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Solidarity in Europe

Philipp Genschel, Joint Professor of European Public Policy, Department of Political and Social Sciences and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Anton Hemerijck, Professor of Political Science and Sociology, Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute

Abstract

European solidarity is in high demand but short supply. By using survey evidence on attitudes towards European solidarity, conducted by YouGov in 11 member states (April 2018), the paper explores viable strategies for leveraging European solidarity. The survey reveals three important findings:

1. Public support for European solidarity varies by issue (solidarity for what?), by instrument (solidarity how?) and by member state (solidarity by whom for whom?).
2. Variance in support offers opportunities for leveraging European solidarity by linking different issues and instruments
3. European publics are often uncertain in their attitudes towards European solidarity. This opens space for political leadership on European solidarity by issue- and instrument-linkage. Voters, who in large majority wish to stay in the EU, should be ready to listen.

Acknowledgements

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Author contacts: Philipp.Genschel@eui.eu; Anton.Hemerijck@eui.eu



I. The demand-supply gap

European solidarity is in high demand but short supply. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, the demand-supply gap has grown considerably, seriously fraying the social, economic, institutional and political cohesion of the European Union (EU). Just consider the following examples:

- The Eurozone crisis quickly turned into a blame game between creditor and debtor countries that left the burden of saving the Euro mostly to the (constitutionally inadequate) ECB.
- In some member states (youth) unemployment rose to levels not seen since the 1930s, while leaving other member states unaffected and seemingly unconcerned.
- The refugee crisis led to finger-pointing between frontline states, transit states, host states, and unaffected bystanders while (not so) temporary border controls sprang up throughout the Schengen area.
- Calls for more unity in European Security and Defence policy go hand in hand with manifest disagreement on defence spending and the pooling and sharing of defence equipment, technology, and production.

How can the demand-supply gap be closed? There are two approaches. One is to **reduce demand for solidarity** through disintegration. This is the Brexit approach. The partial or complete exit from the EU and its common policies reduces the need for risk and burden sharing with other EU states and societies. The solidarity gap is closed by dismantling policies and institutions that require solidarity.

The other approach is to **increase supply of solidarity**. This is the EU approach. The Treaties are replete with exhortations of solidarity, social cohesion, mutual assistance, etc.: “Europe can be built only through real practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity” (Preamble of the ECSC Treaty). Yet, as the crises of the past decade demonstrate, the meaning of real solidarity is essentially contested. The supply of solidarity is often blocked by disagreement about who owes what to whom, when and where.

How can the zone of agreement be expanded? How can European solidarity be leveraged to achieve the most effective risk and burden sharing between member states

TAKE AWAY

- ▶ *The signature crisis of the EU today is a solidarity crisis*
- ▶ *The task at hand is to expand the supply of solidarity*

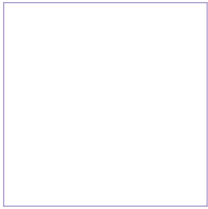
with the least risk of antagonising anybody? In this paper we use **new survey evidence on attitudes towards European solidarity in eleven member states** to map areas of agreement and disagreement on European solidarity across policy issues, policy instruments, and member states. This helps to identify politically viable issues and strategies for expanding European solidarity and to develop persuasive narratives for explaining them to the broader public.

II. What is European solidarity?

Solidarity refers to the normative expectation of mutual support among the members of large anonymous groups (the class, the party, the nation). Group members ought to share one another’s risks and burdens in order to secure the goals and cohesiveness of the group as a whole: one for all, all for one, with no one left behind.

The advantage of solidarity is that it provides the members of a group with **insurance** against ‘bad risks’. This allows individual members to accept more risk, and enables the group as a whole to pursue more ambitious goals and to better defend its cohesiveness under conditions of adversity. Yet, there are also disadvantages:

- Solidarity is **costly**. It requires that group members pass some of their own physical, financial, human or organisational resources to members of the group in order to improve the well-being, or reduce the suffering of these other members. Solidarity involves sharing in a real, material sense.
- Solidarity is **uneven**. Solidarity involves transfers from better-off to less well-off group members. The transfers are zero-sum, at least in the short term. They flow from good risks to bad risks, from givers to takers, from net-contributors to net-beneficiaries with no immediate compensation.



