

Solidarity in the EU: More hype than substance?

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List of abbreviations

CERV	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme
CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe
CP	Cohesion Policy
CSO	civil society organisation
ECB	European Central Bank
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EUI	European University Institute
EUSF	EU Solidarity Fund
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NGEU	Next Generation EU
SGP	Stability and Growth Pact
TEU	Treaty on the European Union

Executive summary

During the COVID-19 crisis, *solidarity* was a concept that was widely referred to by EU decision-makers. It was used as a call for cooperation between EU member states, and a rhetorical tool to legitimise joint decisions. Although it is not the first time solidarity is called upon in a moment of crisis, *EU solidarity* has remained vague and ambiguous, as traditional forms of solidarity are barely developed in transnational settings.

While solidarity at the national level can be considered ‘first-order’, EU solidarity remains ‘second-order’. In other words, the quality of solidarity-based relationships between European countries and between European citizens are poorer than at the national level.

EU solidarity comes in two forms: interstate solidarity between EU member states, and interpersonal solidarity between EU citizens. The former is based on either reciprocity, or the enlightened self-interest of member states which realise that it is in their interest to enter solidaristic relationships with other member states. This form of solidarity is relatively well-developed at the EU level. For instance, the decision over the COVID-19 recovery package emerged from most member states’ recognition that they would all be better off with an extensive EU recovery package than if they went their own paths.

However, there is almost no interpersonal solidarity in the EU; there are no direct redistributive mechanisms between EU institutions and citizens. In addition, EU citizens are unlikely to form transnational alliances among themselves due to a lack of social ties.

The emergence of solidarity at the EU level is highly dependent on the political context and on the willingness of national governments to agree to solidarity mechanisms with other European countries. The COVID-19 crisis provides good conditions for solidarity to emerge, as no single European country is responsible for the pandemic, and all are affected by it equally. In comparison, the 2010 European debt crisis was another story. EU solidarity barely emerged as member states pointed fingers more easily, depending on national economic situations.

Solidarity is a core pillar of European cooperation. Reversely, a lack of solidarity represents a *threat* to European integration: without solidarity, there is no European cohesion and, in turn, more divides between European countries and within societies. European decision-makers must prioritise solidarity in their political agenda and give the concept more substance rather than employ it as a mere buzzword.

This Issue Paper presents four recommendations on how to foster solidarity in the EU:

1. The EU should rethink its concept of *solidarity*: move away from a purely transactional understanding, and shift towards a definition that allows for the emergence of interpersonal solidarity.
2. The EU’s cohesion agenda should be consolidated and widened to include interstate and interpersonal solidarity mechanisms rather than only inter-territorial ones.
3. The EU should better support national solidarity mechanisms as the basis for social cohesion in the EU27.
4. The EU should establish the conditions necessary for interpersonal solidarity to emerge in Europe.

This Issue Paper, written in the framework of the Charlemagne Prize Fellowship and in cooperation with the EPC, explores the different forms and dimensions of solidarity at the EU level before delving deeper into an analysis of solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis.

Introduction

“Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.”

Robert Schuman Declaration (1950)

EU SOLIDARITY BEYOND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In April 2020, a month after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez highlighted the importance of solidarity for European cooperation: “Without solidarity there can be no cohesion, without cohesion there will be disaffection and the credibility of the European project will be severely damaged.”¹ The role of solidarity as a fundamental pillar for European cooperation is clear. EU member states should find common solutions that benefit everyone simultaneously, rather than act as ‘lone wolves’ during a global pandemic.

Indeed, the EU’s role was crucial at this moment of crisis. Member states did not have the capacities to raise an extensive recovery package individually. Only the EU could relax the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) rules and ensure a sufficiently flexible fiscal framework that can respond to the crisis. The decision to allow all eurozone countries to continue borrowing from the European Central Bank’s (ECB) purchasing programme at low costs also could not have been decided at any other level. In addition, the Union’s joint procurement programme for vaccines allowed all EU countries to have more negotiation power and ensured that all member states – even smaller ones – would have equal access to COVID-19 vaccines at roughly the same time. Without joint frameworks of cooperation at the EU level, Europe’s response to the global pandemic would have been less successful.

The COVID-19 crisis provided good conditions for EU solidarity to emerge, especially compared to the Union’s crises of the past decades.

The COVID-19 crisis provided good conditions for EU solidarity to emerge, especially compared to the Union’s crises of the past decades. The pandemic was an exogenous shock: everyone was affected equally, and no government in the EU was responsible for the

impact of the virus. Due to the nature of the crisis, national governments could not invoke the ‘moral hazard’ argument to oppose joint EU responses. Compared to the 2010 European debt crisis, or ‘euro crisis’, the pandemic was not related to flaws in the Union’s policies or political architecture, as the EU has little to no competences in the area of health.

Despite the promising conditions for EU solidarity, its reach in the COVID-19 crisis remained limited – much more could have been done to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic at the Union level. The scope of the EU’s response correlates directly with not only its lack of competences in certain policy fields but also the narrow framework available for EU solidarity. The existing EU solidarity mechanisms are of an interstate nature, remain highly conditional and depend on national governments’ willingness to enter such relationships with other EU countries.

This crisis should be a wake-up call for the EU to develop a more substantial understanding of EU solidarity.

The COVID-19 crisis will have far-reaching consequences on the social fabric and cohesiveness of European societies. It is likely to deepen already existing divides in the Union between EU member states and regions and within national societies. This crisis should be a wake-up call for the EU to develop a more substantial understanding of EU solidarity. The Union must not only focus on short-term emergency solutions but also develop more comprehensive instruments to ensure sustainable cohesion in the EU. This would bridge the gap between the inflationary use of solidarity in political speeches and its capacity to deliver concrete policies and initiatives that actually foster cohesion. In the long term, this would increase the EU’s resilience against future (global) crises.

This Issue Paper refines the understanding of EU solidarity, which is different from national solidarity and remains open to multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, EU solidarity is real and does exist. The notion of EU solidarity should be built on the EU’s existing mechanisms, including Cohesion Policy (CP), its social dimension, and solidarity in cases of exogenous shocks. This Issue Paper explores how the EU could foster solidarity in the coming years to fight centrifugal forces and ensure the Union’s cohesion.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Solidarity is a widely used social, cultural and political concept but has a weak conceptual basis. Political theorists are less preoccupied with it than ideas like *freedom* or *equality*, despite its relevance in the development of modern nation-states. However, *solidarity* has become increasingly relevant in the past decades because of the erosion of solidarity mechanisms at national levels (i.e. welfare systems), which has led to more fragmented and unequal societies. In addition, governments struggle to deal with increasing individualisation and polarisation within societies, which also strains social cohesion.

The conceptual basis for EU solidarity is rather weak.

Solidarity has been mostly analysed within more developed polities rather than the EU, especially in the context of the institutionalised solidarity mechanisms of welfare states.² Consequently, once again, the conceptual basis for EU solidarity is rather weak. There is little analysis available on the different categories and forms of solidarity at the Union level. Most of the research focuses on specific moments of solidarity, such as the euro crisis (2011-12) or the European migration crisis (2015).

So far, research has found that EU solidarity is mostly transactional. It is based on either reciprocity – member states initiate solidaristic relationships in the hope that the other will help them in the future if need be – or enlightened ‘self-interest’ – joining a solidarity mechanism at the Union level advances the country’s own interests. EU solidarity is generally defined by an understanding that member states should offer assistance if another needs support. As such, it is mostly triggered in cases of ad hoc exogenous shocks, such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks, rather than premised on permanent redistributive schemes like welfare

mechanisms. The latter form is based on another kind of solidarity, which is not transactional in nature.

While there are EU mechanisms that could be considered ‘redistributive’, such as cohesion and structural funds, these programmes are not framed as solidarity mechanisms. Instead, they are compensation schemes for potential losses created by the Single Market, thus focusing on the economic aspects of EU policies. This framing is due to the perception that the EU’s legitimacy in creating a single market is stronger than in the field of solidarity, revealing how controversial EU solidarity seems to be for many decision-makers and Europeans.

Empirical political science studies on EU solidarity focus on its policy dimensions, as well as public narratives and attitudes. However, they fail to define the concept in more concrete terms.³ Other studies, such as law or sociology, explore the concept via comparative analyses of the different EU member states or focus on solidarity in particular crises (e.g. migration crisis, euro crisis). There is little academic or think tank research on the sources of legitimacy for EU solidarity, or how EU solidarity could be developed further.

OUTLINE

This Issue Paper contributes to the extensive yet incomplete research on EU solidarity by providing an overview of the different conceptual notions of solidarity in the EU (Chapter 1) before delving into the current forms and dimensions of solidarity at the EU level and analysing public attitudes (Chapter 2). The author also explores the solidarity mechanisms that the EU established during the COVID-19 crisis and their limits (Chapter 3) and proposes recommendations to foster solidarity at the Union level (Chapter 4).

This Issue Paper is the starting point for further research on EU solidarity, under the framework of the Charlemagne Prize Fellowship. The Fellowship funds young researchers to further debates on the future of Europe. The research will continue until the end of 2021, exploring the EU’s options for developing its solidarity agenda in more detail.

Chapter 1: What is solidarity?

1. A MULTIFACETED CONCEPT

The term *solidarity* first appeared as a legal concept in Roman law; a synonym of a common legal obligation (*obligatio in solidum*). Everyone in the 'community of joint debtors' was jointly responsible for paying back the creditor. To this day, solidarity displays an element of joint obligation within a clearly defined community.

It was only much later that solidarity also developed into a political concept, shaped mostly by the French Revolution. The idea of *fraternité universelle* (universal fraternity) helped create a basis of legitimacy for the new political system. Fraternity helped create social cohesion after the loss of the traditional basis of political legitimacy, which was based on monarchy and its God-given sovereignty.

Since the Romans, **three political traditions of solidarity** emerged in Europe, with different sources of legitimacy:⁴

1. The **Christian socialist understanding** is based on *caritas*, specifically the obligation to 'love thy neighbour'. It originates from Catholic social teaching, a doctrine focused on the common good, social justice and wealth distribution.
2. The **liberal-national concept** is based on a shared identity (e.g. nationality as an 'artificial acquaintance' of a nation). In the nation-state, a joint national identity creates and upholds shared feelings of belonging and is the basis for the 'modern' political community.
3. The **socialist concept** was developed by labour movements and later institutionalised into the welfare state in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is based on a shared sense of destiny and a common identity as workers uniting to fight for their social rights. European social democratic and socialist parties rely on this concept of solidarity.

These traditions showcase the vast array of sources of legitimacy for solidarity: an opposition to monarchy, a lifestyle according to Christian precepts, a means to overcome – or at least tame – the excesses of capitalism. Depending on the political traditions, the criteria for defining solidarity change. Is avowing to a 'general humanity' enough to create common bonds and social ties? Or should they be based on ethnic, religious or national identities? Should solidarity be based on reciprocity or moral obligations?

