Figure 9
The Spatial Position of PS (FR)

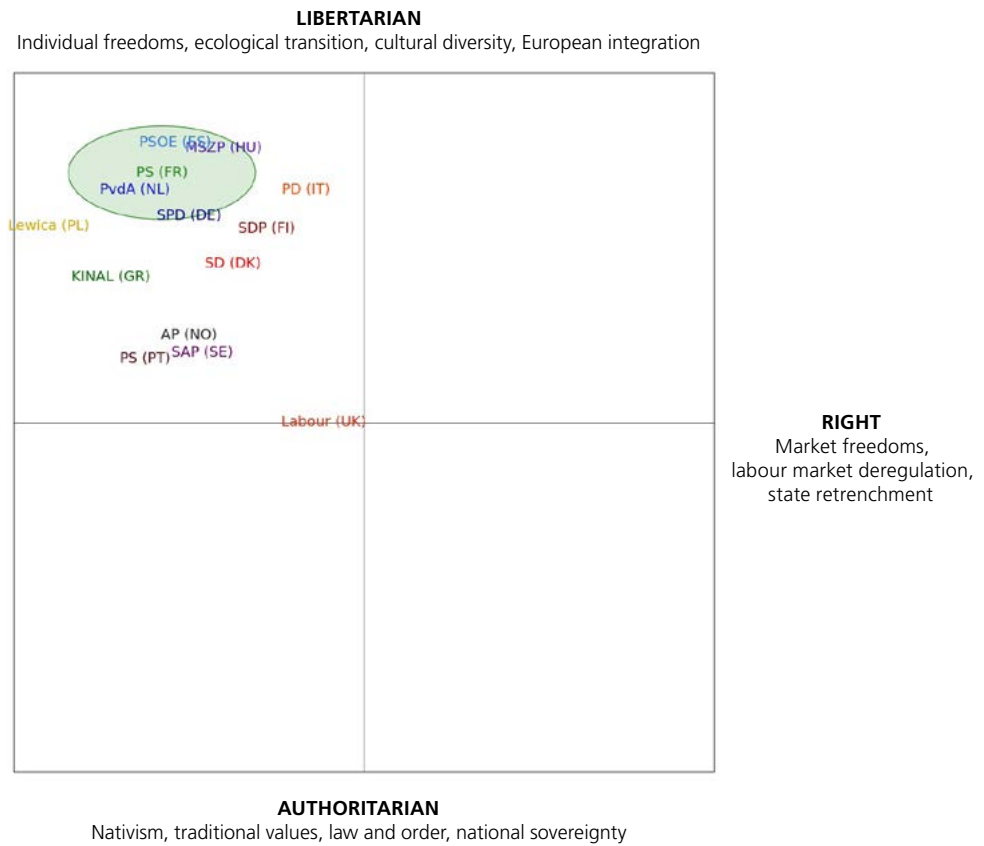


Figure 10
The Spatial Position of PS (PT)

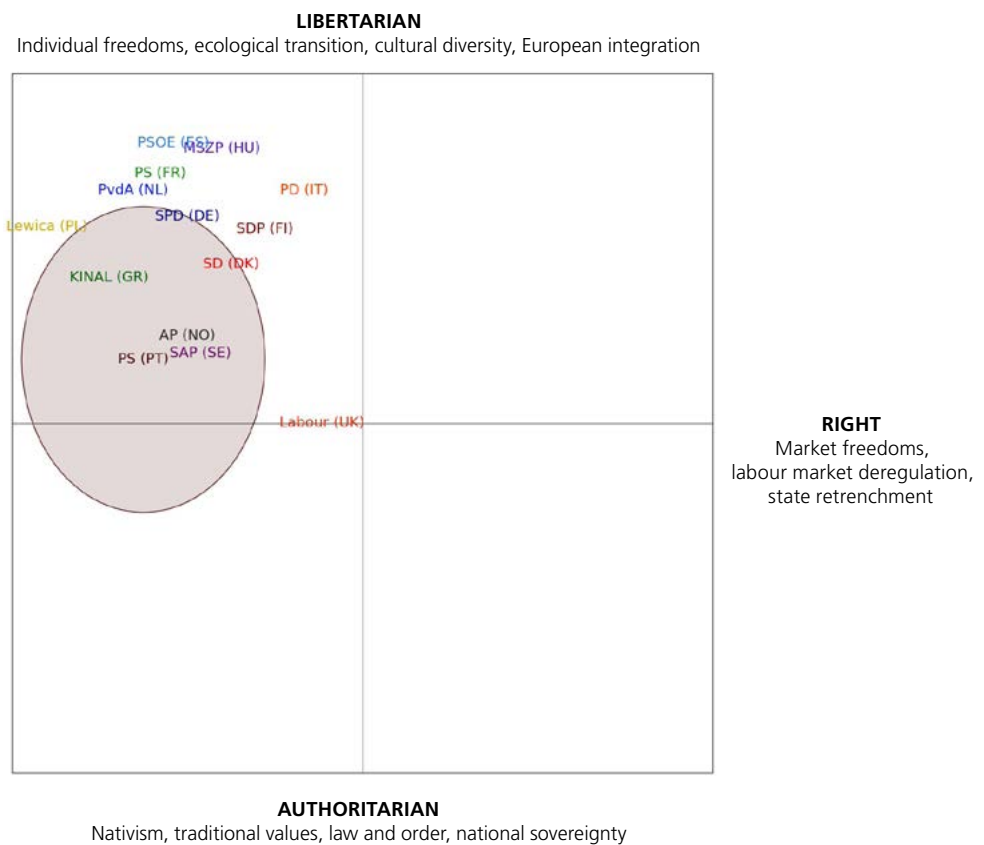


Figure 11
The Spatial Position of PSOE (ES)

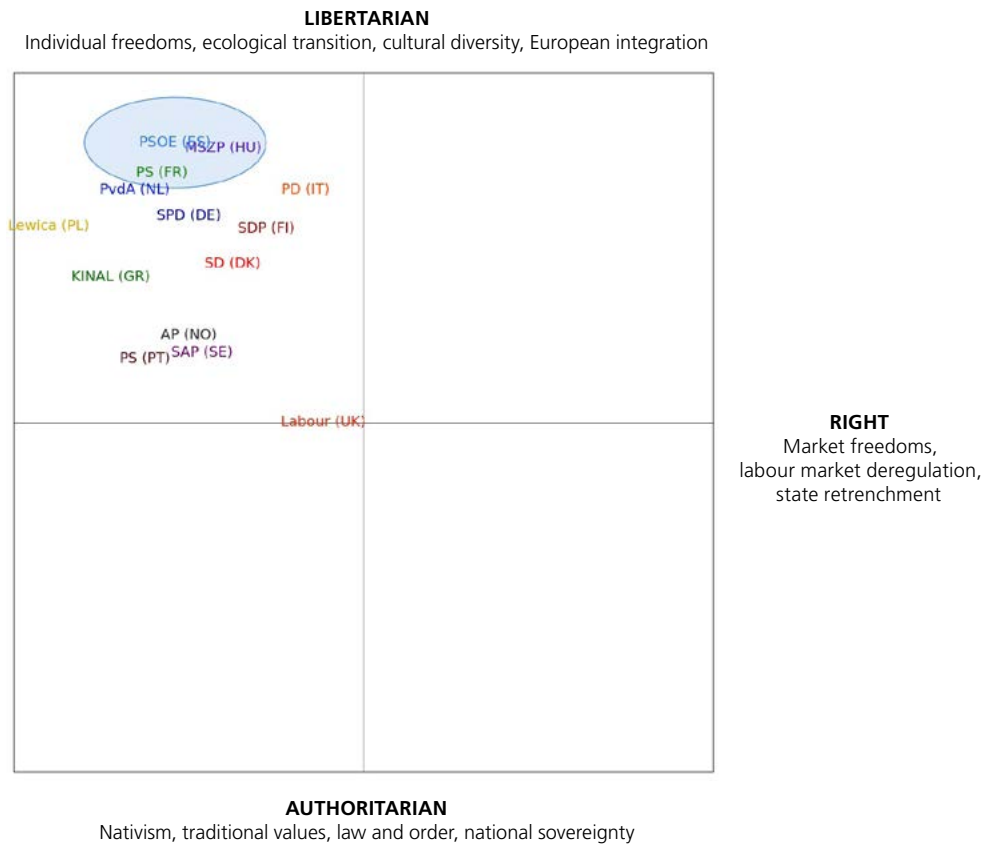


Figure 12
The Spatial Position of PvdA (NL)

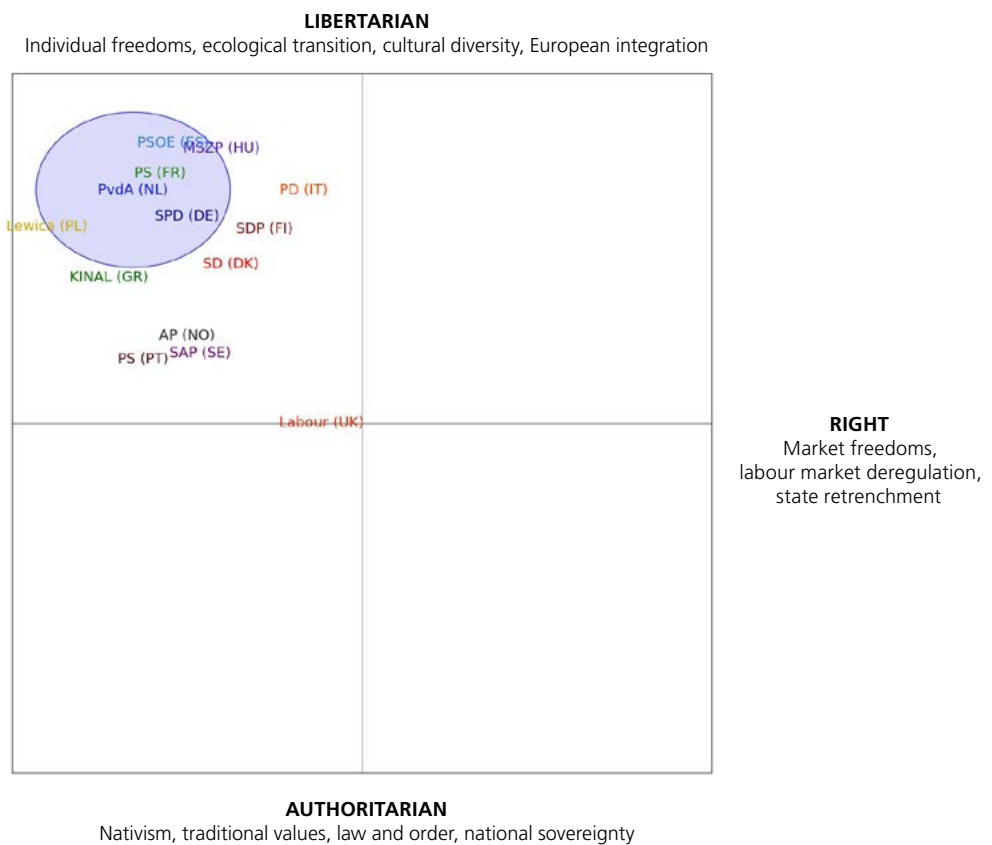


Figure 13
The Spatial Position of SAP (SW)

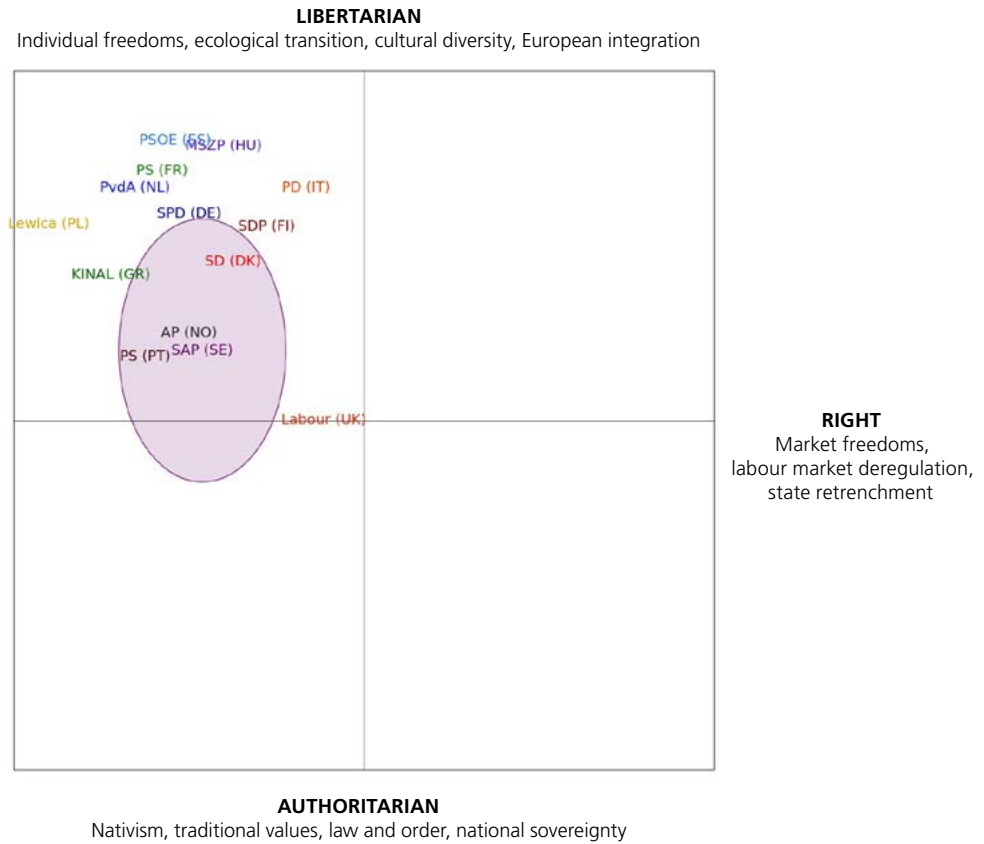


Figure 14
The Spatial Position of SD (DK)

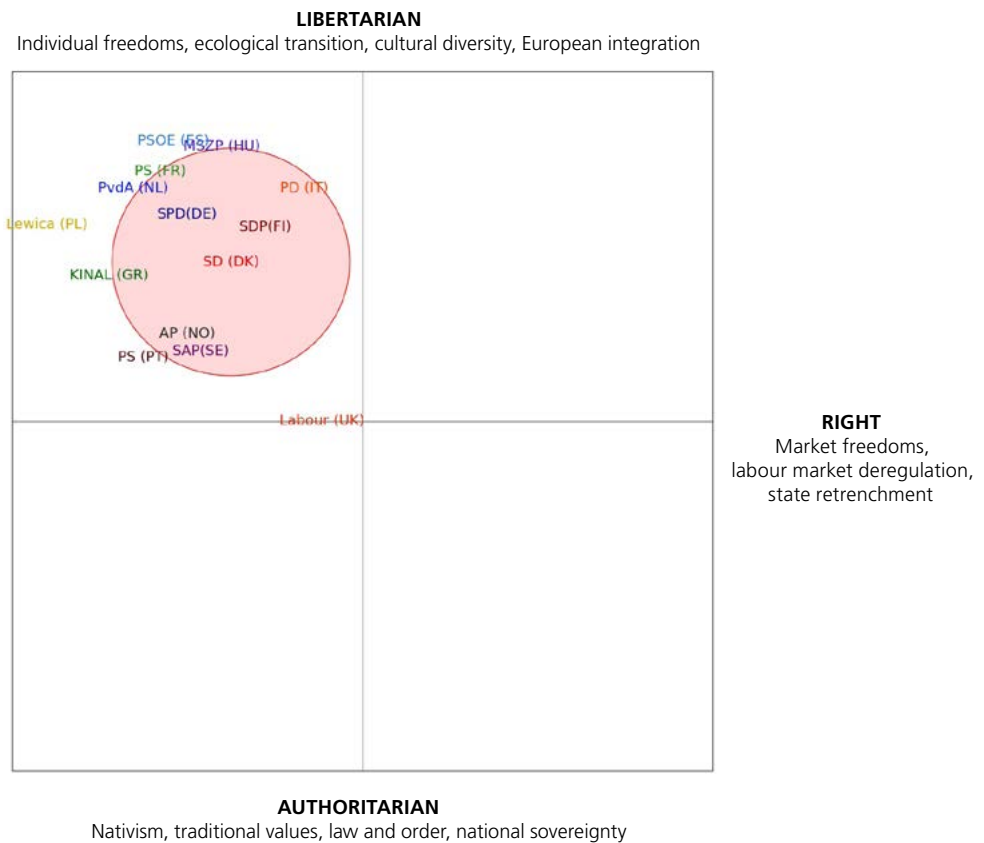


Figure 15
The Spatial Position of SDP (FI)