- Solidarity breeds **moral hazard**. Solidarity unburdens actors from the need to self-protect against bad risk. This may induce careless or even openly exploitative and fraudulent behaviour that triggers unnecessary bad risks, i.e. risks that could have been avoided through appropriate self-protection, and thus further increasing the costs of solidarity.

There are solutions to each of these problems but they are somewhat contradictory. To reduce the costs of solidarity, risk should be put on many shoulders. The risk pool should be large. To avoid the same actors always ending up at the paying-end of the solidarity relation, the risk pool should be heterogeneous so as to increase the chances of turn-taking in solidary giving and taking. Yet, to reduce moral hazard, the risk pool should be kept small and homogeneous. People tend to trust people who are like them because they have more scruples before betraying each other.

Given these inherent contradictions, real world systems of solidarity rely extensively on institutional support structures: **borders and hierarchies**. Borders restrict the territorial and social reach of solidarity to the members of a well-defined group. The rise of the national welfare state was linked to the emergence of social citizenship to clearly demarcate the boundary between thick national and thin cross-border solidarity. The rise of the welfare state was also associated with the growth of nation-wide administrative structures for the provision of welfare support, the disciplining of welfare recipients and the collection of mandatory welfare contributions. In short, borders and hierarchies facilitated the emergence of national welfare states and national communities of solidarity, both mutually reinforcing each other.

EU solidarity can draw much less on borders and hierarchies than national welfare states. The borders of the EU are wide and incomplete. They include not only half a billion individuals but also 28 pre-existing national sharing communities at very different levels of economic development. Also, EU borders are open to revision through enlargement or individual exit (e.g. Brexit). Wide borders increase the size and heterogeneity of the risk pool, thus raising the potential benefits of solidarity. At the same time, however, they also increase the moral hazard predicament. Individual moral hazard is compounded by national-level moral hazard, as member state governments exploit European solidarity in order to facilitate national solidarity among their national citizens. In addition, the incompleteness of EU borders raises the spectre

of enlargement to bad risks (i.e. poor and vulnerable states entering) and the exiting of good risks (i.e. rich, resilient member states leaving).

Hierarchical enforcement is weaker partly because the EU lacks the institutional apparatus to enforce payment obligations or behavioural restrictions on the member states. Perhaps more importantly, given the pre-existence of rather popular national (welfare) sharing communities, EU level enforcement of European contributory obligations or behavioural constraints can easily be seen as foreign imposition. As a consequence, **European solidarity has to rely more on spontaneous public support** by EU citizens and member governments, and can rely less on institutional facilitation than national solidarity.

TAKE AWAY

► *European solidarity is potentially beneficial because it encompasses a large and heterogeneous risk pool.*

► *European solidarity is highly contingent on spontaneous public support because it cannot draw on the institutional support structures that sustain solidarity at the national level: definite borders and nation-wide hierarchies.*

III. Public support for European solidarity

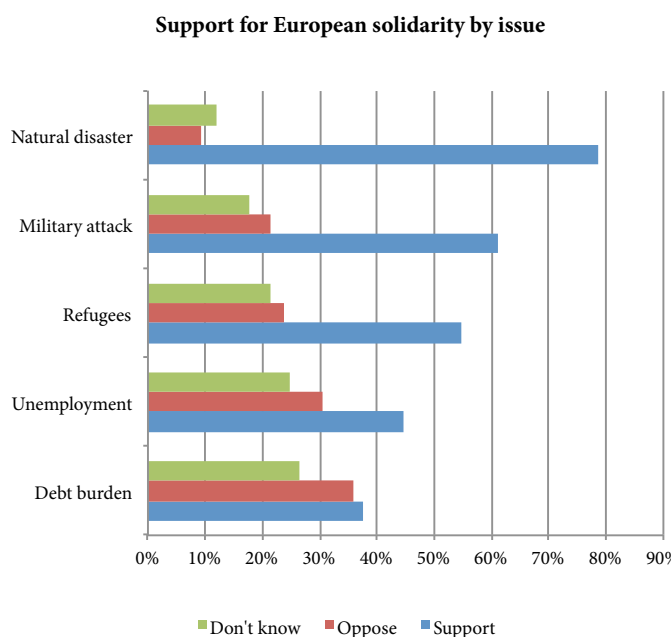
How strong is public support for European solidarity? In April 2018, YouGov conducted a survey in 11 EU member states¹ to explore this question. The results show that the support for European solidarity varies with the issues involved (solidarity for what?), the instruments used (solidarity how?) and by member state (solidarity by whom and for whom?).