Discussions on solidarity are inevitably linked to questions about the social contract, the functioning of political systems, and the rules for participating in a

solidarity-based community. They constantly beg the questions of who the actors of solidarity are, what unites them, and what they owe to each other.

Solidarity is a highly contested and fragile concept because it relies on preconditions that it cannot guarantee by itself – a common feeling of belonging, a common identity, shared action, or a common belief. In that sense, it is similar to modern secularism, suffering from the Böckenförde Dilemma: solidarity cannot define the conditions upon which it exists; solidarity itself does not have the regulatory power to define the criteria of a political community.⁵

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The criterion of inclusion is particularly relevant when discussing solidarity. In Ancient Greece, women and slaves were excluded from solidarity mechanisms. In the Third Reich, anyone who did not correspond to the state's ethnic nationalist understanding was brutally excluded, persecuted or murdered. Today, the question of 'who belongs' has taken a new quality in the context of increasingly diverse and multicultural societies. While political communities always had to cope with varying degrees of diversity, the question now is how public power should manage it. Is there a breaking point where a state and society can no longer cope with an overly heterogeneous population because it lacks 'common ground'? In the case of the EU, the heterogeneity of 27 different political cultures makes it difficult to form a common basis for solidarity.

Nevertheless, solidarity plays a crucial role in creating and upholding the legitimacy of the state; in sustaining the Weberian *Legitimitätsglaube*,⁶ or the belief in the state's right to rule beyond its monopoly of violence.⁷ The EU's contested legitimacy as a polity might be a reason why it is difficult for EU solidarity to emerge. Or alternatively, because of a lack of solidarity, the EU polity struggles to be recognised as legitimate by all European citizens.

As solidarity creates social value for participants of a community, it can also be used as an instrument of power. Interdependencies and reciprocal relationships influence citizens' and decision-makers' behaviour. The *lack* of a solidarity mechanism can also be used for political purposes. For instance, to exclude certain minorities

from decision-making or to avoid the emergence of collective power. Finally, solidarity can also be used as an anti-political tool to avoid political conflict in the public sphere, for non-democratic purposes.⁸ If a certain type of institutionalised solidarity is framed as 'normatively good', it does not allow for contestation and therefore has an authoritarian tendency.⁹

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Solidarity has a variety of meanings and political traditions. Theories and perceptions have evolved alongside social and political developments. Solidarity can be legitimised through different means and narratives, from a shared identity or a common belief to joint action. Knowledge of the different historical facets of solidarity can help us pick and choose from various concepts to develop EU solidarity further. As solidarity is a highly ambiguous and complex political concept, understanding its origins and political traditions is essential to grasp its potential uses at both national and EU levels.

2. NATIONAL SOLIDARITY AS FIRST-ORDER SOLIDARITY

National identity creates a sense of common destiny and belonging in Western democracies. This allowed for institutionalised solidarity mechanisms like welfare systems. However, solidarity based on a shared identity also has its 'dark sides', such as the feeling of superiority over other nations. Solidarity based on national identity therefore has an exclusionary character, defining who belongs to the solidarity-based community and who does not.

This nationalistic aspect can also be used in arguments against strengthening European identity as a basis for EU solidarity, as this might repeat the same mistake and eventually lead to some form of 'European nationalism'. As the prospect of a joint European identity is still far off, it cannot be said whether it would face the same challenges and dangers as national identity. It would also depend on decision-makers' instrumentalisation of identity as a concept for their political ends. For instance, in Poland and Hungary, European identity is based on Christian roots exclusively and thus used as a justification for anti-immigration policies, even though this contradicts the European values set out in the EU Treaties.

While national identity formed the basis for solidarity in 20th century Europe, the grounds upon which solidarity relies can shift over time, depending on social and economic developments.

While national identity formed the basis for solidarity in 20th century Europe, the grounds upon which solidarity relies can shift over time, depending on social and economic developments. New forms of belonging and commonality can emerge, influencing our understanding of solidarity. Such changes in our understanding of solidarity have already happened in the past. This also means that in the future, European public perceptions of solidarity are sure to shift again.

In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), French sociologist Émile Durkheim showcases an important shift in the understanding of solidarity, from mechanical to organic. Traditional societies were based on the former, where there was little individual differentiation: "each one's margin for individual action was close to zero and society could only change and act as a whole, mechanically."¹⁰ In contrast, modern societies are based on organic solidarity, which is not based on similarity but rather differences. With the division of labour, the sphere of the individual has expanded, as have their interdependencies.¹¹ Durkheim's analysis must be read in the context of industrialisation, urbanisation, individualisation and democratisation, which led to new forms of social bonds. Modern societies define themselves through differences rather than kinship.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' differentiation between a 'community' and 'society' (*Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*; 1887) follows a path similar to Durkheim's to explain the development of new forms of social ties in modern and industrialised nation-states. Social ties rely on personal interactions and the roles, values and beliefs developed in the 'tribes' of a community. Meanwhile, in a society, they are based on more abstract values and beliefs rather than personal interactions. As the basis for social ties changes with a community's evolution into a society, the understanding of solidarity also shifts. For instance, joint beliefs developed within the community become more normative values that are equally valid for all citizens.¹²

The institutionalisation of welfare mechanisms has made national solidarity 'first-order': national social ties prevail over others.

Fig. 1

OVERVIEW OF THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF SOLIDARITY

	Forms	Explanation	Examples	Duration	Sources of legitimacy
First-order solidarity = National solidarity	Institutionalised	Between the state and citizens	Redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state (e.g. healthcare)	Permanent	National identity, historical social ties
	In civil society settings	Between citizens within the national borders	Labour movements	Ad hoc	Social ties between citizens
Second-order solidarity = EU solidarity	Interstate	Between EU member states	Assistance and mutual help in cases of terrorist attacks	Ad hoc	Transnational reciprocity, enlightened self-interest of EU member states
	Interterritorial	Between EU institutions and EU regions	Cohesion and structural funds, Common Agricultural Policy	Permanent	Transnational reciprocity, enlightened self-interest of EU member states
	Interpersonal	Between EU citizens across national borders	Direct funding from the EU to citizens or EU taxes for mobile citizens	Not yet developed, but preferably permanent	Social ties between EU citizens, joint forward-looking objectives

Durkheim and Tönnies show that the definitions of social ties and kinship evolve and change our understanding of solidarity. Nevertheless, national solidarity is rather unshakeable, as it has been institutionalised via redistributive mechanisms, starting in the middle of the 19th century. Otto von Bismarck, the Minister President of Prussia, established several new welfare provisions under political pressures from social democrats during his mandate from 1873 to 1890. Its heritage is still present in Germany today. In the UK, Prime Minister Clement Attlee founded the National Health Service after the Second World War, which has now become a key element of British pride. In France, the *État social*, based on a universal understanding of republican values, is so highly regarded by its citizens that they regularly go on the streets to defend it. Such institutionalisation of welfare mechanisms has made national solidarity ‘first-order’: national social ties prevail over others.

In contrast to this institutional notion, solidarity can also be viewed purely in a civil society context. According to this understanding, solidarity is seen as a form of shared action between social groups. Social movements in the 20th century – the labour movement, the women’s liberation movement, the civil rights movement – relied on the solidarity of their community to fight for equal rights, recognition and self-determination. Solidarity is created through joint action against an ‘oppressor’ as well as a shared sense of ‘communal identity’, not national identity.

Despite historical developments and theories, the main framework for solidarity remains the nation-state. In this sense, national solidarity is first-order solidarity. Meanwhile, EU solidarity is ‘second-order’: less developed and not reliant on the same forms of legitimacy. First-order national solidarity relies on strong social ties, shared values and customs, and a high level of public

trust. Second-order EU solidarity, on the other hand, still relies mostly on reciprocity or the enlightened self-interest of EU member states that recognise that solidarity is in their own national interest (see Figure 1).

3. EU SOLIDARITY AS SECOND-ORDER SOLIDARITY

The EU is a ‘Union of states and citizens’, mixing intergovernmental and supranational modes of action. This *sui generis* model means that the EU has two legitimacy channels: elected governments in the Council and direct elections of representatives in the European Parliament. Reflecting the Union’s two sources of political legitimacy, two forms of solidarity should also be present in the EU: solidarity between member states and solidarity between citizens. Or, respectively, interstate and interpersonal solidarity.

Two forms of solidarity should also be present in the EU: solidarity between member states and solidarity between citizens. Or, respectively, interstate and interpersonal solidarity.

There are several mechanisms related to interstate solidarity at the Union level, but almost no interpersonal solidarity between citizens, let alone mechanisms. There are some solidaristic relations between EU citizens in civil society settings, but none that are institutionalised. This is problematic, as it means that citizens have no opportunities to create bonds beyond national borders and cannot create the basis for representative democracy at the EU level. One form of solidarity should not trump the other, as both are equally important in a Union of states and citizens. However, both forms must exist if the EU is to remain legitimate in its current form.¹⁵

The EU is a developing political community rather than a mature polity. It remains a “family of nations”,¹⁴ where different countries enter partnerships to coordinate their policies. Its political framework is less developed than the national, while trans-European social ties between people are loose. The grounds for common EU action rely on sources of legitimacy different from nation-states. Rather than create the same legitimisation mechanisms that exist at national level, the EU must create a common purpose through other means, such as shared political objectives and common institutions: “the commonality of purpose and the bonds within the new collectivity do not result from a common descent, but from shared forward-looking objectives and modes of governance”.¹⁵

Despite the relative ‘thinness’ of EU solidarity and the predominance of national solidarity over EU solidarity, conflicts can occur between first-order national solidarity and second-order EU solidarity.

EU solidarity is based on ties that are looser than in national solidarity; it is second-order solidarity. This is reflected in the minimal redistributive policies that exist at the EU level, as well as the little integrative potential of its policies. The EU is known to reduce trade barriers and facilitate the movement of capital, goods and services (‘negative integration’), but not build cohesion policies and extensive new policy areas (‘positive integration’). As political scientist Peter Mair puts it, “the EU does not engage very extensively in the redistribution of resources, except perhaps via the structural funds; nor does it even do a great deal towards positive integration.”¹⁶ The EU’s political system does not allow for a broad institutionalisation of solidarity in line with the welfare state mechanisms that emerged in 20th century Europe. Interpersonal solidarity between EU citizens is little developed.

EU solidarity has one important advantage: the risk that second-order solidarity takes on an exclusionary character is less pronounced. As the social ties are less developed, second-order solidarity cannot be instrumentalised to exclude certain groups from the solidarity mechanisms (e.g. prohibiting migrants from accessing healthcare on the grounds of lacking citizenship). In addition, conditional and reciprocal solidarity is in all EU member states’ interests. However, due to the current EU decision-making procedures and the requirement of unanimity in the (European) Council for key decisions, pushing through solidarity mechanisms that even one member state does not fully support is near impossible.

