

Solidarity and reciprocity in the European Union: What citizens think

A policy paper based on focus group research in nine countries

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Project Frame

Between 2021 and 2024, the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research commissioned a series of research projects devoted to cohesion in Europe. One of the projects, HEUREC, was conducted by researchers at the Institute of Political Science at Technical University Darmstadt, Germany. The project investigated which expectations of solidarity and reciprocity citizens in the European Union have toward other European countries and the institutions of the European Union. In this brief report, we will sketch the key results from the research project and, based on this, formulate some policy advice for shaping the social policy dimension and future development of EU cohesion.

Case selection and data collection

In order to know what Europeans think about solidarity and reciprocity and how connected they feel to each other, we formulated a seemingly easy question: “Who owes what to whom in the European Union?” The project was designed to grasp the ideas of ordinary people about the EU, but we deemed the question too complicated to put it into a quantitative survey. Moreover, we wanted to identify which notions of solidarity people in the EU have and how they justify their opinion. Therefore, we decided to pick ordinary people and invite them to join a series of group discussions about our topic. Since survey data suggested that different socio-economic groups see the EU differently, we decided to pick people from three groups: a) high-skilled people, b) lower paid or unemployed people, c) young people in their 20ies. Furthermore, we decided to restrict our research to countries in the Euro zone (currency area), because those countries are more closely tied together through their common currency – they can drag each other down if one encounters fiscal problems, but they can also lift each other up. We further limited research by picking nine countries from the Euro zone with widely differing net balance of financial transfers to and from the EU. We picked three net payers, i.e. countries that always pay more to the EU budget than they receive from it (Finland, Germany and the Netherlands). We also selected three net receivers, i.e. countries that always have received more from the budget than they have put in themselves (Greece, Portugal and Spain). For all six countries, it is not expected that their balance will change in the near future. As a third group, we picked three additional countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia), which currently are net receivers, but show an economic development which could put them in the payer category in the future. The idea behind the case selection was that people in countries

which are net payers may have a different perspective on the question “who owes what to whom” than people from receiving countries. People from the third group maybe would pick again another position. In each of the nine countries, we conducted three focus groups with up to eight persons each (146 people in total). The groups were moderated by a member of the project team, following the same guidelines for discussion in all 27 groups.

Since we did not want to address solidarity on an abstract level, we presented three scenarios: 1) A natural disaster in an EU member state, 2) a financial crisis unfolding in the EU, and 3) the challenge of social inequality across the EU. In each scenario, participants were asked to discuss three main questions: “Would you help?”, “What should your country do?” and “What should the EU do?” Participants were encouraged to openly discuss the questions presented. All focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and translated into English. After that, we analysed the positions of the participants using various tools of content analysis.

General notions towards the EU

In general, the EU was seen positively by most participants. To get the focus group discussions started, participants were asked to name three terms which they would use to describe the EU. Several features which were frequently mentioned, e.g. the EURO as common currency of the countries (mostly in the sense of a common economic area, but also in practical terms because it makes money exchange between countries obsolete), but also free travel across borders (Schengen agreement). Also, EU programs like ERASMUS (exchange for students and staff at universities) and EU structural funds were explicitly mentioned. While the EU itself was assessed positively in general, some critical points were raised. Frequently, “bureaucracy in Brussels” was mentioned as a negative element, the latent dominance by some larger countries (Germany and France were suggested here) and problematic conduct (opaque processes, obscure decision making, corruption). Interestingly, participants often made inconclusive remarks, e.g. criticized that every country has a veto but at the same time demanded that all countries “should have a say” and should be treated equally.



“I think the European Community today is more politicized and less focused on the citizens who make up that community. And we see countries criticizing, trying to veto immigration policies, trying to blackmail others [...]”
(Portugal)

In general, nationally framed statements were very persistent in the focus groups. Even if we asked participants directly what they expect the EU to do, people quickly adopted a national perspective (e.g. “my government could...” or “Slovakia will...”). Independent from the following presentation of research project results, it is important to recognize that even in a setting which is explicitly dedicated to the EU as the focal point of discussion and even with questions directly aiming at the EU, people still tend to argue and think from the national perspective.