Variation by issue

Two survey items measure respondents' support for European solidarity depending on the policy issues involved: Would respondents support or oppose financial solidarity with another member state suffering from unsustainable debt, very high unemployment, large numbers of refugees, or natural disaster? Would they support military assistance to a member state under foreign attack? Figure 1 summarizes the main results.

Figure 1



Survey question: Thinking about different sorts of problems and crises that could hit other members of the European Union, do you think EU countries should be willing to offer financial aid to another member state in the following circumstances?

Available answers: Other member states should give them financial help (support); Other member states should not give them financial help (oppose); Don't know.

Survey question (military attack): If another European Union country came under military attack by a country outside the European Union, would you support or oppose your country coming to its military defence?

Available answers: Strongly support, tend to support (support); Strongly oppose, tend to oppose (oppose); Don't know.

Figure 1 highlights two features. First, **support for European solidarity varies strongly with the issue**. Support is strongest (and opposition lowest) in case of natural disaster. Support is lowest (and opposition highest) in case of excessive debt. Support for European solidarity on

issues of high unemployment, large refugee inflows, or foreign attack ranges between these two extremes.

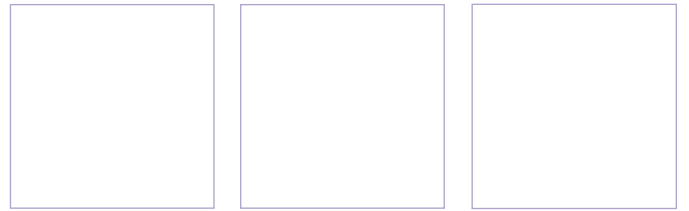
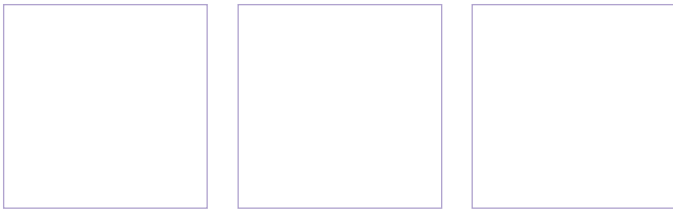
Second, low support for European solidarity is associated with **ambiguity and uncertainty** about the desirability of solidarity as indicated by the share of 'don't know' responses. While less than 10 percent of respondents 'don't know' whether they should support (or oppose) European solidarity in case of a natural disaster, close to 30 percent don't know whether to support (or not) an over-indebted member state.

Closer inspection of the data reveals **low cross-country variation in issue rankings**. Natural disaster triggers the highest support for solidarity in all 11 member states included in the YouGov survey. Unsustainable debt is associated with the lowest support for solidarity in all states but Greece. Also, the ranking of the other issues (unemployment, refugees, attack) largely follows the pattern of figure 1.²

Natural disaster is an easy issue for European solidarity because such disasters have **exogenous** causes (i.e. moral hazard is not an issue) and they are **one-off** (no long-term transfers and obligations involved). Unsustainable debt, by contrast, is a difficult solidarity issue because it has **endogenous** causes (i.e. moral hazard by the over-indebted state is an issue) and may involve **long-term** transfers and obligations (because national debt is partially driven by systemic interdependencies created by the Single Market or Monetary Union).

Foreign attack and large refugee inflows resemble natural disasters in that their causes are mostly exogenous and the required assistance is of the one-off emergency assistance type. Hence, support for solidarity is fairly solid. High unemployment, by contrast, resembles the problem of unsustainable debt: endogenous causes and a need for long-term or permanent risk and burden sharing. Support for European solidarity is correspondingly low.

In conclusion, the good news is that solidarity instincts are similar across member states. This should facilitate intergovernmental agreement on joint risk and burden sharing. The bad news is that spontaneous solidarity is highest for risk types that matter little in the EU, i.e. for natural disasters (usually too small to require European solidarity) and military attacks (core competence of NATO, not EU). Solidarity is lowest for risk types that are central to the EU's Single Market and EMU – debt and unemployment. Yet, there is a glimmer of hope: the high



share of ‘don’t know’ responses associated with the issues of debt and unemployment points large groups of European citizens who are undecided, and potentially open for political cueing. This opens a space for boosting support for European solidarity through political leadership in public discourse. National leaders in particular would have to speak up. Finally, also on a positive note, support for (financial!) solidarity on the refugee issue is surprisingly high even in countries like Poland and Lithuania.