Despite the relative ‘thinness’ of EU solidarity and the predominance of national solidarity over EU solidarity, conflicts can occur between first-order national solidarity and second-order EU solidarity. In certain cases, the EU has been regarded as an actor that undermines existing national solidarity mechanisms, mostly due to its liberalisation agenda, while its interpersonal solidarity mechanisms are not (yet) developed. For example, when one EU citizen uses their right to freedom of movement to relocate to a different member state, their access to said country’s national solidarity mechanisms (e.g. healthcare, social security) can be restricted for some time (i.e. waiting periods), or conditional to ‘self-sufficiency requirements’, so that the citizen is no burden to the state.

The public fear of 'benefit tourism' showcases that certain layers of solidarity can contradict each other. In this case, European interstate solidarity, which creates the freedom of movement for EU citizens, clashes against national solidarity, which establishes welfare mechanisms for national citizens.¹⁷

Another example is from the euro crisis. Certain decisions taken at the EU level had negative consequences for national social systems. The Greek government had to impose important structural reforms, leading to drastic spending cuts in national social provisions to pay back debts to its European creditors. In this instance, interstate 'solidarity' within the eurozone clashed with the national interpersonal solidarity of the Greek welfare state.

3.1. Interstate solidarity: Reciprocity and enlightened self-interest

The legitimacy of EU solidarity is based on two sources: "a rationale based on direct reciprocity (I help the others so that they will help me in the future in case of need) and a rationale based on enlightened self-interest (I help the others because I know that acting in the interest of other EU members or in the interests of the EU as a whole ultimately serves my own self-interest)."¹⁸ Both sources can work together, as witnessed in the COVID-19 crisis. Member states were fully aware that they could be in a similar situation as those most affected by the virus (i.e. reciprocity). They also realised that a joint economic recovery would be to their benefit (i.e. enlightened self-interest). EU solidarity is provided because it is in the self-interest of those involved rather than for higher moral ground or a common belonging.

Another example of EU solidarity based on enlightened self-interest is CP, where solidarity is driven by the donor countries' conviction that helping recipient countries will benefit them in the long run; that there will be a 'return on investment'. Interestingly, the EU does not consider CP to be a solidarity mechanism, probably out of fear that the public might oppose it if it was framed as such.

Despite the presence of interstate solidarity between EU member states, creating new solidarity mechanisms can be difficult as not all 27 member states have national interests that would benefit from *more* EU solidarity. Three recent examples are outlined below:

- ▶ While some countries value the concept of solidarity in **the EU's migration policy** – especially countries of first arrival (e.g. Greece, Italy, Spain) as well as countries of destination (e.g. Germany, Sweden) –, others are thoroughly opposed to this form of solidarity, also due to public opinion within their countries.
- ▶ **Economic solidarity** plays an important role in some countries (e.g. Greece, Italy, France, Portugal, Spain), while others (e.g. Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands) do not share the same understanding of economic solidarity. For instance, many citizens and political elites in Austria and Germany considered the financial help during the euro crisis to be charity.

However, public opinions were drastically different in Greece, Spain and Portugal: the austerity focus of the crisis recovery recipe was leading to severe economic hardship.¹⁹

- ▶ Some member states consider solidarity mostly in terms of **supporting other countries enduring external or internal threats**, such as the Baltic countries facing Russia, Greece neighbouring Turkey, or France and Belgium confronted with homegrown jihadi terrorism.

Besides interstate solidarity based on enlightened self-interest and reciprocity, other forms emerge on an ad hoc basis, depending on the political context. For example, in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum, '**deterrence solidarity**' became apparent. Given the UK's withdrawal from the EU, solidarity was created between the 27 other member states to deter further withdrawal. The economic, social and diplomatic consequences of leaving the Union became very clear, as did the benefits of preserving its unity. This form of unity and deterrence solidarity was based on a cost-benefit calculation by the remaining EU member states, as the price of leaving the Union was clearer than ever.

The transactional character of interstate solidarity has one important downside: it makes EU solidarity a fragile construct.

The transactional character of interstate solidarity – whether it be based on the enlightened self-interest of a country or reciprocity – has one important downside: it makes EU solidarity a fragile construct. Transactional solidarity is less stable and sustainable than interpersonal solidarity, given that it relies on ad hoc decisions of member states to enter a 'solidaristic agreement' with other countries. The lack of permanent solidarity mechanisms at the EU level means that the decision to foster solidarity relies almost entirely on national governments and their willingness to 'act in solidarity'. It prohibits establishing a more sustainable basis for cooperation, where citizens could play a more important role, for example.

3.2. Interpersonal solidarity: A limited concept in the EU

While interstate solidarity does exist in the EU, interpersonal solidarity between EU citizens across national borders remains weak. Interpersonal solidarity implies that European citizens have a direct link to EU institutions and that redistributive mechanisms exist between different European citizens. These mechanisms would not be based on nationality or even regional identity but rather on socio-economic criteria. For instance, the EU's social dimension could count as an

interpersonal solidarity mechanism. However, this policy field remains extremely limited in scope, as EU social policy only *supports* national welfare mechanisms.

An example of the lack of interpersonal solidarity is the EU's focus on negative integration, such as the reduction of trade barriers, market liberalisation and deregulation. It has not yet pushed extensively for positive integration, which would transfer national competences in policy fields like social policy, education and healthcare to the EU level. This lack of positive integration complicates the Union's ability to respond to challenges in cohesion, inequality and post-COVID-19 fragmentation.

The deficient interpersonal solidarity at EU level reduces the ability of European citizens to unite in solidarity beyond their national borders.

The deficient interpersonal solidarity at the EU level reduces the ability of EU citizens to unite in solidarity beyond their national borders. For instance, employees in the German digital sector might face the same hurdles as those in Italy, Finland or Poland, but do not create transnational alliances as they do not consider themselves part of the same 'political cause'. This also limits the EU's ability to strengthen social cohesion across the EU.

The lack of interpersonal solidarity also influences the narratives around existing solidarity mechanisms in the EU – they are not always understood as such. Even the European Commission frames CP as an inter-territorial compensation scheme for potential disruptions in the Single Market, rather than a typical redistributive mechanism based on solidarity.

If interpersonal solidarity has not yet emerged in the EU, it is because the conditions to establish stronger social ties among citizens do not exist. There are three reasons for this shortcoming:

1. Interpersonal solidarity is based on a **joint definition of solidarity**. There is no such definition that is agreed upon across all 27 member states. In France, the nation is the unitary factor (*nation indivisible*), based on shared *citoyenneté*. In Germany, *solidarity* is based on an ethnic nationalist understanding of identity, which has never been questioned since the Second World War.²⁰ This is visible in Germany's understanding of citizenship, based on *jus sanguinis* (i.e. parents' national identity) rather than *jus soli* (i.e. birthright) until recently. In other European countries, religion or joint action against an oppressive regime (e.g. the *Solidarność* trade union in Poland) were important national uniting factors. These multiple understandings of solidarity in Europe

make it difficult to establish a joint understanding of EU solidarity.

2. Interpersonal solidarity requires a **joint political space** for citizens to discuss the forms of solidarity they would like to see emerge. For now, there are 27 different political spheres; the EU lacks a political community and has no clearly defined *demos*. The EU's political framework "does not (yet) facilitate the evolution of a genuinely transnational space".²¹ Without a strong European public sphere nor any transnational political exchange, no joint feeling of belonging can emerge across the EU.
3. The EU's **diverse population** and **sheer size** challenge the emergence of interpersonal solidarity. Indeed, citizens from one country are more likely to enter solidarity-based relations with their neighbours than with distant EU citizens.²²

However, there are three reasons why interpersonal solidarity can and should be developed at the European level:

1. **The EU is suffering from the erosion of national solidarity**. The social, economic and cultural changes of the past decades have challenged solidarity mechanisms at the national level. New questions have emerged: How to ensure social protection for self-employed workers in the tech sector? How to define the criteria which determine what benefits are given to immigrants?

The increasing diversity of the nation's *demos*, both in cultural and economic terms, paired with a reduction of integrative forces, has led to a fragmentation of social cohesion. The repercussions reach the Union, as many EU policies are not entirely separable from the national level and fall under 'shared competences'. The more interpersonal solidarity there is at the EU level, the more citizens could also create links across national borders rather than recreate the links that eroded within their societies. This would strengthen European cohesion, as it would be based on links between not only national governments but also EU citizens.

2. As global challenges increase, **the EU will remain an important actor to solve Europe's joint problems**. COVID-19 cannot be solved by nation-states alone, as the virus does not stop at borders. The climate crisis can only be solved via international efforts. The digital transformation requires a transnational regulatory framework. These challenges can only be tackled effectively if EU member states work together within the Union's setting.

The more solidarity there is in the EU, the easier it will be to find common solutions considered legitimate by most citizens.²³ Thus, there is an important link between the efficiency of EU decision-making and European cohesion. The EU will be the most efficient and effective when a strong interpersonal dimension

complements interstate solidarity. Interstate solidarity will always be based on national interests, while interpersonal solidarity is based on a joint endeavour between citizens. The latter would make European cohesion more sustainable and permanent.

There is an important link between the efficiency of EU decision-making and European cohesion.

3. Interpersonal solidarity is the form of solidarity that would **make the EU the most sustainable as a political system**. For now, “there is an imbalance between the high degree of European integration, together with institutionalised decision-making structure, and the relative absence of transnational solidarity at this same level.”²⁴ Interpersonal solidarity serves as an “inner cement holding together a society”;²⁵ “the glue that binds society and prevents it from disintegrating”.²⁶ Through this practice of ‘social sharing’, EU citizens would create a stronger sense of common belonging.

To conclude, the EU’s second-order solidarity is much weaker than national solidarity. Interpersonal solidarity, which unites citizens beyond their national borders, is almost non-existent in the EU, whereas interstate solidarity is much more developed. The latter builds on reciprocity, an enlightened self-interest of member states, or both.

Before exploring which steps would foster solidarity at the EU level, Chapter 2 expands on the theoretical analysis in order to delve into the current state of solidarity in the EU, in three steps: (i) exploring the EU’s current approach of solidarity; (ii) understanding the various forms and dimensions of EU solidarity; and (iii) studying public attitudes towards solidarity. The next chapter outlines the original basis upon which EU solidarity was developed, the currently prevalent concept of solidarity and the implicated policy areas. It will inform the recommendations in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2: The state of play of solidarity in the EU

Solidarity is a term used widely in public discourses in the EU, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. But what exactly does solidarity in the EU entail? Is it mentioned in the EU treaties? Which EU policy areas are implicated under *solidarity*? And is there broad public support for EU solidarity?

1. CURRENT APPROACH TOWARDS EU SOLIDARITY

According to the EU treaties, *solidarity* has three conceptual meanings: it is a value, a principle (of cooperation), and a clause.