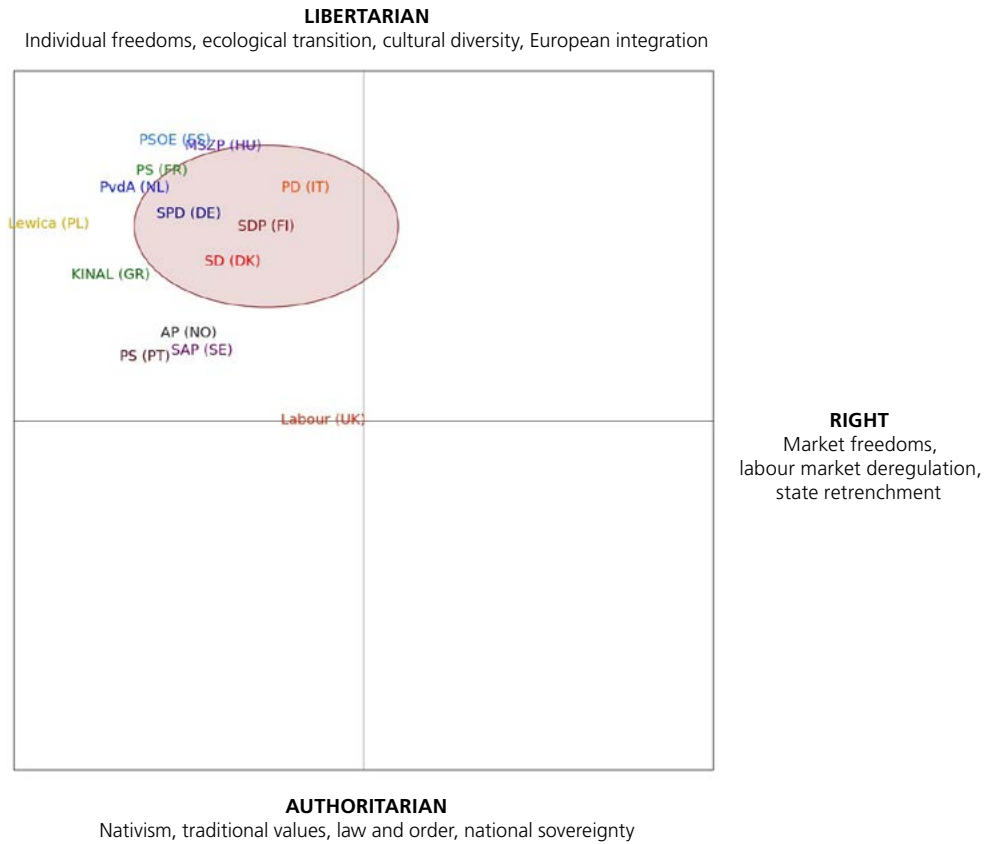
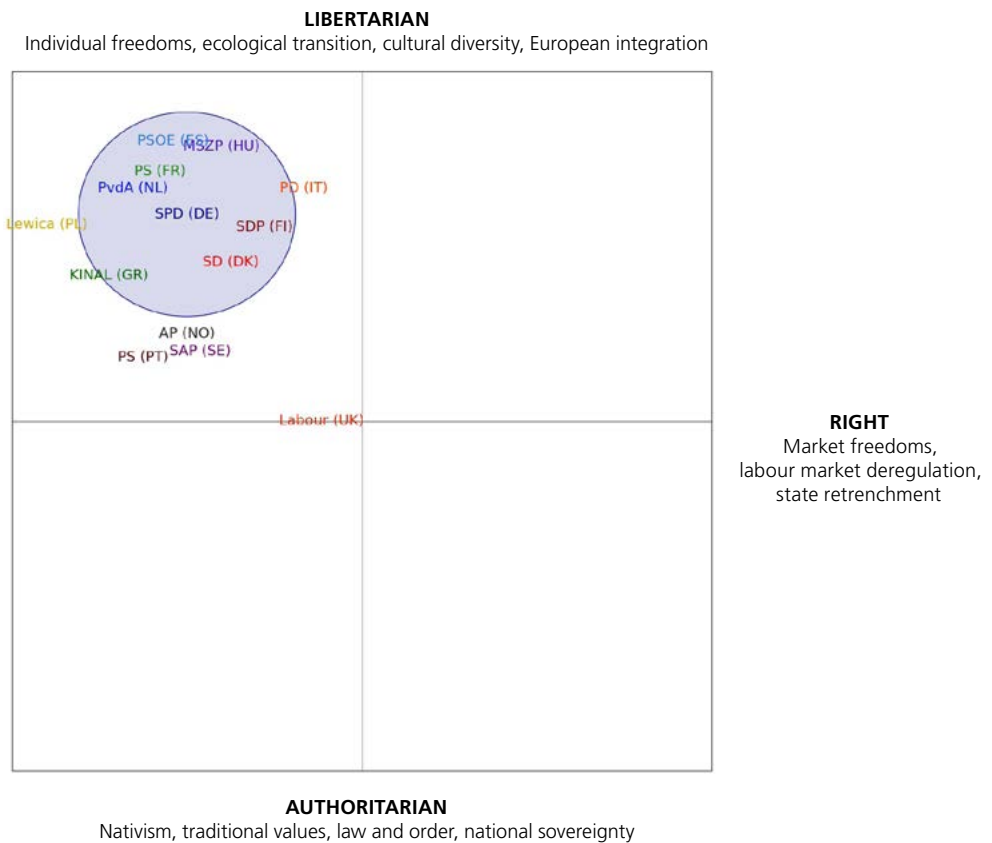
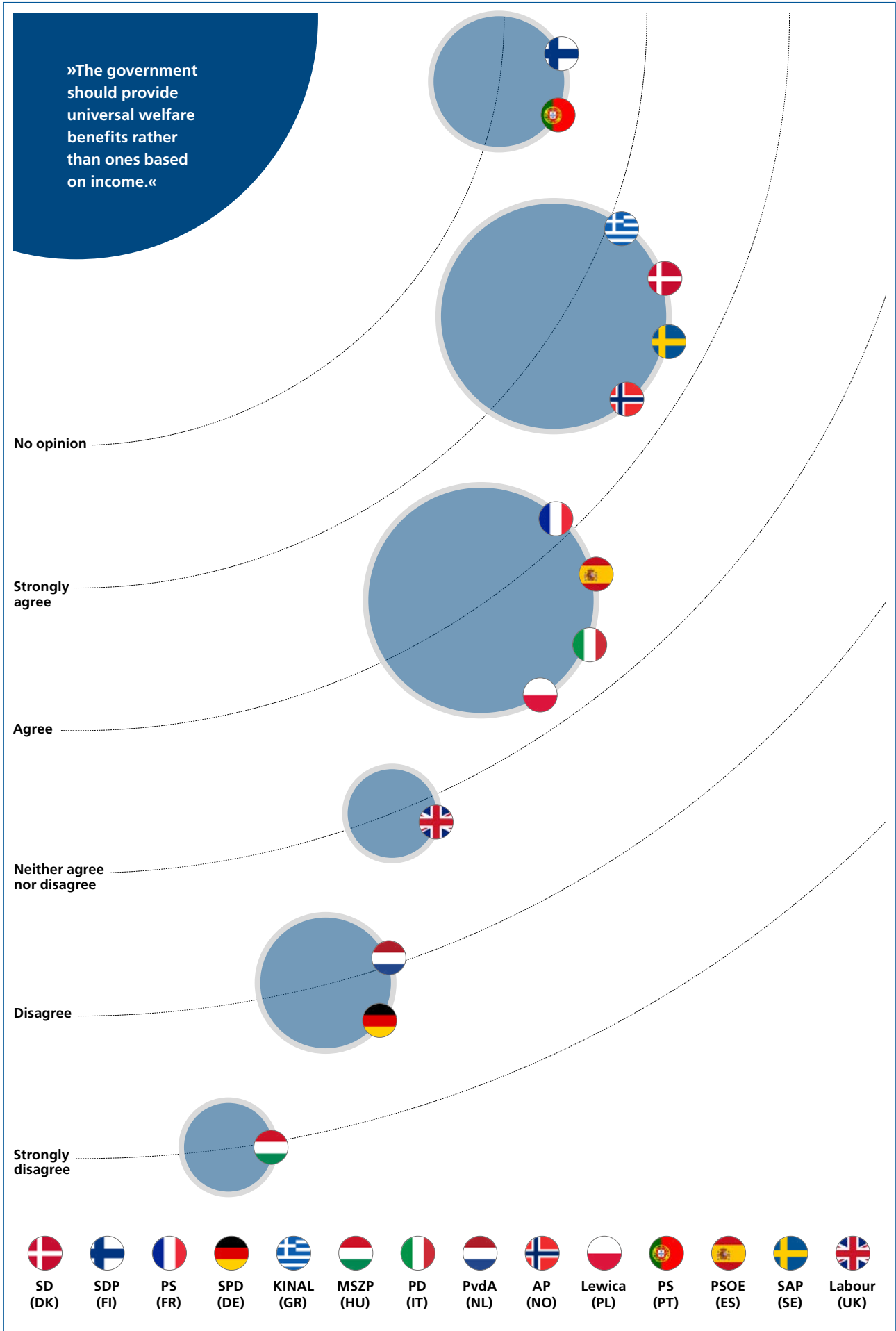


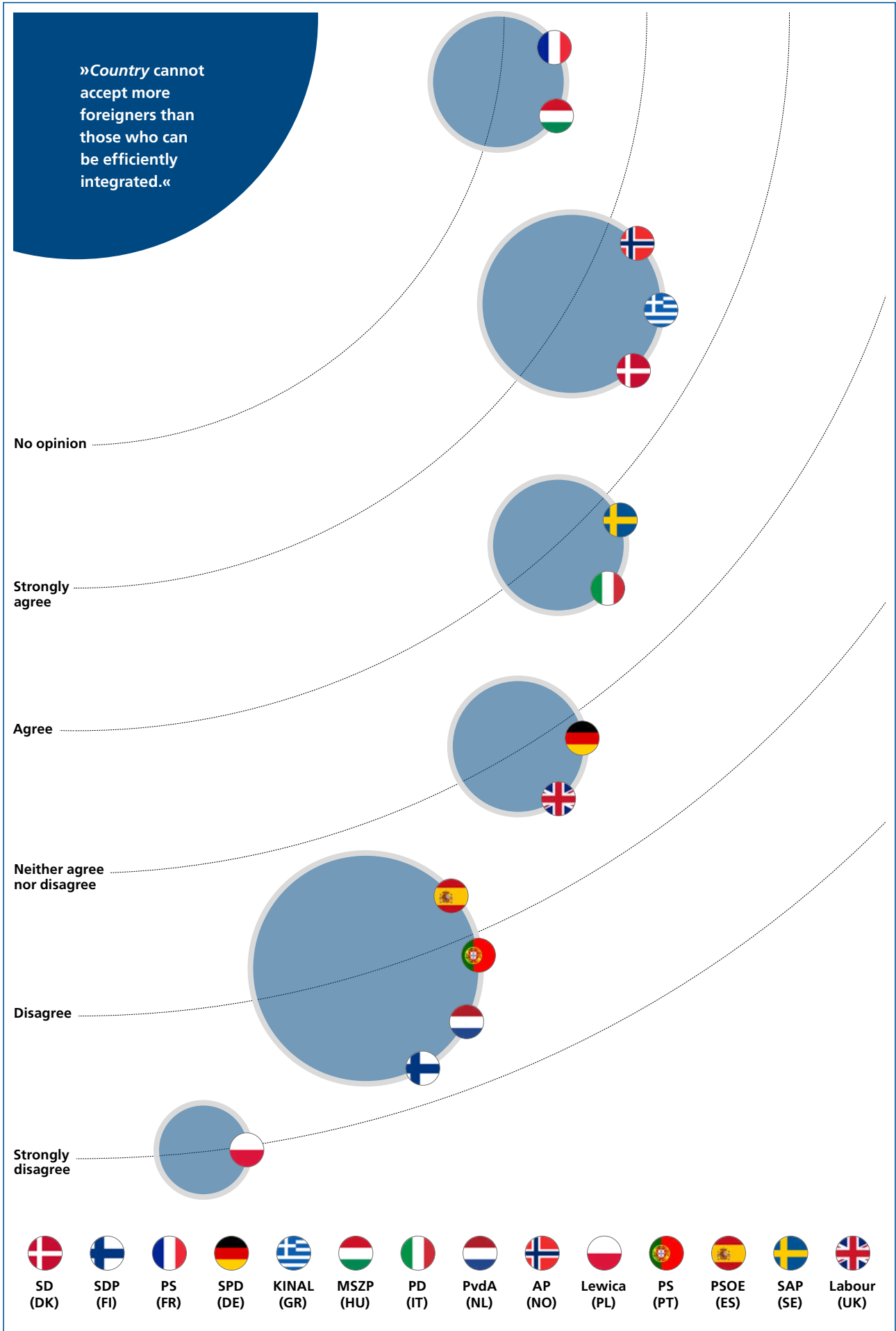
Figure 16
The Spatial Position of SPD (DE)