TAKE AWAY

- ▶ Public support for European solidarity is high, and uncertainty is low, if issues are exogenous and one-off (natural disaster, military attack).
- ▶ Support for solidarity is low, and uncertainty is high, if issues are endogenous and potentially permanent (debt crises, high unemployment).
- ▶ Little cross-national variation

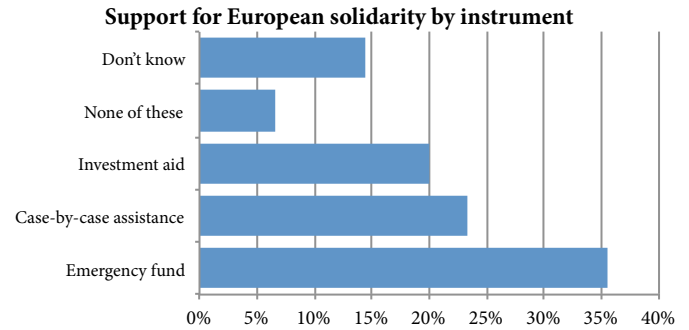
Variation by instrument

What do respondents think are the best instrument for solidary risk and burden sharing in the EU? The YouGov survey offers three choices: a common emergency fund set up *ex ante* by all member states to help any of them encountering bad risk in the future; *ex ante* investment aid for weak member states to strengthen their economies and reduce their vulnerability to future bad risk; *ex post* emergency assistance mobilised on a case-by-case basis after a member state was hit by bad risk.

As figure 2 shows, the *ex ante* emergency fund enjoys most support among survey respondents, followed by *ex post* case-by-case assistance, and *ex ante* investment aid. Closer inspection of the data reveals cross-national convergence on the *ex ante* emergency fund as the preferred risk sharing instrument: respondents in 10 of the 11 member states in the YouGov survey rank the emergency fund over the two alternative risk sharing instruments.

There is more cross-country variance in the second and third preference. Respondents in Denmark, Finland,

Figure 2



Survey question: Thinking more specifically, which of the following do you think would be the best way for better off European Union countries to give financial aid to other member states?

Available answers: EU countries should pay into an emergency fund, which could be accessed in the future if a member country faces a crisis of some sort (Emergency fund); EU countries should not pay any extra money now, but contribute money on a case-by-case basis if a member country faces a crisis of some sort (Case-by-case assistance); EU countries should pay money into reducing potential risk now, with better off countries giving money to worse off countries to make their economies stronger (Investment aid); None of these; Don't know.

France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden offer more support for solidarity by *ex post* case-by-case assistance than by *ex ante* investment aid. One assumes this is in order to keep a closer check on where their money goes. Respondents in Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Spain, by contrast, prefer *ex ante* investment aid to *ex post* case-by-case assistance. Perhaps this is because they expect their home countries to be net-beneficiaries of investment aid. Also the Eurozone crisis may have undermined their trust in the reliability and generosity of *ex post* case-by-case assistance. We come back to these issues below.

The broad support of emergency fund schemes across member states is good news for projects like the European Monetary Fund or the European Deposit Insurance Scheme that can plausibly be presented as *ex ante* emergency funds of this sort. Yet, it warns against attempts to sell a potential Eurozone budget as an ‘investment budget’. It may be more convincing to present it as a general ‘rainy day’ fund providing re-insurance against bad risks across a broad range of policies – economic, social, security, defence – but leaves investment to the national level to increase ‘ownership’.

Note also that large majorities of respondents in all member states prefer *ex ante* instruments for European solidarity (i.e. an emergency fund or investment aid) to



exclusive reliance on *ex post* case-by-case assistance. In other words, there is support for precautionary instruments of solidarity.