1. Solidarity is listed as a **value** in the preamble of the EU treaties, as well as in **Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU)**. It is also listed in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was initiated by the European Convention on Human Rights in 2000 and enshrined in EU law with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. This positioning in the treaties suggests that solidarity is a core value of the EU. However, while there is agreement regarding the existence and importance of solidarity, its definition and exact application remain ambiguous. Contrary to the rule of law, which has been refined further by the European Court of Justice, the EU has not yet detailed what the value of solidarity means in practice.
2. Solidarity is also listed as a **principle** in **Article 80 TEU**: the "fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States." This principle hints at an understanding of solidarity as a reciprocal endeavour and basis for mutual cooperation. Article 80 TEU explains further that "appropriate measures to give effect to this principle" can be taken but does not outline them explicitly. Does this mean that member states should simply pay their fair share to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU budget? Or that a social Europe should be built, including further redistributive mechanisms?
3. Solidarity is also understood as a **clause** in **Article 222 TEU**: member states should cooperate "in a spirit of solidarity" during natural or man-made disasters. This clause reads as one of mutual help in exceptional situations and an obligation of assistance to a member state faced with an important threat. It does not encompass an understanding of solidarity that would legitimise more permanent solidarity mechanisms.

The treaties' definition of solidarity remains vague, but its broad interpretation as a value, principle and clause could be widened to encompass more policy fields, and to a much broader extent than what has been applied in practice until now.

The treaties' definition of *solidarity* remains vague, but its broad interpretation as a value, principle and clause could be widened to encompass more policy fields, and to a much broader extent than what has been applied in practice until now. While the reciprocity argument is present in the treaties, there is no clear incentive for interstate solidarity over interpersonal solidarity – which opens the door for other forms of solidarity to develop at the EU level. The value of solidarity has also not been refined further, meaning that it could be understood more broadly as a fundamental core of European cooperation.

In practice, the only form of solidarity that the EU promotes is interstate solidarity between member states: they must assist others in exceptional circumstances when one country is faced with an external threat. In this case, solidarity is not a legitimate source for more permanent EU mechanisms. The overriding advantage of EU solidarity is that it allows member states to pursue collective goals that are more ambitious than national ones by taking a common risk under a 'veil of ignorance'. The hope is that a country will better defend its interests by working with others, rather than having 27 member states search for individual solutions.²⁷ Citizen-centred interpersonal solidarity, which would take the form of redistributive mechanisms, has not yet been developed at the Union level.

2. THE FORMS AND DIMENSIONS OF EU SOLIDARITY

In the EU, solidarity is much less institutionalised than at the national level. The most developed form of EU solidarity is reciprocal support and mutual help in cases of exogenous shocks, as set out in Article 222 TEU. Other EU policies – especially CP – as well as the EU's social dimension can be viewed as solidarity mechanisms, although there are rarely framed as such.

Categorising solidarity is a difficult endeavour, as its emergence is highly dependent on political contexts and the willingness of member states to engage in solidarity mechanisms. Nevertheless, the following section lists the different forms and dimensions that EU solidarity has taken until now and differentiates between institutionalised and ad hoc mechanisms.

2.1. Institutionalised solidarity

The most developed form of solidarity at the EU level is **solidarity in cases of exogenous threats**. These are typically natural or man-made disasters. The EU foresees providing mutual aid and assistance through, for instance, a civil protection mechanism. This form of solidarity is the only one spelt out in the treaties – specifically, under the solidarity clause of Article 222 TEU – and is present in the only EU initiative that has ‘solidarity’ in its name, the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF). This fund was created as a reaction to the severe 2002 Central European floods. Since then, it has been used for 80 disasters, including floods, forest fires, earthquakes, storms and droughts. 24 member states have been supported so far with a total of over €5 billion. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the EUSF’s scope was extended to encompass major public health emergencies. Italy is by far the largest beneficiary, having received more than €3 billion.²⁸

Secondly, **cohesion and regional policy** are arguably the first ‘tools of solidarity’ developed in the EU. More specifically, the first tool instituted at the Union level was the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), a financial instrument for alleviating regional imbalances within the Community. It was originally a policy of solidarity to ensure a common ground of solidarity.²⁹ The founders of the European integration project understood that pooling together sovereignty would require a common ground of values, mutual trust, and a solidaristic ethos to be successful and long-lasting. This led to the creation of intra-territorial solidarity to reduce disparities in the development levels across regions and foster economic convergence.³⁰

Since 1975, CP has been developed and expanded further, while regional policy now comprises three elements: the ERDF, the Cohesion Fund and the European Social Fund. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund also count as structural support. These five funds make up the European Structural and Investment Funds and assist European regions and sectors, from financial solidarity to rural development measures and food programmes for people living in deprived regions.³¹

Thirdly, the EU’s **social dimension** can be considered a solidarity mechanism, although its scope is limited. In the early years of European integration, social measures were mostly related to harmonising health and safety standards for workers within the Community. In 1974, the first step towards a more comprehensive approach to social policy was taken with the Social Action Programmes. But it was only with the Single European

Act of 1986 that the social dimension received a more prominent role in European integration, and later in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, where the European Social Charter was added to the Social Chapter.

Since then, several attempts have been made to improve the EU’s social dimension, but to no avail. The latest attempt was taken with the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), launched in 2017 in Gothenburg, but the principles remained mainly on paper. The Portuguese Council Presidency tried to revive it with the Porto Social Summit in May 2021 by getting the EU27 to agree to an action plan but only achieved limited success. Several member states are unwilling to give up sovereignty in social policy. For instance, political negotiations to establish an EU minimum wage have been complicated, as certain Nordic countries fear that more ambitious EU social standards will undermine their well-functioning national systems based on collective agreements.

In addition, the linkages between social policies and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) remain weak. The EU has not adequately supported national efforts to reduce inequalities and promote cohesion among national citizens. For example, “at the inception of the [euro crisis], the [ECB] continued to follow the ‘one size fits none’ rules of monetary policy that had exacerbated (rather than reduced) member-states’ economic divergences.”³² In the Single Market, increasing competition between national economies has emerged, with a race to the bottom in terms of labour and tax standards. Certain EU policies, such as the Posted Workers’ Directive 96/71/EC, also led to ‘social dumping’ (e.g. employers using cheaper migrant labour rather than hiring domestically). This not only increases competitiveness but has also led to a situation in which the wage gaps between EU member states are exploited to create more profit and not support peoples’ livelihoods.

The linkages between social policies and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) remain weak. The EU has not adequately supported national efforts to reduce inequalities and promote cohesion among national citizens.

Overall, **progress in social policy is slow and hindered** by the lack of member states’ political will to commit. EU countries do not want to give up their last prerogatives of national power – social policies and solidarity instruments are among the last ‘bastions’ of sovereign competences which remain in their hands. In addition, “[s]ome [member states] were simply concerned about the effects that the cost of the Community’s social policy may

have on the growth, employment, and competitiveness of the [member states'] economies as well as the European economy in general."³³

Others doubt that the EU would push for an ambitious social agenda if the Union gained more competences in the field, mostly due to the Union's strong economic focus and its history of undermining national social standards. Due to such political positions that favour a 'market Europe' and economic integration, as well as the reticence of social actors to entrust the EU with the objective of developing an ambitious social model, there has been no substantial political drive to develop EU solidarity – until today.

2.2. Ad hoc solidarity in crisis moments

In past years, the EU endured several crises which called for EU solidarity. The latest example is the COVID-19 pandemic, during which multiple solidarity mechanisms were put into place to respond to the economic damage, and coordination in the healthcare sector was strengthened (e.g. vaccine procurement). However, the solidarity provided by the EU is limited and does not always lead to sustainable nor permanent solidarity mechanisms. For instance, the euro crisis did not lead to a stronger focus on the EMU's social dimension. Whether the Union will be allowed to establish a more permanent recovery package after the pandemic is still unclear. Thus, while there was EU interstate solidarity during crises, that these ad hoc expressions will materialise into more permanent forms of solidarity at the EU level is not a given.

Three examples of **ad hoc solidarity** in past crises that deserve special attention are outlined below:

- ▶ Solidarity during the **euro crisis** (2010) was rather weak. The convergence process in the eurozone stopped by 2012, and the euro crisis changed it into a process of increasing divergence. For instance, Ireland had an average growth rate of over 3% and had increased its GDP per capita to 112% of the EU15 average by 2012. In contrast, Italy grew slower and thus only reached 85% of the EU15 average of GDP growth per capita.³⁴ Instead of adding a social dimension to the EMU (by e.g. improving the coordination of employment policies, adopting social standards, adding an unemployment reinsurance scheme) and reinforcing cohesion between EU regions, the EU and national governments' response was one of individualising responsibility.

The euro crisis strengthened the internal divide by distinguishing between the 'saints' who followed the SGP rules and the remaining 'sinners'.³⁵ Whereas the cohesion of the eurozone was maintained, the socio-economic price EU citizens had to pay was enormous. Interstate solidarity also suffered, as member states that advocated for an austerity agenda were seen as lacking solidarity towards those countries that had to endure severe reform programmes. At the same time, the response from the European troika (i.e. the

International Monetary Fund, ECB and European Commission) towards the latter countries led to their citizens' deep-rooted mistrust of the EU.