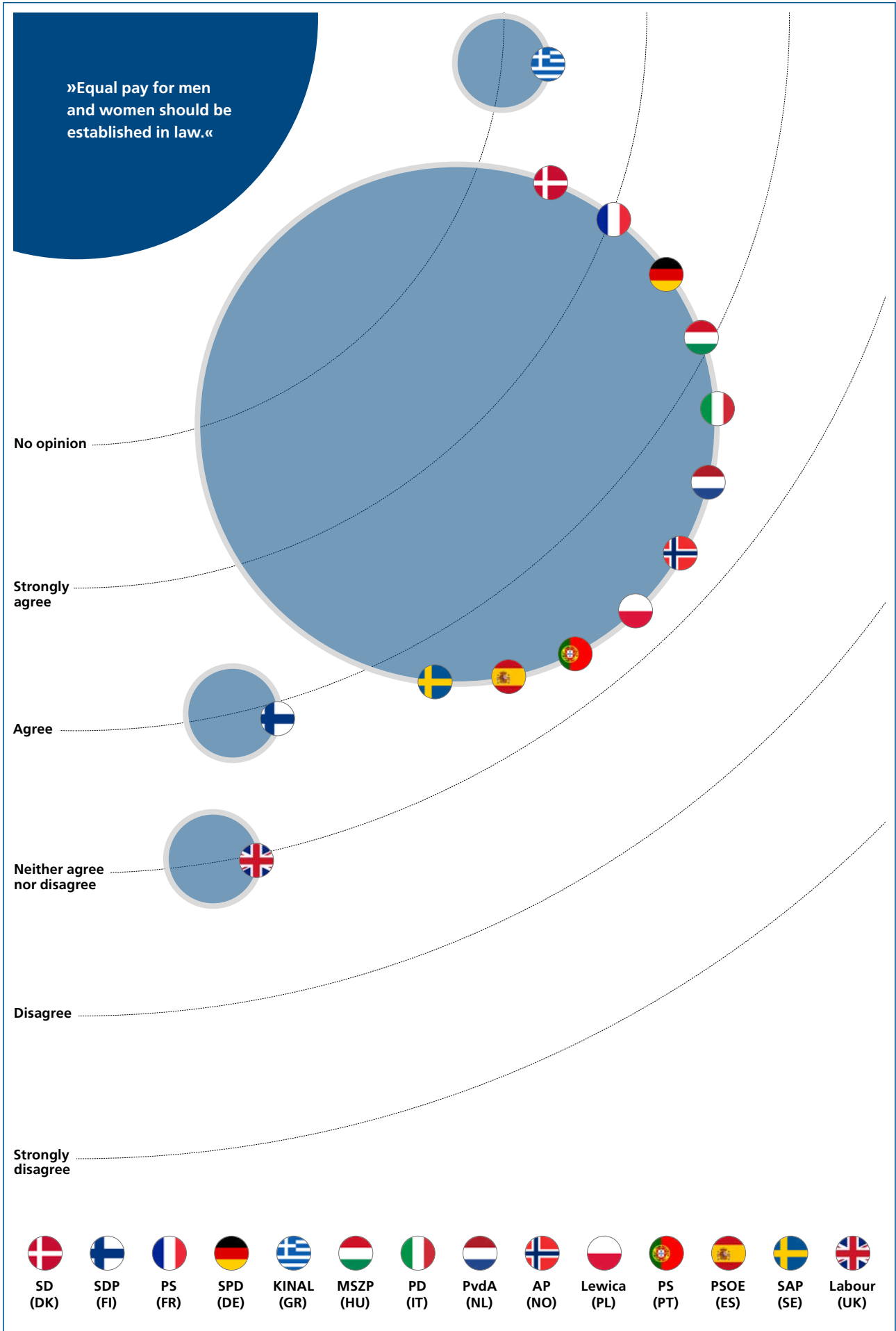


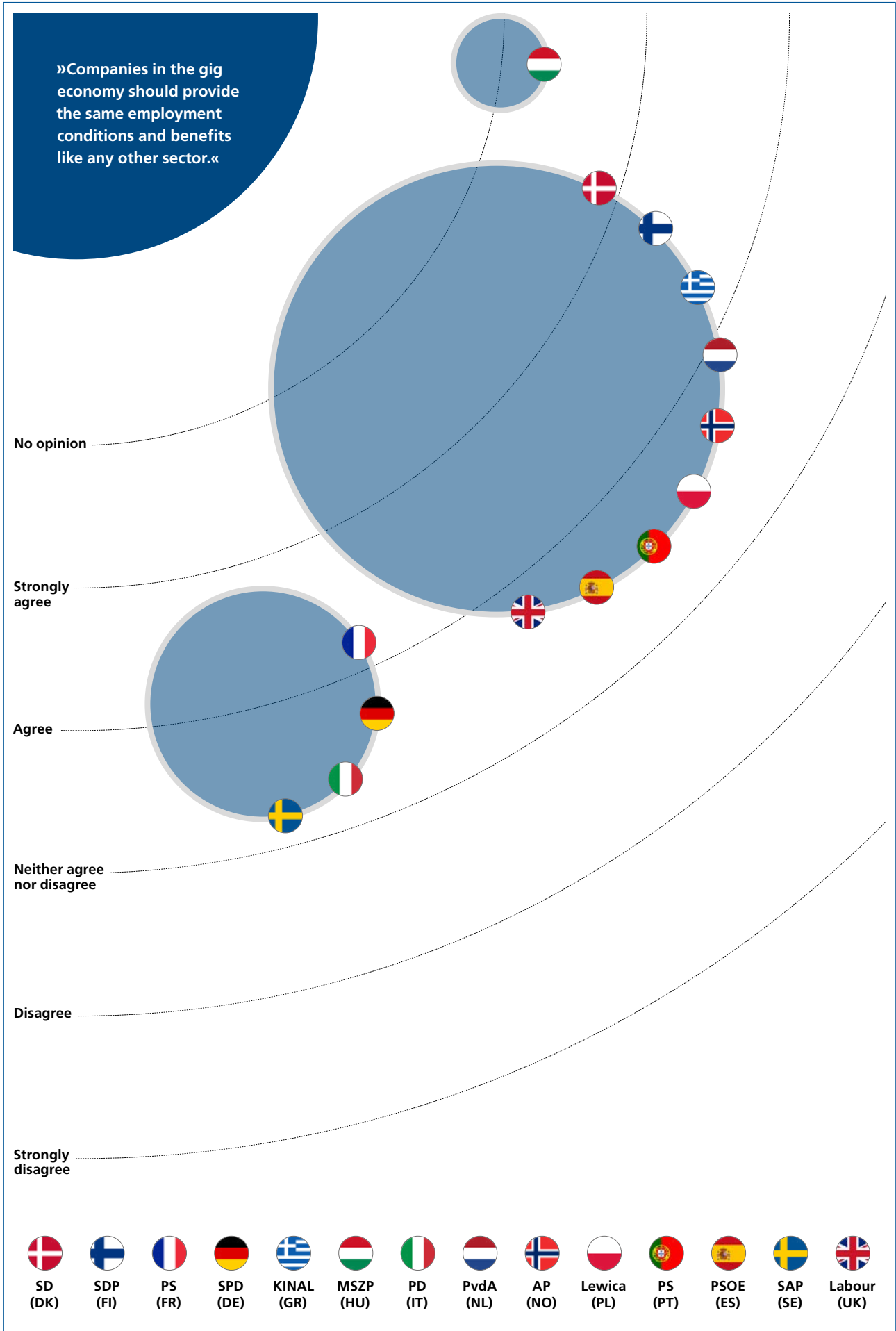
ANNEX: ISSUE-STATEMENTS AND PARTY STANCES

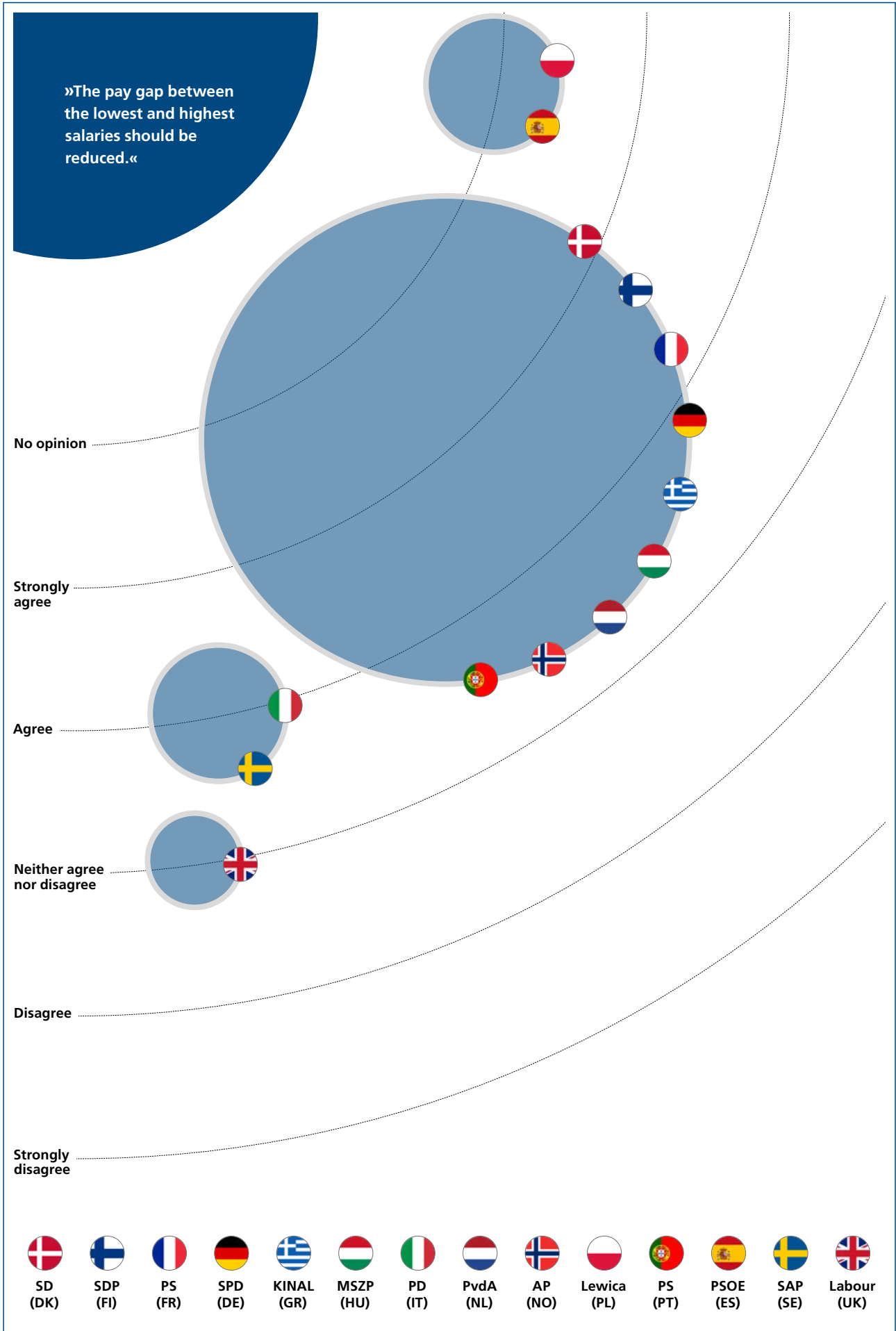
This annex contains the issue-statements and respective party coding used to construct the political landscapes featured in this study. The exact party coding was derived from official party documentation, such as manifestos, party websites and media appearances by experts from each country included in the analyses. The parties were coded on a 5-point Likert scale (“completely disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree”, “completely agree”).