TAKE AWAY

► There is broad support for an *ex ante* emergency fund ('rainy day fund')

► Support for *ex ante* investment aid and case-by-case assistance splits along country lines

► Respondents in all member states prefer precautionary instruments (i.e. *ex ante* emergency fund or *ex ante* investment aid) to *ex post* improvisation through case-by-case assistance

Variation by member state

Despite broad similarities in the rank ordering of issues and instruments, there are significant cross-national differences in the level of support for European solidarity. As the YouGov survey shows, support for European solidarity depends on whether respondents expect their own country to end up at the giving or the receiving end of the solidarity relation. **People favour solidarity if they think that other member states will pay for it;** they oppose solidarity when they think their own state will have to pay up. Importantly, however, there is **variation across issues and instruments.**

Figures 3a and 3b show a strong correlation between respondents' support for solidarity on debt (issue) and for cross-border investment aid (instrument), on one hand, and respondents' perception of their home state's net financial-contribution to European solidarity, on the other hand.³ There is a stark divide between one group of self-perceived net-contributors (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, UK) and another group of self-perceived net-recipients (Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Spain), with France and Italy somewhere in between. Respondents in net-contributor countries offer little support for European solidarity; respondents in net-recipient countries are all in favour.

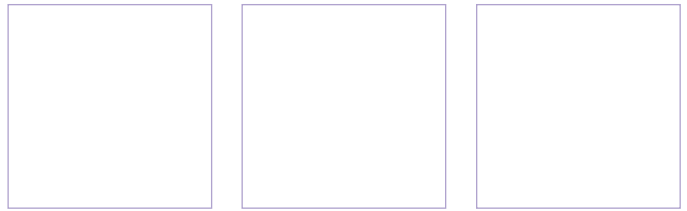
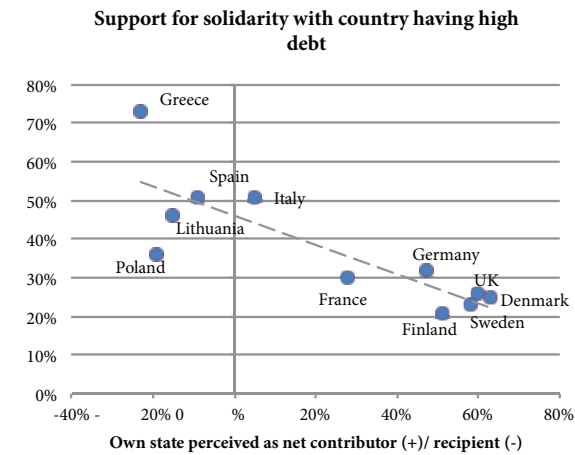


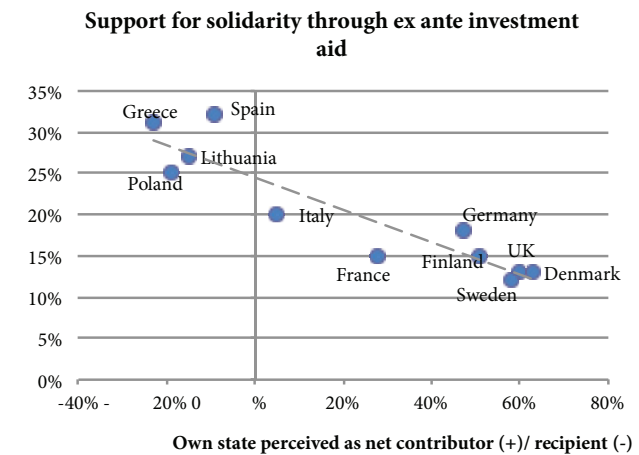
Figure 3a



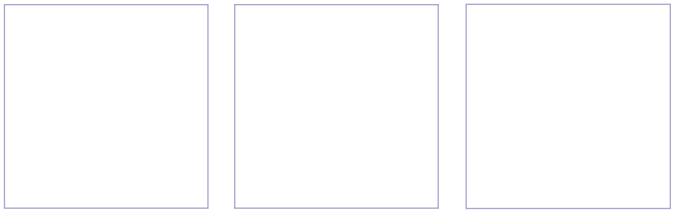
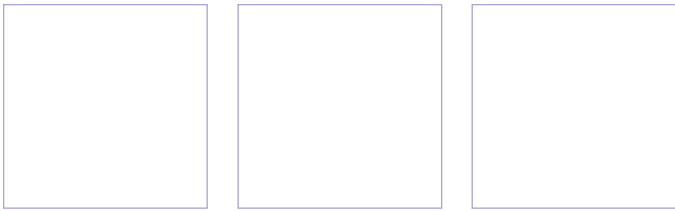
X-axes in figures 3a and 3b report the difference between the share of people in each countries that perceived their own state as net contributor and as a recipient of EU aids, taken from the following survey question: 'Imagine there was an EU fund to help member states facing a crisis of some sort. Over the long term, do you think COUNTRY would end up being...'