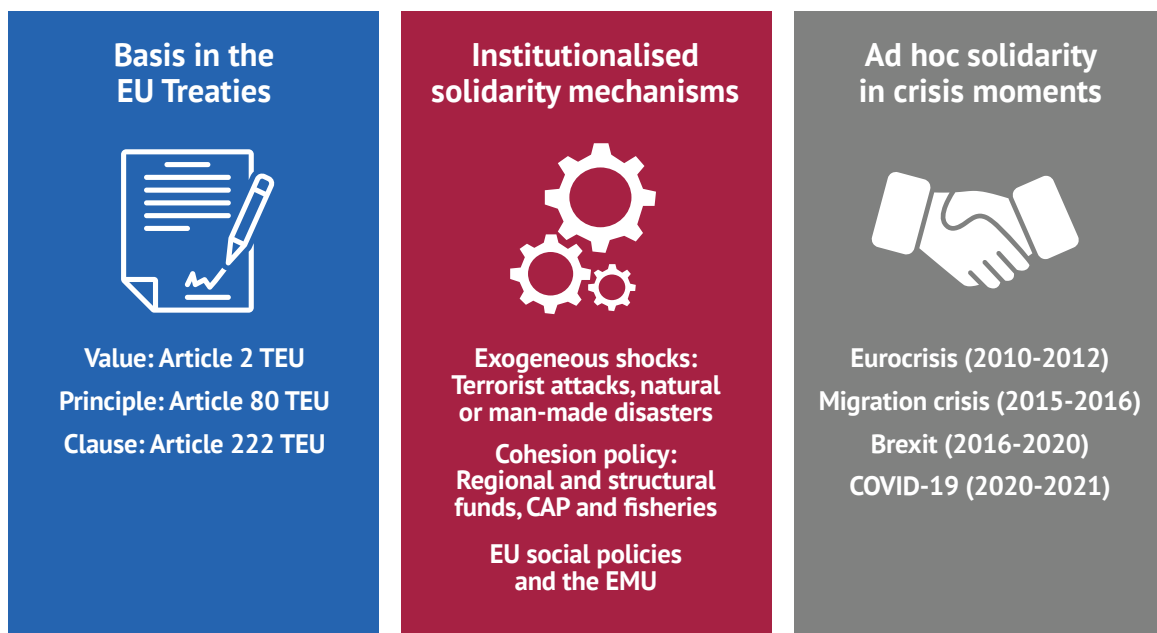
- ▶ During the **European migration crisis** (2015-16), two forms of solidarity would have been required: solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers, and interstate solidarity with the countries most affected (i.e. countries of first arrival, and countries of destination). The failure to reform the Dublin Regulation (604/2013), which puts the responsibility for migrants and asylum seekers on countries of first arrival, showcased that many EU countries were unwilling to share this burden, largely because of anti-immigrant and partly xenophobic national public opinions. Many governments decided that their national cohesion was more important than EU interstate solidarity and solidarity with migrants and refugees. The migration crisis showed that EU solidarity is second-order, only coming after national considerations.
- ▶ Solidarity was invoked during the **Brexit negotiations** (2016-20) to preserve the EU's unity given the UK's withdrawal from the Union. EU solidarity was not expressed through policy initiatives or instruments, but rather the consistent unity of the 'remaining 27' in their support for the European Commission's Task Force for Relations with the UK, as well as Ireland, one of the countries most affected. EU solidarity was created through a deterrence effect, as the disadvantages of leaving the Union became clear. Solidarity was also created through fear that the UK would divide the EU27, which would lead to very high economic costs.

These crises show that solidarity is not a fixed concept; it can emerge in particular moments. For instance, no one would have expected the EU to launch a joint vaccine procurement mechanism before the global pandemic. In addition, new policy areas that require novel forms of solidarity can also emerge. For example, intergenerational justice has become increasingly important in European politics as the continent's demography changes. This means that solidarity between age groups should be considered in European politics. This new form of solidarity is particularly relevant in the context of climate change, which is a greater risk to the livelihoods of younger generations than their older counterparts.

These crises show that solidarity is not a fixed concept; it can emerge in particular moments.

However, crises do not create EU solidarity *per se*. In the euro crisis, for instance, the EU's 'fiscal solidarity' undermined 'welfare solidarity' in several countries,

FORMS AND DIMENSION OF EU SOLIDARITY



especially Greece.³⁶ The migration crisis was also a failure of solidarity, in terms of both that with refugees and with other member states that struggled with the number of arrivals.

To conclude, various forms of EU solidarity exist: in cases of exogenous shocks, the most developed form of solidarity in the Union; more permanent mechanisms that are not framed as solidarity mechanisms (e.g. cohesion and structural funds, the Common Agricultural Policy); and the EU's social dimension, which is underdeveloped (see Figure 2). EU solidarity can emerge in crises on an ad hoc basis, such as in the form of the NextGenerationEU (NGEU), the Commission's COVID-19 recovery package. However, solidarity mechanisms can also be institutionalised, as in the case of the EU's CP. Finally, solidarity can emerge as a narrative in certain crises, such as Brexit or the migration crisis.

The next section explores public attitudes towards EU solidarity, as they impact decision-makers' willingness to foster a more ambitious agenda of solidarity at the Union level. While there can be an inconsistency between the general readiness of the public to foster solidarity at the EU level and opposition to concrete solidarity mechanisms, public opinion is a factor that should nevertheless be taken into account.

3. PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOLIDARITY

Asked about the drivers of solidarity, EU citizens are clear-minded: 40% of respondents of a European University Institute (EUI) survey believe that solidarity is motivated by reciprocity, while 24% believe that EU solidarity is a

matter of moral obligation.³⁷ Solidarity based on a shared identity does not rank as an important driver. The survey's key findings, listed below, reflect the current approach of EU solidarity: interstate solidarity based on reciprocity rather than interpersonal solidarity based on a joint sense of belonging.

- ▶ **“Europeans are more prepared to help others deal with ‘exogenous’ shocks than with ‘endogenous’ problems of the national economy.”**³⁸ This explains why the rapid joint reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 3) was so different from that of the euro crisis. While individual member states could be held responsible for their situation in the euro crisis, the global pandemic was an external shock for which no single EU member state could be held responsible. This facilitated national governments' responses, given that national electorates were more inclined to accept EU solidarity mechanisms. Public attitudes are reflected in decision-makers' choices: solidarity in cases of exogenous shocks, but not when it comes to endogenous issues, such as the euro crisis.
- ▶ **EU citizens are not in favour of spending national tax revenues on other member states.** The willingness to share national resources remains very low. Allowing the European Commission to take on debts to establish a European recovery package, rather than create a 'transfer union' between the member states, thus follows public opinion.
- ▶ **EU citizens' support for solidarity varies according to geography, the issue and the perceived net benefit to their respective country.** While 75% of all respondents support financial help to member

states suffering from a natural disaster and 69% for pandemic-stricken countries, only 35% support financial assistance to over-indebted governments.³⁹ The support for 'debt solidarity' is much lower across all states than for other forms, while net-contributing states (e.g. Finland, Germany, the Netherlands) reject it entirely. In addition, solidarity is more readily given to neighbouring countries than distant member states.

Further findings from the EUI study could be used as grounds to develop EU solidarity in the future:

- ▶ **Citizens seem to prefer a 'Europe that protects' over a 'market Europe'**.⁴⁰ Based on the proposal made by French President Emmanuel Macron in his Sorbonne speech in 2017, where he introduced the concept of a 'Europe that protects', the EU could develop European public goods (e.g. infrastructure, health, social policies) more ambitiously. Other survey results show strong public support for a 'solidaristic ethos' in the EU. Asked about a metaphor comparing the EU to a house, an apartment building, a playground and a sinking ship, a relative majority (30.1%) preferred the image of an apartment building, followed closely by the playground (26.0%), the house (23.8%) and finally the sinking ship (20.3%).⁴¹ This shows that most Europeans favour close cooperation, as both the house and apartment building comparisons make up 53.9% of the respondents' answers.

- ▶ **Citizens support more permanent mechanisms of solidarity over ad hoc solutions.**⁴² Most respondents to the EUI study prefer permanent EU arrangements of risk and burden sharing over ad hoc mutual assistance. This is an interesting finding, as the EU relies mostly on short-term solidarity mechanisms and has put little effort into establishing more permanent solidarity mechanisms.

Solidarity as a general concept is much more widespread among EU citizens than decision-makers may assume. Of course, this does not mean that citizens will agree to any broad solidarity mechanism in any crisis – the migration and euro crises reveal some clear limits to European solidarity. Nevertheless, the EUI survey shows an opportunity to develop other forms of EU solidarity that exceed its current forms, such as solidarity mechanisms that are not necessarily crisis-specific.

Chapter 3: EU solidarity in the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic reignited a public discourse on solidarity in Europe. *Solidarity* was used as a political narrative to achieve the ambitious objectives set by decision-makers. It was also a 'call to action': at the national level, interpersonal solidarity was part of an appeal to citizens to legitimise sweeping restrictions in public life and border closures. In addition, solidarity with medical staff facing incredible hardship was invoked. The EU public largely supported the political discourse on solidarity. According to an EUI survey, most European voters supported pandemic relief programmes and thus solidarity in the pandemic.⁴³

The EU used solidarity widely in two contexts of the crisis. For one, to denominate **bilateral support** and assistance between individual EU countries, particularly in treating patients, sharing medical supplies and bringing home stranded EU citizens (interstate solidarity). For another, it was **a call for joint EU action** and a reason to legitimise decisions at the EU level, such as lifting state aid rules to increase support for companies or the flexible arrangement on fiscal rules (i.e. the crisis-driven measures taken by the ECB and in the NGEU recovery package). This solidarity concerns European programmes explicitly and created an important new function for the European Commission to borrow on capital markets.

The lack of coordination between the EU27 led to a patchwork of measures from the onset.

3.1. SOLIDARITY MECHANISMS IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

At first, member states had a 'national reflex' when responding to the COVID-19 crisis in its early phases. Several member states resorted to protectionist measures, such as banning medical equipment exports to other member states.

The lack of coordination between the EU27 led to a patchwork of measures from the onset. For instance, there was no coordination on restrictions related to national public health measures, which led to a mixed bag of rules. In addition, the travel restrictions and regulations between member states were unnecessarily complex, untransparent and uncoordinated. The EU27 launched 27 different 'track and trace' apps, which were incompatible and limited to the country of origin, despite the important numbers of EU citizens travelling, working and living in other EU countries. Finally, certain EU countries decided to resort to unilateral procurement processes of vaccines

rather than wait for an EU scheme. National vaccination strategies were rolled out in every member state, leading to a European race on the speed of progress.

This lack of coordination between national governments might be due to the possibility that national decision-makers underestimated the level of interdependencies in Europe and overestimated their powers to fight the pandemic effectively. It also gave the wrong impression to EU citizens that national measures were protecting them while the Union was inefficient and superfluous. Although at first member states behaved egotistically, a change in their behaviour became evident as soon as the European Commission and certain national and EU decision-makers started calling on solidarity as "a pivotal idea underlying these measures and necessary to solve the crisis."⁴⁴

The EU took several ad hoc initiatives to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, specifically in its health and economic dimensions. In **healthcare**, the EU took the following steps:

- ▶ The Commission rapidly issued an implementing act to protect the availability of personal protective equipment (e.g. face masks). Later, it introduced guidelines regarding the supply of medicines. As part of its Civil Protection Mechanism, a European stockpile of emergency medical equipment was created, called rescEU. This was seen as solidarity put into action and resulted in the delivery of facemasks to Spain, Italy and Croatia and ventilators to the Czech Republic.
- ▶ Despite its limited competence in public health, the EU27 collaborated in the joint procurement of vaccines, allowing smaller countries to profit from lower vaccine prices and more extensive production capacities than if they had negotiated alone. This is a clear case of solidarity through enlightened self-interest. Member states were aware of the potential negative spill-over effects that would have existed should no joint vaccine procurement be put into place: uncoordinated competition, political infighting, 'vaccine nationalism'.⁴⁵
- ▶ Even if limited in scale, member states also resorted to bilateral solidarity. For instance, stockpiles of medical equipment were created, stranded EU citizens were relocated via joint repatriation flights, and patients were transferred from hotspots (e.g. France, Spain, Italy) to other countries with spare capacities (e.g. Austria, Luxembourg, Germany).