“I think voting weight is perhaps also a point when it comes to disadvantages. If you’re not Germany or France, [...] [it] is much more difficult to achieve at the EU level, because the same voting rights for all countries [...] is not given. That Germany and France push very strongly and that they just have a much greater influence on what is implemented.”
(Germany)

Statements about solidarity and reciprocity

In general, there was *broad consensus* among participants that one should help if help is needed. Especially in the natural disaster scenario, we experienced that people are willing to support other people without reservation. In all groups, participants described help for people in distress as a fundamental obligation for everybody. Nearly all participants expressed their expectation that their own country would immediately help with everything what’s necessary and that the EU should also help. Some participants even considered personal responsibility if certain requirements were met, i.e. compensation for loss of salary. Within this scenario, solidarity was basically understood as *unidirectional support*, i.e. participants usually refrained from expressing their expectations of some kind of “payback”. The only remarks concerning reciprocity were aiming at situations where the own country would be in need due to a natural disaster. Solidarity was generally understood as unconditional support, covering all countries and people. Some participants even challenged the idea of solidarity within the EU in the case of a natural disaster by arguing that help should not be

“[T]his is about membership. [...] In the European Union, when you are in that group [...] you are obliged [...] to help.”
(Lithuania)

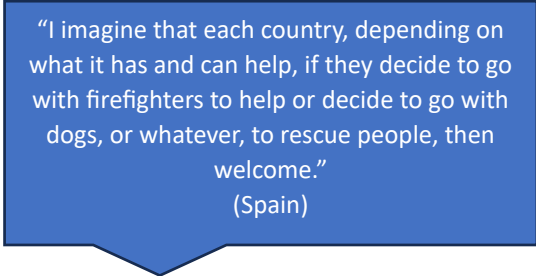
“And I would see that in the same way that helping out is not just a matter of one nation, but that one also sees oneself as a community of states.”
(Germany)

“I actually believe that this simply already works even beyond the EU level. Simply independent of whether it's now a Member State or not, that you simply offer help [...]and then just look further how you can proceed afterwards.”
(Germany)

restricted to EU member states, but that people generally should help others who need it, be it inside or outside the EU.

In connection with solidarity, some general caveats were frequently expressed. Participants stressed that one could only help if the resources were at hand (e.g. a country can only help with rescue dogs in the case of an earthquake if it actually has those dogs available). Some statements added that solidarity is only helpful if the help offered actually meets the needs of the country in distress (e.g. one should not simply “throw money at a problem”). Participants frequently also referred to fairness and equality, mostly in the sense that the burden of help should be distributed among countries. In this regard, participants debated what fairness required in the context, e.g. if bigger or richer countries are expected to give more than smaller or poorer countries.

In some countries, participants were also reporting special relationships between their own country and others, where solidarity is considered to be even higher than towards the average European partners. For example, Finnish participants frequently referred to the “Nordic countries” (including Iceland and Norway, both of which are not EU members). Participants from all countries accentuated that in the case of emergency, direct neighbours have a special responsibility, not only because they are geographically closer and thus can help faster, but also because neighbourhood is implicating a special relationship.



“I imagine that each country, depending on what it has and can help, if they decide to go with firefighters to help or decide to go with dogs, or whatever, to rescue people, then welcome.”
(Spain)

In contrast to the natural disaster case, participants were more sceptical of unidirectional support in the other two scenarios. Confronted with the possibility of a financial crisis in Europe, participants again expressed their support for solidary behaviour and agreed in principle to transfers of money from their country to the country in need. Even though it was mostly agreed that help is an obligation, there were frequent warnings that helping others might come at a cost. Expectations of reciprocal behaviour were expressed more often here

than in the natural disaster scenario. Sometimes, the expectations regarding reciprocity remained diffuse, i.e. with a general expression like “we help them today, and they will help us tomorrow”. In most instances, participants were more detailed in their expectations, linking help in a financial crisis to two criteria: the deservingness of the country in distress and conditionality of the help offered. The concept of deservingness was most prominent in the focus groups of the net payer countries. Some participants argued that they would be less inclined to help if the situation was self-inflicted, i.e. if the country had manoeuvred itself in the critical situation by making bad decisions.

“I valued positively the opinion that it’s not always the fault of an outside influence, it’s often the fault of the politicians’ decisions, bad ones. And in that case, why should we be saving, let’s say, their ass, when it’s their own fault?”
(Slovakia)

“So, let’s say a country has gone crazy and taken out a lot of high loans [...] or if they want to retire people at 40, then I think I would be a bit less generous than if it were due to other factors.”
(The Netherlands)

In all countries, conditionality was discussed as a possibility to make help effective or more efficient. Some participants expressed hope that if the country will get strings attached to the help, it will show stronger efforts, e.g. to pay back the help or to ensure the situation will not happen again. A common argument was that some kinds of help can only be effective if specific conditions are met by the receiver (i.e. economic stimulus being accompanied by additional measures). In all net receiver countries, conditions were discussed extensively, even in a self-critical way. Some participants admitted that their country was not fully trustworthy and that conditions would ensure that corruption would not absorb significant parts of the help transferred.