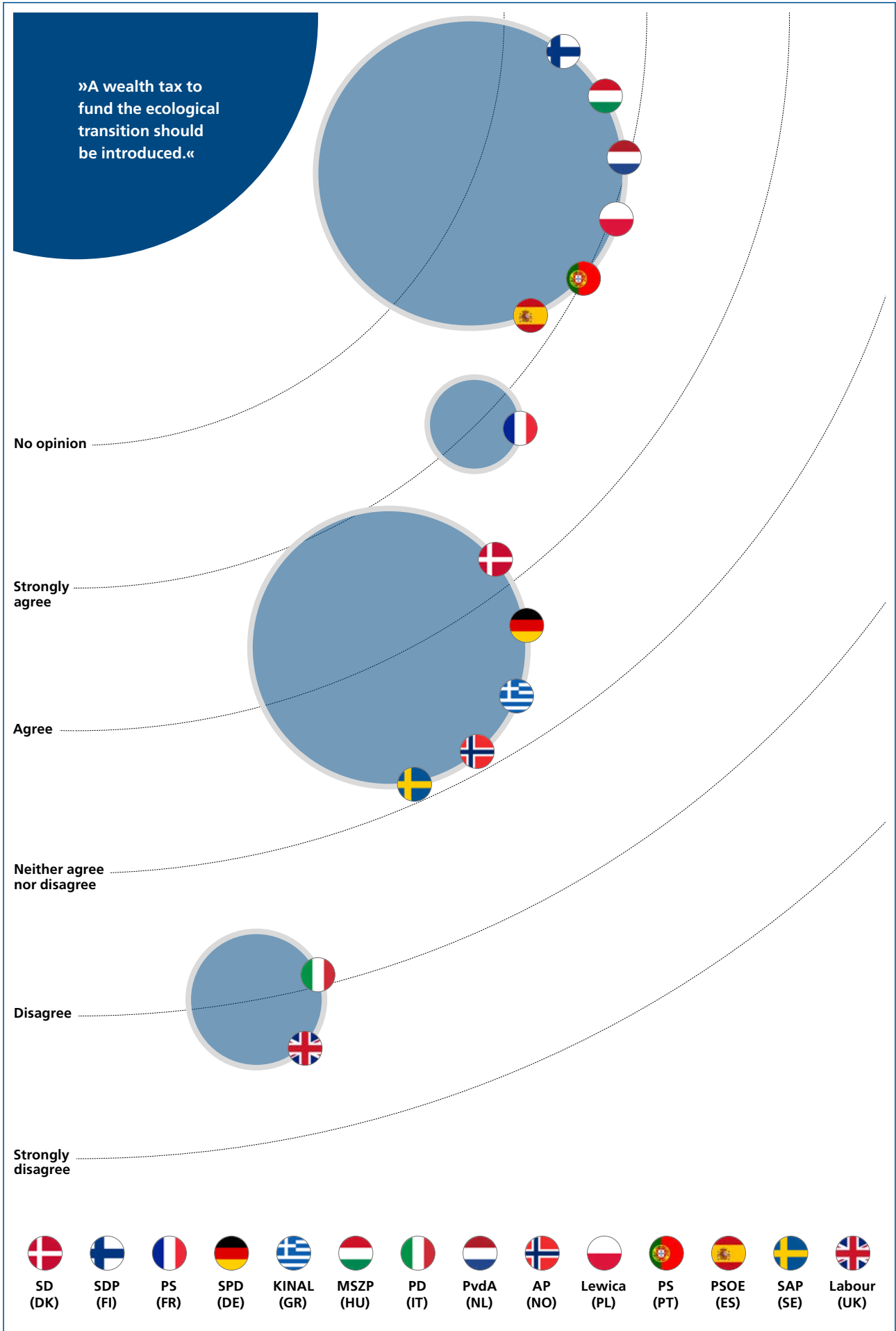


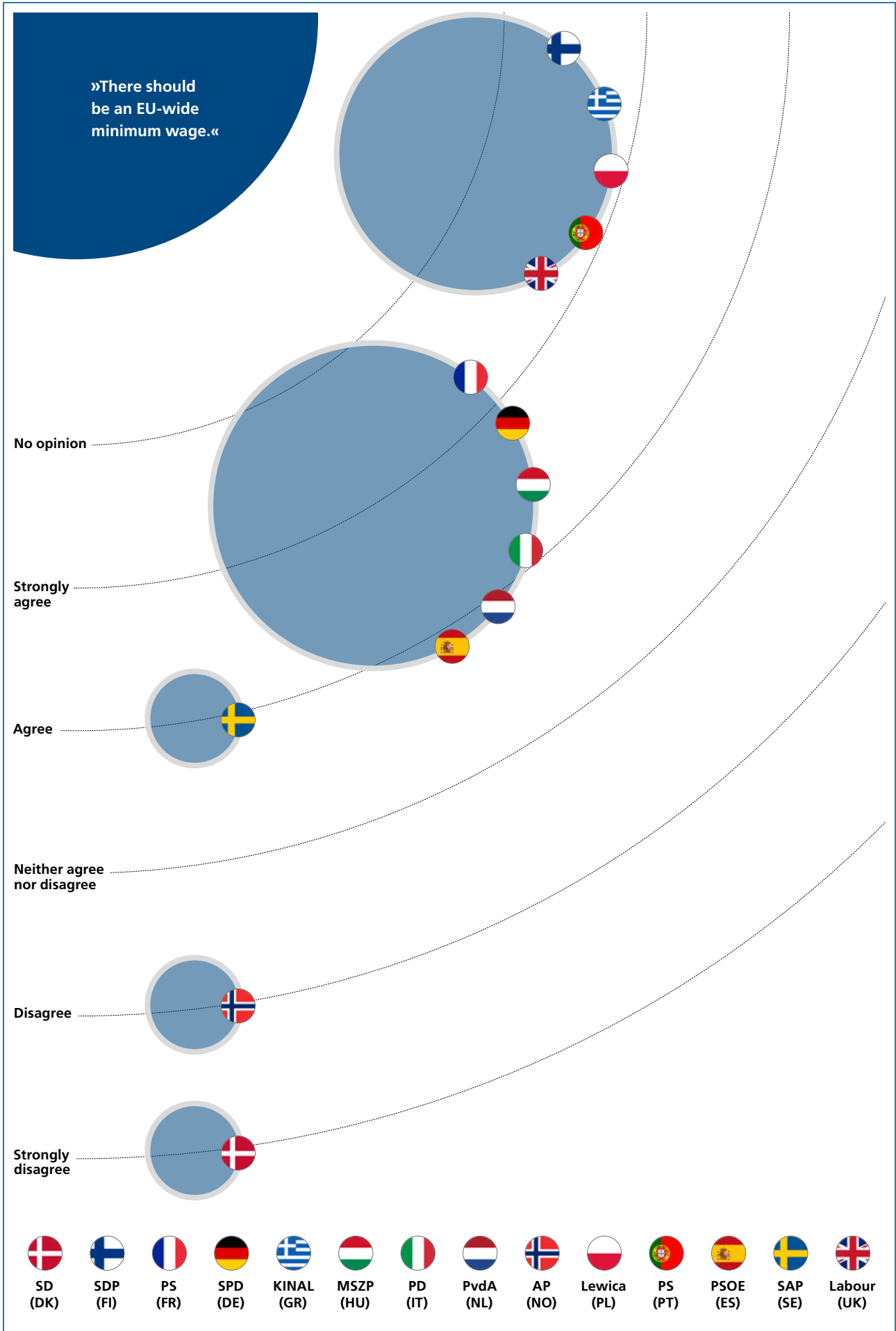


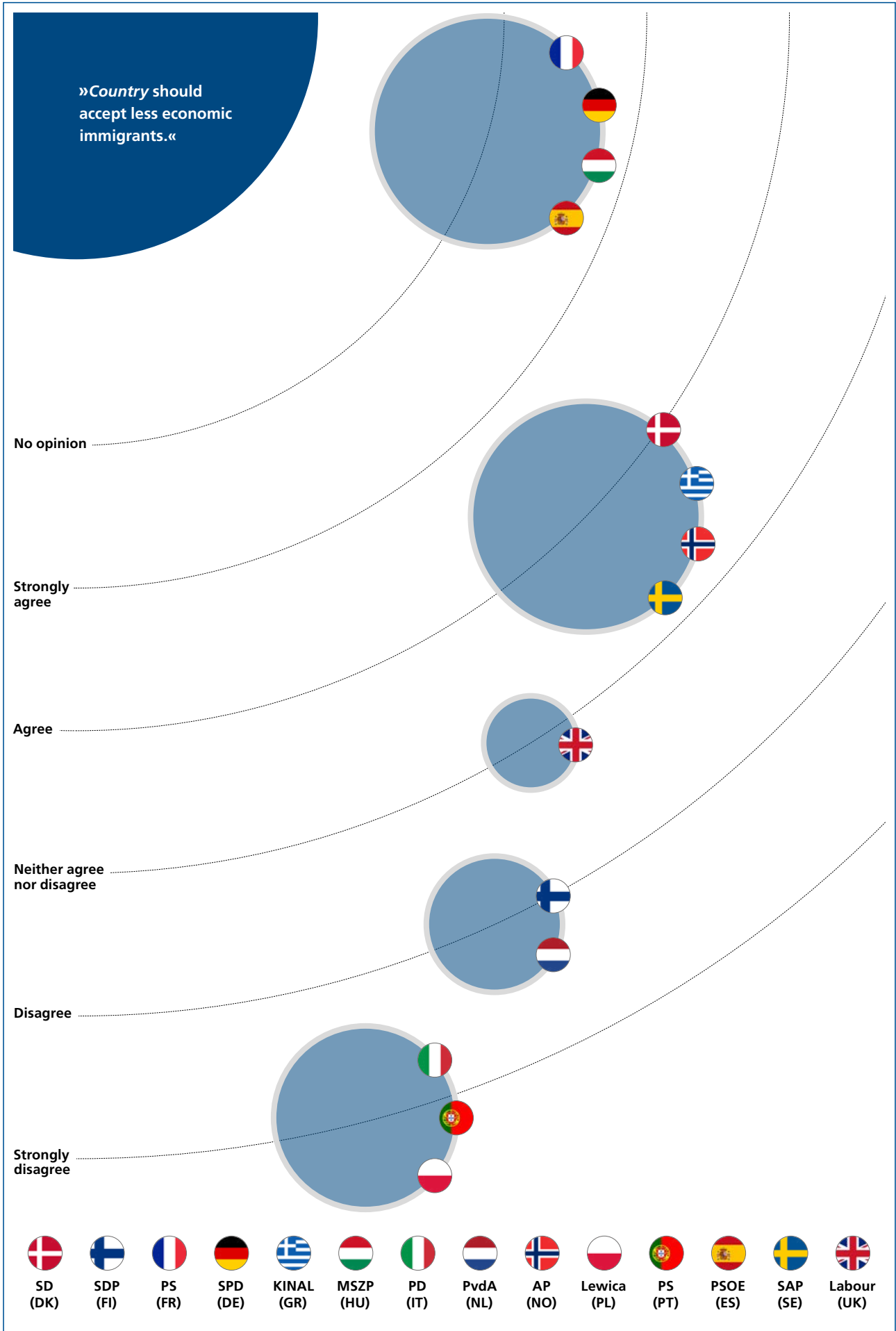


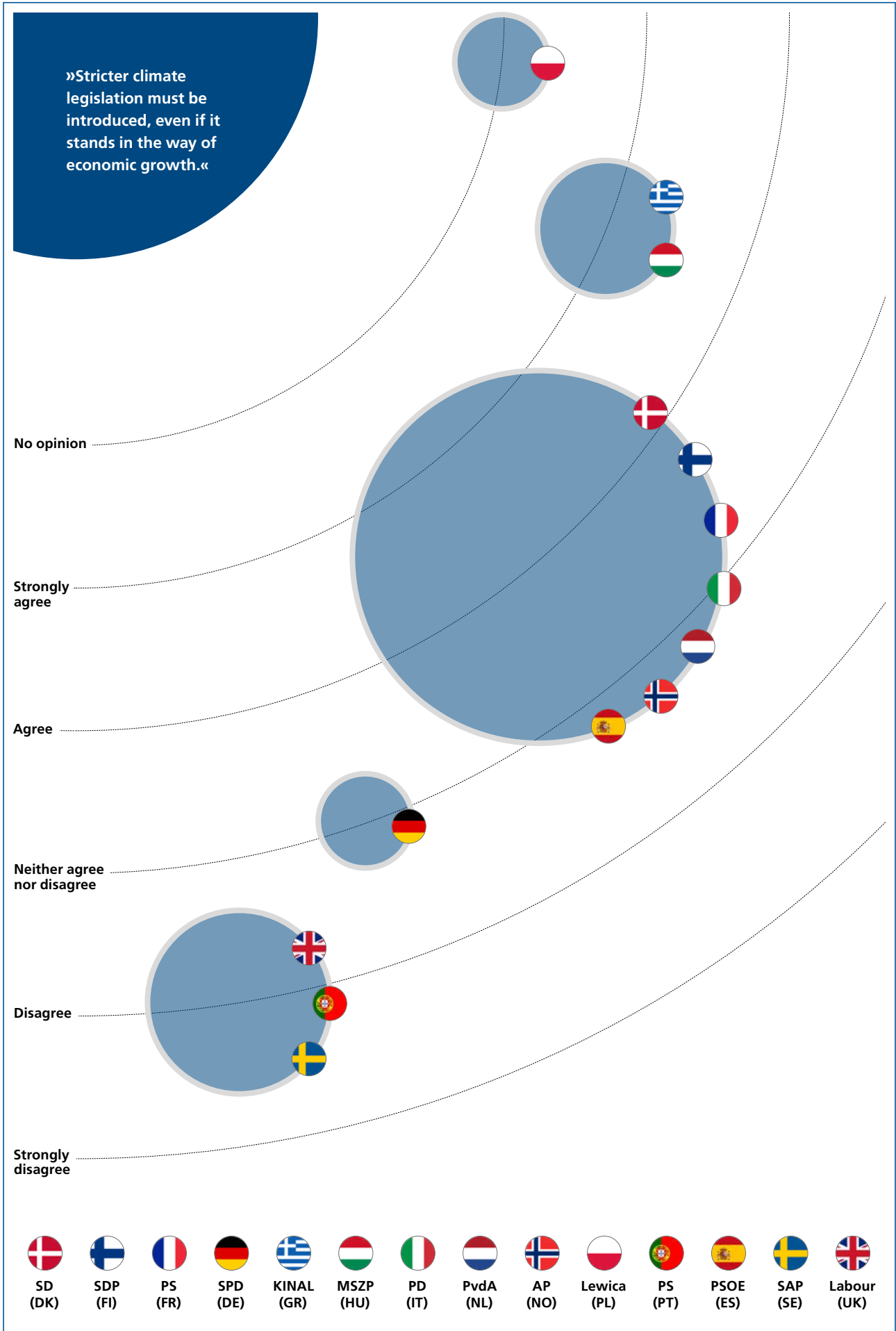


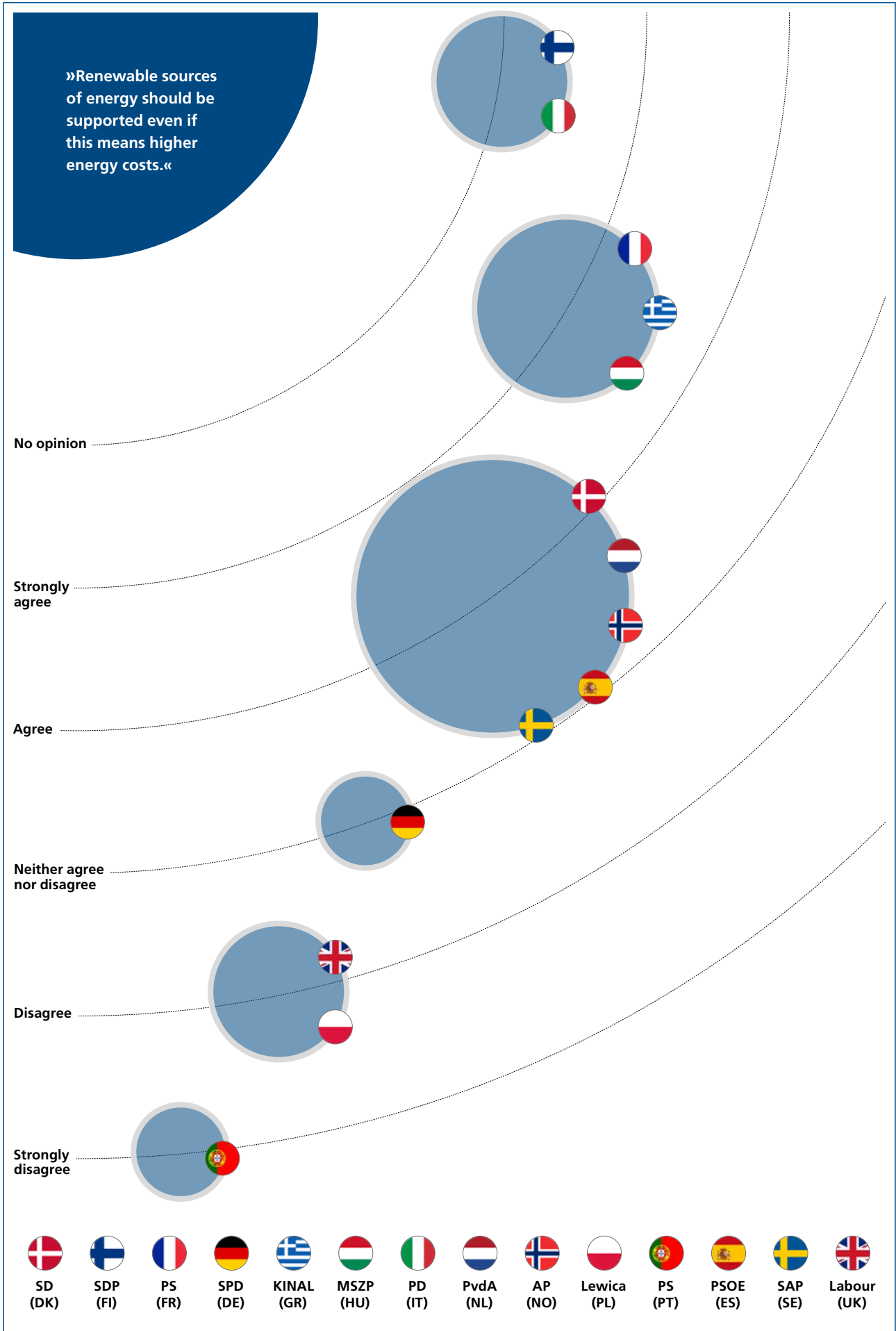


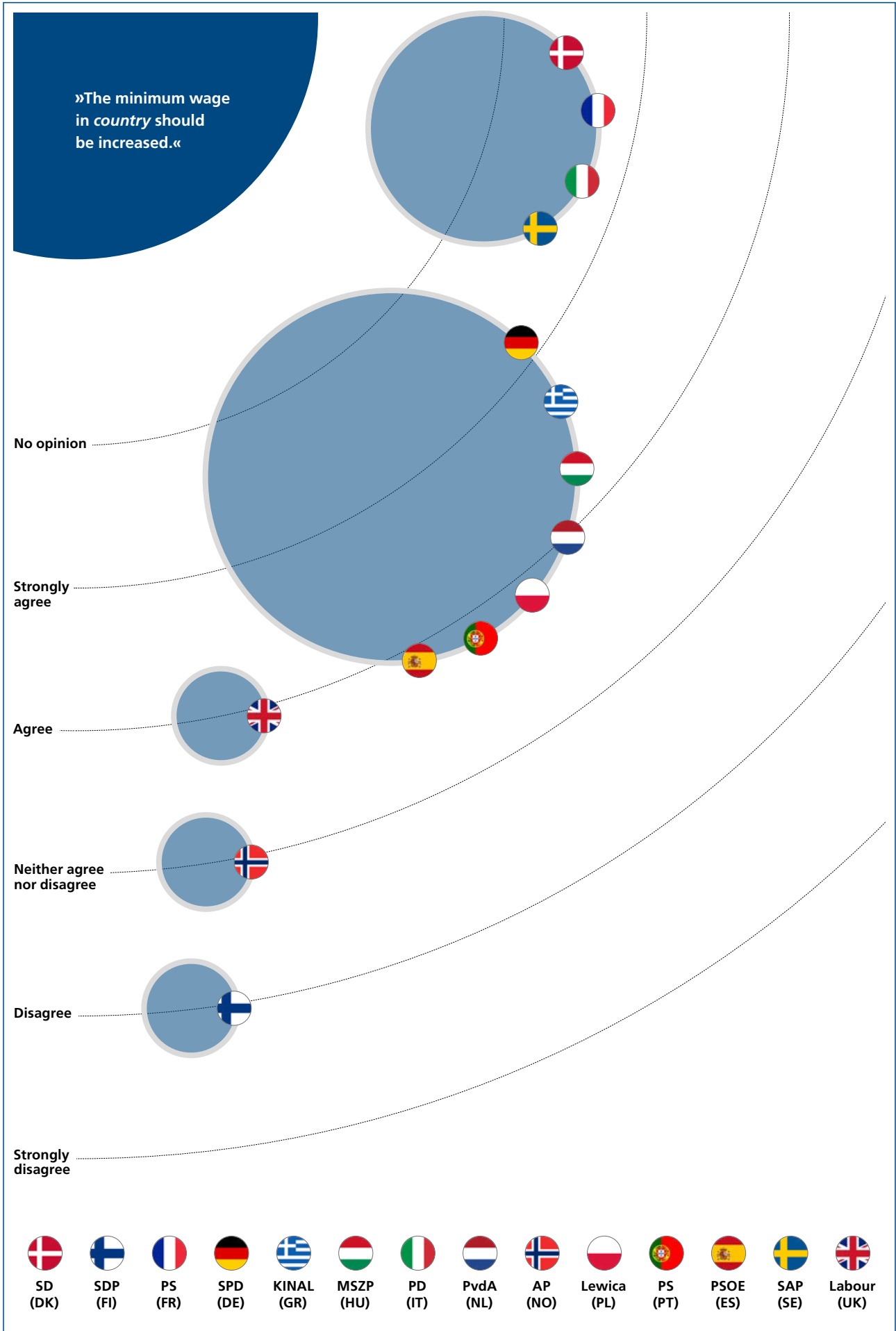


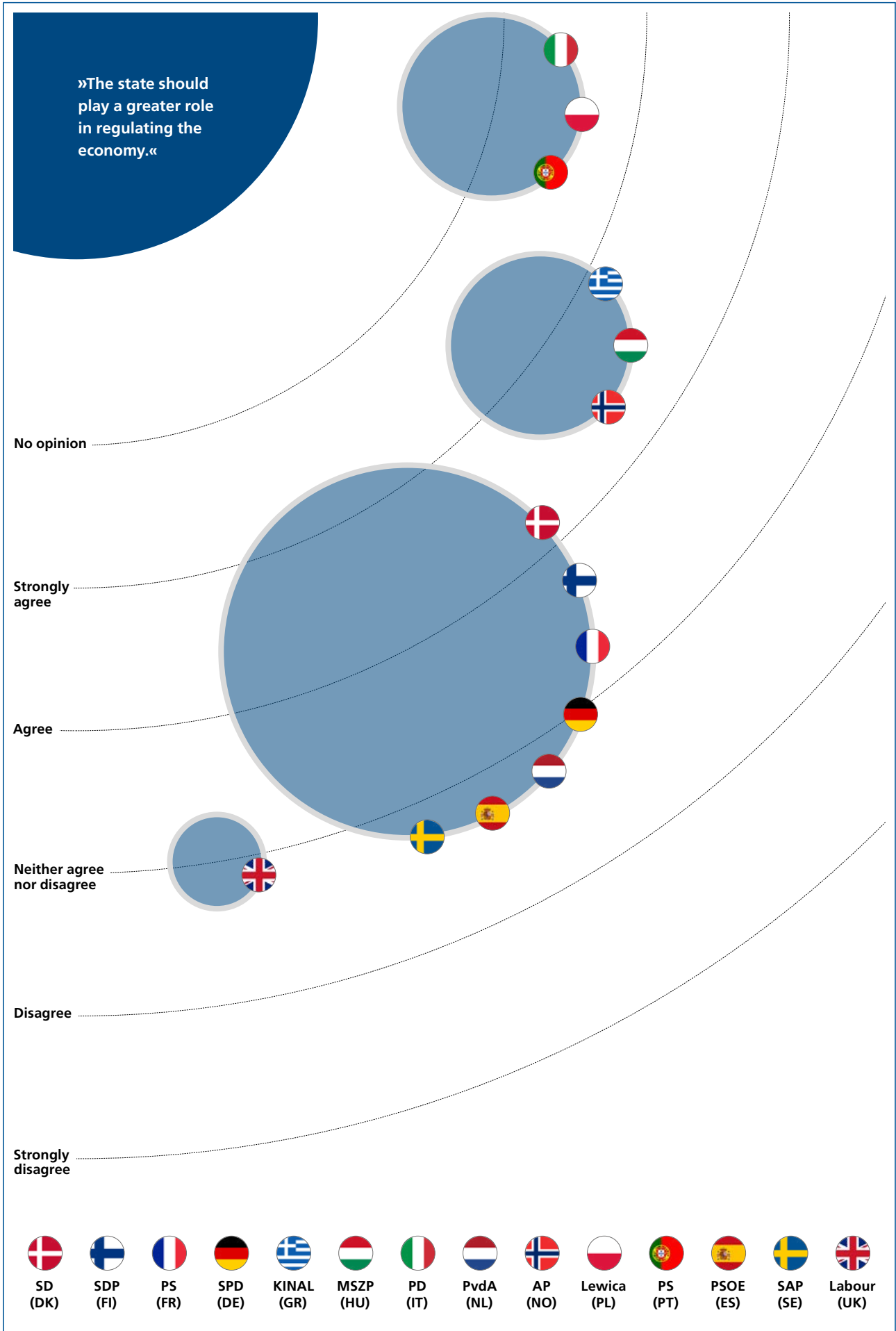


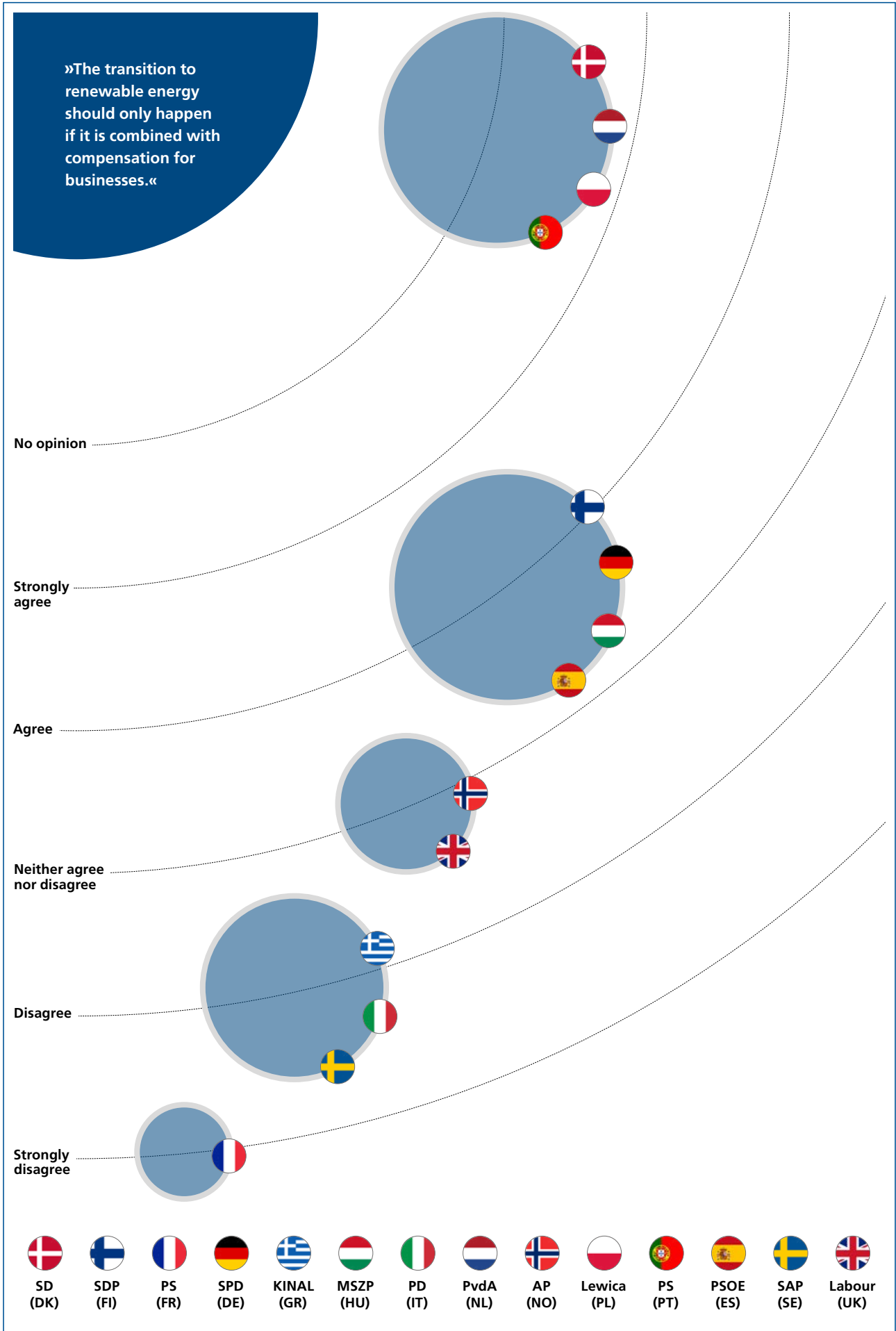


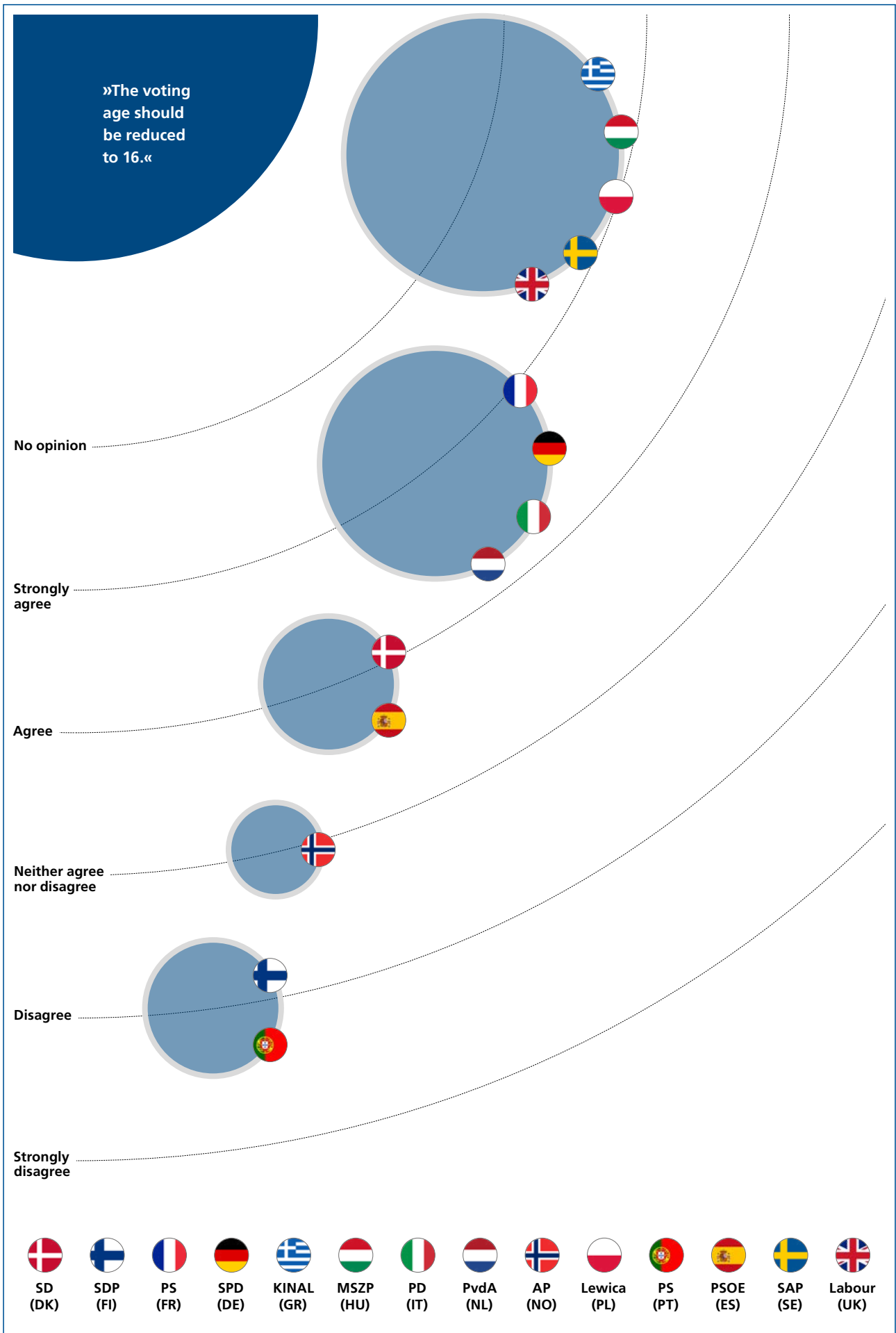


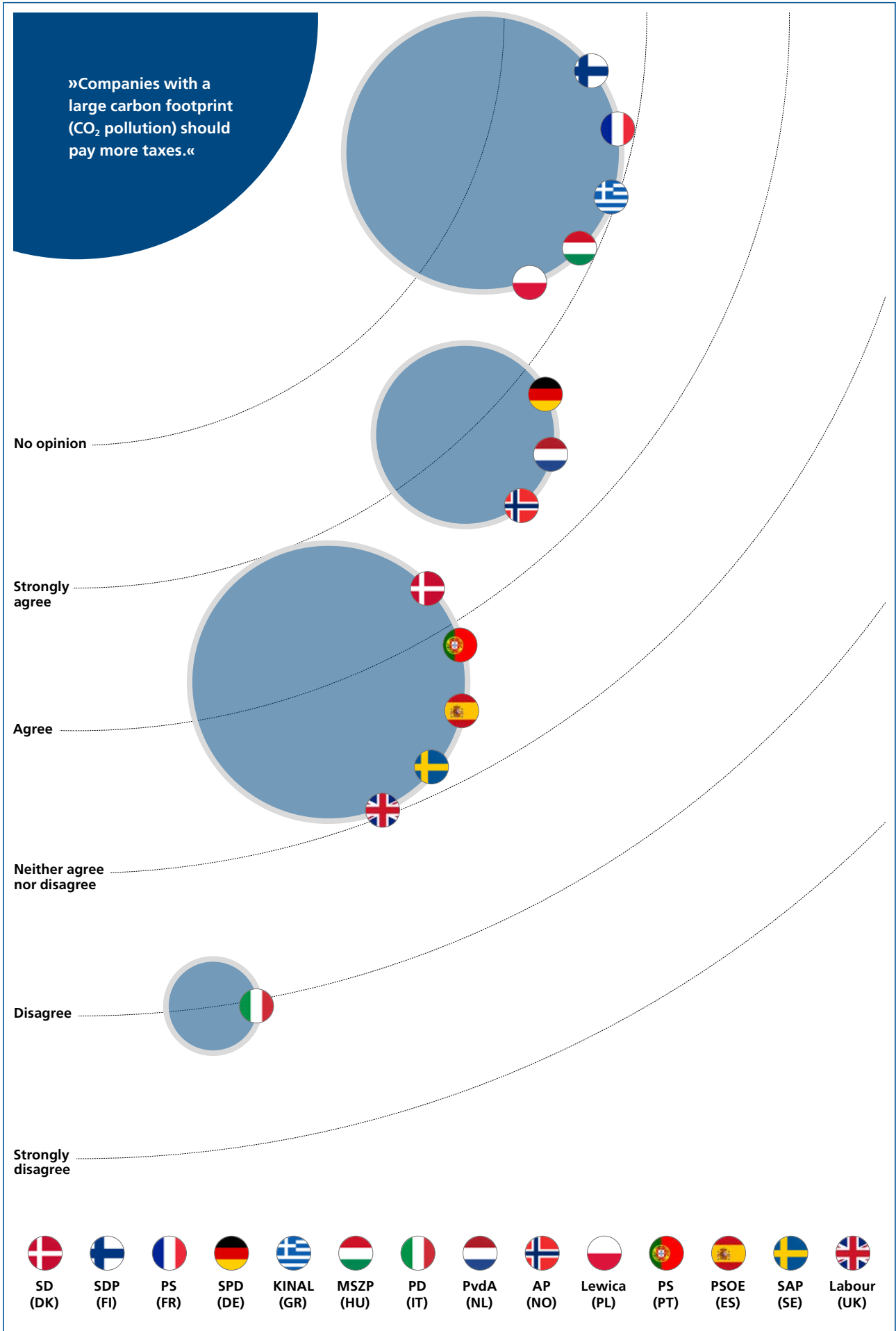


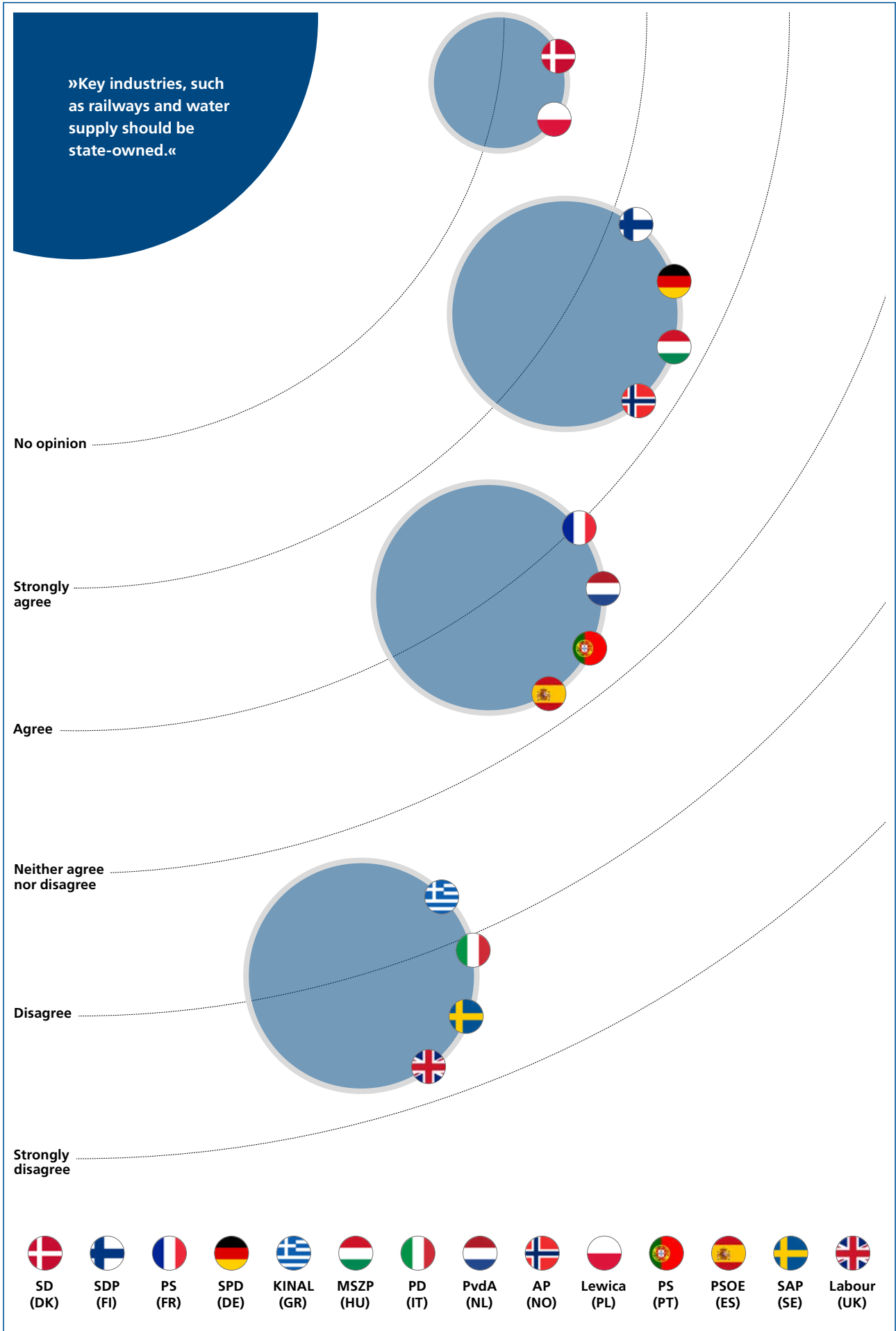