To tackle the **economic consequences** of the COVID-19 crisis, the EU resorted to the following measures:

- ▶ The Commission issued temporary state aid rules to allow governments to provide liquidity to the EU economy, to support citizens and save jobs. It also triggered an 'escape clause' that allows maximum flexibility to the budgetary rules set out in the SGP.

Thirdly, the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) instrument created liquidity to support short-term work programmes.

- ▶ The ECB's €1,850 billion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme has been key in upholding the eurozone during this crisis, allowing the 19 eurozone countries to borrow at lower costs.
- ▶ Most importantly, the EU launched the €750 billion recovery package, NGEU. Solidarity for this recovery package emerged largely out of the enlightened self-interest of EU member states. The economic consequences of the crisis would have led to further distortions of the Single Market if the EU did not intervene, as some countries, such as Germany, were able to support their economies more than others. These divergences were already visible in the differences in national state aid once EU rules were lifted.⁴⁶

These EU initiatives and instruments were particularly important as the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis will be highly asymmetric, depending on the countries' vulnerabilities.⁴⁷ Not every member state was prepared to face a global pandemic; not every national economy was resilient enough. Above all, the social cohesion within member states was already fragile.

The exogenous nature of the COVID-19 crisis allowed the EU to trigger a form of solidarity different from that of the euro crisis.

The exogenous nature of the crisis allowed the EU to trigger a form of solidarity different from that of the euro crisis, which was blamed on certain EU countries. No one in the EU could be condemned for the virus, and no 'moral hazard' could be invoked for the solidarity mechanisms that were put into place. Calling for more solidarity in the fight against the pandemic was politically easier for decision-makers.

In addition, the COVID-19 crisis mostly concerned the health dimension, in which the EU has little to no competence. Compared to the euro crisis, which was also a crisis of faith in the Union's fiscal and economic structure, the pandemic had little to do with the EU's institutional architecture and governance structures. This may have also facilitated joint decisions, as the design itself of the Union was not contested.

The EU responded to the COVID-19 crisis by triggering existing and launching new solidarity mechanisms. Most prominently, the NGEU recovery package now allows the Commission to borrow money independently of EU member states. And the joint procurement programme

for vaccines granted the EU new competences in a policy field that has been largely confined to the national level. However, these new solidarity mechanisms triggered public contestation, displaying the divides in the EU. The mechanisms are also limited in their scope and reach.

3.2. THE LIMITS OF THE COVID-19 SOLIDARITY MECHANISMS

The new EU solidarity mechanisms launched during the COVID-19 crisis have triggered contestation:

- ▶ Between June and July 2020, debates over the recovery package – especially the distribution of EU funds and the ratio between grants and loans – displayed the rift between Southern European countries, which were already struggling with lacking competitiveness and fragile economies, and the 'frugals' which entered the crisis with more robust economies.
- ▶ Similarly, Hungary's and Poland's contestation of the recovery package at the end of 2020 – specifically, a rule-of-law budget conditionality – illustrates the division between Eastern and Western Europe on democratic standards. While the German Council Presidency managed to find a compromise, the problem of increasing divergences has not disappeared and is likely to remain an issue for European solidarity in the future.
- ▶ At the beginning of 2021, the already fragile 'vaccine solidarity' between EU member states splintered. Austria, Denmark and Hungary decided to negotiate separate deals to accelerate their vaccine campaigns instead of going through the joint EU programme.

Further contestation on COVID-19 solidarity mechanisms is likely to emerge on two issues. First, the disbursement of financial support provided through the NGEU could lead to clashes between EU institutions and national governments on how to spend the money and what criteria it should follow. The European Parliament has already accused Hungary and the Czech Republic of cronyism. Second, the Commission will propose several new tax mechanisms to pay back the debts it takes on through the recovery package (i.e. a financial transaction tax, a tax on carbon emissions, a reform of the corporate tax base), which will not go uncontested.

Overcoming the divides between Northern and Southern Europe will be extremely important to avoid further fragmentation between the EU27. Countries that feel that they are losing out by staying in the EU are more likely to want to leave the Union than the 'frugals', where citizens' attachment to the EU is higher.⁴⁸ For instance, in Italy, which was hit particularly hard by the crisis, support for EU membership dropped significantly during the COVID-19 crisis. In April 2019, 50% of Italian respondents of the EUI survey said that they would vote to remain in the EU in a hypothetical referendum. Exactly a year later, this remain vote decreased to 30%, while the leave vote had increased from 25% to 41%.⁴⁹

A successful recovery package is not only crucial for Europe's economic recovery but also for maintaining the cohesion and unity of the European project.

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Similarly, overcoming divides between Eastern and Western Europe on the rule of law is also crucial. While the link between solidarity and values might not always be straightforward, without a minimum common denominator reflecting basic European values, no European solidarity mechanism will be successful. The recent conflict over the rule-of-law budget conditionality in the 2021-27 MFF and NGEU highlights the need for solidarity mechanisms based on a solid ground of common values. The Union risks losing further legitimacy if EU funds are misused, and EU institutions allow authoritarian and/or corrupt decision-makers to violate basic principles of cooperation.

While the link between solidarity and values might not always be straightforward, without a minimum common denominator reflecting basic European values, no European solidarity mechanism will be successful.

Besides the public contestation, the NGEU also has a limited scope in the following manners:

- ▶ The NGEU is an ad hoc instrument between EU member states, which implies that it is yet unclear whether it will become a more permanent solidarity mechanism that persists post-COVID-19. **The recovery package does not guarantee that EU member states will display equal levels of financial solidarity in future crises.** Instead, its manifestations would depend heavily on the preconditions. For instance, in the case of a political crisis in the EU in the near future, a high level of mistrust between national governments stemming from fights over the spending of EU funds might make it difficult for solidarity to emerge.

- ▶ **A flawed implementation of the NGEU package could weaken the EU** if, for instance, the financial assistance does not live up to its expectations nor helps member states bridge this socio-economic crisis. Similarly, the size of the recovery package is such that it might be insufficient to support member states' recovery. New solidarity mechanisms might be needed later, which would be more controversial and contested as the immediate urgency of the crisis would have already passed.

- ▶ **The EU took no measures to support citizens individually** because of its lack of competences. While individual citizens will profit indirectly from the EU recovery package, national governments will likely take credit. Direct EU support for citizens might have improved the Union's visibility and thus public opinion, displaying the positive effect of 'EU money' on people's lives.

These three caveats should be taken seriously, especially as the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis will affect social cohesion in the EU significantly. The crisis will create more inequalities in and regional divides among the EU27. It affects not only people's health but entire livelihoods. Those with freelance jobs, small businesses and unstable incomes will suffer from the long-term consequences of this crisis. The inequalities will also be reflected in other areas, such as education, the 'digital divide' and housing. This means that at the individual level, the ability to protect oneself largely depends on socio-economic situations. On a broader scale, existing territorial inequalities between EU member states and even regions within a member state will be enhanced.

The COVID-19 crisis is a textbook example of a particular crisis leading to progress in the EU integration process, as the European Commission was granted a new function – the ability to borrow from capital markets on a grand scale. However, despite this rather positive development, the crisis has also shown that national solidarity continues to trump second-order EU solidarity.

Whether the EU acts in solidarity depends on the nature of solidarity invoked, the political context, public attitudes and EU competences. As the crisis will have long-term consequences, the Union should launch and boost initiatives that strengthen solidarity rather than merely focus on short-term solutions. Only through more long-term solidarity mechanisms will the EU be able to forge and strengthen its cohesiveness.

Chapter 4: Four policy recommendations to foster solidarity in the EU

To fight the centrifugal forces in the EU, rebuild cohesion and counter the increasing inequalities post-COVID-19, the EU institutions and member states should widen their approach to EU solidarity. In particular, they should concentrate on the following four aspects: (i) clarify and widen the concept of EU solidarity; (ii) establish a comprehensive cohesion agenda which includes both interstate and interpersonal solidarity; (iii) strengthen national solidarity mechanisms and ensure that no EU initiative counteracts national social provisions; and (iv) encourage the emergence of solidarity between EU citizens by, for instance, investing in mobility and exchange programmes.

RECOMMENDATION 1 CLARIFY AND WIDEN THE CONCEPT OF EU SOLIDARITY

The current notion of *EU solidarity* (see Chapter 2) is too limited given the high degree of integration and interdependencies between member states and between EU citizens. The limitations will not allow the EU to respond appropriately and efficiently to the threat of growing inequalities and fragmentations within EU societies, which will only be reinforced post-COVID-19.

The increasing complexity of the interlinkages between the national, supranational and intergovernmental levels does not facilitate the emergence of EU solidarity. The blurring of lines might give the impression that member states still have the necessary power and tools to respond to global crises. However, since the euro crisis, the need for systemic solutions has become more obvious. As the former President of the European Council and current President of the EPC, Herman Van Rompuy, incessantly repeats: “We are all in the same boat.”⁵⁰ To respond to the increasing interdependencies between member states, a more cohesive EU is necessary. If the EU is to address systemic challenges in the future, the current framing of solidarity as interstate reciprocity is insufficient. The EU will have to resort to “increasingly demanding principles of socio-economic justice.”⁵¹

This could mean, for example, that EU solidarity must include interpersonal solidarity mechanisms and direct redistributive mechanisms.

Before establishing new mechanisms, the first step should be to **develop a broader understanding of solidarity in the EU**. This could lead to strengthened EU solidarity that is not merely based on reciprocity. For this, four dimensions will be key:

1. **The EU should develop its own conceptual understanding of solidarity and avoid replicating national models.** In the latter, “solidarity is often

treated as a form of fellow-feeling that is not readily susceptible to rational assessment, akin to those emotions or passions that merely overcome us, and for which we have no justification.”⁵² While EU member states share cultural and institutional attributes shared values and geographical proximity, important differences can hinder the development of such a “fellow feeling” at the Union level. However, this does not mean that EU solidarity cannot be developed. Citizen-centred solidarity can be based on other grounds, such as collective action or social justice.⁵³

2. **The EU should initiate a wider debate that includes decision-makers and citizens to redefine the ‘European social contract’ and the EU’s solidaristic ethos.** It should cover questions on what binds us, what unites us and what ground there is for joint action. For now, solidarity remains a vague term that is limited to political speeches and does not play a major role in the concrete formulation of EU policies. To change this, the following steps should be considered:

- ▶ include EU solidarity as a topic of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE);
- ▶ launch a wider EU communications campaign to communicate to citizens why more EU solidarity is needed to fight polarisation and fragmentation; and
- ▶ national decision-makers better communicating why solidarity mechanisms are necessary. “[...] it is not easy for government leaders in (self-perceived) net-contributor states to explain that European solidarity today is in the long-term national interest even if it involves short-run costs.”⁵⁴ Policymakers in net-recipient member states would have to explain why some measures of external discipline might be required to reassure donors.