A country that puts more into such a fund than it gets out of it (net contributor); A country that gets more out of such a fund than it puts into it (net recipient); A country that gets about the same amount out of such a fund as it puts into it (not used); Not sure (not used).

Figure 3b



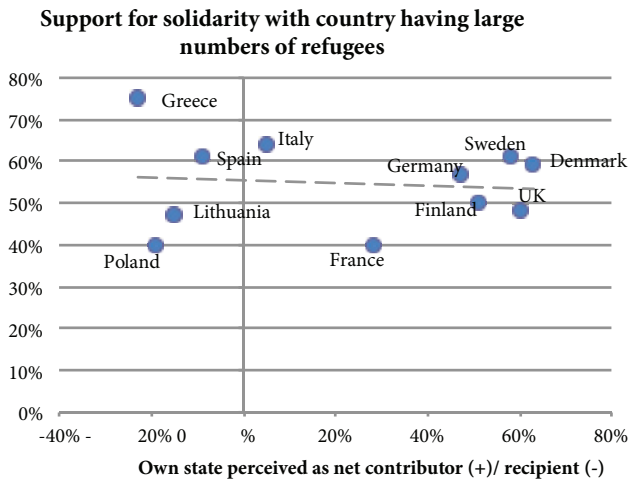
Figures 4a and 4b replicate the set-up of figures 3a and 3b to investigate support for financial solidarity for high refugee numbers (issue), and support for a joint emergency fund (instrument) respectively. While the level of solidarity still reflects the perceived net-financial position of the respondents' home state in European solidarity, the correlation is much more muted (figure 4b – emergency fund) or virtually non-existent (figure 4a - refugees). Wealth heterogeneities among the member states recede



to the background. Other heterogeneities come to the fore, some of them quite surprising.

Support for European solidarity is often low among **Polish** and **Lithuanian** respondents even though they perceive their home countries as likely net-beneficiaries. Yet, their

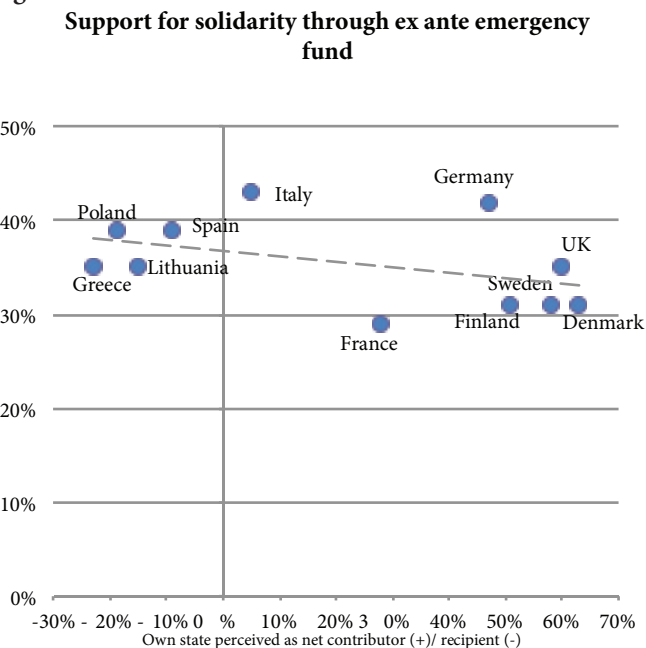
Figure 4a



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Figure 4b



solidarity on the refugee issue is actually higher than in **France**. **France** exhibits the lowest level of solidarity of all 11 member states in figures 4a and 4b, and is also consistently below the regression line in figures 3a and 3b. The **Nordic countries** also exhibit consistently low support for European solidarity. **German** respondents' by contrast tend to exhibit higher levels of solidarity than the perceived net-contributor position of **Germany** would suggest. **German** support for a joint EU emergency fund is higher than in all other states, but **Italy**. Support for European solidarity in the Southern periphery is generally high. Yet, there are exceptions. For instance, **Greek** support for an EU emergency fund is relatively low (on a par with the **UK**).