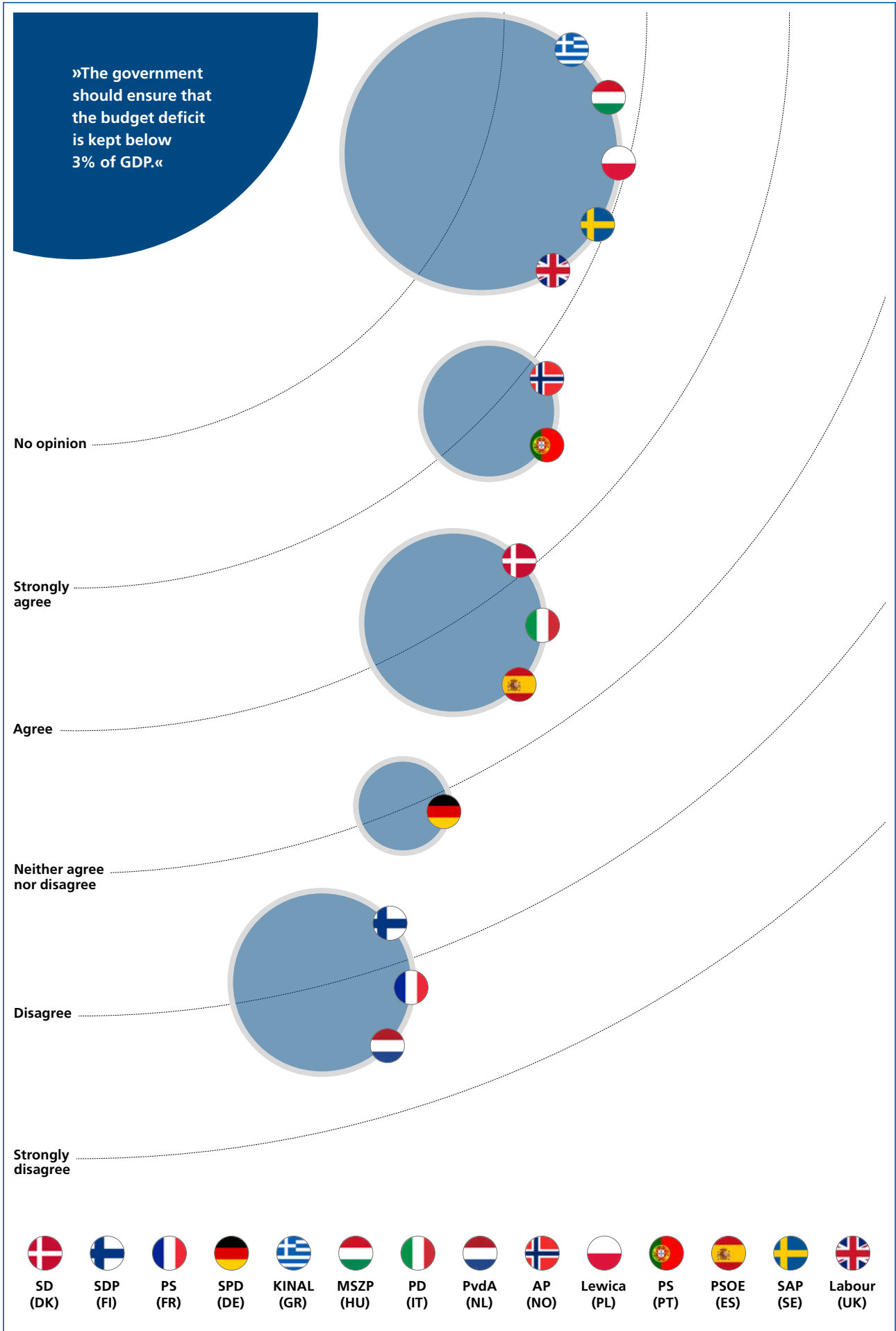


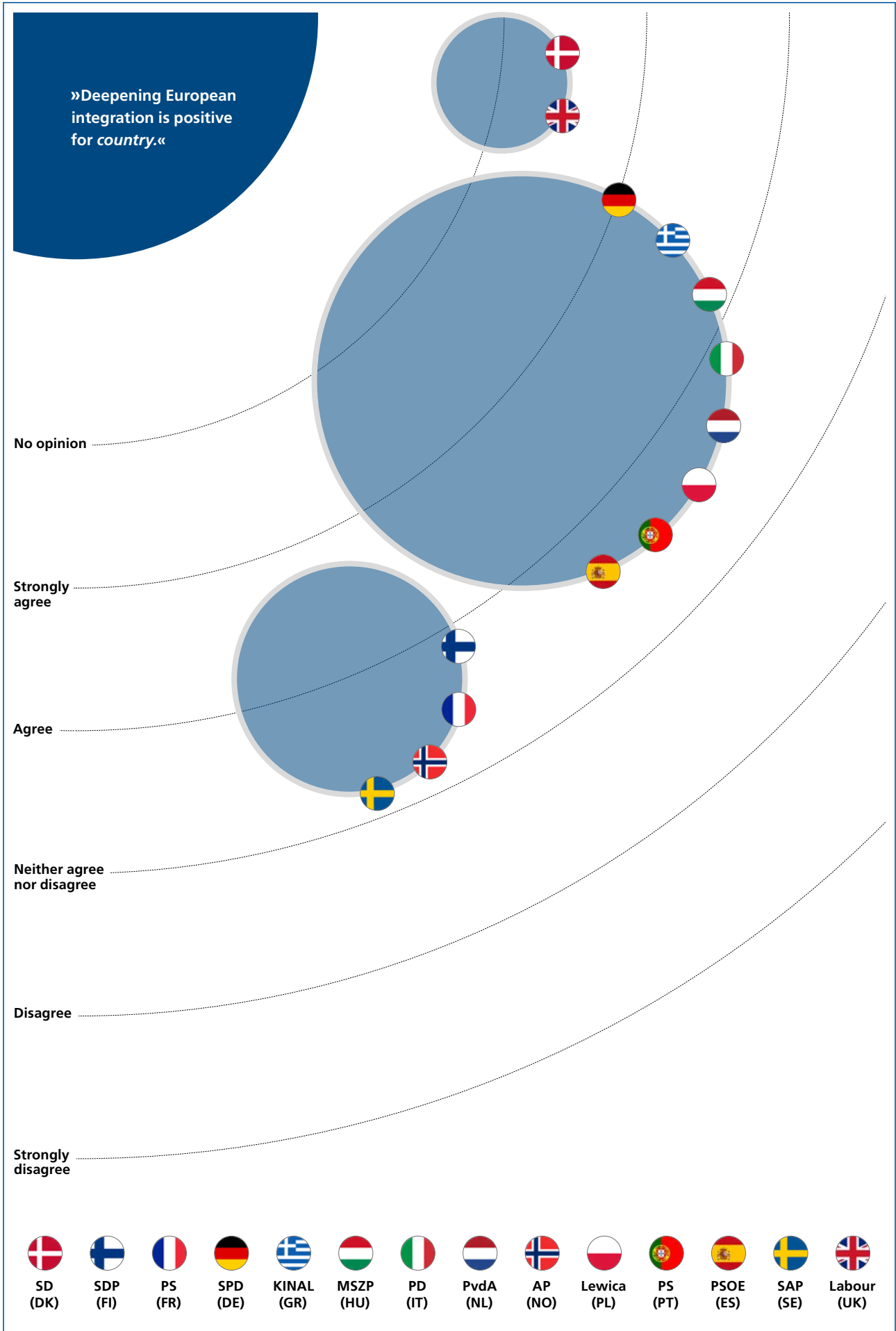


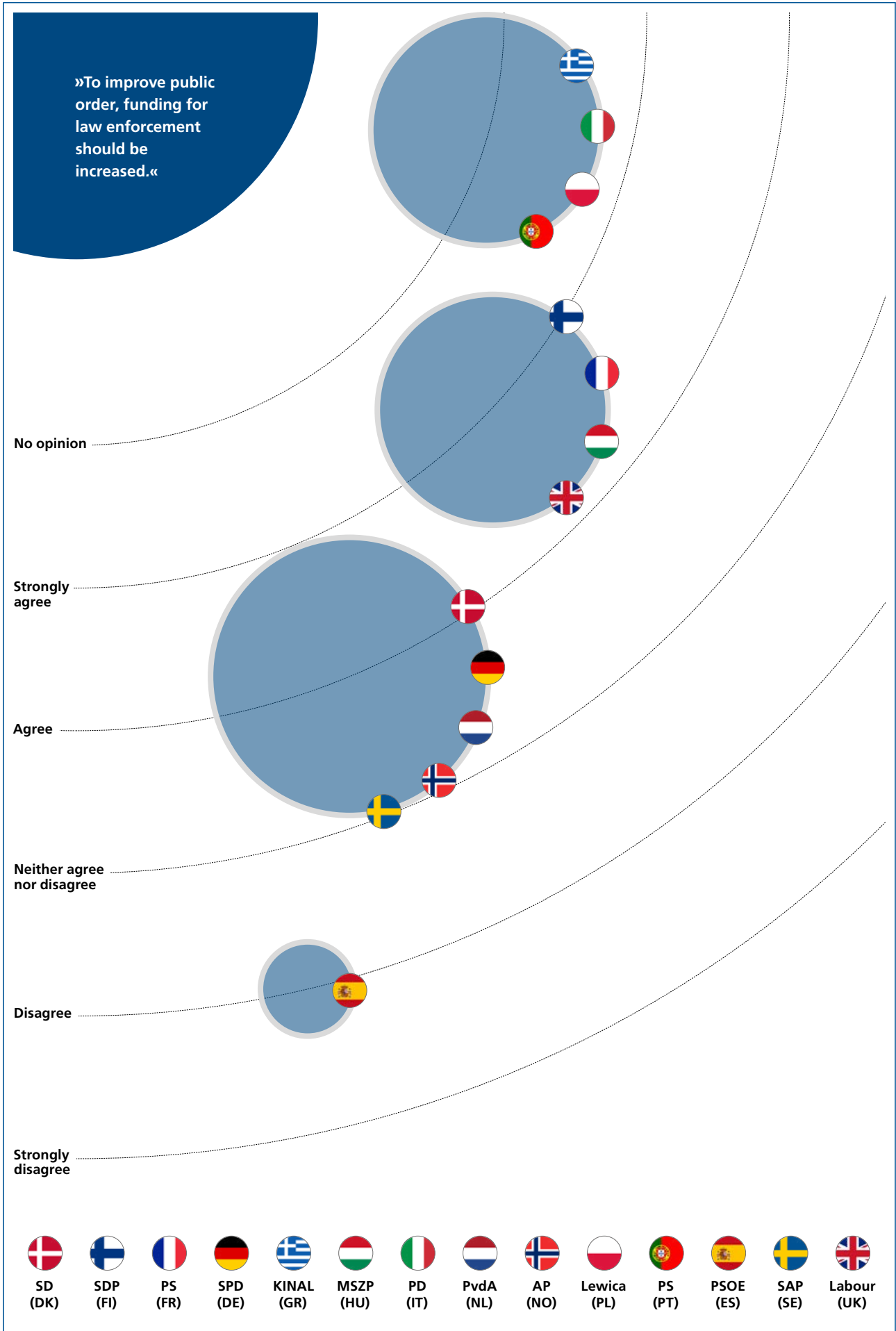


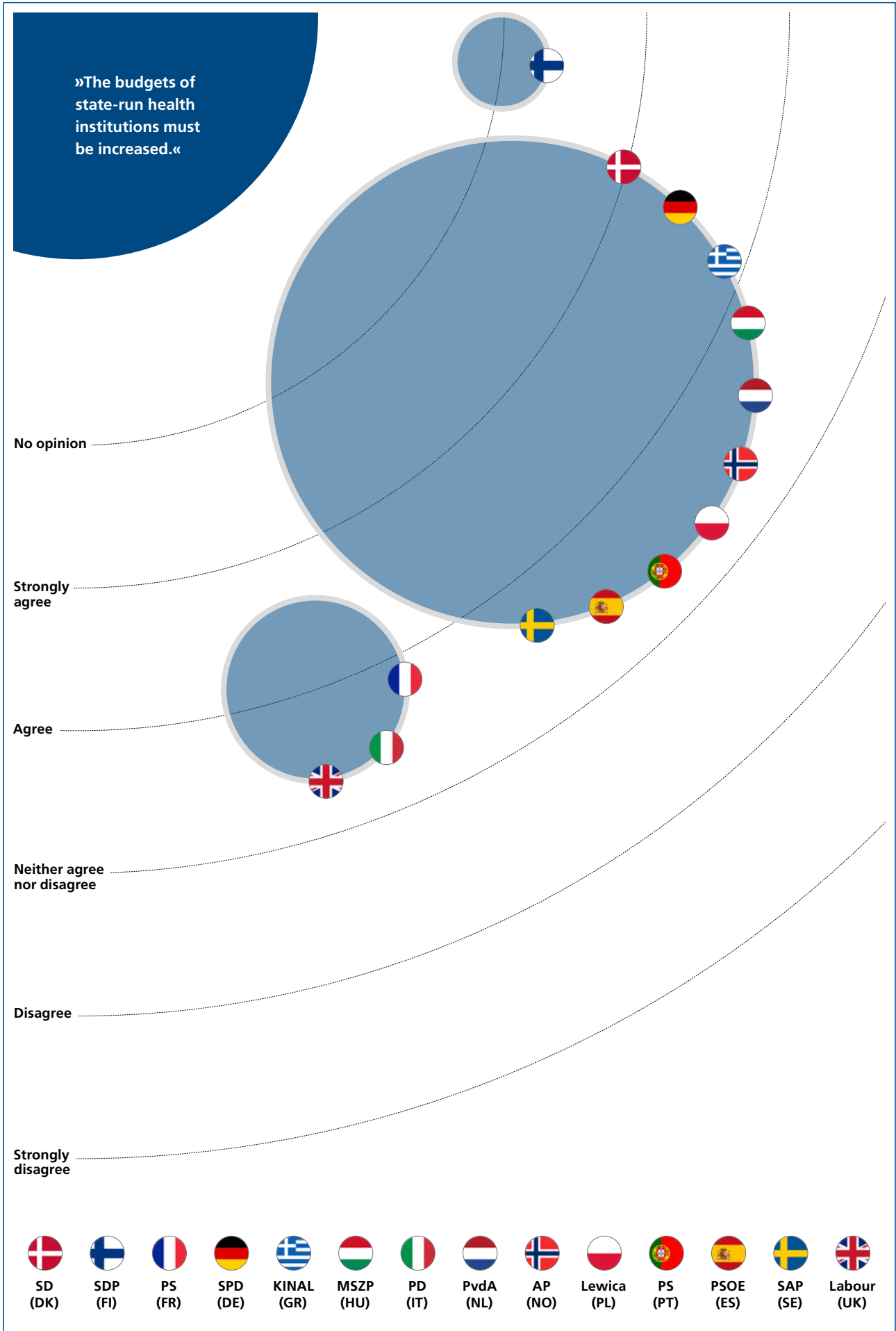


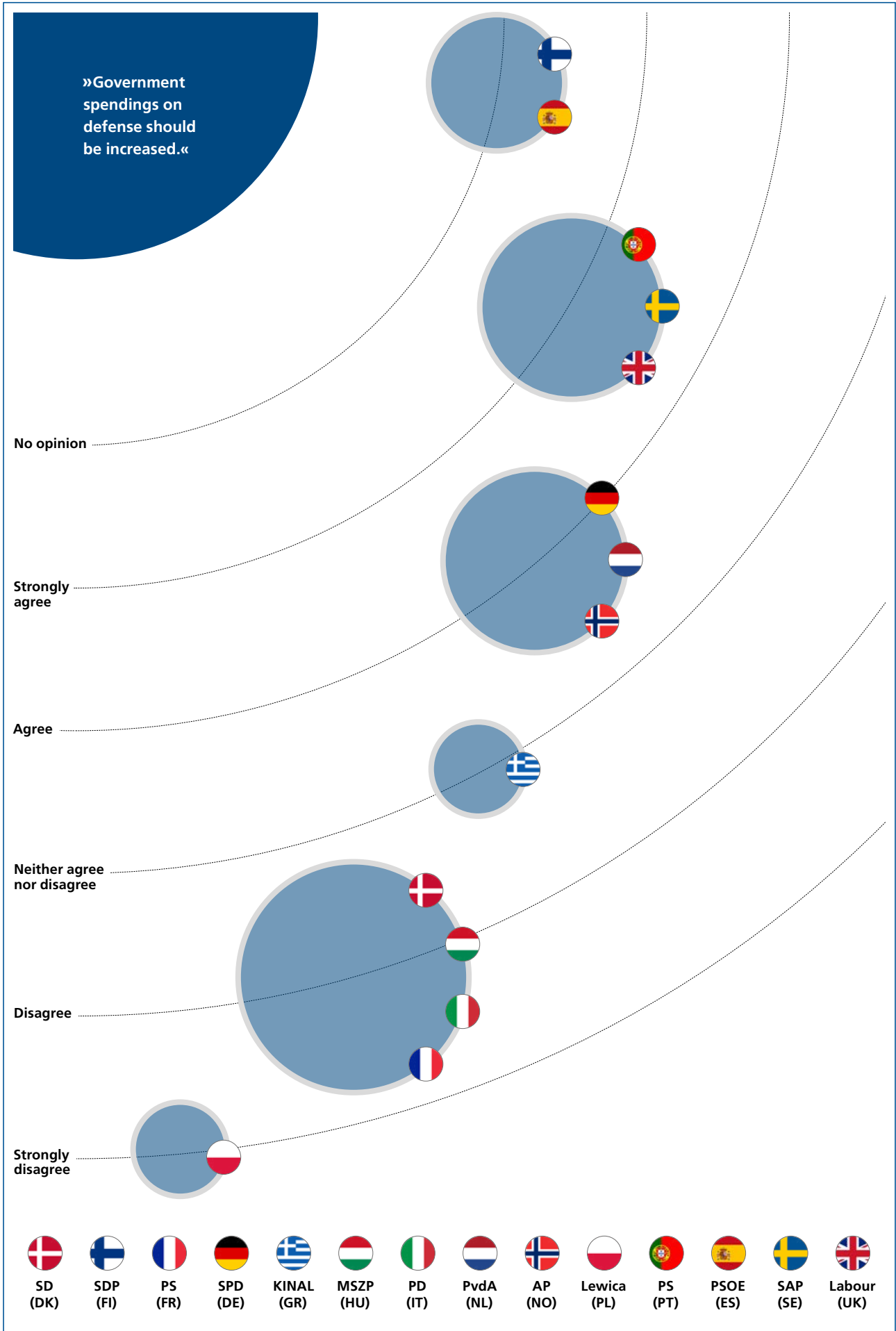


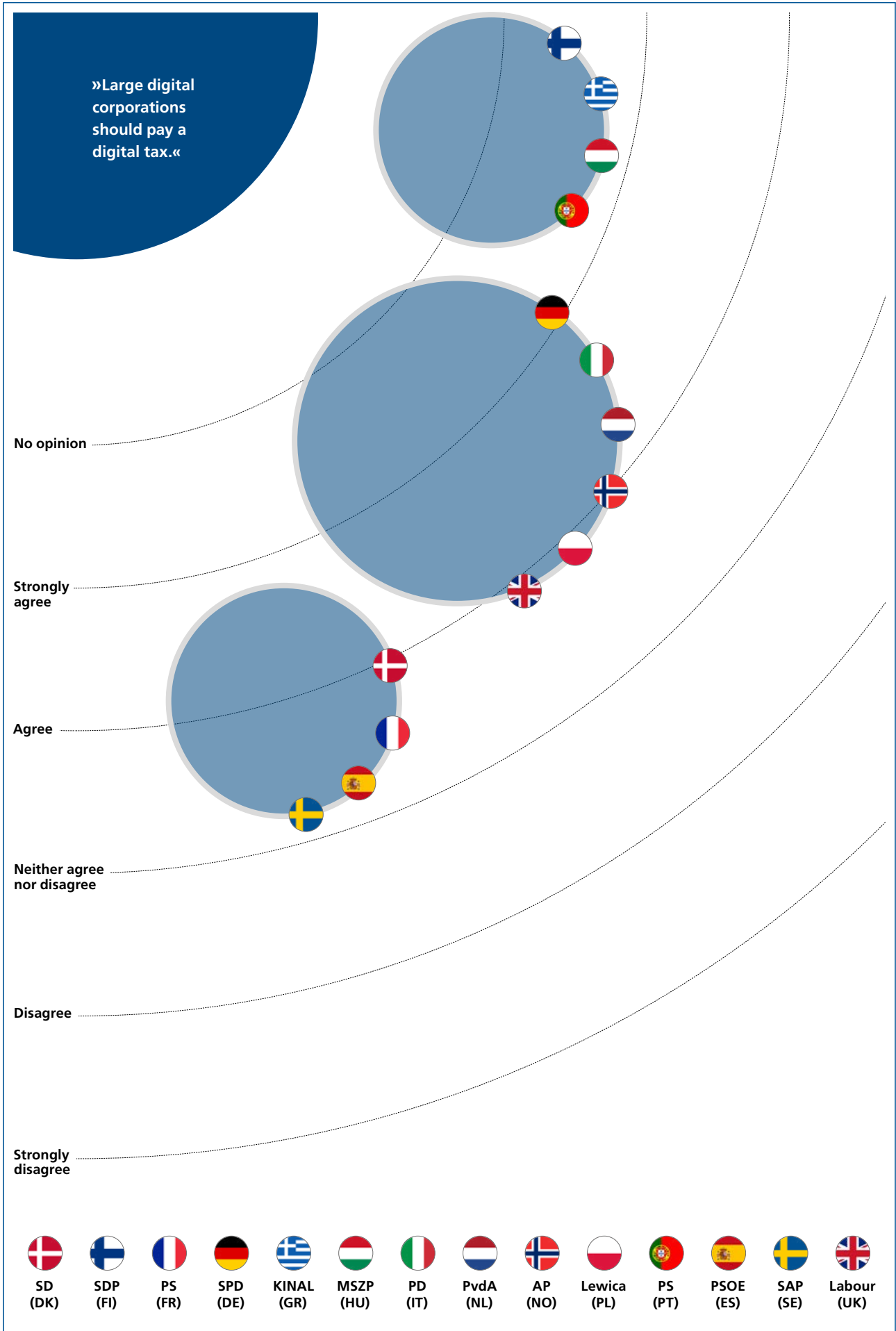


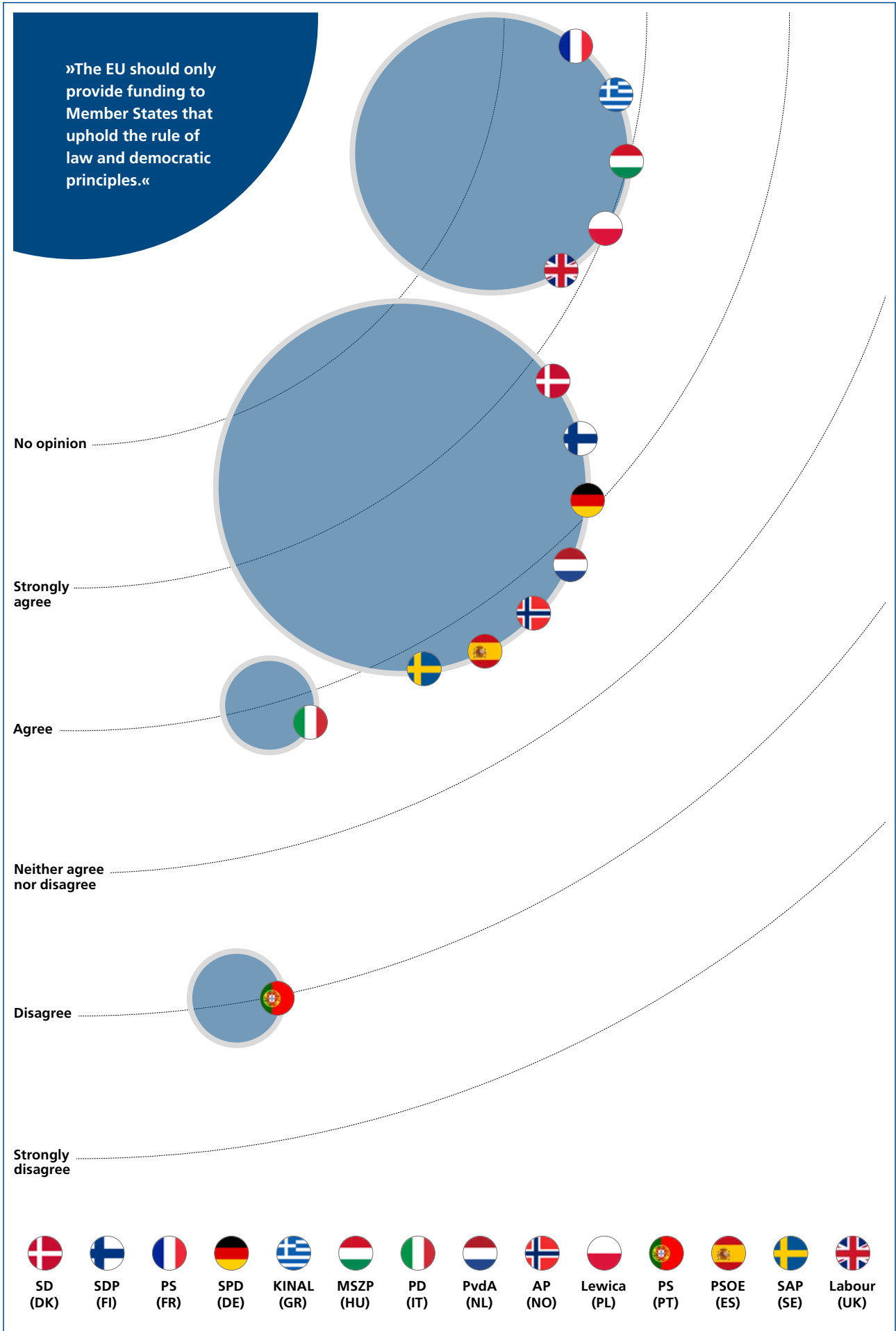


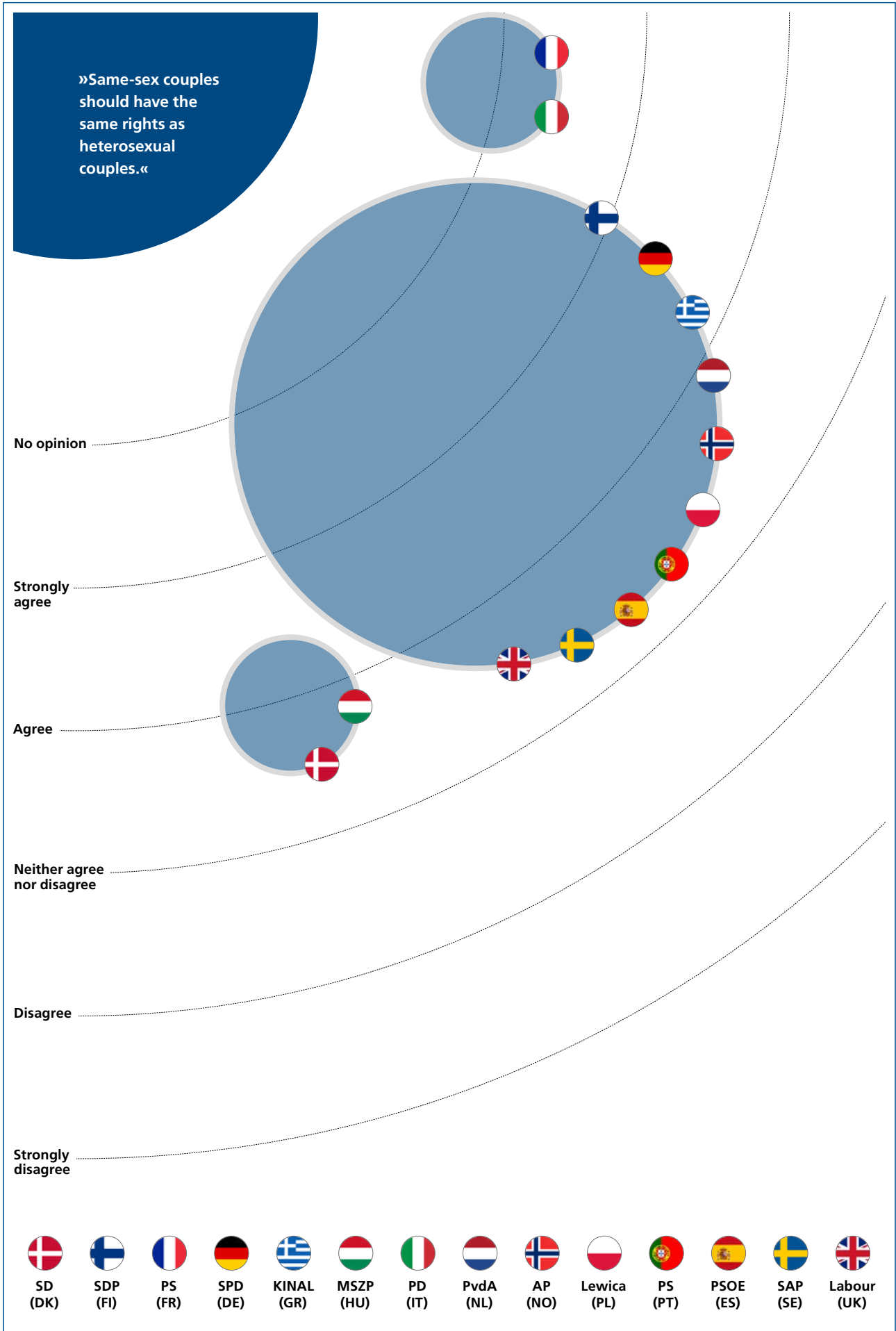


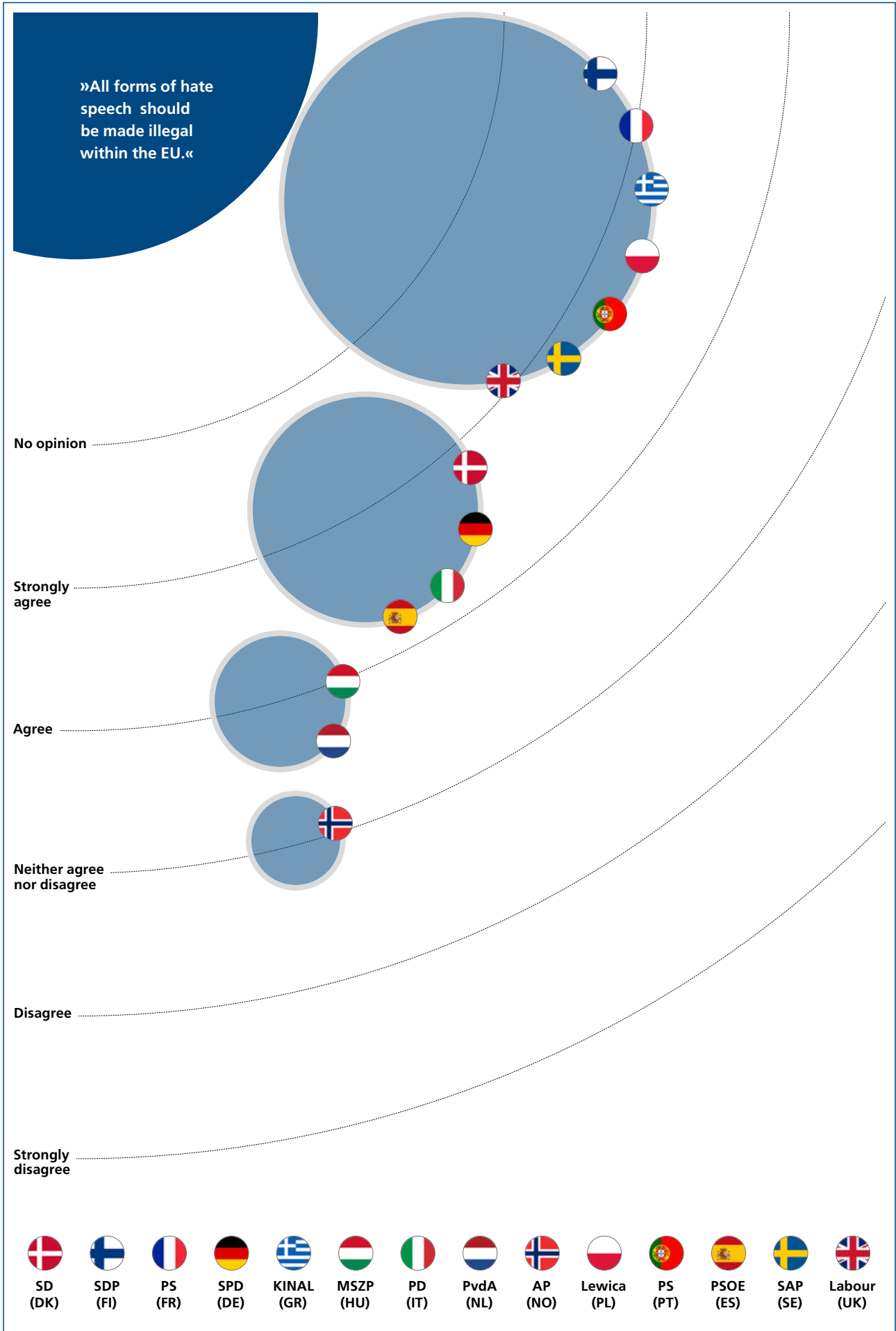


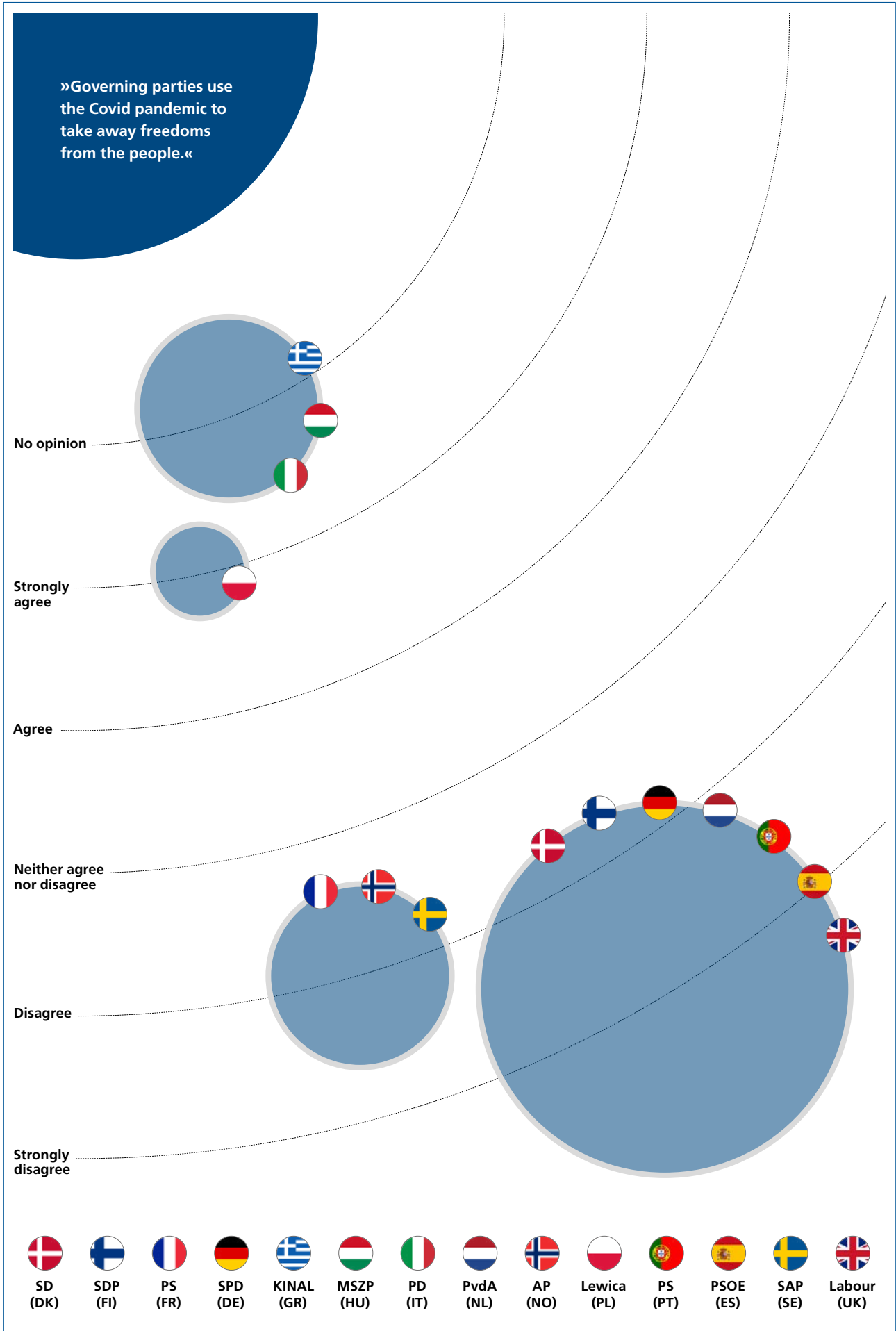


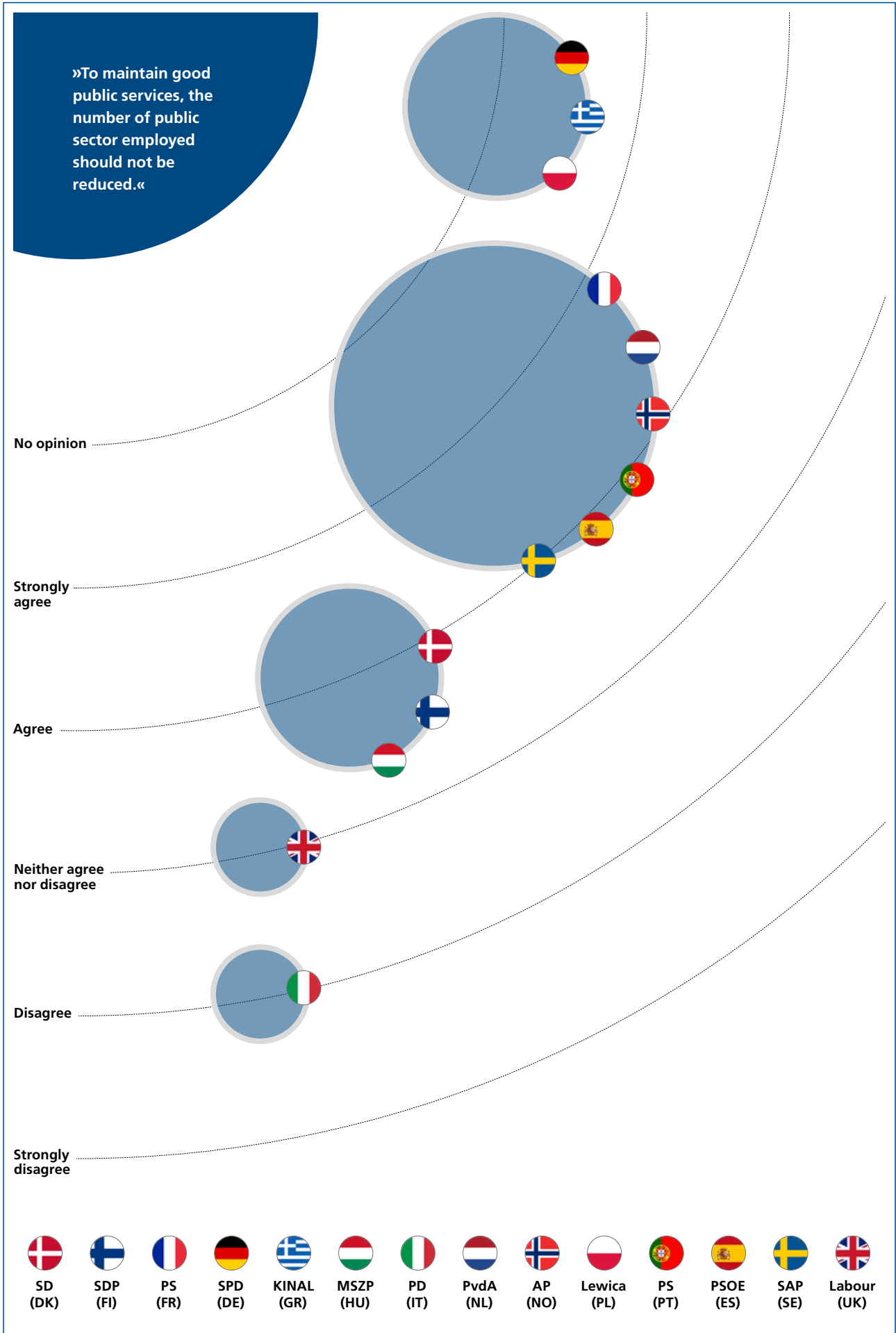












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COMPARING EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Differences and Similarities between 14 Social Democratic Parties



Despite moving in a similar direction marked by moderation and de-ideologization, centre-left parties across Europe have managed to maintain differing stances and profiles, as evidenced by the analyses presented in this report.



There is some evidence that centre-left parties are returning to more pronounced left-wing positions. Nevertheless, the centripetal movement of social democrats was substantial in the last two decades of the twentieth century. With the slow but steady decline of distinct left-wing positions, party politics in Europe is generally moving in the direction of more traditional, conservative, and authoritarian politics, albeit at a different velocity in each country.



The transformation of social democracy created a space on the political fringes from where more radical parties have emerged. These new parties posed a direct electoral challenge to the established centre-left. Such parties include the far-left democratic socialist and communist parties. The agendas of these parties often resemble what social democrats initially proposed after WWII. The social democrats' in the 1970s and 1980s were green, environmentalist parties that focused on post-materialist values. Additionally, far-right parties have emerged that have shifted the discourse from economic issues to identity politics.