3. **The EU should explore on what grounds it could develop interpersonal solidarity.** In view of the EU’s nature as a Union of states and citizens, solidarity based on forward-looking action and a shared common future rather than a ‘European identity’ should be considered. The CoFoE could be the first step to better grasping the different understandings of solidarity among citizens. While crises are ‘stress tests’ for the European project, the joint experience of hardship can also be formative and unite citizens. The EU should develop and refine its understanding of interstate solidarity further. For instance, it could explore in which policy areas a more sustained interstate solidarity would, in the long run, improve policymaking. For instance, increased interstate solidarity would support struggling countries of first arrivals in terms of migration.

4. **The EU should rethink solidarity as a value**, giving it as much weight as the other values listed in Article 2 TEU. While they have been taken as a ground for further EU initiatives, such as the rule of law and the European Democracy Action Plan, the value of solidarity has not yet been put into practice. To give it a more significant position in the formulation and implementation of EU policies, the Union should commit to “the search for commonality despite diversity, a shared commitment to reciprocity despite interest-based divergences, political equality despite disparities of power resources, and sober brotherhood and fraternalism vis-à-vis different national vulnerabilities and needs.”⁵⁵ Understanding solidarity as a fundamental value of the EU is important, as there are interlinkages between solidarity and other core values such as democracy. The less the EU invests in cohesion and solidarity, the more divided the EU27 will become on other values.

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RECOMMENDATION 2 ESTABLISH A COMPREHENSIVE EU COHESION AGENDA

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU should shift its perspective from its current predominant focus on economic growth to developing its cohesion portfolio further. Rather than following a narrow understanding of solidarity that only applies to emergencies, the EU could establish more sustainable solidarity mechanisms beyond the current focus on crisis-exclusive mutual assistance. This could be achieved by, for instance, **elaborating a much more comprehensive cohesion agenda that encompasses both interstate and interpersonal solidarity mechanisms**. To this end, the EU and its member states should concentrate on the following actions:

► **A more comprehensive cohesion agenda should include reforming and widening the EU’s CP** to ensure that it is better aligned with the European Commission’s current work programme. For now, the cohesion and structural funds do not focus much on the digital divide or the potential social costs of a green transition. While the European Green Deal foresees a Just Transition Fund with links to the ERDF and the European Social Fund Plus, it is not yet fully integrated into CP. The reform of CP within the 2021-27 MFF already includes a strengthened link to the European Semester and economic governance but is still missing the link to the EPSR. In addition, CP does not (yet) support civil society in regions that lack a strong civic ‘infrastructure’.

► **The EU should help tackle social fragmentation and polarisation** at the national level by including initiatives in its policymaking that might not be automatically considered cohesion policies. This could include initiatives that have already been launched, such as the EU’s efforts to fight disinformation and protect media pluralism. It could also include and enhance programmes that support civil society. While the EU supports civil society organisations (CSOs) through its new Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV), it does not support those within member states that are not linked to the EU, despite their crucial role for national cohesion.

► The EU should ensure the coherence of the Union’s *acquis communautaire* in its support for social cohesion. This could be achieved, for instance, by **establishing a ‘cohesion check’ on EU legislation**. The way in which new EU directives and regulations impact cohesion should become a criterion of the legislative process.

The EU should ensure the coherence of the Union’s *acquis communautaire* in its support for social cohesion.

► The Union could build on existing EU freedoms to **improve solidarity among EU citizens at the interpersonal level**. This could be initiated by improving mobility schemes for EU citizens relocating to another member state, including better recognition of national healthcare and/or pension insurances. The EU could also initiate its first direct taxation scheme for ‘transnationals’, or citizens who live and work in another EU member state. Rather than pay income taxes to the new member state of residence, they could pay their taxes directly to the EU. While national governments are unlikely to support such a direct taxation scheme, it would be a legitimate move, as it is the EU that facilitates the movement of citizens within the Union. This decision would create not only direct links between the Commission and EU citizens but also a new source of revenue for the EU, as almost 4% of the EU population works in a foreign EU member state.⁵⁶

If the EU decides to develop a more comprehensive cohesion agenda, it would **surely encounter opposition from several sides**. National governments would suspect that the EU is gaining more competences;⁵⁷ civil society and citizens might fear a further erosion of national social standards; and some even within the EU institutions might say that the EU treaties do not provide the required legal basis for such an agenda. Certain political parties and decision-makers would be opposed because such an agenda diverts the political direction of the EU away from its traditional priorities on the Single Market (e.g. competitiveness, growth, liberalisation).

However, surveys show that the EU has the public support for more permanent solidarity mechanisms and a ‘Europe that protects’. Therefore, a broad alliance of national and European actors – political parties, CSOs, national governments – should attempt to put cohesion and solidarity at the helm of the EU agenda.

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National decision-makers should also consider EU solidarity in the long term rather than focus on short-term electoral gains for their respective electorates. Public opinion shifts rapidly depending on the political context, and EU citizens might become more supportive of the Union if it decides to be more ambitious in the fields of cohesion and solidarity. Currently, most citizens expect a reciprocal benefit from EU solidarity. But this could change if the EU develops more direct solidarity mechanisms, such as a tax system for ‘transnationals’, or supports welfare policies more visibly.⁵⁸ These efforts would, over time, contribute to the development of interpersonal solidarity and have two positive effects: the EU would respond to global challenges more effectively, as more cohesive societies would ensure that there is stronger support for EU action; and the Union’s legitimacy would be increased in the eyes of EU citizens.

RECOMMENDATION 3 STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SOLIDARITY MECHANISMS

The EU is faced with a double challenge. Not only are the EU member states fragmented, but the social cohesion within national societies is also threatened. The success of European policies depends heavily on the quality of cohesion within the EU27. If the Union is to establish more sustainable and resilient solidarity mechanisms, it must support efforts to strengthen national cohesion.

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In the past, the EU undermined certain solidarity mechanisms at the national level through policies of fiscal discipline and budget consolidation. This mistake should not be repeated under any circumstances. Such measures that were forced upon the member states in the context of the euro crisis hurt citizens’ salaries, pensions and welfare provisions. The austerity policies led to a degradation of several EU countries’ cohesion and citizens’ living conditions. The obvious example was Greece, which was obliged to accept spending cuts in return for a troika bail-out. Of course, Greece might not have been able to uphold its welfare provisions if it had lost access to financial markets. However, the EU should have ensured an economic recovery of Greece that did not entail cutting national public services so drastically. These decisions ultimately undermined the EU’s legitimacy, as Southern European populations became much more critical towards the EU after the euro crisis.⁵⁹

To avoid repeating past mistakes, the EU should take the following measures:

- ▶ **Ensure that the COVID-19 recovery process is not focused on budget consolidation and fiscal discipline.** Instead, the EU should support member states’ social contracts and their social dimension. While the COVID-19 recovery package includes criteria for green and digital investments, it does not provide any to ensure that national social services are not cut due to insufficient funding caused by an economic recession.⁶⁰
- ▶ **Incentivise national governments to implement ambitious national solidarity policies** by, for example, linking EU funds to social criteria. For instance, the EU could introduce a ‘non-regression clause’ to ensure that national governments do not cut their spending on welfare provisions post-COVID-19. This would ensure that all member states prioritise social protection and focus on policies like infrastructure, healthcare and education.
- ▶ **Develop European public goods further through targeted investments** – particularly in transport, energy, education and healthcare – to support national governments’ ability to provide public services. The EU should also establish minimum social standards and ensure their implementation in practice, including applying the EPSR.⁶¹
- ▶ **Decipher more systematically what areas of social policies are not yet well-developed across the EU27**, then provide EU-wide solutions. For example, the European digital workforce is barely protected by national provisions. The EU is already attempting to tackle the digital skills gap by supporting national mechanisms through programmes like the European Skills Agenda and the Digital Education Action Plan, but their scope remains limited. The EU could also create a status for European freelancers, who are barely covered by national social provisions.

RECOMMENDATION 4 MOVE TOWARDS INTERPERSONAL SOLIDARITY

Those opposed to a more ambitious European solidarity agenda might argue that the Union's 'democratic deficit' should first be solved before the EU takes on further competences. However, this argument is mostly used to block or delay progress, despite the urgency of strengthening solidarity in view of future challenges. Solidarity should not be reserved to mature political systems built on a strong political community, demos or common identity. **Solidarity should be put into place when political circumstances call for it, social provisions are insufficient, or the economic integration creates divergences that need to be tackled.** EU solidarity becomes even more relevant when the social ties at the national level are increasingly contested, and national solidarity mechanisms are not as solid and comprehensive as they were in the past. The Union should not wait to reform its institutional architecture fundamentally to foster EU solidarity.

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In addition, developing a more ambitious solidarity agenda at the EU level should not be stymied by national governments that do not wish to see the EU develop such a solidarity agenda. It is unlikely that the EU27 will move forward on developing EU solidarity – especially at the interpersonal level – when there are significant divides at the European level, in terms of both democratic values and socio-economic fragmentations. The heterogeneity of the EU27 and its growing divides in terms of values are too significant to realistically expect unified progress.

While differentiated integration always bears the risk of further fragmentation, not moving forward at all would be more dangerous than moving forward with only a few EU member states.

The countries willing to push for an ambitious EU solidarity agenda should use the method of enhanced cooperation. This instrument could help foster interpersonal solidarity mechanisms by, for instance, establishing new redistributive mechanisms at the EU level (see Recommendation 2). In case this method does not

work – it requires a minimum of nine member states –, the willing countries should also consider possible cooperation outside of EU treaties, as was initially the case for the Schengen area. While differentiated integration always bears the risk of further fragmentation, not moving forward at all would be more dangerous than moving forward with only a few EU member states. And those wishing to join the 'solidarity club' could always do so at a later stage.

While differentiated integration always bears the risk of further fragmentation, not moving forward at all would be more dangerous than moving forward with only a few EU member states.