TAKE AWAY

- ▶ Cross-national differences in wealth erode support for European solidarity in self-perceived net-contributor states.
- ▶ The resistance of self-perceived net-contributors to European solidarity varies strongly across issues and instruments.

IV. Four lessons

European solidarity is difficult

The scope for European solidarity is constrained by **distributive conflict** between (self-perceived) net-contributors in the North (especially the **Nordic countries** and **Germany**) and net-recipients in the South and, to a lesser extent, in the East.

European solidarity exists

There are issues and instruments of solidarity that attract spontaneous support across the **distributive divide**: European solidarity on issues of natural disaster, military attack, and, to a lesser extent, refugees enjoys broad support in Northern, Southern, and Eastern member states; a joint emergency fund is the preferred instrument of solidarity in (almost) all member states. In fact, national publics may sometimes be more supportive of European solidarity than their governments. One wonders, for instance, whether parts of the German

public are not closer to the Euro-vision of French President Macron than to the fiscal orthodoxy of their own ministry of finance. As the YouGov survey shows, the ‘rainy day fund’ logic underlying proposals for an EMF, for a joint deposit insurance scheme or, arguably, for a joint Eurozone budget receives very strong support from German respondents.

European solidarity can be leveraged

The scope of European solidarity can be expanded by linking controversial issues and instruments. For instance, a mix of *ex ante* investment aid and *ex post* assistance may garner more spontaneous public support across member states than each of these instruments on its own. For this purpose, *ex post* assistance would have to be made conditional on the proper use of *ex ante* investment aid. The investment aid would incentivise recipient countries; the conditionality would reassure donor countries. Why not, for instance, allow struggling economies to (temporarily) breach the 3% deficit rule on condition they use the additional fiscal space to fast-forward capacitating investments? In a similar vein, a link between the debt and the refugee issue may increase support for solidarity on both. On the one hand, large refugee numbers induce fiscal expansion in surplus countries like Germany and Sweden, thus mitigating adjustment pressures on deficit countries. On the other hand, large refugee numbers in debtor countries may facilitate support for debt relief in creditor countries. Obviously, such instrument- or issue-linkages would have to be explained in public because their logics are not necessarily self-evident.

European solidarity needs explaining

European publics often don’t know whether to support or oppose European solidarity. Their uncertainty rises with the complexity of European arrangements that mix and match risk and burden sharing across issues and instruments. This is a problem but also an opportunity. It opens space for increasing support for European solidarity through political leadership. This leadership would have to come primarily from the national level (with the usual brokering by EU actors in the background). Policy makers in (self-perceived) net-contributor states would have to explain why European solidarity may be in the long-run national interest even if it involves short-run costs. Policy makers in net-recipient member states would have to explain why some measure of external discipline might be required to reassure donors. The political risks are obvious. **However, voters are not stupid and they may actually listen to good reasons.** Large majorities across all member states want to stay in the EU. If this requires more European solidarity, it may be useful to tell them.

Endnotes:

1 The survey covers 11 EU member states. Total sample size was 1692 (Great Britain), 1005 (France), 1017 (Germany), 1030 (Denmark), 1019 (Sweden), 981 (Finland), 956 (Poland), 738 (Lithuania), 746 (Greece), 1065 (Italy), and 1035 (Spain) adult respondents. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18th - 30th April 2018. The survey was carried out online. All figures are based on data taken from the YouGov survey.

2 There are five exceptions. Respondents in Poland and Lithuania rank solidarity in case of unemployment over solidarity in case of refugee inflows. Greek, Italian, and Swedish respondents support solidarity on the refugee issue more strongly than solidarity in case of a foreign attack.

3 Replacing unsustainable debt by high unemployment in figure 3a yields an even stronger correlation. Replacing investment support by case-by-case emergency assistance yields the reverse image of figure 3b: respondents in net-contributor countries are in favor, respondents in net-recipient countries are more skeptical.


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School of Transnational Governance

European University Institute
Via dei Roccettini, 9
I-50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Tel. +39 055 4685 545
Email: stg@eui.eu
stg.eui.eu — www.eui.eu

 @STGEUI @EuropeanUni

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