“[W]e had to borrow money and pay what they wanted [...], and we are still paying. [...] [T]he rules should be the same for everyone. Maybe the loan shouldn’t be with interest, or at least [not] with such high interest rates. But that’s what happened to us and Greece, for others it would have to be the same.”
(Portugal)

“I also think that there should be conditions, because [...] no one lends money without guarantees that they will get it back. But [...] I do not think that the European Union should impose policies on the country to which it lends money. There must be freedom for the country to present a plan [...]. I don’t think it has to be a one-sided thing on the part of the European Union.”
(Portugal)

We found the most interesting results concerning the third scenario (social inequalities). We asked the participants if they would support a European unemployment scheme in addition to

the national programmes already in place. The reason for choosing this scenario was that we wanted to disassociate the notion of solidarity from the level of nation states (to which most of the focus group discussions referred to) to the level of interpersonal solidarity. We were eager to know if people who were absolute supporters of unconditional help in the case of natural disaster would also support individuals in other countries with their own personal resources (e.g. a Dutch worker paying contributions from his own salary into the European unemployment fund to help unemployed persons in Portugal). Although we expected some opposition against this measure, we were surprised that even people from the low-paid and unemployment group in net receiver countries strongly rejected the idea of a pan-European unemployment scheme. The main arguments were a) doubts that one European scheme would fit for all countries, given the very different welfare systems which are in effect now; and b) that decisions made on the EU level might not work “down on other levels”. Especially the latter argument, which has a strong connection to the idea of subsidiarity was visible across most focus groups.

“This [social inequalities] should be solved by each state [...], but simply if the state itself cannot solve it or simply does not want to solve it, then in my opinion [...] the EU should step in, which would set some conditions.”
(Slovakia)

“Unemployment is so different, in different parts of the EU. [...] At least in the current situation [it] would be very difficult to deal with it in a uniform way. And [...] the different member states have such different [...] social safety nets. [...] It will be very difficult to look at it from an EU perspective.”
(Finland)

Political lessons

Against the background of the focus group results, we can conclude that the idea of solidarity is very prominent among EU citizens in the nine countries and the three socio-demographic groups. Surprisingly, there is great overlap across the three groups of countries. But there are also differences: Sometimes, we found self-critical positions (i.e.

“I also don’t want daddy Europe to be telling me how to live. I mean, [...] when you are an adult, the thing is to take individual responsibility [...]. And neither would I like [...], that they come from outside to tell you [how to live]. Each one of us has our idiosyncrasy, our culture, and maybe we want to change some things and not others.”
(Spain)

Germans think that Germany is too dominant in Europe, Portuguese think that Portugal is not honest in using EU funds), sometimes we found statements which are very close to stereotypes (e.g. Finnish participants describing Southern countries as “banana republics”). Overall, EU

citizens are firmly committed to solidarity and discuss limitations of this concept in a straightforward manner. This solidarity is a precious resource for political action. As long as the burden of those who undertake solidary action

“I think they [Southern European countries] have quite enough of their debts [laugh]. It will be so long before they could help us back in this case.”
(Finland)

can be justified by human obligation, by referring to a common good or by citing reciprocal relationships, Europeans are willing to give, even if most of the countries will always remain in the same role.

Even redistribution across borders seems to be legitimate if good reasons can be stated. Europeans are well aware that there are economically stronger countries and weaker countries. All focus group participants were able to relate to the position of other people in other countries, putting themselves in their shoes; everybody was ready to acknowledge that Europe is a project worth pursuing. While transfer between countries directly or via the EU is accepted, people are hesitant to introduce pan-European social insurance schemes directed to unemployment because they doubt that there can be “one size fits all” solutions. Instead, they seem to prefer their national frameworks. It seems that the main bone of contention is how to formulate concrete policy measures adapted to local contexts and needs. Setting common goals and some policy guidance at the EU level does not seem to be a problem. However, setting priorities and implementing measures on the ground is primarily perceived as an issue for domestic politics, attributed to national or local government. It is important to point out that this preference for subsidiarity is not simply a case of nationalism. The concern that citizens formulated was a perceived lack of knowledge about, and consequently a lack of responsiveness to, conditions on the ground.

We like to emphasise that we also found that citizens were more prone to help unconditionally if a crisis is caused exogenously and no one’s fault. This became clear when participants in the group discussions were ready to share the burden of solidarity and, importantly, share it unconditionally in the case of a natural disaster in contrast to the case of a financial or economic crisis brought about by human action.