While moving forward with a solidarity agenda should not first require a reform of the EU's institutional architecture, establishing new solidarity mechanisms – especially at the interpersonal level – will require certain changes to the Union's political system over time. First and foremost, **the disconnect between EU citizens and EU institutions should be closed.** To achieve this objective, the EU and its member states should concentrate on the following actions:

- ▶ **The EU should make EU citizenship more meaningful** without necessarily creating a *European identity*. This could be achieved by (i) facilitating the political engagement of citizens living in foreign EU countries; (ii) fostering the role and increasing the powers of European political parties to better represent European citizens politically; and (iii) ensuring that all national citizenship laws are compatible with the values that underpin EU citizenship.
- ▶ **The EU should invest in programmes that create stronger social ties between its citizens**, laying the grounds for higher levels of interpersonal solidarity. In the long run, citizens would self-identify through features other than their nationality, like employers, tourists, consumers, or mobile citizens in the Schengen area. This could be achieved by ensuring that CSOs representing those 'identity features' (e.g. trade unions, consumer associations) have much stronger links with EU countries, share resources and coordinate between themselves. This could be incentivised in, for instance, the existing programmes for civil society, such as the new CERV programme. 'Europeanising' CSOs would also contribute to a better representation of citizens at the EU level; an avenue which has not been sufficiently explored yet.⁶²
- ▶ **The EU should enhance investments in policy fields that foster mutual understanding and cooperation not only among EU citizens** but also between member states bilaterally. For instance,

the Union could invest more substantial resources in cross-border, bilateral exchanges and mobility programmes, such as the DiscoverEU programme. It should also ensure that these programmes are used more widely by facilitating their access and investing in communication campaigns, as many citizens are not aware of those opportunities. In addition, while the Erasmus+ exchange programme has been widened to include non-academic studies and apprenticeships, it is not exploited to its fullest potential as there are too many hurdles in the application process, a widespread lack of knowledge about the programme, and a lack of resources for applicants.

These fields are often seen as less important than economic or trade policy. However, investing in cross-border and citizen-centred programmes should be a priority if the EU is to ensure a broad legitimacy for further integration processes in policy areas that remain largely national competences, such as health.

- ▶ The EU should develop democratic spaces further so that citizens can debate across borders. To achieve this aim, **the EU should invest in a more integrated European civic and public sphere**. It could invest in new technologies that improve interpersonal communications. The new opportunities to improve exchanges emerging from the digital transformation have not yet been used to their full potential. Strengthening deliberative formats and participatory democracy is another avenue that could ensure better links between EU citizens, and between EU citizens and EU institutions. For instance, the EU could establish a permanent European citizens' assembly which also discusses issues of solidarity, to be institutionalised after the CoFoE.

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- ▶ **The EU should incentivise the Europeanisation of national public spheres** by, for instance, proposing regular training on the EU for national journalists; and fostering exchanges between national parliamentarians. The Union should also have a more ambitious communications strategy to increase its visibility in national public spheres. Additionally, national political parties should ensure that their European political families are much more visible during the European election campaigns. The process of Europeanising national public spheres will take time and not be straightforward. Nevertheless, it will be indispensable to the EU's wish to become more cohesive.

By following those broad recommendations, the EU could foster solidarity in the long run, far beyond ad hoc mechanisms put into place during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In view of Europe's multiple crises of the past decade – and considering the repercussions of the more recent pandemic –, investing in solidarity cohesion should be a top priority for the EU.

Conclusion

Fostering EU solidarity will not be easy. It will be a highly contested, long and tedious process. However, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the necessity for solidarity: inequalities will continue to surge in and among societies, while the risk for further fragmentation between the EU27 is high. If the EU is to prevent divides from deepening, both politically and socio-economically, it should avoid going back to 'business as usual' after the crisis. Instead, a changed EU rationale towards solidarity would allow us to shift from the current use of solidarity as a mere buzzword towards an applicable political concept that fights the disintegrative forces in the EU.

The Union and its member states should widen their understanding of solidarity and emphasise it as a core value of EU cooperation. The EU should also explore its capacity to consolidate its existing solidarity mechanisms and develop a more comprehensive cohesion agenda. Finally, the EU should provide the conditions for interpersonal solidarity to emerge. Only if the EU manages to consolidate its inner core will it be able to face future challenges.

- ¹ Sánchez, Pedro, [“Europe’s future is at stake in this war against coronavirus”](#), *The Guardian*, 05 April 2020.
- ² See e.g. Weber, Martin (2007), [“The Concept of Solidarity in the Study of World Politics: Towards a Critical Theoretic Understanding”](#), *Review of International Studies*, Volume 33, Number 4, pp.693-713.
- ³ For studies in political philosophy, Andrea Sangiovanni is one of the most prolific authors, while public attitudes towards EU solidarity have been analysed by the likes of Philipp Genschel and Jürgen Gerhards.
- ⁴ Brand, Jürgen (2005), [“Solidarität und Identität”](#), *Rg*, Volume 6; Sangiovanni, Andrea (2015), [“Solidarity as Joint Action”](#), *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Volume 32, Issue 4, pp.340-359.
- ⁵ Ferrera, Maurizio and Carlo Burelli (2019), [“Cross-national solidarity and political sustainability in the EU after the crisis”](#), *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 57, Number 1, pp.94-110.
- ⁶ Weber, Max (1978), *Economy and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology*, 2nd edition, University of California Press, pp.901, ff.
- ⁷ Ferrera and Burelli (2019), *op.cit.*
- ⁸ White, Jonathan (2020), *Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union*, Oxford University Press.
- ⁹ See Mouffe, Chantal (2016), [“Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach”](#), *Política común*, Volume 9.
- ¹⁰ Wachinger, Marie, [“EU solidarity between social cohesion and active commitment”](#), *EuVisions*, 25 November 2018.
- ¹¹ Jones, Robert Alun (1986), *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., pp.24-59.
- ¹² Tönnies, Ferdinand (1957), *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Charles P. Loomis (trans.), East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp.223-231.
- ¹³ The final ‘solidarity construct’ – whether both inter-state and inter-personal solidarity should have the same weight in the long run – is a question that should be discussed publicly. It is linked closely to the other question on the future of the EU and whether it should become a more supranational Union, retain the mix of intergovernmental and supranational elements, or become a purely intergovernmental association of states.
- ¹⁴ Castles, Francis G. (1993, ed.), *Families of Nations: Patterns of Public Policy in Western Democracies*, London: Dartmouth Pub Co.
- ¹⁵ Ferrera and Burelli (2019), *op.cit.*, p.96.
- ¹⁶ Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso, p.124.
- ¹⁷ Sangiovanni, Andrea (2013), [“Solidarity in the European Union”](#), *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Volume 33, Issue 2, pp.213-241.
- ¹⁸ Fernandes, Sofia and Eulalia Rubio (2012), [“Solidarity within the Eurozone: how much, what for, for how long?”](#), Paris: Jacques Delors Institute, p.4.
- ¹⁹ See e.g. Coppola, Frances, [“The terrible human cost of Greece’s bailout”](#), *Forbes*, 31 August 2018.
- ²⁰ Brand (2005), *op.cit.*
- ²¹ Ciornei, Irina and Malcolm G. Ross (2021), [“Solidarity in Europe: from crisis to policy?”](#), *Acta Politica*, Volume 56, p.218.
- ²² Cicchi, Lorenzo; Philipp Genschel; Anton Hemerijck; and Mohamed Nasr (2020), [“EU Solidarity in times of Covid-19”](#), Florence: European University Institute.
- ²³ Of course, other reasons could also lead to national governments tackling common problems together. Nevertheless, the bigger the divides and weaker the cohesion, the more difficult it is to reach joint EU decisions rapidly.
- ²⁴ Ferrera and Burelli (2019), *op.cit.*, p.94.
- ²⁵ Bayertz, Kurt (1999, ed.), *Solidarity*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p.9.
- ²⁶ Banting, Keith and Will Kymlicka (2017, eds.), *The Strains of Commitment: The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.5.
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- ²⁸ *European Commission*, [“EU Solidarity Fund: supporting disaster recovery 2002-2020”](#) (accessed 15 April 2021).
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- ³² Schmidt, Vivien A. (2015), [“The Eurozone’s Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy: Can the EU Rebuild Public Trust and Support for European Economic Integration?”](#), Discussion Paper 015, Brussels: European Commission, p.7.
- ³³ Dodo, Mahamat K. (2014), [“Historical Evolution of the Social Dimension of the European Integration: Issues and Future Prospects of the European Social Model”](#), *L’Europe en Formation*, Volume 2, Number 2, p.53.
- ³⁴ Goecke, Henry and Michael Hüther (2016), [“Regional Convergence in Europe”](#), *Intereconomics*, Volume 51, Number 3, p.166.
- ³⁵ Dyson, Kenneth (2014), *States, Debts, & Power: ‘Saints’ and ‘Sinners’ in European History & Integration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ³⁶ White (2020), *op.cit.*
- ³⁷ Cicchi *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Ferrera, Maurizio and Alessandro Pellegata (2016), [“Can Economic and Social Europe Be Reconciled? Citizen Views on Integration and Solidarity”](#), rescEU.
- ⁴² Cicchi *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Joppe, Anne, [“Solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis within the European Union – a legal principle or just a pivotal political aspiration?”](#), *RENFORCE*, 29 January 2021.
- ⁴⁵ At the time of writing, ‘vaccine solidarity’ has slightly backfired due to considerable delays from certain pharmaceutical companies, particularly AstraZeneca. As a result, countries like Hungary decided to unilaterally order vaccines, including the Russian Sputnik V, despite it not being approved by the European Medicines Agency.
- ⁴⁶ *Euractiv*, [“Massive German state aid to virus-hit firms? Others in EU doing as much or more: Vestager”](#), 09 February 2021.
- ⁴⁷ Poiars Maduro, Miguel; George Papaconstantinou; and Carlos Closa, [“EU and Covid-19: Time to think outside the box”](#), *EUIdeas*, 21 April 2020.
- ⁴⁸ Busse *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.*
- ⁴⁹ Cicchi *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.*
- ⁵⁰ See e.g. Van Rompuy, Herman, [“Nieuwspoor Gala Dinner”](#), EUCO 93/13, The Hague, 23 April 2013.
- ⁵¹ Viehoff, Juri and Kalypso Nicolaidis (2015), “Social Justice in the European Union: The Puzzles of Solidarity, Reciprocity and Choice” in Dimitry Kochenov, Gráinne de Búrca, and Andrew Williams (eds), *Europe’s Justice Deficit?*, Oxford: Bloomsbury, p.278.
- ⁵² Sangiovanni (2015), *op.cit.*, p.348.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.348.
- ⁵⁴ Cicchi *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.* p.12.
- ⁵⁵ Ferrera and Burelli (2019), *op.cit.*, p.100.
- ⁵⁶ Eurostat, [“4% of EU citizens of working age live in another EU Member State”](#), 87/2018, 28 May 2018.
- ⁵⁷ White, Jonathan (2003), [“Rethinking Transnational Solidarity in the EU”](#), *Perspectives*, Number 20, pp.40-57.
- ⁵⁸ Cicchi *et al.* (2020), *op.cit.*
- ⁵⁹ Teperoglou, Eftichia and Ana Maria Belchior (2020), [“Is ‘Old Southern Europe’ Still Eurosceptic? Determinants of Mass Attitudes before, during and after the Eurozone Crisis”](#), *South European Society and Politics*.
- ⁶⁰ Rayner, Laura (2020), [“The recovery triangle must include social investment if it is to succeed”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁶¹ Social Platform (2018), [“Building Social Europe: A comprehensive implementation plan for an effective European Pillar of Social Rights”](#), Brussels.
- ⁶² Ciornei and Ross (2021), *op.cit.*

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